Leonardo Padura Fuentes, Symbol of the New Cuban Literature:

Comments on Pasado perfecto

(Preliminary draft; not to be published without authorization of the author)

Prepared for delivery at the 2000 Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Hyatt Regency Miami, March 16-18, 2000

John M. Kirk,
Department of Spanish,
Dalhousie University,
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Canada B3H 3J5

Fax: 902-494-1997
Email: kirk@is.dal.ca
Leonardo Padura Fuentes, Symbol of the New Cuban Literature:
Comments on Pasado perfecto

Few Cuban writers have been feted in the glossy upscale magazine, Cigar Aficionado—but Leonardo Padura managed to be included among some rather influential company in a recent number. In all there are only eleven profiles, ranging from politicians (Raúl Castro, Ricardo Alarcón, Roberto Robaina and Carlos Lage) to popular figures in the sports realm (athletes Ana Fidelia Quirot, Teófilo Stevenson and Javier Sotomayor) and cultural world (Carlos Varela, Manolín, and Eusebio Leal). Heady company indeed for the writer from Mantilla, a dusty suburb of Havana, of which Padura is extremely proud. In the controversial June 1999 issue (which Miami politicians and functionaries sought to ban because of what they perceived as favorable accounts of Cuban reality), there is in fact a significant entry for Padura, the only writer to be featured.

The reference in Cigar Aficionado hints at the recent, controversial nature of Padura’s work, and in particular his novel Máscaras (“First published abroad, the sale of this book was, until recently, banned from Cuba…”). The article seeks to present him (incorrectly) as a symbol of opposition, claiming that he “represents a class of Cuban writers who, in the future, may be able to work with greater freedom.” In actual fact Padura has been in the vanguard of Cuban literature for a decade, both as a literary critic (he has two excellent works of literary criticism on Carpentier and the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, and edited the important anthology of Cuban short stories, El submarino amarillo (Cuento cubano 1966-1991), and as a novelist. He has also written five movie scripts, and a number of short stories.

But it is his novels which have deservedly received so much critical attention. In all he has five to his credit, an initial (and somewhat predictable) love story, Fiebre de caballos (1988), and four superb novels revolving around the exploits of a Havana detective, Mario Conde. Springing from his long journalistic career (first with El Caimán Barbudo, and then with Juventud Rebelde), there are also two books of interviews published, one with Cuban baseball stars, and another--particularly interesting--anthology with salsa singers, Los rostros de la salsa (1997). He is also the co-editor of a forthcoming book of interviews on contemporary Cuban literature, “Culture and the Cuban Revolution: Conversations in Havana” (with the University Press of Florida), and is currently working on a new novel.

Undoubtedly the literary reputation to date of Leonardo Padura evolves around his series of novels dealing with the exploits of Mario Conde. In all there are four novels, grouped together in what Padura has called “The Four Seasons.” The first of these was Pasado perfecto, first published in Mexico in 1991, and subsequently published in Cuba in 1995. The second novel of the series was Vientos de cuaresma, published in Cuba in 1994, and awarded the “Cirilo Villaverde” prize for 1993 by UNEAC (the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba) for the best novel published in Cuba that year. Then came Máscaras, the novel which deservedly solidified Padura’s reputation. It received the prestigious Café Gijón prize in Madrid in 1995, was
published by Tusquets Editores (and since translated into Italian, French and German), and was later published in Havana in 1997. The fourth, and final, novel of the “Seasons,” is Paisajes de otoño (1998), published first in Spain (for contractual reasons), and then in Cuba. It is soon to be made into film, in a Spanish-Cuban joint production, with Jorge Perrugoría (of “Fresa y chocolate” and “Guantanamera” fame) playing the lead role of Mario Conde.

This brief presentation examines the first novel of the series dealing with Conde, Pasado perfecto. Its objective is quite simple: to analyze the novel, emphasizing its insightful comments on contemporary Cuba, the psychological depth in the portrayal of the protagonist (and to a lesser extent some of the secondary characters), and the outstanding literary value of the novel. Any one of the four novels in “Las cuatro estaciones” could have been selected for this purpose—since all share similar merits. (My own “favorite” is Máscaras, a novel of chilling political intrigue, social commentary, and an intricate plot). Since Pasado perfecto is the first of the series, however, it seemed particularly useful to examine this work.

Introducing Mario Conde...

Padura himself has described well the character of his protagonist, Mario Conde, who appears in all four novels: “es un hombre irreal, construido para la literatura; alguien que rechaza la violencia, odia la represión, detesta las armas y que sueña con tener una casa en Cojímar frente al mar para escribir novelas.” The problem is, however, that el Conde—as he is often referred to—is a policeman, called upon to solve a variety of serious crimes, and this in a society where machismo is prized, and where socialist revolutionary values are to be imposed. Clearly this ensuing psychological tension makes for an interesting dynamic.

