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Leonardo Padura and the “New” Historical Novel

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One of Cuba’s bestselling authors, Leonardo Padura has published over the last twenty years an impressive oeuvre. With eleven bestselling novels to his name, Padura lives in Cuba and has accomplished the rare feat of being able to continuously publish both abroad and on the island with considerable acclaim from both local and international readers. Having received Cuba’s national literary award in 2012, Padura has achieved a literary fame that puts him close to two much revered figures in Cuba: Alejo Carpentier, on whom Padura has written a literary study, but also, on the other end of the spectrum, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, the bestselling author of *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* and *El Rey de La Habana*, and a friend of Padura’s in Havana. The works of these two authors in fact circumscribe the range of registers that Padura has touched upon in his own novels. On the one hand, they often are set in a squalid and crumbling Havana, where corruption and crime thrive despite the efforts of Padura’s main protagonist, Mario Conde, a police detective who gives up his profession to become a bookseller, and his friends. This world of decay and precarious lives on the lower fringes of society is the world of Gutiérrez’s heroes as well. On the other hand, Carpentier’s ghost is noticeable in Padura’s more

recent novels, many of which are set in the past, and where Padura aims to render present historical episodes that put Cuba in relation to the world at large. Clearly, Padura has struck a tone in his novels that borrows from other well-known Cuban writers yet is also attuned to global book market trends, where detective fiction and historical novels in particular have been popular for a number of years.

One can indeed argue that Padura's success as a writer owes not only to his remarkable productivity, meticulous research and intertextual plays, but also to the evolution that he has made from writing detective fiction to the historical novel, a different kind of "genre fiction" entirely. While he has maintained his knack for capturing popular types and the local picturesque of contemporary Cuba, he has increasingly begun to focus his attention on well-known literary figures and episodes of Cuban history, such as the Cuban exile in Mexico José María Heredia, or Ernest Hemingway, the docking of the ship M.S. St Louis, filled with Jewish refugees, in Havana harbor, or the connections of Trotsky's assassin Ramón Mercader with Cuba. Having made his name during the 1990s economic crisis in Cuba with detective novels that have been analyzed by Persephone Braham as neo-policíaco fictions critiquing the previous socialist detective novels of the 1970s in Cuba (Braham), one might ask in what way Padura is now building on and modifying a genre such as the historical novel, that has perhaps fewer plot conventions, but still a quite clearly circumscribed local and transnational trajectory. More to the point, I would like to ask what social function Padura's use of the historical novel has fulfilled, and how this function might differ when read in relation to Padura's Cuban or foreign readership.

Leonardo Padura's *El hombre que amaba a los perros* (2009, in English 2014) is one of several novels published by Padura in the last years that in fact combine crime plots with a historically delineated past. Other novels qualifying in this rubric are *La novela de mi vida* (2002), which reconstructs the exiled life of Cuban poet José María Heredia by way of a search attempted by a scholar of Heredia's disappeared manuscript of his autobiography; *Adiós Hemingway* (2006), featuring Mario Conde, Padura's detective from previous novels, and involving an assassination

plot set in the late years of Ernest Hemingway’s life. Finally, Padura’s most recent novel *Herejes* takes place between 1939, when the Jewish refugees aboard the ocean liner M.S. Saint Louis were denied entry to Cuba, and 2007, when descendants of one Jewish family investigate the fate of a painting that had been on the ship. This last novel also features Conde, adding a fictitious crime plot to the historically precise evocation of a well-known diplomatic crisis. For the sake of completeness, it also must be said that Padura published during this same twelve year period crime novels set in the present time, even though here too, with forays into the not quite so remote period of the 1950s, again with Mario Conde as their protagonist: *La neblina del ayer* (2009) and *La cola de la serpiente* (2011). Padura has in this way established a pattern of genre fiction where detective plots are transformed into investigations of a past that is evoked in detailed tableaux characterized by big events such as the Second World War or the Cuban Revolution, depicting the ripple effects of these events among ordinary people.

