

**CARLOS MARTÍNEZ
MORENO'S *LUNCHEON OF
THE BOATING PARTY*:
INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCE
IN "LOS PRADOS DE LA
CONCIENCIA"**

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If Kenton V. Stone is to be believed, the best place to begin interpreting most of Martínez Moreno's works is with the title itself (1994:54). While this is certainly the case with the novella *Cordelia*, reading "Los prados de la conciencia" (published in 1968; all page references are to this edition) is more problematic, and depends to some extent on how we decipher his disconcerting metafictional techniques.

Equally comfortable writing about the Montevidean bourgeoisie or the criminal underclasses whom he knew in the course of his professional activities as a lawyer, in this story Martínez Moreno focuses on the feelings, reactions and observations of a writer visiting New York. Short stories, as

we know from our wider reading, use a range of settings to present characters on their own or in relation to others, the boarding house or hotel, the prison or school. Here the framing device is an international writers' conference. And within the conference, Martínez Moreno singles out a particular event, a boat trip along the River Hudson, thus setting a frame within a frame. As regards point of view, although the story is narrated mainly from a third person perspective, as it progresses, there are an increasing number of interventions in the first person – “momentáneamente llámenme Pérez” (p.7) – and then a series of direct addresses to Pérez, articulated by an unknown omniscient narrator who is able to move backward and forward in time, entering and leaving the boat trip frame at will. The simple third person narrative corresponds to the most objective content, the first-person insertions express Pérez's unease, while the direct addresses convey a certain anger and contempt.

According to Stone, “A trip to Mexico City and another to New York, both times as a delegate to conferences on writers and their social responsibility, provided Martínez Moreno with a jarring contrast in experiences. The year 1968 saw the resulting publication of *Los prados de la conciencia*, another book of short stories delving into the ethical dimensions of the growing crisis in his country” (p.31). This may well be true, but the reader will be hard pressed to find explicit social or political comment in this particular story. Rather, we must read for what he does not say, or what he implies, especially about the role of the artist. Martínez Moreno makes serious demands on his readers, because of the diegetic complexity of his narrative, its shifts in focalisation or metalepses, and its non-linear temporality. He does not write for a mass audience, but assumes a certain level of awareness or knowledge in his readers: “me sería infiel si tratara de ser demagógicamente sencillo o escribir en un estilo meramente interjectivo o confianzudamente coloquial” (1985:161). Martínez Moreno has taken what Linda Hutcheon has termed the “literary-critical recognition game” (1989:60) and makes it a central tool of his own literary production, for instance in his novella *Cordelia (King Lear)* (1956) and in his novel, *El color que el infierno me escondiera* (1981), with its manifest debt to Dante and the earlier *Inferno*. Here the majority of intertextual allusions in this story are to the visual arts, paintings, photographs and sculptures.

The story opens (and closes) with the sentence: “El vaporcito avanzaba, empenachado de humo, por las sucias aguas del Hudson” (p.7). However, this is immediately undermined by the second sentence: “No, no era una buena frase para empezar” (p.7). The reader is immediately made aware of an artistic consciousness at work. Someone is trying out phrases to see if they work. Thus we have the construction of a fiction within a fiction. The remainder of the paragraph clarifies the circumstances in which the focalizer finds himself, on board the steamer. Going back slightly in time, in a brief flashback, we learn that Pérez and the other writers have been transported to the quayside in coaches. What they are able to see from the coach windows

– the third frame – becomes an oblique comment on the bleakness of New York cityscape, and, to some extent, the American way of life.

The first explicit intertextual reference comes with the allusion to the artist and photographer Ben Shahn (1898-1969). From the coach window, Pérez can see a man throwing baseballs to a child, and compares them to figures in a Shahn oil painting (p.8). Shahn first achieved fame and recognition, in the 1930s as a Social Realist artist, doing in the visual arts what Steinbeck did in fiction. Coincidentally, one of his photographs, *Untitled (Houston Street Playground, New York City)*, c. 1932, depicts precisely the same kind of scene as is described by Pérez, boys playing some kind of ball game in a playground. Even though Shahn moved away from specific social issues and injustices to explore myths and biblical themes, he never lost his commitment to narrative, and continued to tell stories through his art. By viewing New York through the prism of Ben Shahn's socially committed art, Martínez Moreno simultaneously reminds us of the writer's role in society, and points to the notion of other. Shahn was, after all, triply "other", by virtue of his Jewishness, his immigrant identity and his socio-political stance, demonstrated by such works as his series *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1931-1932), or the famous *Years of Dust* colour lithograph poster of 1936, produced for the Resettlement Administration during the Depression.