From the outset the character of this somewhat reluctant policeman is presented in an unusual fashion. Not for him the tough, brash style of some of his literary confreres. Instead the very first page of Pasado perfecto gives a clear indication that we should not expect many similarities with protagonists from the detective genre, as he struggles to come to terms with his hangover, only to vomit copiously: “Vio en una penumbra remota su imagen de penitente culpable, arrodillado frente al inodoro, cuando descargaba oleadas de un vómito ambarino y amargo que parecía interminable”(p. 11). The frailties of the human condition (including too-frequent visits to the ronero), and a profound self-questioning are thus shown from the outset as the characteristics of el Conde. Throughout the novel (and indeed throughout the entire series), he will reveal his innermost concerns and weaknesses. As he explains in one particularly moving confrontation with Tamara, a woman he has known since his youth, he harbors many fears: “A los años que me están pasando por arriba y están acabando conmigo y con el plazo de mis sueños. A que se muera el Flaco y me quede solo y me sienta más culpable todavía. A que el cigarro me mate a mí. A no hacer bien mi trabajo. A la soledad, mucho miedo a la soledad”(p.132).

Mario does not look like a policeman. More importantly, he does not feel like one—and is even unsure why he chose the profession. Later in the novel he reveals that there is a simple rationale for his vocation: “no me gusta que los hijos de puta hagan cosas impunemente”(p. 84). He is constantly adjusting the belt and his pistol (with which he never feels comfortable), and he
cannot even drive the police car properly. Indeed neither his boss at the police station nor his partner, Sergeant Manuel Palacios, seem comfortable in their chosen profession.

In fact the only policeman who really seems to enjoy life in the police force is Captain Jorrín, and he too is badly disillusioned--and considering retirement. The démise of the Soviet Union and its impact upon Cuba is already sending shock waves throughout society, as everybody struggles to “resolver” their difficulties, often illegally. Revolutionary morale has fallen, while crime has increased substantially, intimates Jorrín, who in this novel is investigating the case of a 13-year-old boy, killed by somebody who stole his bicycle: “¿Qué cosa es esto, Conde? -Cómo es posible tanta violencia? ... Fui esta mañana al entierro del muchacho y me di cuenta de que ya estoy muy viejo para seguir en esto. Coño, no sé, pero que todavía maten a un niño para robarle una bicicleta... no sé, no sé”(p.60).

Mario Conde shares many of the concerns of his older colleague. Moreover he is also well aware that he is getting old, is badly out of shape, and that his hair is thinning. He drinks and smokes to excess, and cannot develop a meaningful relationship with a woman in any book of the series. He likes music, but his favorite song is “Strawberry Fields” by the Beatles, whose music was severely frowned upon by Cuba´s cultural commissars in the 1960s because of its “decadent imperialist” nature. Clearly he does not fit in. He is a frustrated writer, apparently locked into the career path of a policeman, where his intelligence and wits have been well challenged--but he obviously is not cut out to be a policeman.

He also feel terribly, hopelessly alone--despite the occasional company of his friends, and in particular of el Flaco. He feels like a zombie, lost in a sea of time of almost Dali-like dimensions: “miró su reloj y comprobó alarmado que apenas eran las dos y media y sintió que había atravesado una larguísimá mañana de minutos perezosos y horas blandas y difíciles de superar y vio ante sus ojos un reloj de Dalí”(p. 61). He is unable to express his deepest emotions, and horribly frustrated with his life--from which he sees absolutely no escape. In one (of several) moments of lucidity, he questions himself with his normal frankness:

¿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 y uno a uno desfacer sus propios entuertos, sus engaños y excesos, sus iras y sus odios, Desnudarse de su existencia equivocada y encontrar el punto preciso donde pudiera empezar de nuevo(p.52).

The storyline of Pasado perfecto is simple: Rafael Morín Rodríguez, the head of an important Cuban enterprise, has gone missing, and it is Conde´s job to track him down. The plot thickens, as it were, because Morín had been at school with Conde, and had married the girl with whom at that time Mario had been in love. And, whereas Mario was clearly an ordinary, working class habanero, his erstwhile rival was in the political and commercial jet set, having achieved the rank of Deputy-Minister, and living extremely well--despite the deteriorating economic circumstances in revolutionary Cuba. Padura thus weaves the traditional police plot into the personal storyline, allowing his protagonist to reflect upon life during his adolescence, and too
against the backdrop of a Cuba that was itself facing a major identity crisis in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Cuba during the “Special Period”

Mario Conde is clearly the channel for Padura to cast his gaze over Cuba in the late 1980s, a time of great change and concern in Cuba. Padura, perhaps exaggerating somewhat, has noted the utility of the detective novel for this purpose: “Mi apropiación del género policial es absolutamente utilitaria, pues lo empleo para penetrar en las zonas oscuras y sórdidas de la vida cubana actual.” And so that there should be no doubt about the significant changes taking place in Cuba at the time, particularly in the wake of the Ochoa scandal, Padura provides a Foreword to his novel: “Los hechos narrados en esta novela no son reales, aunque pudieron serlo, como lo ha demostrado la misma realidad ... Nadie, por tanto, debe sentirse aludido por la novela. Nadie, tampoco, debe sentirse excluido de ella, si de alguna forma lo alude” (p.9).