La novela de mi vida, *Herejes* and *El hombre que amaba a los perros* are the three novels that most closely fit the label of the historical novel, with actions set far back in the past, mostly outside of Cuba, and protagonists that are mostly historical figures. In them, Padura also turns towards the characteristic themes of the genre of the historical novel. For Georg Lukács, to take the best-known theorist of the historical novel, the rise of the genre at the beginning of the 19th century represented the manifestation of a historical consciousness whereby history became a mass experience. Lukács thought that the beginning of the genre was tied to the Napoleonic wars in Germany, producing a nationalist movement that eventually led to the national uprising of 1848. He writes: “Thus in this mass experience of history the national element is linked on the one hand with problems of social transformation; and on the other, more and more people become aware of the connection between national and world history” (25). Similarly in Padura’s *El hombre que amaba a los perros*, history becomes a necessity for those who are in danger of being written out of it and Cuba as a country serves as only one of several scenarios of a story that spans the Soviet Union, Turkey, France, Norway, and finally

Mexico, the main ‘protagonist’ being the Communist Revolution and its international networks during Stalin’s regime.

Whereas by the 1930s Lukács had diagnosed a general decline of the genre of realist or historical novels, however, Padura’s turn to historical fiction only echoes an overall growing popularity of the genre by the late 1990s and the 2000s, even in the new context of the post-cold war period, where Hegelian or Marxist teleological philosophies of history have fallen out of favor. One of the remarkable features of the phenomenon has been that the customary generic divisions between, on the one hand, the “popular” detective novel, and on the other hand, the “historical novel” as a more highbrow genre—seem to have lost relevance. Outside of Cuba, a new crop of historical novels has been published by writers such as Hilary Mantel, David Mitchell, William Golding, and others who have found acclaim both from bestseller-buying readers and critics alike. Still, in the case of *El hombre que amaba a los perros* and in the case of Padura’s fiction, there can be discerned a quite serious engagement with Lukács’s meta-historical questions about historical consciousness and the relation between the individual and the masses. While dramatizing a monumental historical topic like the late life of Leon Trotsky and that of his assassin—the Catalan of Cuban extraction Ramón Mercader—Padura also asks how historical novels may respond to society in a way that is not simply the recreation of a moment in time, but provides readers with a sense of subject-hood that may be found in this case in their sense of defeat.

The historical novel has a long history in Latin America, one that has been traced by several landmark studies over the years. In his book on Latin America’s New Historical Novel, Seymour Menton claimed that the historical novel dated from the 19th century romantic novels of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, José de Alencar and others, but had acquired, with Carpentier’s novels, new characteristics, less focused on mimetically restoring a time in the past and more on larger philosophical ideas that often presupposed the cyclical nature of history. For Menton, Carpentier’s and later “new” historical novels were meta-fictional in so far as a contemporary narrator often intervened, modern, anachronistic language was used, and intertextual quotes helped put history into perspective for

the reader. Lois Parkinson Zamora in her *The Usable Past* also studied how many Latin American and North American novels of the last decades feature an “anxiety of origins” reaching back to a past that enables them to inscribe themselves from a peripheral standpoint into world history. The British Marxist historian Perry Anderson has supported this view in his more recent article on the historical novel—published in the *London Review of Books*—where he flatly argues that:

[Meta-historical fiction] was born in the Caribbean with Alejo Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*), which appeared in 1949, followed by his *Siglo de las luces* (*Explosion in a Cathedral*) of 1962. Settings: Haiti, Cuba, French Guyana. Five years later came García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Over the next thirty years, Latin American historical fiction became a torrent, with many tributaries beyond Carpentier and García Márquez: Roa Bastos, Carlos Fuentes, João Ubaldo Ribeiro, Fernando del Paso, Mario Vargas Llosa and many more. Here, unquestionably, was the pacemaker for the global diffusion of these forms, which, like the concept of the postmodern itself, were invented in the periphery. (27)

The tenet of these studies is that the Latin American historical novel, building on earlier 19th century novels, has had a renaissance in the second half of the twentieth and in the early twenty-first century, ushering in the postmodern novel, yet with a peculiar Latin American twist, whereby history, instead of being an eclectic recourse, becomes a fiction of origin for peripheral countries, and one that ended up being appropriated by authors in the global centers as well.

