



Hipertexto 15
Invierno 2012
pp. 114-123

**Of Authors, Criminals, and Detectives:
Metaphysical Detective (Meta)fiction in
Edmundo Paz Soldán's *Río Fugitivo***

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Edmundo Paz Soldán was born in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 1967. He is the author of several short story collections and novels including *Las máscaras de la nada* (1990), *Días de papel* (winner of the national novel award “Erich Guttentag,” 1992), *Desapariciones* (1994), *Alrededor de la torre* (1997), *Río fugitivo* (finalist for the “Premio Romulo Gallegos,” 1998), *Sueños digitales* (2000), *La materia del deseo* (2001), *El delirio de Turing* (2002), and *Imágenes del incendio* (2005). *Río fugitivo* is a novel set in Paz Soldán’s home city of Cochabamba. The narrator of the novel, Roberto, or Roby, remembers a time in his adolescence, thirteen years prior to the present, when he was preoccupied with writing crime fiction and creating perfect crimes for his fictional detective, Mario Martínez, to investigate and solve. What Roby comes to discover, however, is that the fictional crimes of his stories can never be perfect because a perfect crime is one that cannot be solved through the logical endeavors of a detective following clues. It is only in the realm we call reality that such perfect crimes can and do occur. Roby himself inadvertently becomes involved in a series of perfect crimes when he takes it upon himself to investigate the death of his thirteen-year old brother, Alfredo, who dies as a result of a drug overdose. As Roby looks for Alfredo’s drug pusher and indirect killer, he comes to realize that the rules of logic and deduction that define the world of detective fiction will not necessarily produce solutions in the real world that surrounds him. The real world is tainted by rumors and gossip that may or may not be true, as well as by social and political corruption and economic instability, all of which combine to make the straight-forward answers one traditionally finds in detective literature impossible to achieve in the realm of reality. Unable to be a Sherlock Holmes and rely on logic and deduction to solve the “murder” of his brother, Roby allows himself to be carried away by hearsay and suspicion, changing from detective to criminal when he, himself, commits the perfect crime, killing his possibly innocent cousin, Mauricio. In this study, I will examine the way in which Roby’s authorial self-conscious reflections combine with elements of the detective genre in order to create a new type detective story, one which also comments on the unstable situation in 1985 Bolivia. Most

contemporary Spanish American crime fiction either focuses on the questioning of reality through writing or on commenting on the socio-political situation through its contents. What makes Paz Soldán's novel stand out is the fact that it is able to comment on a socio-political reality while simultaneously questioning the very notion of its existence.

Paz Soldán's novel belongs to a genre that has come to be known as "metaphysical detective fiction," defined by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney as "a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions - such as narrative closure or the author's role as surrogate reader- with the intention or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (2). Roby begins his literary career by authoring traditional detective fiction in the form of stories that feature the character of Mario Martínez as the detective. These stories have found an audience in Roby's classmates at Don Bosco, the Catholic high school where he is a student. The majority of Roby's classmates, however, do not read books and, consequently, do not realize that his stories are nothing more than plagiarized plots from Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers, and a number of other authors associated with the traditional school of detective fiction. Roby would like to be more creative in his endeavors, he would prefer to add a certain depth of character to his detective by making Mario Martínez capable of the same metaphysical reflections that preoccupy Roby's own mind. Doing so, however, could cost him his audience, as the "compañeros que leen quieren acción, un caso simple y entretenido, sin detectives melancólicos ni metafísicos asesinos bajo la lluvia" (18). Thus, Roby keeps employing the original formula in his plots, plagiarizing the classical authors and creating mysteries for his logical detective to resolve, all the while hoping that one day, he, too, will be able to write an original novel: "El desafío para mí consiste en escribir pronto una novela propia, echar a andar a mi imaginación con ayuda de otros pero sin plagio: ésa es la única forma de asegurarme de que, algún día, yo también seré plagiado" (61).