Havana is falling apart around him, given the lack of government funding. There is insufficient transportation for the city’s almost 2 million inhabitants. And food is becoming increasingly difficult to find, with rations supplied by the libreta not enough to cover more than two weeks of the month. (In an amusing series of asides, in all four books of the series, Conde plays with the theme of food, talking at great length about the sumptuous meals that he devours at the house of his friend el Flaco and his mother Josefina. Given the scarcity of food in Cuba at the time, the obvious question was: where does all this food come from? In the final novel the truth is finally told. It is all in Conde’s mind, an escape from the meager rations and scarce supplies available as Soviet subsidies started to dry up, and all references to the food are an inside joke, as he tries to conjure up images of the “good old days,” when food was plentiful).

But even that period was not without its faults, insinuates el Conde, for although material conditions were notably better, there was still an extremely tight societal control, with great pressure imposed upon all to conform. The medium to illustrate this is the fate of the highschool literary journal, La Víboreña, to which Mario contributes. He clearly has a literary vocation (in the fourth novel he abandons the police force to throw himself wholeheartedly into his writing), and is pleased with the journal. Things come to a head when the budding writers are invited to meet with the director. They expect to be congratulated for their hard work and imagination. Instead they come up against ideological intransigence, and in a cliché-ridden harangue he berates both their literary efforts and their lack of revolutionary conviction:

¿Por qué todos, todos los poemas de la revista eran de amor y no había uno solo dedicado a la obra de la Revolución, a la vida de un mártir, a la patria en fin? ¿Por qué el cuento del compañero Conde era de tema religioso y eludía una toma de partido en contra de la iglesia y su enseñanza escolástica y retrógrada? ... ¿Esa es acaso la imagen que debemos dar de la juventud cubana de hoy? ¿Ese es el ejemplo que proponemos, en lugar de resaltar la pureza, la entrega, el espíritu de sacrificio que debe primar en las nuevas
generaciones...?, y ahí se formó la descojonación total (pp. 55-56).

Any doubt about the significance of this triumph of intolerance and ideological purity over liberal ideas is put to the rest with a subsequent outburst of Olguita, the teacher who had supported the students in their initiative. She condemns the “Inquisición” of the director, criticizes his ignorance (“sólo unos trogloditas políticos podían interpretar los trabajos de la revista de aquella forma”) and the “perspectiva estalinista” which he represents, and promptly hands in her resignation. Intransigence thus triumphs over creativity, a matter of great concern for Mario Conde--and Leonardo Padura.

Contemporary Cuba is the background for these four novels, and specifically the first half of the last decade, a time when the momentous scandal over the Ochoa case was unfolding, and the Soviet Union was falling apart. The end result is a climate of almost fin-de-siècle concern and introspection; there is a sense that life was changing rapidly as the old models slowly disappeared--but without any knowledge as to what was to come in its place. Before, things seemed so simple: the social organization was clear, political parameters were understood, the bulk of trade was with members of COMECON, the Soviet subsidies continued to roll in, and life was predictable. Or had been--since now Conde finds that circumstances have changed radically, and things have become very difficult to understand, much less predict.

What had appeared a “Pasado perfecto” was no more--and it was unclear what the future had to offer. As Stephen Wilkinson has correctly noted, “The obviously ironic title labels a tale of corruption of a top ministry official who is pursued by a hard drinking, heavy smoking cop whose own wavering commitment to his job is a major theme. It is the first time in Cuban detective literature that the villain is a top Party official, and also the first time that the cop is anything less than perfect.”

Nothing was to be the same anymore.

There was a wholly different reality now facing Cubans. And along with the new reality came the need to survive--at whatever the cost. Visitors to Cuba at this time could not help but be aware of the radically changed circumstances: the black market was used by all, dollars were eagerly sought, Cubans were in many ways second-class citizens in their own country (since they lacked dollars), petty theft was endemic, and prostitution again became commonplace. It was not a pleasant truth, and coming after three decades of comfortable living--the “pasado perfecto” of the title--it was a major shock to the body politic of Cuba. Almost overnight there was a new reality, one that for many was extremely hard to come to terms with. Mario Conde, walking around one night, reflects with great insight on “the new Cuba”:

Observó al mulato apacible ... esperando quizás el paso del primer extranjero elocuente para proponerle un desesperado cinco por uno, seis, mister, siete por uno, mi broder, y tengo hierba, todo para abrirse las puertas del mundo prohibido de la abundancia con pasaporte. Observó la farola del flanco opuesto, se moría de frío la rubia maquillada con incontenible lascivia, con promesas de ser caliente aunque nevara, con su boca de mamadora empedernida, la rubia para la que un mortal
de producción nacional como Mario Conde valía menos que un gargajo de borracho, esperaba los mismos dólares que su amigo el mulato rastafari y le propondría uno por treinta: su sexo juvenil y entrenado y perfumado y garantizado contra la rabia y otros males, por aquellos dólares de sus desvelos, mamada con tarifa extra, of course(p.193).

