

SPLEEN, NOSTALGIA, AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN TIME IN LEONARDO PADURA'S *LAS CUATRO ESTACIONES*

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This paper seeks to highlight the contribution made to detective literature by the Cuban Leonardo Padura, one of Latin America's foremost contemporary detective writers. With *Las cuatro estaciones*, his famous tetralogy, Padura became one of the central figures of the Latin American *neopolicíaco* sub-genre and instilled a definite renewal in Cuban detective fiction. This paper will focus on Padura's unique ways of departing not only from his national tradition but also from the 'classic' and 'hardboiled' models, hence illustrating the author's contribution to the detective genre. It is argued that Padura's tetralogy most significant innovation is its thorough articulation of the narrative identities of individuals, through a reconstruction of human time (Ricoeur) in present-day Cuba. *Las cuatro estaciones* can further be thought as a mosaical endeavour (Benjamin) that allows for the capture and additional development of fictional but credible beings' ipseities. The mosaical endeavour gives rise to other literary strategies, such as a polyphonic narration, the use of the detective pretext and the ironical subversion of the 'detachment of the detective' principle. These three strategies enable the author to refigure human time in contemporary Cuban society, in such a way that it becomes possible to grasp the meanings and origins of a generational *spleen* feeling that can be observed in most of the series' main characters – and especially in its protagonist, Mario Conde.

Detective fiction has evolved tremendously since Poe's Auguste Dupin elucidated the mystery surrounding *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. Indeed, many authors have since redefined the limits and formulaic patterns of detective fiction. Among Latin American writers, Cuban Leonardo Padura is one of the authors who have had the most influence on the (r)evolution of the genre, notably with his famous tetralogy *Las cuatro estaciones*. Its four constituents, *Pasado perfecto* (1991), *Vientos de cuaresma* (1994), *Máscaras* (1997) and *Paisaje de otoño* (1998), differ not only from the 'classic model' or the so-called 'hardboiled' crime fiction, but also significantly depart from the author's national tradition: the socialist detective fiction – the three of which are, at different levels, intertextualised and parodied.

Padura's tetralogy may be considered a twofold transgression of similarly rigid systems that impede the capture and further development of (human) novelistic content within a detective fiction work: detective narrative conventions and Cuban cultural policies under Castro's regime.¹ On the one hand, in making the human experience the centre of his detective fiction series, Padura contravenes one of the foundational tenets of classic detective fiction. Indeed, as stated in *The Sign of Four* (1890) by one of the emblematic founders of the detective fiction tradition, shifting focus away from the 'analytical reasoning from effects to causes' has long been considered a condemnable 'attempt to tinge [the exact science of detection] with romanticism' (both Conan Doyle 2001, 7).

On the other hand, Senel Paz, a Cuban writer and contemporary of Leonardo Padura, implied in *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (1990) that a socialist system, striving to live up to orthodox ideological expectations, hampers the portrayal, in the arts in general, of human beings who apparently frustrate the hopes set on the New Socialist Man, and leads to the impossibility of human fulfilment from life

¹ In 1961 Fidel Castro delivered the speech 'Palabras a los intelectuales' (Address to the intellectuals) in which he expressed his wish that all artistic production would coincide with the revolutionary ideology. It is from this speech that the quintessential mandate 'Dentro de la Revolución todo, fuera de la Revolución nada' (Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing) stemmed.

experience. By presenting the story of a friendship between David, an incarnation of the New Socialist Man, and Diego, a religious homosexual, critical of the Revolution, in 1990s Cuba, *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* offers a powerful account of a possible harmonisation between ‘spirit’ (sense of duty towards the Revolution) and ‘consciousness’ (sense of duty towards a fellow human being) that allows for the recovery of the mutuality that is essential to humanness (Dettman 2006, 36). Similarly, in *Las cuatro estaciones*, Padura is able to provide, by circumventing two rigid systems, a realistic portrait of core aspects of the human condition, in the context of present-day Cuba.

Since the emergence of endogenous detective fiction in Cuba in the early 1970s, most cultivators of the genre have sought different means to entertain and instruct, while making the virtues of the Revolution apparent in their works, either assertively or more implicitly (by contrast). The performance of their writers’ role primarily as exemplary supporters of a socio-political project has greatly influenced, for instance, the essentialist and dichotomised way in which socialist detective fiction authors have tended to construct their characters’ narrative identities.