In one of Pérez's first-person interventions, inserted parenthetically into the text, the narrator-focalizer justifies this comparison with Shahn by explaining: "qué querien, todas mis asociaciones de ideas tienen algo de artístico, es mi caldo, de allí extraigo incluso los colores con que veo el espectáculo" (p.8). Although he is a writer, his true element is the visual, he is happiest working in colours. Inverting the idea of the visitors looking out at the spectacle, he suggests that the writers themselves may be viewed, inside the coaches, through the green tinted windows. He then returns to the narrative: "debía reconducirse y narrar" (p.8), drawing our attention to his tendency to stray from the point, as well as to the fiction-making process. The narrator simultaneously presents himself as an impartial observer and places himself right in the middle of this temporarily constituted artistic community.

The story continues with a description of the writers going on board and receiving their packed lunches. "Cien, doscientos, trescientos escritores" (p.8). Whether intentional or not, the reminiscence here is of the animals marching determinedly into Noah's Ark. Ironically described as "esta profesión exquisita" (p.8) their main preoccupation is to get enough to eat and drink, while their hosts are impeccably polite and thank them for everything. The underlying suggestion is that writers should be above such base considerations, otherwise "hay algo cruelmente marchito y envilecido" (p.9). We should note the narrator's quizzical comments on women writers: they are numerous, decorative – and he pokes fun at their hats. They come from all over the world, and here the inattentive reader might overlook a significant detail. Their name badges proclaim "Chile, Canadá, El Exilio, la misma New York"

(p.9). *El Exilio* figures in a list of countries, it is everywhere and nowhere. Here it functions as one of the few political references in the text.

The next visual intertextuality is not explicit, but I believe it is firmly embedded in the text. The background against which the women authors sketched is one of dirt and degeneration. “Al ir despegándose el vaporcito de la muelle, las plumas, los crisantemos y las rosas de tul contrastaban con el fondo picoteado, descascarado, ahumado, hollinoso de los ladrillos, sobre la herrumbre las grúas quietas” (p.9). This is grimy, industrial New York. And yet, despite the repeated allusions to the “aguas sucias del Hudson”, the whole idea of a luncheon on board a boat on a river must inevitably recall Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881), as well as all those other luminous paintings of the Seine, by Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Alfred Sisley, Camille Pissarro, Gustave Caillebotte. Set against this artistic tradition, the steamer and the Hudson somehow seem even smokier, greyer, dirtier. Nevertheless, the intertextuality serves to reinforce the fictive nature of the New York scenes.

The focaliser continues to comment on his professional group –“aquella humanidad ilustre” (p.13), “aquella multitud esclarecida” (p.15) – and in doing so completely destroys any notion of the writer as a unique or special being. It has been said that Martínez Moreno is the master of the “función desenmascaradora” (Stone, 1994:51), and nowhere do we see this more clearly than in “Los prados de la conciencia”, where it is largely achieved through humour and irony. Pérez observes his fellow conference delegates closely, noting the smallest detail. If any one of this group stands out, it is not because of their literary or artistic merits, but due to an eye-catching item of dress – the ladies’ hats remind him of “jardines colgantes” (p.11) and the men sport panama hats, berets that are “conmemorativos de remotos colegios aristocráticos y de polilla”, or silly, childish caps (p.11). Or they are defined by a salient physical characteristic: the French essayist has “grandes incisivos de conejo” (p.14), and the chubby English lady author is later described as a “jamona” (p.13).

In yet another shift of focalisation, signalled by the first-person plural of “nuestra época” (p.11), the narrator retreats mentally from the lunch party to explore his own use of language and of a literary convention that brings to mind Zola and the Naturalists, “la exaltación romántica de la fealdad, la apoteosis de la mugre” (p.11). In fact, the waters of the Hudson are not so dirty after all; Pérez’s attempt to narrativise his own experiences on the river might almost be seen as a displacement activity, a way of avoiding his responsibilities as an author.