Yet, if one follows Padura’s path from the detective novel to the historical novel, it is quite clear that his fiction is not so much preoccupied with cyclical, mythic history or with origins, than with what Roger Caillois has called the inversion of time, typical of the mystery novel: the substitution of the order of occurrence by the order of discovery. Padura’s historical novels often feature, just like his detective novels, an enigma—the disappearance of a painting or a manuscript, or the encounter with a stranger who has a dark secret—that is subsequently uncovered by the lead character, a scholar or a witness who employs just the same means of logic and investigation that a detective would employ. This technique distinguishes Padura from writers like Carpentier, who in *El reino de este*

mundo and in *El siglo de las luces* would first carefully set up a cultural milieu helping to explain the revolutionary events that were to follow.

Interestingly, too, Caillois, in his analysis of the mystery novel, has the genre rise in the early 19th century just like the historical novel, locating its beginning in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when Napoleon's police minister Joseph Fouché introduced the secret police agent as a way of controlling political intrigues. For Caillois, it was the secret agent who first replaced the pursuit of criminal offenders with undercover investigation and therefore opened up new narrative possibilities as well, whereby the agents in mystery novels dressed up in theatrical disguises to obtain information allowing them to resolve crimes (6). For Caillois, the detective novel is in this sense fundamentally a game of the mind, not so much invested in moving its audience, as melodrama or tragedy would do, but rather in demonstrating and revealing a truth by means of deep analysis. One might take Caillois's analysis one step further and say that the detective novel represents then in a way the Janus face of the historical novel: both forms act as forms of political analysis, in the sense that both the historical novel and the detective novel represent to their audience the aftermath of an important event—a revolution or a crime—and gesture back to the past. But while the historical novel focuses on the individual and affective elements that make possible larger historical changes, the detective is preoccupied with the secretive currents underpinning such changes, ranging from revolutionary conspiracies to criminal offenses against the law that implicitly threaten the existing order.

Padura has suggested that his detective novels have a political function in relation to the specific historical situation of post-revolutionary Cuba. He evokes life in Cuba after 1989, that is, after glasnost and the dismantling of the Soviet Union, as a discovery of history for his generation: “Así, fuimos teniendo una idea distinta de lo que había pasado con el socialismo. Redescubrimos la historia y nuestra percepción cambió. Comenzamos a sentir que nos habían engañado. Junto con ese engaño y con la crisis económica, mi generación experimentó un gran sentimiento de frustración” (López and Padura 164). However, he characterizes the detective novels he began to write, alongside those of others, as broadly

“social novels,” where writers turned away from genre elements such as the enigma or the policeman or detective to instead write from the perspective of common citizens about urban settings where violence and a basic lack of security were part of everyday life: “A partir de los años ochenta se empieza a producir una renovación universal en Estados Unidos, en España, y en América Latina de lo que fue la novela negra. [...] Se vuelve una novela absolutamente social y renuncia por completo al enigma, éste prácticamente desaparece para convertirse en algo funcional” (165). Glen Close, too, has diagnosed this turn in Hispanic crime fiction (or novelas negras) as one where there is an emphasis on the “cognitive mapping of the contemporary metropolis” at a time when large-scale migrations to the city have risked making the urban fabric unintelligible (20). These are, then, the genre conventions within which Padura writes, which belong indeed to a more global tendency. On the other hand, the concern with history, particularly Cuba’s and its relation to the Soviet state apparatus is uniquely his, and can be seen perhaps most clearly in *El hombre que amaba a los perros*.