In ‘The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer’, Susan Sontag suggests that for the modern consciousness, the writer is the exemplary sufferer: the person to whom we look to be able to best express suffering (his and that of others) through his works. As a person, the man of words suffers and perceives other people’s suffering; as a writer, he transforms this suffering into art. As an exemplary suffering self, the writer therefore portrays, questions and reflects on suffering in his works (Sontag 2001, 42). Drawing on Sontag’s essay, it may be argued that with *Las cuatro estaciones*, Padura’s role as an exemplary sufferer takes precedence over that of exemplary supporter – phenomenon rather new to the Cuban detective fiction world. This can be seen in the way Padura, unlike most of his predecessors, articulates intimate and realistic narrative identities of multifaceted characters in a thorough, personal, and critical manner. In this sense, the author of *Las cuatro estaciones* can be said to have instilled a definite renewal in Cuban detective fiction.

Moreover, in ‘making of the very reality [his] narrative material’ (Padura 2003, 13) Padura also became one of the central figures of the Latin American *neopoliciaico* sub-genre. The Latin American *neopoliciaico*² is a distinct version of the Hispanic detective novel with its own discursive paradigms and identifiable features. Inspired by the Anglo-American hardboiled crime writing, the Latin American *neopoliciaico* emerged in the 1970s and has come to be characterised by its sharp and critical scrutiny of contemporary urban daily realities. Socially committed and therefore concerned with realistically depicting the singularities of Latin American postmodernity, *neopoliciaico* authors constantly and dynamically test generic boundaries. At times emulating the formal and conceptual tenets of the detective fiction formulae, at times violating them consciously, *neopoliciaico* writers ultimately fulfill the core function of the genre: the artful exposition of a crime (Braham 2004, xiv).

Furthermore, as is the case with many *neopoliciaico* and postmodern detective fiction writers, the use of specific strategies to falsify the detective genre³ helps Padura depict the complexities of the ‘ordinary man’ and the chiaroscuros that constitute his daily life in contemporary Cuban society. This particularity further assimilates Padura to the Latin American *neopoliciaico* – a sub-genre often used as a pretext to critically capture contemporary realities in a context where the media are reluctant or unable to adequately perform this role. *Neopoliciaico* authors indeed tend to use the detective genre ‘to demarcate an alternative space for representation and articulation of ethicopolitical concerns’ (Braham 2004, xi-ii), a practice also characteristic of Padura’s tetralogy.

² To obtain a more detailed description of the *neopoliciaico* see: Braham pp. ix-xv.

³ Leonardo Padura himself indicated in an interview with Manuel Fernández: ‘[w]hen I write a detective fiction novel, I am aware that I am falsifying the world of detective fiction’ (Fernández 2003, 45: Authors’ translation).

However, *Las cuatro estaciones* is distinct even among the *neopoliciaco* sub-genre in the way it compels a postmodern re-evaluation of the inmost aspects of human existence and a thorough reflection on the human condition against the backdrop of 1989 Cuba. Moreover, according to Milan Kundera and Carlos Fuentes, the ‘art of the novel’ is, among other things, that of reiterating the complexity of individual and collective issues, helping uncover different aspects of existence (Kundera 1986, 25; 30), and allowing for the constant redefinition of human beings as ‘open problems’ (Fuentes 1993, 21). These artful manoeuvres are central to *Las cuatro estaciones* to such an extent that the most significant means by which Padura’s tetralogy renovates the genre is by articulating the narrative identities of individuals, through a reconstruction of human time at a given (and highly decisive) moment of Cuban history: the four seasons of the year 1989.⁴

In *Time and Narrative* (1984), Paul Ricoeur indicates that human time is neither a phenomenological time (the inner time of each consciousness) nor a cosmological (objective) time. It is the time of individual (or collective) life, action and suffering that can only acquire a figure of signifying dimension in and through the act of telling a story. Ricoeur considers fictional narrative as a *mimesis*, a creative imitation that ‘opens the kingdom of the as if’ (Ricoeur, trans. McLaughlin and Pellauer, 1988, 64); an iconic augmentation of the human world of action (Ricoeur, trans. Thompson, 1981, 292) from which one can capture and articulate the narrative beings’ selfhoods.