This searing new reality of course hurt—but nevertheless it was an incontrovertible fact. It is to Padura’s credit that he faced up to the challenge of presenting the new Cuba, at a time when most of his colleagues writing in this genre would have not done so.

Other Characters in the Novel

But if the protagonist of the novel is unlike anything seen before in Cuban literature (particularly in the detective genre, where policemen had traditionally been tough, self-confident revolutionary stalwarts, happily defending the goals of socialism), the same can also be said of virtually all the secondary characters. They are indeed very different. His best friend, for instance, is el Flaco Carlos, and again Padura presents a very different secondary character than had been the norm for almost three decades—for el Flaco is a war veteran, albeit one with a difference: “Pero el Flaco Carlos ya no era flaco y sólo él insistía en llamarlo así. El Flaco Carlos pesaba ahora más de doscientas libras y se moría a plazos sobre una silla de ruedas. En 1981, en Angola, había recibido un balazo en la espalda, justo sobre la cintura, que le había destrozado la médula. Ninguna de las cinco operaciones que le habían hecho desde entonces había logrado mejorar las cosas y cada día el Flaco amanecía con un dolor inédito, un nervio muerto u otro músculo inmóvil para siempre”(p.89). Not for Padura the triumphant return of a bemedalled war veteran from internationalist service, but instead a cripple devoured by frustration and anger.

Another victim of the changing times is a minor character, Zoila, a woman who was linked with Rafael Morín. She turns out to be his mistress. But Padura also employs her to illustrate how the desperate economic times being lived in Cuba had translated into her pursuing desperate measures. She in fact had become a jinetera, prostituting herself with foreigners in order to maintain her comfortable lifestyle: “parece que la niña es un bomboncito y sabe que a la gente le gusta el chocolate. Todavía no se sabe dónde coño está metida, pero no es un punto fácil, vaya, que es tremenda guaricandilla y tiene ficha de jinetera, pero sin expediente. Nada, que lo mismo anda con un mexicano que engancha a un búlgaro, que vive una temporada en el Focsa o se pasa quince días en el internacional de Varadero, pero todos sus novios tienen carro, plata y buena posición. Ya tú sabes”(p.11). The final comment by Sergeant Palacios, “Ya tú sabes” in fact says it all, since the phenomenon of many Cubans prostituting themselves in the early 1990s was an embarrassing experience for all, tourists and habaneros alike. Once again—as in the case of el Flaco—Padura does not shy away from the troubling issues of contemporary Cuba: instead he tackles them head-on. And, in the literary context of revolutionary Cuba, once again he blazes new territory, dealing with a wholly different set of social problems than had been seen in Cuban detective fiction before.
The victim of the plot--Rafael Morín--is presented in an unflattering portrait. When he is first seen he was a student at the same highschool as Mario Conde. He was described as “alto, casi rubio, de ojos muy claros--un azul ingenuo y desvanecido--y lucía recién bañado, peinado, afeitado, perfumado, levantado y a pesar de la distancia y el calor, tan seguro de sí mismo”(p. 19). He is clearly different from the other highschool students, apparently destined to rise in society, be it capitalist or socialist, and to profit from his endeavors. Yet at the same time his mother lives in squalor, and is generally ignored by her well-to-do son, a fast-rising star in the government hierarchy.

Morín and his wife Tamara live extremely well. There are original Portocarrero paintings on the wall of their extremely large, well-furnished house. They have a cleaning lady who comes in to tidy things up. In references that would have far greater meaning in revolutionary Cuba of the time than elsewhere in Latin America, the living conditions of Rafael and Tamara are particularly well presented. There is ample, expensive electronic equipment, plush furnishings, and a clearly wealthy lifestyle. It bothers Mario to see this opulence--as he subconsciously questions the inequality in revolutionary Cuba--and Tamara’s curt reply does little to convince him: “Oye, tú sabes que nadie trabaja como un loco por gusto. Todo el mundo busca algo y... aquí el que puede comer filete no come arroz con huevo”(p. 43).