El hombre que amaba a los perros is Padura’s most extensive and ambitious attempt to address the political and historical quandaries of revolutionary Cuba’s multiple and often secretive ties to the Soviet Union. The story of Leon Trotsky’s death in Coyoacán, Mexico, at the hands of Ramón Mercader, a Catalan Communist hired by Stalin’s secret police, has been told a few times before, most notably by Jorge Semprún and in a 1972 French/English/Italian co-produced movie (Gallo). Padura’s novel, however, tells us, through the fictional Cuban first-person narrator Iván, that neither Trotsky’s biography nor his writings were known in post-revolutionary Cuba, and his crucial role alongside Lenin during the Russian October Revolution was left blurry in Cuban Marxist-Leninist textbooks. The novel makes much of this intellectual void and brings out elements of the story that were little known until today, notably that Mercader’s mother was born in Cuba, and that Mercader spent the last years of his life in Cuba. The novel begins in 2004, when the fictional first-person narrator Iván loses his wife to cancer and reflects back on having told her a story which he up to that moment had not dared to write down, about his chance

encounter with Mercader and his dogs on a beach outside of Havana. The following chapters take the reader back, telling in alternating chapters the parallel life stories of Trotsky, his assassin, and Iván. We learn about Trotsky's years of exile, first in Alma Ata (1928), then in Prinkipo, Turkey (1929), followed by a stay in Barbizon, France (1934), Norway (1935), and finally, Coyoacán, Mexico (1939). During this time, we also learn of the Stalinist show trials in Moscow and the deaths of Trotsky's exiled son and daughter. Other chapters tell about Ramón Mercader's family and youth, his fight during the Spanish Civil War, recruitment by the Soviet secret service, his training and infiltration into Trotsky's circle and from there to Mercader's later life in Moscow and then Cuba. Finally, Iván's death is told in a last chapter by his friend Dany. Unsurprisingly, the reflection turns toward the end of the novel to the parallel loss of any kind of political utopia in all three countries, Cuba, Spain, and the Soviet Union and the sense that the Soviet Communist Party used Spain and Cuba as tokens in its much larger power calculations.

Yet Padura's novel is less about disenchantment (*desencanto*) with the revolution, a theme that runs more strongly in his detective fiction, and in fact in much of the Cuban literature of the 1990s, as Jorge Fornet has shown in his *Los nuevos paradigmas*.¹ Another theme that is perhaps more prevalent among the characters of *El hombre que amaba a los perros* is what I would call their "desajuste," a malfunction, lack of adjustment, or time lag causing individuals to miss out on opportunities or feel alienated from their social context. This *desajuste* can be seen, for example, in the tragic end of Iván's brother William, a gay man who together with his partner leaves Cuba on a raft only a few months before the Mariel exodus, during which they, as gay men, would have been readily allowed to leave the country. As it is, William and his partner shipwreck and presumably

¹ Fornet also calls attention to the attempt of many writers of the 1990s to "(re)write history" (78) mentioning a long list of writers including Jesús Díaz, Zoé Valdés, Abel Prieto, and Leonardo Padura. For Fornet, Cuban writers of the "novel of disenchantment" all are driven by their disillusion with an accomplished fact. They have witnessed the transformation of a world and the waning of a utopia that they desire to replace with a new one, without knowing what precisely. In this historicizing attempt they were preceded by the writers of the Mexican revolution and also by the French writers like Balzac, writing in the aftermath of Napoleon's reign (55-92).