In the case of *Las cuatro estaciones*, the cognitive value of fiction helps make sense of potentially ‘real’ ipseities through the articulation of the characters’ narrative identities. Bearing in mind that ‘fiction and representation of reality do not exclude one another’ (Ricoeur, trans. Thompson, 1981, 291), *Las cuatro estaciones* also constitutes a useful approximation to the verisimilar ‘opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering’ (Ricoeur, trans. McLaughlin and Pellauer, 1984, 53) of individuals in contemporary Cuban society. A purposeful refiguration of human time first and foremost, *Las cuatro estaciones* thus provides the readers with an invaluable opportunity to explore in depth conflicts that are specific to the(ir) human condition, and to further generate interpretations of the deep implications of these issues for the(ir) human experience. By means of strategies that render possible such an enterprise, *Las cuatro estaciones*, among other detective fiction works, thus transcends the mere divertimento mode that has a priori been conferred to the genre.

The strategic falsification of the detective fiction genre is a common feature among the authors who cultivate the Latin American *neopoliciaco*; Leonardo Padura does not constitute an exception to such proclivity. Nevertheless, this paper will only explore those strategies that allow for what arguably represents Padura’s main contribution to the genre: the articulation of the narrative identities of fictional but plausible individuals, through a careful reconstruction of human time in present-day Cuba.

Given that Padura’s contribution is driven by the existence of a well-developed novelistic plot, the author’s most significant means of falsifying the genre is that which prompted the very restoration of this long-banned novelistic plot, within the narrative framework of a detective fiction work. Such an opportunity is provided by the existence, in the four constituents of *Las cuatro estaciones*, of a multiplicity of interacting textual dimensions: the detective plot, the parodied detective works and traditions, the novelistic plot, the many levels of metatextual references, and so on.

⁴ 1989 in the Cuban context is the year in which ‘the dreams and illusions of a whole generation irremediably broke into pieces’ (Vilches 2006, 70: Authors’ translation). The implosion of the Soviet Union and the subsequent drying up of its subsidies translated into an even archer economic reality and greater sacrifices for Cuban people. Internal convulsions such as the Ochoa and La Guardia corruption affair further contributed to alter Cuban social dynamics. For an insightful analysis of the significance of 1989 in the Cuban context see Vilches pp. 69-71.

In *Detective Fiction from Latin America* (1990) Amelia S. Simpson suggests that most Latin American detective fiction works can be read as palimpsests. In these works, the relationship between two (or sometimes more) juxtaposed textual layers allows authors to ‘offer material worthy of serious critical consideration beyond those aspects relating to the detective genre alone [and] make readers aware of features of culture and society’ (Simpson 1990, 24). Though the notion of the palimpsest is relevant to many Latin American detective works, *Las cuatro estaciones*’s textual complexity goes beyond such a conceptualisation.

Indeed, all four constituents of Padura’s tetralogy involve a wide array of postmodernist literary techniques that complexify their narrative framework; more so given the literary background and ongoing literary aspirations of Mario Conde, the police inspector of the series. A frequent and lasting resort to intertextuality and metafictional devices can therefore be apprehended in all four books, but especially in *Máscaras* (1997). A gem of intertextual allusions and metaliterary observations that crosses generic boundaries, *Máscaras* abounds in evocations of the Bible, Antonin Artaud’s famous manifesto *The Theater and its Double* (1964), Sophocles’s tragedies, Virgilio Piñera’s *Electra Garrigó* (1941), Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (1982), and Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *Life is a Dream* (1636), to name but a few. The novel even includes a short story written by Mario Conde himself which is also the subject of literary criticism for his friend, the playwright Alberto Marqués, who relates it in his analysis to *The Stranger* (1942) by Albert Camus, as well as other works. Closely linked to intertextuality and metafiction, parody is also a recurrent device throughout Padura’s tetralogy, especially in *Paisaje de otoño* (1998), a novel often read as a tribute to Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1930). The variety and quality of such literary techniques, and the artful manner in which they all piece together with the rest of the textual – and metatextual – elements to form an interacting narrative whole, calls for a concept that might articulate *Las cuatro estaciones* beyond the horizon of the palimpsest.

