

Koans and Deconstructing Logos: A Zen reading of *La nueva novela* by Juan Luis Martínez

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“Tao” significa propiamente camino. Primitivamente esta palabra se usó para designar el curso de las estrellas en el cielo. Es el concepto fundamental de la filosofía china y es equivalente al “Logos” griego y, sin embargo, fundamentalmente distinto. (Martínez, *La nueva novela* 96)

Abstract

This article proposes a reading of Juan Luis Martínez’s *La nueva novela* to reveal the way in which the Chilean poet mobilizes texts from Western authors to undermine Western epistemology from within. Martínez uses Eastern philosophical concepts to deconstruct the logocentric tradition, creating poetic texts that operate similar to Zen koans. Martínez’s project reveals the similarities in literary deconstruction and Zen by decentering language and questioning the processes of producing meaning.

Keywords: Juan Luis Martínez, Chilean Poetry, Zen Buddhism, Logos, Tao, Neo-avant-garde

The presence of Eastern philosophical thought in the works of Juan Luis Martínez has been well documented from the very beginning. In one of the first essays written on Martínez, Enrique Lihn and Pedro Lastra state:

el norte verdadero de Martínez es el oriente, no solo por las paráfrasis y citas falsas o verdaderas del budismo Zen, sino por la aplicación de lo que Fenollosa consideraba el *método científico de la poesía* y del sistema ideográfico de los chinos, por oposición a las abstracciones del pensamiento occidental. (13)

This quote, for example, recently appeared in an article by Marcelo Rioseco in which the Chilean critic provides new findings about the influence of Chinese writing in Martínez’s work: the wax paper insert with Chinese text over the page titled “La poesía china” is not poetry at all, but an excerpt from a dictionary, and secondly, Martínez did not make a mistake in repeating the trigram “Kan” on the cover of *El poeta anónimo*, but rather used a less common translation based on the work of James Legge.¹ Along with the poems from Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng on the aforementioned page, these constitute

the most overt examples of Chinese philosophy in Martínez's work and have justly received the most critical attention.

In addition to analyzing these key parts, other critics have looked at the influence of Eastern philosophy on Martínez's work in a more holistic fashion. As noted in the same article by Rioseco, Marcela Labraña highlights the importance of the notion of trans-individuality in Martínez's *desdoblamientos* and the practice of juxtaposing images as a form of composition.² Rioseco traces this vein of visual analysis from Lihn and Lastra to the further investigations of Juan Herrera and Adolfo Vásquez Rocca. Scott Weintraub furthers the work of Labraña and others in his analysis of how the *I Ching* and the organization of philosophical principles help structure Martínez's work. Weintraub argues that Labraña's observations on the compositional structure of *La nueva novela* can easily be applied to *Aproximación del Principio de Incertidumbre a un proyecto poético* in its visual combinatorics. He concludes this chapter by claiming that *Aproximación* "attempts to encapsulate the larger literary and philosophical principles that make Martínez's work such a rigorous (although often internally contradictory) theoretical system" (183). In a recent article, Fernando Pérez Villalón argues that *Aproximación* is not meant to create a coherent system, but rather a type of meaning-producing machine that eludes literary interpretation.

Thus far, Martínez's criticism has focused on the overt examples of Eastern philosophy in his work, but the influence of Eastern thought motivates many of the poet's strategies and games. Currents of Eastern philosophy often emerge subtly from his strategic employment of Western influences that reappear throughout his oeuvre, such as Arthur Rimbaud, Lewis Carroll, and Jean Tardieu. The appropriation of texts from these authors often serves to undermine Western epistemologies from within. For this reason, it is essential to examine not only texts from Eastern sources but also Western ones in exploring the coincidences between his deconstructive poetics and the similarities to the attempts in Zen Buddhism to go beyond dualistic, Aristotelian logic, challenging one to explore the intuitive and peripheral forms of knowledge which have largely been ignored in the rationalist and empiricist Western traditions. Martínez's rebellion in the verbal realm can be read as part of an action of countering dominant epistemologies by undermining their structural apparatus. More specifically, a juxtapositional reading of his book with Eastern philosophical texts reveals the similarities in the strategies of postmodern literary deconstruction and the practice of Zen koans.

Koans in Zen Buddhism

The use of koans is an ancient tradition that has survived until today, particularly in the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism. Although its exact origins are obscure, the practice may have begun as an exercise in commenting on the recorded sayings of Zen masters and in literary games of improvised poetry. The koan often presents itself as a riddle although this appearance is somewhat deceiving, since its purpose is not to engage the intellect. Most people have heard of Hakuin's koan "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" even if they may not be aware of its use as a koan or how it is meant to be answered. Since the koan takes the form of a question, a student will typically respond by undertaking a search for the answer, trying to discover the secret to the riddle. Although there are acceptable and unacceptable responses to the koan, the search for an answer is often the first misstep, as it is not designed to be solved using reason. It is meant to be experienced; the experience of understanding a koan is often described as a form of enlightenment in which the student becomes aware of a new understanding of some facet of the nature of reality.³ The koan does not produce this awakening through the forms of conventional knowledge, but rather a reorientation of the mind away from reason, towards intuition. In fact, a satori can be described as a cessation of thought, a sort of mental paralysis from a shift in perspective.