Roby's dreams do come true, years later when he is able to write his new novel: "ahora ya sabía qué puertas abrir, con qué enfrentarme en mi nueva novela. Ahora ya no tenía miedo y estaba listo para sumergirme en el fango doloroso y sagrado de mi adolescencia, y extraer de allí un relato" (440). The new novel in question is none other than the novel we have in front of us, which features not Mario Martínez, the logical detective stripped of life and emotions, which, according to critics such as Michael Holquist is "the essential metaphor for order" (157), but rather a confused and irrational detective-turned-criminal by the name of Roby. In an article entitled "The Detective Is Dead. Long Live the *Novela Negra!*" Glen S. Close points out that "today, the reality of radical urban insecurity has superseded and disabled the conventional function of the detective protagonist: that of semi-sanitary moral mediation of crime. What remains is the hard-boiled narrative's frank depiction of violence [...] and its Darwinian or nearly dystopian social view" (154). This dystopian social view reflected in Roby's inability to solve his brother's murder and the numerous possibilities that continue to arise even on the last page of the book assure that the metaphor in this novel will not be one of reassurance and order, but rather one of doubt and disorder. Michael Holquist explains

that metaphysical detective stories are designed to underline such disorder: “instead of reassuring, they disturb. If, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved” (173). Aside from providing the possibility of metaphysical reflection on the meaning of life, the metaphor of chaos and disorder that predominates the book is also reflective of the economic, political, and social commentaries expressed in its pages. According to Amelia S. Simpson, “what distinguishes Latin American works from many others, especially those of the French *nouveau roman* school, is the stress on real-world sociopolitical contexts over literary and philosophical considerations” (139).

In Paz Soldán’s novel, it is 1985 and Bolivia is still adapting to a newly emerged democracy under the second presidency of Hernán Siles Zuazo. Although pleased with the democratic process, most people find themselves unable to survive on a currency that steadily loses value on a daily, or even hourly, basis due to hyperinflation. Some, like Roby’s father, yearn for the return of dictatorship when at least they were assured work and a steady income. The monetary shortage produced by hyperinflation, in turn, causes people to turn to other means in order to support themselves. Upon noticing his friend Conejo’s brand name clothing, for example, Roby suspects that Conejo “se está dedicando a algún tipo de negocio sucio” (115).

Such dirty business could include the illegal practice of buying drugs and selling them to young children, a practice to which Alfredo falls victim when he overdoses on sleeping pills because he could not afford cocaine. Alfredo’s death, consequently, could be seen as having indirectly resulted from the economic chaos that rules the country. In fact, upon arriving at the crime scene, inspector Daza, the detective assigned by the police to investigate Alfredo’s death, immediately brings up the crisis: “Siles es un pésimo presidente [...]. Para ser presidente se necesita mano dura, y él no la tiene. ¿Vieron a cuánto está el dólar? ¡A tres mil!” (262). Although Daza does not directly blame the government for the death of this young boy, his tirade produced by the sight of Alfredo’s body is enough to suggest that the two are not as unrelated as they seem to be. The crisis creates criminals, and unlike the criminals investigated by Mario Martínez, these criminals are frequently impossible to catch because their crimes are set in the real world, where not every cause has an effect and not every clue will lead to an actual solution.

The clue that preoccupies Roby’s mind when he takes on the role of detective to attempt to find his brother’s indirect killer is a chess piece, a white bishop that Alfredo clutches in his hand when his body is found (249). To Roby, the bishop is a clue, possibly linked to the black bishop that the gang of The Chess Player has been using to sign the threatening notes they circulate around the school. The Chess Player was originally Mauricio’s father, who disappeared during General Hugo Banzer’s dictatorship along with the investments of several people who participated in his money-lending business. He was given the nickname “Ajedrecista” after somebody found out that he used to participate in chess games as a youngster at school. Rumors detailing his whereabouts abound, and the figure of The Chess Player has become a legend in Cochabamba: “Si desaparecía dinero del Banco Central, si se producía un secuestro, si

se arruinaban las cosechas de papa, era obra del Ajedrecista” (143). Initially, Roby utilizes conventional logic similar to that of his fellow literary detectives in order to solve “El caso del Alfil Blanco” (336). He becomes a Sherlock Holmes, and asks his friend Camaleón to be his Watson. “Qué hará Martínez in mi lugar? *Las celulas grises. Elemental, querido Camaleón*” (336). Traditional detection leads Roby to suspect that the bishop in Alfredo’s hand points to the gang which has chosen to utilize this name, which in turn is most probably made up of the boys from “Chinatown” – the bullies and trouble-makers in his class who break the rules, abuse drugs and alcohol, and are involved in petty crimes. He soon realizes, however, that the same logic can point in other directions and “lo que comenzaba incriminando a una persona podía terminar incriminando a todo el universo” (337). The clue of the white bishop points towards a number of possible criminals. In order to solve his brother’s murder, Roby will need to rely on the testimonies of other students. The problem with people, however, is that they are usually unreliable narrators.