This can further be exemplified by the following passage from *Máscaras*:

Porque no sé si notó que todo esto [referring to the crime that gave rise to the story and its subsequent investigation] parecía una tragedia griega, en el mejor estilo de Sófocles [...] Pero todos enfrentan un destino que los supera, los obliga y los impulsa en la acción dramática [...] Lo único lamentable de este juego casi teatral es que los dioses hayan escogido a Alexis para el sacrificio macabro de su destino. (Padura 1997, 220-1)

(Because I don’t know if you’ve noticed that all of this [referring to the crime that gave rise to the story and its subsequent investigation] looked like one of Sophocles’ finest tragedies [...] But they all face a destiny that exceeds them, that compels them, and drives them into dramatic action [...] The only deplorable aspect of this theatre-like game is that the gods have chosen Alexis for the macabre sacrifice of his destiny.) (Authors’ translation)

This passage, while prompting the consideration of *Máscaras* as a literary representation of a tragic theatrical staging, also denotes a philosophical determinism in its allusions to destiny and fatality. This is, according to Artaud’s *The Theatre and its Double* – referred to many times in the novel – not only one of the central features of the Greek tragedy but also some of the most powerful imagery of the cruelty that theater is supposed to re-present (Artaud 1964, 157-8; 190-1). This ‘superior determinism’ (Artaud 1964, 158) is often alluded to in *Máscaras*: ‘*Sintió que ambos se desplazaban con la premeditación de dos actores conscientes de sus movimientos escénicos?*’ (Padura 1997, 96) (He felt they both moved with the premeditation of actors

conscious of their movements on stage) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2005, 89); '*El Conde pensó otra vez que estaba en medio de una representación teatral demasiado parecida a una realidad prefabricada y en la que cada cual ya tenía asignado su papel y su asiento*' (Padura 1997, 169-170) (The Count again felt he was in the middle of a theatrical performance too much like a pre-packaged reality where everyone had their role and seat assigned) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2005, 166). Such determinism is also the central theme of the short story written by Mario Conde.

This example suggests an interaction between the detective plot (the crime and its investigation), the novelistic plot (Mario Conde's literary aspirations) and metatextual elements (the sensation of determinism that arises from references to tragedies and *The Theater and its Double*). This interaction in turn prompts the existence of a metadiegetic gloss (Mario Conde's short story), which later has repercussions at the level of the novelistic plot, independently of the detective plot. Indeed, after the resolution of the crime and the closure of the investigation, Mario Conde visits Alberto Marqués, who is now a friend rather than a suspect. The development of this unexpected friendship between them and the positive literary criticism Conde receives from Marqués later (in *Paisaje de otoño*) influence his decision to quit his job as a policeman to become a full-time writer.

Consequently, a concept that emphasises the simultaneous nature of these interactions is required in order to do justice to the richness and complexity of the interactions between the textual elements of Padura's tetralogy. The palimpsest seems to render more adequately the notion of juxtaposition than that of simultaneous interaction of parts that form a more complete and fully enmeshed whole.

In the epistemo-critical prologue of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), Walter Benjamin provides an insightful analogy that can be employed for the purpose of conceptualising Padura's tetralogy in a manner that conveys such simultaneous interactions more fully than does the concept of the palimpsest. *Las cuatro estaciones*, along with other postmodern detective fiction works, can be considered a mosaical endeavour, in which the detective plot represents the underlying structure on which mosaical particles – rich textual elements and literary devices – have been purposefully disposed. The interaction between the mosaical particles and the underlying detective plot (and between the mosaical particles among themselves) ultimately yields a brilliant mosaical representation of a novelistic truth that can 'only [be] grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter' (Benjamin, trans. Osborne, 1998, 29).

Las cuatro estaciones can therefore be envisioned as a successfully proportioned and interacting narrative arrangement, in which elements have been strategically pieced together to allow for the capture and further development of fictional but credible beings' ipseities. Such a venture subsequently gives rise to the use of other literary strategies that enable the reader to make sense of the characters' lives, actions, and sufferings.