The narrator (and Martínez Moreno himself) is too intelligent to indulge in national stereotypes or simple caricatures. Rather, he singles out different participants on the basis of their inability to cope with contents of their lunch boxes and the plastic cutlery, a kind of initiative test. The Burmese lady poet eats with her fingers, the French essayist tosses his bone away. Pérez chooses not to risk disaster and does not eat at all. The writers are seen as if they

were a a herd of hungry animals. Good manners and dignity are tossed overboard in their anxiety to eat. Pérez thinks back to his childhood, “su infancia descalza”, marked by “privaciones” (p.13). A completely different world, in strong contrast to the one he now inhabits, crystallised in the image of a child who goes to fetch water from the “aguatero”. He is now a mature, older man, but not so distant from memories of his childhood, which act as touchstone and restraint when he feels out of control. Pérez seems genuinely bewildered: “a qué estoy aquí, qué diablos he venido a haver, quién me obligó a esto?” (p.14), and thinks of his wife, who has remained at home in their “paraíso perdido” (p.15), an association perhaps triggered off by the fact that his fellow authors are busily eating the shiny red apples that accompany their packed lunches. This is more than simple homesickness, rather a feeling of malaise, heightened by the letter sent by his wife, “su misiva ya leída, estrujada de soledad, de extrañamiento y de amor” (p.15). Curiously, his wife seems more alive, more real, than the people around him, “presencias fantasmales que mordían, trituraban y deglutían (p.15), whom he describes as “filisteos” (p.15). At the same time, Pérez has not lost his sense of the ridiculous, and, framed in yet another visual image, imagines the writers – one of whom could be a figure from El Greco (“la criatura del Greco, p.19) – sliding about on deck in a “zarabanda descompuesta y alegre” (p.16) like the characters in a silent movie (Chaplin, perhaps, or Keaton) or in an Expressionist film that subversively attacks the respectability of the upper classes. The greatest exponent of the expressionist technique, it should be remembered, was the Viennese-born film director Fritz Lang (1890-1976), who fled to the United States rather than remain in Germany and collaborate with the Nazi government, thus becoming an icon of resistance.

Nothing has happened on board the steamer, the writers remain seated in their deckchairs: “nadie requebrajaba la delgada capa de lo solemne, la frágil ceremonia crepuscular del piquenique sur l’eau” (p.16). Again, we are pointed towards visual references. If the French phrase echoes such titles as *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, the static quality of the scene described reminds us of a painting by the left-wing artist Georges Seurat (1859-1891), the Neo-Impressionist *Bathers at Asnières* (1883-1884), though without the elements of heat and light.

As the steamer moves along the river, the narrative is divided between Pérez’s thoughts on his wife, their patio with its plants (in contrast to the New York skyline) her letters to him, her concerns about his shirts (whether he has hung up his clothes in the wardrobe), and another visual description, a panning shot of the cityscape with its tall buildings. Pérez cites Céline: “New York c’est une ville debout” (p.19), an interesting allusion, given that Céline focused on the human predicament in modern industrial society, with its concomitant fear, loss of hope, loneliness and anguish in the face of decay and degradation. Curiously, he does not refer to John Dos Passos.

Again, there is a shift in focalisation, this time not signalled by the use of parenthesis. “Los recuerdos literarios me persiguen, he dicho. Mis lecturas

hacen las veces de mi gusto, de mi experiencia y de mi vida” (p.19). This might be interpreted to mean that he takes refuge in literature rather than participating fully in life. In fact, we are never told what he writes about, which is his chosen genre or subject matter.

The next stage in the narration introduces the figure of *el Poeta*, with his entourage, and the narrator inserts a brief flashback to the *Maestro*’s recital and reception of the previous evening, how he was fêted, acclaimed, photographed for *Life*. The references to the Poet may be intended to remind us of another Poet in New York (1929-1930), Federico García Lorca, and especially his *Oda a Walt Whitman*, with its famous line, “Y tú, bello Walt Whitman, duerme a orillas del Hudson”. It is difficult not to make these associations, especially when we compare parts of Martínez Moreno’s narration of Pérez’ boat trip along the river with certain lines from Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

... iba ahora acodado a una de las barandas (p. 7)

...

Para ellos solos el efecto rutilante: las paredes, entre tanto, estaban perdiéndose fuera de foco, en el sueño, en el bostezo, en las sordas vibraciones del color de las gaviotas que arrancaban a volar oblicuamente, a maniobrar en anillos sobre el vaporcito, a ponerse en marcha tras él. Luego los almacenes del muelle cedían su función de decorado a un simple fondo pálido de cielo, del impuro cielo estival de la media tarde de domingo en Nueva York. (p.16)

...

fue hacia la baranda que daba sobre el lado de New York anocheciendo” (pp.21-22) Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood, yet was hurried;

...

I watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls – I saw them high in the air, floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies, I saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies, and left the rest in strong shadow, I saw the slow-wheeling circles, and the gradual edging toward the south.

I too saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water, Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams

...

The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the grey walls of the granite store-houses by the docks

...

The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hayboat in the twilight

...

Fly on sea-bird! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air

The parallels may be purely coincidental, after all both authors are describing the same riverscape and the same sea-gulls circling in the darkening skies above. The main difference lies in the emotional perspective adopted. One points up the other. Whitman is singing a paean of praise to his America, Pérez is disillusioned. New York has failed to impress.

On board the steamer, someone is filming – framing - the Poet, and the Statue of Liberty, with a cine-camera, the latter “simbolizando lo más

obvio”, “Sólo la noche podría ennoblecerla” (p.21). As the boat proceeds along the wate, Pérez feels more confident, more in control of his language, or, as the ironic narratorial voice states, “más dueño de tus imágenes grandilocuentes” (p.22), better able to represent the scene in front of him. Interestingly, he repeats the carping and chauvinistic observation, “C’est pas la même chose dans une péniche sur la Seine” (p.22), made by the French essayist’s wife, present in her capacity of “Observer por France”. This again points us back to the Impressionist paintings of the Seine at Bougival or Argenteuil, not necessarily in an Old World/New World binary opposition, but as a means of emphasising the differences between the charming, tranquil, idyllic world depicted with such charm by the Impressionists, and Pérez’s uneasy snapshots of his disquieting American experience. For Pérez, New York is a series of obligatory visits on the tourist itinerary, taking in, among other sights, the chess-players in Washington Square (a nod to Henry James?), the Empire State Building, the notorious Bowery Bums (“borrachos dormidos las aceras del Bowery” (p.24).

Once again the focalisation shifts, and now Pérez is addressed directly: adopting what Genette has called prior or predicative narrating (1980:217-219), the narratorial voice emerges to warn him of what lies in store. As regards artistic reference: the Picassos in the Museum of Modern Art, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), a painting whose title notably fails to hint at its radical subject matter, five prostitutes in a brothel, and *Guernica* (1937), lasting testimony to the victims of the Spanish Civil War. Also mentioned are Turner’s “huevos fritos de luz”, Henry Moore’s bronzes, and Aristide Maillol’s sculpture of a chubby nude (perhaps *Desire*, 1907-1908, though the *The River*, 1938-1943, might be more appropriate in this context).

After this culture-fest, the reader is shifted forward in a prolepsis, a flash-forward embedded in references to the past. This section refers to a Sunday afternoon trip to a typical country house where “Todo es Arcadia” (p.25), where a smiling, “crucificada” American family who serve up turkey for lunch will receive the “tropilla de escritores”, a phrase used several times (p.25, p.28), suggesting that while the writers behave like tourists, their genial hosts consider them as as exotic fauna, to be tolerated or viewed. All of this is narrated in exceedingly long sentences in the present tense interspersed with (exclamatory) indirect speech to convey amazement and admiration, although this is diminished by the Americans’ choice of reading matter, Florence Barclay and Zane Grey (pp.25-26), as well as observations on their exquisite manners and excellent teeth. This excursion will be the culmination of Pérez’s week, “el colofón de tu semana”, so the narrator points out, using a metalinguistic joke to poke fun at the protagonist. The country estate is called Conscience Meadows, “Los Prados de la Conciencia”, and indeed, the whole neighbourhood is named Conscience.

Then the reader is suddenly wrenched back to the present time of the narrative, on the steamer, as the narratorial voice – interpreting Pérez’s thoughts – suggests that if he throws himself overboard, always aware of

the appropriate literary references – “ya se sabe que tus mejores asociaciones de ideas son de estirpe literario” (p.28), “asociaciones literarias hasta el último suspiro” (p.29) – he will wipe out the meadows of conscience, and the week that awaits him, “llena de sinsentido y estupidez” (p.30). He will die far from his wife, and from the “argentina ansiosa” (p.30) whom he will take to his hotel room only to have their sexual encounter cut short by a Mexican poet and his wife.