In a profoundly metafictional reflection, Roby sees all people as narrators. Whenever one recounts a personal anecdote or shares a piece of gossip or a rumor, one is engaged in the art of narration: “somos máquinas de narrar en constante funcionamiento, debemos contar una historia para que un pedazo de nuestras vidas adquiera sentido. Sin una narración, la experiencia vivida no puede ser procesada” (17). Narrations, however, are not always faithful reflections of reality. The narrator usually has a reason for narrating, and the narration based on reality can turn out to be just as fictional as the plots of Roby’s amateur books. Furthermore, the listener’s own experience can and does influence him or her in deciding whether or not a narration is reliable. Roby falls victim to his own feelings and prejudices, thus believing Chino’s account regarding Mauricio’s role in the death of Alfredo. Mauricio is the class president, a handsome adolescent admired by all his classmates (most of whom, including Roby, are secretly attracted to him while at the same time ashamed of being attracted to a man). As a result of his beauty, Mauricio is also the target of envy in many of his classmates. Shortly after a physical fight between Mauricio and Chino, Chino is arrested and sent to jail for drug trafficking. Inspector Daza is convinced that Chino is the one responsible for Alfredo’s death, but Roby remains doubtful. In Roby’s mind, influenced by years of reading detective fiction, such a simple solution cannot be true due to the “paradoja de lo evidente en las novelas policiales” (365), according to which the most obvious suspect is never the killer. Relying on the rules of fiction, which cannot apply to reality, Roby convinces himself that Chino is innocent, and arranges to see him in jail. In need of redemption, Chino narrates a story. In that story, Mauricio is the drug pusher, a person nobody would suspect because all the parents and teachers admire him. The fight between the two was an act designed to lift all suspicions that they might be working together. Chino further explains that Mauricio is, himself, the infamous Chess Player. Roby’s jealousy of Mauricio and the logical narration provided by Chino combine to convince him of the guilt of his cousin. He knows that he has no proof, that Mauricio’s crime is perfect. The great detective, having solved the crime in his mind, becomes the great criminal and commits, in turn, another perfect crime. When Mauricio is alone at home, Roby sneaks over to his cousin’s house with a can of gasoline (available to him due to the fact that his father was storing it as a result of the gasoline

shortages produced by the crisis), and sets fire to the pine trees that surround the house. Years later, Roby finds out that his conclusion had been wrong. His own “Watson,” Camaleón, confesses to having invented the Chess Player Gang as a joke to play on his teachers and classmates. Furthermore, Roby finds out from Alfredo’s best friend, Nelson, that Alfredo’s death was most probably a suicide. Roby, however, is unable to accept that his brother committed suicide and decides to leave the case unresolved: No había pruebas, y mis conjeturas y las de Nelson eran sólo eso, conjeturas, y las demasiadas coincidencias eran sólo eso, demasiadas coincidencias. Las muertes irresueltas estaban exiliadas en el torpe y transitorio mundo en el que habitábamos todos” (452).

Admitting to the impossibility of a solution, Roby ends his own narration with a warning that could be interpreted in several different ways: “el mundo está lleno de narradores peligrosos” (452). The dangerous narrator could be Chino, who through his narration is indirectly responsible for the death of Mauricio. It could be Nelson, whose narration could be construed as a slur on Alfredo’s memory. Ultimately, it could also be Roby, whose book may not be as closely based on personal experience as it pretends to be. In a world where people tell stories in order to fill their own lives with meaning, Roby’s story could be just that, a story as invented as the fictional world of his other writings. This story, however, has not been directly plagiarized from others, although even metaphysical detective fiction owes a debt of gratitude to the traditional genre whose rules it parodies and undermines. Roby’s narration can never be free of the “anxiety of influence” which, according to Harold Bloom has been “the covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries [...], each poet’s fear that no proper work remains for him to perform” (148). Roby’s self-conscious reflections regarding his acts of plagiarism throughout the novel demonstrate his fear that nothing new remains for him to say. In fact, he does not say anything new. Instead, he revisits traditional formulas, parodying them while commenting on their straight-forwardness, which does not correspond to the chaotic reality that surrounds him.