To start with, narration plays a key role. By focalising his narration on Mario Conde, the omniscient extradiegetic narrator allows the reader to get a good sense of what happens in the lives and the minds of an ordinary man and those who surround him. Throughout the tetralogy, this narrator alternates occasionally with other intradiegetic narrators who, in the first person, narrate a part of the(ir) story. While their voices do not necessarily contribute to the detective plot's progression, they allow for the development of autonomous characters that come to life and gain psychological thickness, independently of the external narrator. Such a polyphonic type of narration individualises the literary discourse and helps the reader make sense of the narrative identities of the main characters.

Moreover, given that *Las cuatro estaciones* is a detective fiction series with an underlying structure primarily based on the existence of crimes and the subsequent quests for their resolution, its protagonist has the

ideal pretext to come into close contact with a wide range of different characters, and has the professional legitimacy to examine their lives in close detail. This feature makes the depiction of various aspects of contemporary Cuban society possible from the perspectives of the diverse worldviews presented by the characters.

Another crucial strategy employed by Padura to further centre the tetralogy's attention on the human experience is the subversion of the 'detachment of the detective' principle, widely kept in most 'classic model' detective novels (Simpson 1990, 11). Indeed, in both *Pasado perfecto* (1991) and *Vientos de Cuaresma* (1994), destiny forces Mario Conde to open the Pandora's Box and 'free the demons of the past' (Padura 2000, 24) in order to fulfill his professional obligations⁵. This ironic subversion of one of the basic principles of the formula of scientific rigour that characterises classic detective literature provides Mario Conde with the opportunity to also investigate his past, and that of his generation. Nostalgia, evocation of the past and sporadic flashbacks being constants throughout *Las cuatro estaciones*, the human time that can be reconstituted based on Padura's novels goes back well before the year 1989.

Another central aspect of *Las cuatro estaciones's* narrative universe, made manifest through Padura's reconstruction of the human time of representative figures of his generation, is the articulation of a *spleen* feeling. Disenchantment is a core component of this complex mood, and it has been the subject of the critical attention of scholars such as Jorge Fornet.

In 'La narrativa cubana entre la utopía y el desencanto', Fornet analyses the disenchantment typical of Padura's generation, the first to have grown up under the Revolution. According to Fornet, the 'generación del desencanto' (disenchanted generation) is the result of 'a trauma caused by the failure of a utopia' (2003, 19) and is reflected in the works of many contemporary Cuban writers. Furthermore, the central features of this *desencanto* – obsession to rescue the past; constant yearning for what could not translate into real world experience; nostalgia for the ghosts of the past; the feeling of living a nightmare from which one would like to wake up – can easily be identified in the tetralogy's characters.

However, beyond *desencanto*, what the tetralogy makes perceptible in its characters is an overwhelming malaise due to the loss of, and subsequent yearning for, an ideal, an absolute; a postmodern void of meaning, purpose and direction; a profound melancholy and a desperate quest for making sense of existence; and an ever increasing alienation. This *spleen* feeling can be observed in most of the series' main characters, and Mario Conde is possibly the most archetypal and well-rounded illustration in this regard.

A deeply nostalgic, critical and sensitive man, Mario Conde is condemned to melancholy for being the 'bloody rememberer' his best friend Carlos calls him (Padura 2001, 12):

La ruta de los recuerdos de Mario Conde siempre terminaba en la melancolía. Cuando atravesó la barrera de los treinta años [...] descubrió que le gustaba recordar con la esperanza de mejorar su vida, y trataba a su destino como un ser vivo y culpable, al que se le podía lanzar reproches y recriminaciones, insatisfacciones y dudas. (Padura 2000, 189)

⁵ In *Pasado perfecto*, the case he is given is the disappearance of Rafael Morín, one of his high school classmates whose wife, Tamara, is precisely the woman whom he was in love with for many years. In *Vientos de cuaresma*, the investigation revolves around the high school that Mario Conde and most of the characters who have remained his close friends attended.