Yet even Tamara is fairly well developed as a character. She is not the empty-headed social-climbing functionary’s wife that Padura might have been tempted to present. Her role is clearly a minor one, but nevertheless the portrayal of her is quite complex. Her major function is to allow Conde to reflect upon his youth, and on “what might have been,” had he been able to win her affection. And introspection certainly flows in his meetings with her. But she is also a representative of the class of powerful middle-management functionaries in Cuba, living well off the business trips taken by her husband and the hard currency which he manages to save (and steal), and she consciously takes full advantage of her privileged social position. She too, however, has her worries, and is concerned at the superficial lifestyle which she enjoys. In one exchange with Conde she outlines her own fears: “A sentirme más vacía. A terminar estirada y hablando de la seda y el algodón, a no vivir mi vida, a creer que lo tengo todo porque me he acostumbrado a tenerlo todo y hay cosas sin las que creo que ya no puedo vivir”(p. 135).

The issue of the double standard, or the “doble moral” as it is known in Cuba, masquerading behind revolutionary rhetoric is a common theme in the work of Padura. Hypocrisy has little place in his literary lexicon. In the case of the treatment meted out to the highschool writers in La Viboreña it is significant that it is Rafael Morín who seeks to win the students over to the principal’s side, supporting him in his confrontation with the contributors. Clearly defending the status quo when a teenager, he continues to do so in his professional career, taking advantage of his privileged background to climb his way up the ladder of opportunistic functionaries. The irony, of course, is that Morín turns out to be a crook, a person who has used his government position to steal large amounts of cash, while all the time professing loyalty to the revolutionary government.

Morín’s boss, Deputy Minister Fernández-Lorea, is also treated critically by Padura, who presents him as a pompous, self-seeking functionary, incompetent and unwilling to accept
He hides behind his position at an enterprise whose function was to purchase North American goods via third countries (necessary because of the U.S. embargo against Cuba), thereby guaranteeing himself tremendous flexibility in his business dealings. He also lives very well indeed, in a huge 3-floor brick building with large balconies, and admits (almost) to receiving expensive gifts from wealthy clients abroad. He is part of the upper class of revolutionary Cuba, much like Morín (and his predecessor, who “fue demovido por un problema más o menos así, de dietas y despilfarros internos”[p.118], a functionary who uses his official position and network of connections to live extremely well. And this at a time when social polarization was beginning to be felt in Cuba after three decades of basic equality. Padura clearly has no time for these functionaries, and it shows.

**Padura’s View of the Contemporary Cuban Literary Scene**

Despite the efforts to paint Padura as an “enfant terrible” of Cuban literature, or even a dissident, the writer remains fervently Cuban, supportive of the gains of the revolution, but also critical of its negative aspects. He is manifestly honest and sincere, somewhat brusque in his manner, and focused and clear in his views. The fact that some of his work was first published abroad speaks volumes of how his novels dealing with “el Conde” were initially viewed by cultural functionaries in Cuba. He was clearly seen as a loose cannon on the literary scene--but one who could not be ignored once his work had been published abroad to great acclaim (and not by reactionary sources that often seek out potential dissidents as a means of embarassing the Cuban government).

Padura is transparent in his criticisms of the Cuban system, and they can be encountered throughout the “Four Seasons.” Padura has himself spoken to these matters:

> Las cuatro historias son bastante iconoclastas, con respecto a lo que se considera correcto, políticamente correcto por las esferas políticas y culturales cubanas. Y yo he sentido muchas veces que el silencio que hay en general en Cuba alrededor de estas novelas se debe de alguna manera a esa posibilidad de entrar en un terreno bastante riesgoso políticamente.

> Yo hablo de asuntos que son espinosos, que se han querido olvidar o que se han escamoteado sencillamente, y esto siempre entraña cierto riesgo político.\(^2\)

He is also brutally honest in his evaluation of the current cultural scene in Cuba, in which there has been a significant liberalization in recent years. The appointment two years ago of Abel Prieto, himself a respected writer, as Minister of Culture, has been particularly helpful in this regard. Indeed it was the personal intervention of Prieto that helped him publish, at a time when at other levels officials looked with some concern at his work:
No tuve dificultad para publicar *Pasado perfecto*. Lo envié a un concurso que organiza el Ministerio del Interior, un concurso para novelas policiacas que se llama “Aniversario del Triunfo de la Revolución,” y supe que los jurados consideraban que era la novela que debería ganar el premio. Pero los organizadores consideraban lo contrario, y el premio se dejó desierto. Afortunadamente la novela salió en México. Yo se la entregué, después que salió, a Abel Prieto—entonces presidente de la UNEAC. Y fue Abel Prieto en persona quien decidió que esa novela se publicara por la Unión de Escritores. Se demoró un poco en publicarse, porque en aquel momento no había papel—eran los años más terribles de la crisis económica. Y sale el libro en 1994.