The possibility that the world described as “real” is, in fact, a fictional creation in a work authored by Roby is a metafictional device used to foreground the questions regarding the ontological status of the worlds known as “fiction” and “reality.” Patricia Waugh explains that “contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins” (29). The frames dividing “reality” from “fiction” appear to be quite clear at first. Reality is the chaotic world of Cochabamba inhabited by Roby, a world defined by political, social, and economic chaos, a world where crimes are complex and logic is of no use in their resolution. Fiction is the world inhabited by Roby’s character, Mario Martínez. Martínez’s world is the city of Río Fugitivo. It is a city based on the models provided by authors such as Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Río Fugitivo is ruled by order. Whenever that order is broken by a crime, it is always re-established by the detective’s resolution of that crime. Furthermore, Río Fugitivo is a sort of alternate universe, the diametrical opposite of Cochabamba: “un río de aguas cristalinas, ningún mendigo bajo el puente, empleo para todos y sueldos elevados [...] en la ciudad del río Fugitivo impera el orden” (160).

Meanwhile, in Cochabamba, the river Rocha carries the putrid waste of dead animals, used condoms and feminine supplies, and even aborted fetuses, all of which decay and serve to create three-eyed fish and other mutations in the river's waters. Homeless people live under the bridges of the Rocha, having lost all they had due to hyperinflation. People, such as Roby's father, find themselves without work (although his father continues to go to the office of his architectural firm, pretending, or perhaps hoping, that there might be work again some day). It is easy for readers to distinguish the fictional world of *Río Fugitivo* from the real world of Cochabamba. What is more difficult is the distinction between the fictional world of Cochabamba created by Roby in his new novel, the one we are reading, and the Cochabamba that exists in reality. The fictional Cochabamba of 1985 is so indistinguishable from the real city of the same historical period, which it aims to represent, that Roby's version can and should be considered a "realeme" of the historical city. Brian McHale explains "In principle, we ought to be able to reconstruct the different repertoires of real-world objects, individuals, and properties which are admissible to different genres or texts at different historical periods. Such repertoires are not, of course, made up of real-world things-in-themselves, things in the raw so to speak, but things as signifiers in a system of signification. We could call these semiotized things "realemes," using a neologism coined by Itamar Even-Zohar" (86). Introducing a "realeme" of Cochabamba into a metafictional text whose creation is self-consciously documented by its author-narrator makes the distinction between fiction and reality slightly more blurred than the introduction of a clearly fictional world such as *Río Fugitivo*. Such a commentary on the relationship between reality and fiction is a central preoccupation of metafiction.

Besides providing self-conscious metafictional commentaries on the worlds of writing and reality, metaphysical crime fiction is also frequently concerned with demonstrating the failure of the postmodernist detective to come to a satisfying solution of the crime. Roby's error as detective lies in having focused his attention on the chess piece in his brother's hand, as well as on the story told to him by Chino, giving each of them a significance that it was most probably not meant to convey. Roby thus misinterprets the bishop's role as a "key text" in the novel, just as he has misread some of the narrations told to him as "key texts." Joel Black explains the notion of a "key text:" "the detective uses the information supplied by the key text to achieve his final goal, which is to discover or recover a prized object which may well be *another* text. The detective's success in finding the prize will depend on his prior ability to find and read the key text that specifies its whereabouts, and even its identity" (79). Roby assumes that both Chino's narration and the white bishop are key texts that would lead him to the prize text, namely the name of the person who murdered his brother. In the world of postmodernist metaphysical detective stories, however, such a straightforward correlation between key-texts and prized texts is almost non-existent. Thus, Roby joins a series of his postmodernist colleagues, that is, failed detectives, by misreading the texts and misinterpreting their value. The misreading is a result of his formulaic approach and his anticipation that the world around him will conform to the same rules that guide traditional detective fiction. Jeanne C. Ewert's warning to readers of metaphysical detective fiction could easily be re-addressed to Roby as a failed detective / (mis)reader of key texts: "if the reader of metaphysical detective fiction must give up

her dependence on the detective, she must also give up her expectations of the methods of conventional detection, even though the novels deliberately invoke those expectations” (186). In the end, Roby learns the lesson that detection is not as simple in reality as it is in traditional crime fiction. In his new novel, therefore, he presents us with the new version of crime fiction, the one in which the detective can and does fail, the one filled with metaphysical as well as metafictional reflections, the one ruled by chaos rather than order where the solution is nothing more than a myriad of possibilities, all of which are equally plausible.