(Mario Conde's strolls down memory lane always ended in melancholy. When he crossed the watershed of his thirtieth year [...] he found he liked remembering in the hope that he would improve his life and treated his destiny like a guilty party he could bury under reproaches and recriminations or moans and groans.) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2007, 197)

Incorrigibly self-reflective and an 'egocentric sufferer' (Padura 2000, 208), Mario Conde cannot help but constantly dwell upon his 'existencia equivocada' (mistaken existence):

¿Qué has hecho con tu vida, Mario Conde?, se preguntó como cada día, y como cada día quiso darle marcha atrás a la máquina del tiempo [...] desnudarse de su existencia equivocada y encontrar el punto preciso donde pudiera empezar de nuevo. ¿Pero tiene sentido? [...] aquella larga cadena de errores y casualidades que habían formado su existencia no se podía repetir, debía haber algún modo de enmendarla o al menos romperla y ensayar otra fórmula, en verdad otra vida. (Padura 2000, 56; 28)

(What have you made of your life, Mario Conde? he asked himself daily as he attempted to reverse the time machine [...] cast off his errant ways and find the exact point at which to begin afresh. But does it make any sense? [...] there couldn't be a repeat of the long chain of errors and coincidences that had shaped his existence; there must be some way to change it or at least break out and try another formula, in reality another life.) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2007, 49; 18)

The *spleen* feeling of the tetralogy's protagonist, apart from deriving from his own individual way of relating to his reality, is also a consequence of his particular destiny. Indeed, censorship has played a decisive role in Mario Conde's truncated literary debuts (Padura 1997, 64-7), thus greatly contributing to seal his fate as a failed writer-turned-policeman by a succession of circumstances (Padura 2000, 140-3). This undeniable personal drama constitutes another important vector of disillusion and alienation in Mario Conde's life:

Nada es dulce en las noches de un policía [...] Horror al pasado, miedo al futuro: así corren hacia el día las noches del policía [...] Ser policía, durante más de diez años, le había engendrado tensiones que lo perseguían por todas partes [...] Y ahora recordaba cuánto había querido dedicarse a la literatura y ser un verdadero escritor, en los días cada vez más lejanos del Pre y los primeros años de su inconclusa carrera universitaria. [...] aquella siempre postergada afición artística, tan inadecuada para alguien dedicado por oficio a la represión y no a la creación, a las verdades sórdidas y no a las fantasías sublimes... (Padura 2000, 24; 1997, 23; 113-4)

(Nothing is gentle in the night of a policeman [...] Horror at the past, fear of the future: that's how a policeman's nights rush towards daytime [...] The fact that he'd been in the police for more than ten years had created tensions which pursued him [...] And he recalled how much he'd wanted to devote himself to literature and be a real writer, in the ever more distant days of school and the first years of his unfinished university degree. [...] his eternally deferred artistic instincts, so

inappropriate in someone professionally dedicated to repression and not creation, to sordid truths, not sublime fantasies...) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2008, 27; Padura, trans. Bush, 2005, 12; 108-9)

Mario Conde's *spleen* further takes on an eloquent generational dimension, through the accounts of his friends' lives, and especially through Andrés's 'generational laments' (Padura 1998, 25):

Porque tú sabes que somos una generación de mandados [...] Para nosotros ya todo está previsto, ¿no? Desde el círculo infantil hasta la tumba del cementerio que nos va a tocar, todo lo escogieron, sin preguntarnos nunca ni de qué mal nos queríamos morir. Por eso somos la mierda que somos, que ya no tenemos ni sueños y si acaso servimos para hacer lo que nos mandan [...] ¿Tú [el flaco Carlos] no fuiste a la guerra de Angola porque te mandaron? ¿No se te jodió la vida encaramado en esa silla de mierda por ser bueno y obedecer? ¿Alguna vez se te ocurrió que podías decir que no ibas? Nos dijeron que históricamente nos tocaba obedecer y tú ni siquiera pensaste en negarte [...] Y éste [El Conejo] ¿Dónde se le perdió todo lo que siempre dijo que quería ser y que nunca ha sido en su vida? No me jodas, Carlos, por lo menos déjame estar convencido de que mi vida es un desastre... (Padura 1998, 23-4)