die. Similarly, each one of the three main protagonists is pressed into circumstances that prevent him from fully engaging with History and step up to their potential. As if to emphasize this, in each case, the revelation of the contradiction between individual desire and collective destiny is dramatically infused with affect. Iván studies literature and begins his career as a promising writer with a celebrated volume of short stories. Yet his readings of Kafka, Hemingway, García Márquez, Faulkner, Rulfo and Carpentier are not in tone with the revolutionary ethos that is required of him. After experiencing a traumatic confrontation with his supervisor about a short story that he has written about a fearful Cuban revolutionary soldier, however, he is sent to a faraway province, falls briefly into alcoholism, and is never able to live up the hopes placed his family and friends have in him. Mercader, the future assassin, is forced by his mother and his mentor to make a premature, blind promise to do whatever the party asks of him, ending up sacrificing his individual aspirations and his nationalist fervor for a Republican Spain and become an assassin. Interestingly, Mercader in his later years is seen by Iván in strikingly empathetic terms as a man of the 19th century and out of sync with his time: “Ni quemándose todo el cuerpo se podía quitar su historia de encima, ni creyéndose que era otro... Pero a pesar de todo, a mí me daba lástima saber cómo había terminado, porque siempre había sido un soldado, como tantísima gente... Y si lo mataron ellos mismos, no se puede sentir por él otra cosa que compasión” (Padura 564). Mercader in this passage is worthy of compassion because he killed for a greater good as—it is implied—men did in the past, but was deceived. Finally, Trotsky lives the late years of his exile knowing that he will be killed and forgotten, coming to accept each lived day as borrowed time. More so even than the other two protagonists, his later years are characterized by the ‘future past,’ looking back both at the past and into the future, as Iván states when reading up on Trotsky in the late 1990s, once information about him becomes available in Cuba: “Las profecías de Trotski acabaron cumpliéndose y la fábula futurista e imaginativa de Orwell en 1984 terminó convirtiéndose en una novela descarnadamente realista” (488).

This desajuste or time lag of the individual character with his own time is mentioned once more in a seemingly innocuous scene where Iván speaks about the Cuban celebrations of the year 2000:

Durante años estuve obsesionado [...] con poder determinar el momento exacto en que concluiría el siglo XX y, con él, el segundo milenio de la era cristiana. Por supuesto, aquello determinaría a su vez el instante que daría inicio al siglo XXI y, también al tercer milenio. [...] Aunque para muchos la encrucijada de siglos solo sería un cambio de fechas y almanaques en medio de otras preocupaciones más arduas, yo insistía en verlo de otro modo, sobre todo porque en algún momento de los terribles años previos comencé a esperar que aquel salto en el tiempo, tan arbitrario como cualquier convención humana, también propiciase un giro rotundo en mi vida. (484)

Iván, hoping to radically change his own life by celebrating the turn of the millennium, feels personally offended and unbalanced, when Cuban authorities decide that the new Millennium—correctly for mathematicians, but contrary to the rest of the world—will officially begin in Cuba at the end of the year 2000, and not at the end of 1999. He interprets this as yet another instance in which “la historia y la vida se ensañaron alevosamente con nosotros, con mi generación, y, sobre todo, con nuestros sueños y voluntades individuales, sometidas por los arreos de las decisiones inapelables” (485).

The sense that one is left behind as regards the rest of the world is something felt to be oppressive by all protagonists, unlike in the earlier historical novels of Carpentier, Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, or Reinaldo Arenas, where the act of naming and of rewriting history was felt to be necessary or even liberating. Here, instead, the sense of history, of knowing how the past connects to the present, and of becoming aware of a forgotten part of the past, only adds to the tension that exists between the individual’s own sense of time and History, or else, between the individual’s reasoning and the destiny or causality imposed from outside.

For Fredric Jameson, affective investment is that unspoken element of the realist novel which is opposed to its narrating, chronological impulse, and enables the individual to experience its own being in the world as real, not subject to the passage of time (27-45). One might argue, following Jameson, that in *El hombre que amaba a los perros*, we see an enactment

of this principle, whereby it is the sadness, the compassion, or the disgust of the protagonist with the assassin of Trotsky that enables him to live in his own present time and distance himself from his own past. Yet it is ironically also the writing of Mercader’s history that helps him to become conscious of his disagreement with the prevalent view of history in Cuba.