Another failed detective in the novel is Daza’s character. Unlike Roby, Daza is not a reader of books. He is, however, a viewer of films and television and models himself on screen detectives just as much as Roby tries to model himself on literary detectives: “El inspector Daza, fornido y de mediana estatura, con un sobretodo negro que denunciaba que había aprendido en la tele y en el cine cómo debían lucir los inspectores” (261). While Daza’s assurance that Chino is indirectly responsible for Alfredo’s death is more convincing than Roby’s initial supposition that Mauricio is the culprit, Daza, too fails as a detective. Daza’s failure is a moral one. Unlike his hard-boiled counterparts whose commitment to fight corruption is unshakable, Daza ultimately turns out to have fallen victim to the corruption. It is finally revealed that Daza was accepting bribes from drug cartels in exchange for leaving them alone. Thus he is also to be blamed for indirectly having caused Alfredo’s death. Much like Roby, Daza is a detective who crosses the line and becomes a criminal, in a twist typical of postmodernist metaphysical crime fiction.

Stefano Tani speaks of a similar twist when he defines what he calls “the metafictional anti-detective novel” (“anti-detective” being another term used to define metaphysical detective fiction). According to Tani, such fiction is characterized by a removal of the traditional figures of the detective and the criminal and their replacement with the reader and the author: “The detective is no longer a character but a function assigned to the reader as the criminal is no longer a murderer but the writer himself who ‘kills’ (distorts and cuts) the text and thus compels the reader to become a ‘detective.’ The fiction becomes an excuse for “literary detection,” and if there is a killer in the fiction, he is a ‘literary killer,’ a killer of texts [...] not of human beings, and this killer represents within the fiction the operation that the writer performed on it” (113).

Roby’s role as author makes him a perfect candidate for what Tani terms the “literary killer.” He is, after all, the one who is ultimately responsible for the final text that appears for readers to decipher. When the reader becomes a detective, it is our job to ignore the false clues (perhaps placed there on purpose by Roby himself), and come to a plausible solution by correctly reading the text. Such a solution is not as easy to reach as it would be in traditional detective fiction. Unlike traditional detective fiction, however, metaphysical detective fiction does not have a right or wrong answer. Whether the reader decides to blame the government for Alfredo’s demise, or to blame the corrupt drug-abusing members of Chinatown such as Chino and Conejo, or the seemingly perfect Mauricio, or even Roby, himself, for having abandoned his brother in a time of

need and focused his attention on his own invented world of Río Fugitivo, each solution is equally plausible.

What matters, in the end, is not the solution, but the act of reading the text for clues that lead to it. The careful reader will find his or her own interpretation, and each interpretation will be as valid as the other, provided that readers follow the textual clues left behind by Roby in the possible murder he performed on the text itself. It is highly probable that the only murder that has taken place is one on the pages of a book, created by an author-narrator eager to move away from traditional formulas and unable to find his own voice until he either invented or was faced with the demise of his little brother from a drug overdose in a country mired by crime, corruption, and political, social, and economic instability in the midst of a blooming democracy that requires its victims in order to function.

In writing this metaphysical detective novel, Edmundo Paz Soldán joins ranks with numerous fellow Latin American authors, whose works combine literary self-reflection with a socio-political commentary. The socio-political nature of these texts can be traced back to the *neopolicíaco* genre, established by Mexican author Paco Ignacio Taibo II, which, according to Persephone Braham presents us with “a novel informed by social, economic, physical, and symbolic trauma whose aesthetic sophistication is bolstered by postmodernist literary techniques” (17). Franklin Rodríguez points out that “the philosophical and aesthetical concerns of antidetective fiction are often set in opposition to the socially committed *neopolicial*” (N.P.). One would have to join Rodríguez in disagreeing with such divisions given that one of the central figures associated with the *neopolicíaco* is Cuban author Leonardo Padura Fuentes whose detective, Mario Conde, is constantly engaged in attempts at writing about the gloomy reality that surrounds him. Many of Conde’s narrations are futile and disappear, but some end up sharing titles with Padura’s previous novels. Chilean author Roberto Ampuero’s *Pasiones griegas* (2005) and *Los amantes de Estocolmo* (2003) feature detective Duncan as a secondary character who, while not, himself, involved in literary production, does stumble across questions regarding the nature of such production in the course of his investigations. Such questions take the Duncan narratives a step further than Ampuero’s more traditional novels featuring detective Cayetano Brulé, which also treat socio-political issues but do not enter into literary self-reflection. In Argentina metaphysical detection can be found in the works of Ricardo Piglia, Luisa Valenzuela, and most recently Pablo De Santis and Guillermo Martínez, although the latter tend to focus more on literary detection and less on socio-political commentary. Paz Soldán’s novel focuses equally on both elements and is therefore an excellent example of antidetection and *neopolicial* coming together to form a Latin American brand of metaphysical detective novel, which is both self-reflexive and socially committed.

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