Pero fue una decisión de una persona que creo ha sido muy positiva para lo que ha ocurrido en la cultura cubana en estos años, que es Abel Prieto.22

Moreover the economic difficulties facing Cuba have ironically been beneficial for Cuban culture, since they have led to cultural workers becoming less dependent on the state, seeking increasing commercial opportunities for their work.23 Padura reflects upon these changed circumstances: “En los últimos años se han producido síntomas de permisibilidad y tolerancia que antes no existían, y no porque el gobierno lo deseara ... Los escritores se han ganado ese espacio poema a poema, cuento a cuento.”24 In the 1970s, he noted, there was a culture of an officialist literature predominant in Cuba, one revolving around the concept of “reafirmación revolucionaria.” That has now been replaced—he noted—by one that “interroga a la realidad, la problematiza y busca hurgar en los problemas actuales.”25 He could well have been talking about his own work, since as noted above, this is precisely what this new anti-hero seeks to do.

Leonardo Padura is a writer with a journalist´s eye.26 His many years of working for *El Caimán Barbudo* and *Juventud Rebelde* have indeed paid off, as can be seen in “Las Cuatro Estaciones.” Put simply, he has broken the mold of detective writing in Cuba, developing new themes and characters, rejecting time-honored (and rather limp) literary practices,27 and adopting a wholly new style—one that reflects faithfully the new Cuba, warts and all. His literary talent is self-evident, as can be seen in this series of novels—and in many ways it is unfortunate indeed that in the fourth novel el Conde turns in his pistol for a typewriter. That said, given the similarities between Padura and el Conde,28 and the tremendous popularity of the literary character in Cuba, perhaps in his new profession el Conde will be able to produce his own literary gems...
1. In an autobiographical note in the novel, Padura refers to Mantilla: “Mario Conde había nacido en un barrio bullanguero y polvoriento que según la crónica familiar había sido fundado por su tatarabuelo paterno, un isleño frenético que prefirió aquella tierra estéril, alejada del mar y de los ríos, para levantar su casa, crear su familia y esperar la muerte lejos de la justicia que aún no buscaba en Madrid, Las Palmas y Sevilla” (p. 95). Leonardo Padura Fuentes, Pasado perfecto (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1995). All page references will be given in the text.

2. See the section, “Faces of Cuba,” Cigar Aficionado, June 1999, p. 102. “Those who pass Leonardo Padura on the streets of Havana would hardly suspect that this unassuming 43-year-old man is one of Cuba’s most important writers.

In 1988 he was on the jury of the Walsh Prize of the Institute of the International Association of Mystery Writers. In 1991 he received attention for his story, “El Cazador,” in the Mexican magazine Plural, and in 1997 he co-wrote the script of “Yo Soy del Son a la Salsa,” a Cuban documentary on popular Caribbean dance music. Working on the film gave him the opportunity to visit New York City several times. In 1998 he won the Café Gijón Prize for his 1997 mystery novel, Máscaras, a story that is rife with social commentary on the state of contemporary Cuba. First published abroad, the sale of the book was, until recently, banned in Cuba.

Sincere, adventurous, at once affable and intellectual, Padura represents a class of Cuba’s writers who, in the future, may be able to work with greater freedom.”

3. The novel is based upon the life of the Cuban poet José María Heredia (1803-1839), an exiled Cuban poet who is widely seen as being among the earliest exponents of a truly Cuban form of expression.

4. The UNEAC jury which awarded this prize to Padura commended him on “una novela de asunto policial de excelente factura, que desborda los estrechos marcos de este género para abrirse a un horizonte más vasto: sus páginas son un fresco de ciertas zonas de la sociedad cubana contemporánea, con sus virtudes y defectos, pequeñas grandezas y miserias cotidianas, donde se mueven personajes llenos de vida, literariamente eficaces, portadores de un modo de comportamiento, lenguaje y sicología profundamente cubanos.” Cited on the back cover of the edition of Vientos de cuaresma, published in Havana by Ediciones Unión in 1994.

5. It is interesting to note that Padura originally had no intention of publishing a series of novels. He circulated the manuscript among friends in Mexico, where it was published in late 1991. Padura gave it to the Mexican mystery writer Paco Ignacio Taibo, who decided to publish it in a collection that he was editing in the University of Guadalajara. Since popular reaction was extremely positive, it is at that point that he decided to extend the exploits of Mario Conde into a four-part series.

Padura has spoken about the unusual origins of this series: “Pasado perfecto fue como un
descubrimiento. Entré con los ojos cerrados en un cuarto oscuro, y empecé a tocar paredes y a
tantear. De ese tanteo sale esta novela, y el mundo de Mario Conde.” Interview with Leonardo

6. “Yo quería escribir una novela policiaca. Yo había descubierto entre 1986 y 1987 lo que se
puede llamar la nueva novela policiaca, sobre todo la obra de los escritores españoles, y a la nueva
generación de autores norteamericanos, y además la obra de los mexicanos, los italianos, los
argentinos. Yo quería escribir una novela que no se pareciera a las novelas policíacas cubanas.