(Because you [Skinny Carlos] know we are a generation that obeyed orders [...] Everything was pre-planned, wasn't it? From playschool to the spot in the cemetery assigned for us, everything decided for us, and they didn't even ask what disease we wanted to die of. That's why we are a pile of shit, because we don't dream, we just exist to carry out our orders [...] Weren't you ordered to the war in Angola? Wasn't your life fucked up and you stuck in that shitty chair because you were a good little boy who always said yes? Did you ever dream of saying you wouldn't go? They told us that historically we had to obey and you didn't even think to refuse [...] And as for this fellow [Rabbit]. At what point did he give up on everything he said he wanted to be and never got to be in his life? Don't piss me off, Carlos, at least grant me the right to believe my life is a disaster...) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2006, 12-3)

It is precisely Andrés, the ostensible success story of Mario Conde's group of friends, who, after sporadically venting his frustrations throughout the tetralogy, brings it to a close by articulating 'the terrible sum of their mistaken lives' (Padura 1998, 251: Authors' translation):

[H]asta que una mañana me levanté sin deseos de ir al trabajo, ni de vestir a los niños, ni de hacer lo que siempre se suponía que debía hacer y sentí cómo toda mi vida había sido una equivocación. Eso te suena, ¿verdad, Conde? Ese saber que algo torció el rumbo que uno debió coger, que algo te empujó por un camino que no era el tuyo. Esa sensación horrible de descubrir que no sabes cómo has llegado hasta donde estás, pero que estás en una parte que no es la que tú querías. (Padura 1998, 248-9)

([U]ntil one morning I got up not wanting [U] to go to work, or dress the children, or do any of what I was supposed to do and I felt as though my life was all a big mistake. Does this ring any bells, Conde? The

knowledge that something diverted the route you should have taken, that something pushed you along a path that was not yours. The dreadful feeling when you discover you don't know how you've got where you are, but that you are somewhere you don't want to be.) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2006, 250-1)

This horrible sensation – Andrés's main motivation to finally decide to leave Cuba – is echoed not only by Mario Conde but also by an entire generation that suddenly finds itself in a place it never wanted to be, for the sake of a waning utopia.

In the face of the progressive loss of impetus in one of the major projects of modernity – socialism – *Las cuatro estaciones's* characters emerge as emblematic victims of a deceived generation. As is made explicit by Andrés, the possibilities for self-realisation for these characters have been irreversibly compromised to promote an ambitious societal mission that ultimately results in proliferating everyday contradictions and complications for them.

In a post-utopian context, this generation's vain historical sacrifice can but lead to a profound feeling of void – typical of the *spleen* – that is made manifest in the tetralogy through themes such as the resurgence of religion. Mario Conde, *Las cuatro estaciones's* self-reflective aspiring literatus, also contributes, drawing attention to this postmodern void in his own quest for making sense of his *spleen* feeling and that of his generation:

Mirando el descenso veloz del sol pensó que le gustaría escribir algo sobre el vacío de la existencia: no sobre la muerte o el fracaso o la decepción, sólo sobre el vacío. Un hombre ante su nada. Valdría la pena si lograba encontrar un buen personaje. ¿Él mismo sería un buen personaje? Seguro que sí, últimamente sentía demasiada autocompasión y el resultado podía ser inmejorable: toda la oscuridad revelada, todo el vacío en un solo individuo... (Padura 2001, 130)

(As he observed the sun's rapid descent he thought he would like to write something about the emptiness of existence: not about death or failure or disillusion, only emptiness. A man facing the void. It would be worthwhile if he could find a good character. Could he himself be that character? Sure he could, recently he'd been feeling too much self-pity and the result might be more than perfect: the entire darkness revealed, the entire void in a single individual...) (Padura, trans. Bush, 2008, 164)

In conclusion, Leonardo Padura's *Las cuatro estaciones* stands out as an adroit mosaical endeavour that purposefully affords itself the literary means to approximate and examine in close detail the 'opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering' (Ricoeur, trans. McLaughlin and Pellauer, 1984, 53) within the narrative framework of a detective fiction work. Padura's falsification thus paradoxically leads, arguably, to his most significant contribution to the genre. In his quest to critically capture and articulate plausible narrative beings' selfhoods, through a careful reconstruction of human time in post-utopian, out-of-breath contemporary Cuba, Padura ultimately renders quasi-tangible the generational *spleen* of the many possible collateral damages of an unfulfilled country's destiny.

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