However, his affective investment does not amount to nostalgia. Contrary to the disenchantment present in some of his other novels, Padura’s narrative of *desajuste* implies no nostalgia for the past, no longing for feelings or visions that existed in Cuba before the economic crisis of the 1990s. In contrast to the “off-modern,” recuperative nostalgia that Svetlana Boym has seen in many artists and writers of the former Soviet Union, who creatively rethink their relationship with a past that turned out to be different from what they thought it was (xvi-xviii), Padura’s individuals respond to their discovery of the past by looking for escape strategies. I’m referring to escape here not so much in the literal sense, even though the question of how long Trotsky will be able to escape his assassins, of whether Mercader will escape death in prison, and whether Iván wants to escape from the Special Period in Cuba, is an element of suspense, of course. But I am more interested in the common colloquial meaning of “escaping” in Cuba today that is also present in the novel, referring to the idea of getting by, surviving by distracting oneself or diverting attention.² In one of the later passages of the novel, when Iván, during the Special Period, decides to go together with his friend Dany to the beach to watch thousands of rafters leave (this was a mass exodus reaching a point of crisis in 1994), the following exchange happens between the two friends:

Jamás me imaginé que fuera a ver algo así—le dije a Daniel, embargado por una profunda tristeza—. ¿Todo para llegar a esto?

—El hambre obliga—comentó él.

—es más complicado que el hambre, Dany. Perdieron la fe y se escapan. Es bíblico, un éxodo bíblico..., una fatalidad.

—Éste es demasiado cubano. Qué éxodo ni éxodo: esto se llama escapar, ir echando un pie, quemar el tenis, pirarse porque no hay quien aguante ya... (Padura 406)

² Guillermina De Ferrari has spoken in this context of the “post-Soviet revolutionary contract,” by which Cubans responded creatively and often audaciously to the crisis of the Special Period, yet remained politically passive out of fear or because of the opacity of the general situation (6-7).

Whereas Iván couches the rafters' exodus (as it was widely called in the press) in a novelist's or theologian's terms, interpreting their departure as the expression of a metaphysical void and an ongoing tragedy, Dany is more pragmatic and sees the rafters as directly responding to the bad economy. Yet their individual reaction to having witnessed the rafters leave betrays even more ways of "escaping" Cuba: Iván begins at last to write about Ramón Mercader's life, convincing himself that he has to rescue Mercader's memory, attempting to fulfill what he considers his own personal destiny (404). Dany in turn stops writing, because, as Iván puts it, he is not willing to "tocar los aspectos dolorosos de la realidad" (405). At the end of the novel both writers reject the idea of being writers. They are not able to resolve the tension between what they intuit they should do—to write about their own contemporary reality—and that which comes to them from outside, the life story of Trotsky's assassin. In the end, the manuscript Iván finishes is not published either by him or by Dany. The novel, whose first part begins with one death in Havana in 2004 and whose third and last part, titled "Apocalypse" ends the same year with another death, becomes a symbol of survival despite the odds, and a testimony of a "history which we could not escape," as Dany puts it in his concluding lines.

In this way, we may read Padura's *El hombre que amaba a los perros* as a continuation, in a different key, of his earlier detective fiction, but also as a meta-fictional reflection on the place of the novel, and particularly the historical novel today. In his novel Padura revisits the common places of historical novel writing—the encounter of the individual with world history, the question of destiny and free will, the affective reconstitution of history through fiction noted by Jameson—yet he strikes a new cord, especially with regards to time, that, as Perry Anderson has noted, is not related to a postmodern reclaiming of history coming from the periphery. Instead, I'd like to propose that Padura's novel follows a historical logic of defeat, whereby time advances in a threatening, unreasonable manner, putting into question the individual's agency. This cultural configuration of defeat is not necessarily limited to Cuba or the Soviet Union but characteristic of all those subjects unable to adjust, not so much to the ever accelerated passage of time as in many narratives of

modernity, but to an inhuman time decreed by the state, which affects the very ability of the subject to tell a story, and of the writer to lay claim to reality. Padura’s historical novel is marked by the subject’s mad drive to escape, but also his eventual acceptance of a causality that exceeds him and that he can never quite grasp. It is therefore at the same time a challenge to and an expression of the contemporary historical novel.

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