Ya había escrito varias críticas sobre su obra, y sabía que cometían varios defectos. Uno
de ellos era en la creación del protagonista. Era muy evidente que siempre los personajes se
dividían entre buenos y malos. Y esa división se correspondía con su pertinencia política. Los
buenos eran miembros del Ministerio del Interior, personas que estaban a favor del socialismo, y
eran revolucionarios. Y los malos eran o agentes de la CIA o delincuentes cubanos que estaban
en contra de la Revolución. Y la vida es mucho más compleja que buenos y malos, que
revolucionarios contra contrarrevolucionarios. Yo quise romper con ese esquema.

Cuando empiezo a escribir Pasado perfecto, tengo como modelo los escritores de la
nueva novela policiaca donde muchas veces los personajes protagónicos no son nada heroicos,
donde la realidad es muy problemática, y está llena de matices. Y por otro lado tengo como anti-
modelo la novela policiaca cubana, con su división entre buenos y malos en esa forma tan
maniquea en que se trabajó la visión de la realidad desde una óptica muy ideologizada, y muy
politzada.” Ibid.

7.Cited in Wilfredo Cancio Isla, “‘Los escritores cubanos se han ganado un espacio creativo,’” El

8. “Estuvo claro desde el principio que Mario Conde iba a tratar de ser un hombre lo más cercano
posible a un ser humano ... Fue muy importante la decisión de hacerlo una persona con intereses
literarios, y con una visión cultural de la vida. Mario Conde para nada se parece a un policía de la
realidad cubana. Yo siempre he dicho que es un policía de la literatura, y tiene que funcionar en la
literatura.” Interview.......

9.In one telling sequence between Mario and his boss, the extent of Mario´s existential angst
becomes clear:
“Mario ... Chico, ¿por qué te metiste a policía? Dímelo de una vez, anda.” ...
“No lo sé, jefe. Hace dos años que estoy investigando y todavía no sé por qué” ...
“Ya que eres policía, ¿cuándo te vas a vestir como un policía?, ¿eh? ¿Y por qué no te afeitas
bien? Mira eso, parece que estás enfermo”(p. 23).

10. “La fobia del Conde al ejercicio para él demasiado complejo de guiar con las manos y seguir
con la vista lo que había delante y detrás del auto, y a la vez acelerar, cambiar las velocidades o
frenar con los pies, le permitía a Manolo ser chofer perpetuo”(p. 32).
11. “Cada vez que revolvía el pasado sentía que no era nadie y no tenía nada, treinta y cuatro años y dos matrimonios deshechos, dejó a Maritza por Haydée y Haydée lo dejó por Rodolfo, y él no supo ir a buscarla, aunque seguía enamorado de ella y podía perdonárselo casi todo: tuvo miedo y fue preferible emborracharse todas las noches de una semana para al final no olvidar aquella mujer y el hecho terrible de que había sido un magnífico cornudo y que su instinto de policía no lo alertó de un crimen que ya duraba meses antes del desenlace. Su voz enroquecía por días a causa de las dos cajetillas de cigarros que deschaba cada veinticuatro horas, y sabía que además de calvo, terminaría con un hueco en la garganta y un pañuelo de cuadros en el cuello, como un cowboy en horas de merienda, hablando tal vez con un aparatico que le daría voz de robot de acero inoxidables. Ya apenas leía y hasta se había olvidado de los días en que se juró ... que sería escritor y nada más que escritor y que todo lo demás eran acontecimientos válidos como experiencias vitales”(p. 51).

12. It is also worth noting the lyrics of the Beatles’ song, which in many ways correspond with the melancholic, skeptical approach of el Conde: “Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see. It’s hard to tune in, but it’s alright. It doesn’t matter much to me.”

13. Despite his profound identity crisis, Mario has not lost his sense of humor, though. On one occasion he is climbing up the stairs of an apartment building to question a witness, and realizes that he is in terrible physical shape for a policeman: “Mientras ascendía, jadeaba, respirando por la boca y sentía cómo su ritmo cardíaco se aceleraba por la falta de aire y los músculos de las piernas se entumecían con el ejercicio ... Miró a Manolo y luego a los dos tramos que faltaban hasta la puerta del sexto y con la mano imploró, espérate, espérate, necesitaba respirar, nadie puede respetar a un investigador de la policía que toca la puerta con la lengua afuera, las lágrimas en los bordes de los ojos e implora un vaso de agua, por caridad”(p.69).


16. In the summer of 1989 a public trial was held in Havana, after it had been discovered that several top Ministry of the Interior officials—headed by popular General Arnaldo Ochoa—had been using Cuba as a conduit for cocaine smuggling into the United States. Ochoa, who had been the head of Cuban forces in Nicaragua and Angola, was found guilty and executed. The scandal sent shockwaves throughout Cuban society.