Not only has the point of view shifted from Pérez to the privileged, all-seeing narrator, the tone of the story has become more violent. Though he did not jump off the Empire State Building, he could still climb over the boat rail and sink into the filthy waters of the Hudson, “el hollín caído y semidisuelto, la lepra de las ciudades, la escoria de los vapores” (p.31), a line that would not be out of place in Onetti. But if he jumps, who will use the threadbare shirts he leaves behind? This thought illuminates Pérez’s mind, “como las fastuosas ampollas de luz que hace estallar Turner en la niebla de Londres” (p.32). (It is not clear if the narrator has one particular Turner in mind, perhaps from the *Rivers of England* series of 1825). The shirts seems to trigger off some unexpectedly violent emotions, “la autoconmiseración que te despiertan tus camisas, los pequeños prados arrugados y sucios y lavables de tu conciencia” (p.32). The suggestion here may be of some kind of betrayal: the metaphor of the seedy, wrinkled, yet washable conscience does not sit comfortably with the notion of the committed, socially responsible writer.

Pérez does not attempt suicide, but will return to his hotel room. Following the narrator’s recommendations, “Déjate de sueños tremebundos, de pesadillas de cabeza pendulante” (p.33), he will take his lunch box and go back to the hotel, drink beer, and await “una horrible semana de ponencias trascendentes, New York por la noche, disquerías, museos y también los Prados de la Conciencia” (p.33).

The greatest irony is that as Pérez goes ashore, he is already planning to transform this occurrence into the subject of a story. Unlike the all-seeing, prescient narrator, he has no idea what the week will bring. For the present, he is more preoccupied with committing his ideas to paper and beginning his story with a well-turned phrase: “El vaporcito avanzaba, empenachado de humo, por las sucias aguas del Hudson” (p.34). And he may even include the suicide, “este alegórico naufragio individual” (p.34). Here the reader may wonder whether the narratorial voice is, effectively, the voice of Pérez’s own conscience. However, if this character did undergo some kind of existential crisis, it has passed very quickly. Pérez does not pause to question what has provoked his feelings of dislocation, whether it was the sensation of exile, alienation, or possibly even guilt. What should have signified an epiphanic experience has been defused, domesticated, brought under control by the power of the word.

Earlier, the narratorial voice accused him of preferring literature to “real” life: “Si alguna vez la realidad te fascina, Pérez, deberías vivirla sin

prisa, sin mezquindad y sin cálculo, en vez de ponerte a componer instantáneamente sobre ella, dilapidando y despanzurrando las sensaciones presentes por apresurarte a trabajarlas” (p.22). This has proved to be the case. Pérez does not live life, he is subsumed into some else’s narrative. Like a literary version of the Russian doll-within-a-doll-within-a-doll, Pérez narrates and is narrated, he views the world through the frames of his consciousness and his pictorial intertext—also a kind of narrative—and is viewed in turn by a fictive authorial presence who stands outside the world of the characters, and passes judgment on them.

In many respects, “Los prados de la conciencia” is more concerned with absence than presence. At the most superficial level, the absence of Pérez’s wife, more profoundly, the absence of a genuine conscience or consciousness in pretentious, theatrical literary *poseurs*. Yet we should not disregard the contradictions in this short story, which is open to several interpretations. On the one hand, Pérez’s failure to engage with “the real world”, the reader’s growing awareness of the artificiality and possible futility of the literary enterprise, are offset by Martínez Moreno’s subtle visual intertext, which suggests that art does play an important role and is perfectly able to offer insights into social relationships and responsibilities. Or, on the other hand, we might interpret the Hudson and all the other rivers alluded to, the Seine, the Thames, as symbols of permanence and power, in stark contrast to Pérez and the other authors, portrayed as ephemeral, weak, and unable to respond to or shape their environment. Alternatively, a third analysis of the story might combine these two readings, with readers arriving at a more positive or negative view according to their own intertextual map. In any event, there is no doubt that Martínez Moreno’s “luncheon of the boating party” is considerably more satirical than that of Pierre-Auguste Renoir. The pictorial charm of the latter throws into strong relief the nightmare sequence in Martínez Moreno’s short story, and where the French artist rejoices in light and luminosity, the Uruguayan author uses increasingly dark and gloomy tones to convey his character’s moral ambiguity.

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