17. “Oye bien: las malangas que tú trajiste, hervidas, con mojo y les eché bastante ajo y naranja agria; unos bistecitos de puerco que quedaron de ayer, imagínate que están casi cocinados por el adobo y alcanzan a dos por cabeza; los frijoles negros me están quedando dormiditos, como a ustedes les gusta, porque están cuajando sabroso y ahora voy a echarle un chorrito del aceite de oliva argentino que compré en la bodega; el arroz ya le bajé la llama, que también le eché ajo, como te dijo el nicaragüense amigo tuyo. Y la ensalada: lechuga, tomate y rabanitos. Ah, bueno, y el dulce de coco rayado con queso... ¿No te has muerto, Condesito?”(p. 28)

19. “En la historia yo quería que el personaje malo, negativo, fuera lo que habitualmente en Cuba es un héroe positivo, un hombre correcto, que pertenece al ‘Establishment.’ En el caso de Pasado perfecto es un hombre con rango de vice ministro, pero en realidad se va revelando en toda la novela que es un gran oportunista, un gran arribista, y que es un personaje sencillamente funesto.” Interview, op. cit.

20. Tamara speaks with great insight about the advantages that came with her husband’s vaunted position: “él no se conformaba ya con nada, y soñaba con más y jugaba a sentirse un ejecutivo poderoso, creo que se imaginaba que era el primer yuppie cubano o algo así... Pero yo también me acostumbré a vivir fácil, a que hubiera de todo y a que todo fuera cómodo, que él hablara con un amigo para que yo no hiciera el servicio social en Las Tunas y a que las vacaciones fueran en Varadero y todo eso” (p. 197).

21. Interview, op. cit.

22. Ibid.

23. “Si bien ha habido una crisis en la producción cultural institucional--o sea se hacen menos películas, se publican menos libros, se hacen menos representaciones de teatro--pienso que la creación ha dado un salto importante de grado de libertad en la medida en que el creador ha ganado distancia del estado cubano. Yo mismo no dependo para vivir en estos momentos del estado cubano, y eso me da una margen de libertad que antes no tenía. Y creo que ocurre con muchos otros creadores.” Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. The combination of journalism and literary experimentation is worth noting. Padura has commented on this phenomenon when asked which came first, his literary or journalistic vocation: “Vinieron juntos, y se fueron como alternando. Donde yo primero trabajé es el Caimán Barbudo. Empiezo a trabajar allí en octubre del ’80, tres meses después de haberme graduado. Y trabajo en el Caimán durante tres años. Es una época en que hago mucha crítica literaria. Hago muchas entrevistas a escritores, a teatristas, a músicos--porque era el perfil de la revista. Y estoy allí hasta el ’83, y durante esa época escribo los primeros cuentos que considero que son salvables.

Ya comienzo a hacer periodismo, realmente periodismo, a finales del ´83, cuando paso a trabajar en Juventud Rebelde. Paso a Juventud Rebelde porque hay una gran crisis en el Caimán Barbudo donde varios periodistas somos expulsados por distintos motivos--casi todos por considerarnos gente problemática ideológicamente.”

His experiences in the daily newspaper Juventud Rebelde were particularly important for his understanding of Cuban reality: “Es una época en que conozco profundamente la realidad cubana porque viajo mucho por el país. Y con un sentido mucho más profundo que el simple plan
27. Another noteworthy innovation is his use of the vernacular, since earlier detective novels employed a stilted, correct form of Spanish. By contrast Padura’s characters reflect the rich (and complex) language of the street. One brief exchange between Mario Conde and his colleague Captain Contreras will perhaps illustrate this: “Oye, no me quieras meter en candela que este hombre tiene vara alta... Hay un ministro que llama al Viejo y todo. ¿Tú sabes de cajón si ha estado metido en el lio de los fulas?” (p. 169).

In an interview with Padura he commented upon this deliberate approach, indicating that his journalistic training had been particularly helpful in this regard: “Fue una intención completamente consciente. Creo que la escritura de los diálogos se me da bastante bien. Y creo que lo aprendí haciendo entrevistas. Y sí hay una intención absoluta de reflejar la forma real del habla de los cubanos, sin que sea un tránsito fácil del habla popular al habla literaria, porque siempre hay allí una distancia que uno tiene que saber superar más o menos con delicadeza literaria, con un estilo. Pero creo que los personajes hablan bastante parecido a cómo habla la gente en la calle.” Interview, op. cit.

28. “El Conde se parece bastante a mí, aunque yo no soy Mario Conde, ni Mario Conde soy yo. Es un personaje de ficción con su propia historia, pero compartimos muchísimos rasgos. Se crió en un barrio igual que el mío, de una forma muy parecida a la mía, con amigos muy parecidos a los míos. Y, de alguna manera, la tristeza, el escepticismo, la melancolía de Mario Conde son míos también.” Ibid.