In the tradition of the succession of Zen masters, a student's reaction to a koan is often the evidence needed to determine the next patriarch, although the path was somewhat different for Hui-neng, an uneducated layperson who became the sixth Zen patriarch. According to the apocryphal autobiographical text, Hui-neng was recognized as understanding Buddha-nature through a poetry contest. Hui-neng travelled to the Pao Lin Monastery but could not be accepted as a monk due to his status as a "southern barbarian."⁴ Yet, the fifth patriarch, Daman Hongren, recognized his sharp mind and allowed him to become a servant at the monastery. One day, Hongren told his followers to write a stanza on the question of birth and death, and the winner would be awarded his robes and teachings to become the sixth patriarch. Martínez includes the top student's verses and Hui-neng's response in *La nueva novela* (along with his own footnotes on the bottom of the page):

El cuerpo es el árbol Bodhi
 La mente el espejo brillante en que él se mira
 Cuidar que esté siempre limpio
 Y que polvo alguno lo empañe

Shen-hsiu

Nunca existió el árbol Bodhi
 Ni el brillante espejo en que él se mira
 Fundamentalmente nada existe
 Entonces, ¿qué polvo lo empañaría?

Hui-neng

*(NADIE LEERA NUNCA / OIRA (INTERPRETARA MENTALMENTE)
 ESTOS DOS POEMAS CHINOS).

(NADIE RECORDARA NUNCA / TARAREARA (EVOCARA
 MENTALMENTE) ESTOS DOS POEMAS CHINOS

(FUNDAMENTALMENTE LA POESIA CHINA (EN SU FORMA ACTUAL O
 EN OTRA CUALQUIERA) NO HA EXISTIDO JAMAS). (97)⁵

Hongren recognized that Hui-neng would be the next patriarch but delivered the teachings and robe to him in secret, telling him to flee to avoid being persecuted by jealous monks. Rioseco, who relates this tale in greater detail in his article, observes that although this wasn't originally intended to be a literary contest (but rather a test of enlightenment), these texts have come to be understood as poetry and are treated as such in Martínez's work.⁶ Furthermore, Martínez's response to these poems can be seen in the play of negations between the title and footnotes. While the page title reads "La poesía china," the last of three footnotes states: "(Fundamentalmente la poesía china, (en su forma actual o en otra cualquiera) no ha existido jamás)" (97). In response to the paradoxes of the footnotes Rioseco asks:

¿Cómo debemos leer estos juegos de paradojas y negaciones? ¿Como una meditación acerca de la verdadera naturaleza de la poesía china? ¿O como un desafío al lector quien es invitado a considerar, desde una mirada occidental, formas no literarias como expresiones de algo que llamaríamos – a falta de una mejor definición – poesía china? (280)

I believe that while both are valid, there is a third approach to understanding the paradoxes that extends directly from Hui-neng's poem: Chinese poetry has never existed because "fundamentalmente nada existe."⁷ Martínez takes Hui-neng's poem a step further to say that if nothing exists, then a poem about nothing existing doesn't exist either. In doing so, Martínez undermines his own writing by calling attention to its nonexistence.⁸

Although these texts may serve as koans, more traditional ones can be found in the recorded sayings of Zen masters as well as two extensive collections: *Wu-men-kuan* (*The Gateless Barrier*) and

Hekiganroku (The Blue Cliff Record). It will be helpful to look at some of the more famous koans to highlight their techniques and messages. Case One of the *Wu-men-kuan* relates a story of the Zen master Chao-chou. When a monk asked Chao-chou if a dog has Buddha nature, the patriarch said: “*Mu*” (91). *Mu* in Japanese means “no,” “not,” or “nothing.” Since it is a basic tenet in most forms of Buddhism that all beings are endowed with Buddha nature, this case is often posed to students and they are asked to explain why Chao-chou said *mu*. The challenge in responding to the question resides in the presentation of a logical contradiction, which could be written as an erroneous syllogism (a genre that Martínez cultivates in *La nueva novela*):

1. All beings have Buddha nature.
2. Dogs are beings.
3. Dogs do not have Buddha nature.

The koan thus provides an impediment to the intellect that it does not know how to overcome using logic. The student must look for another way to answer the riddle that lies beyond the principle of non-contradiction. Thus, in *Zen Action/Zen Person*, T.P. Kasulis explains: “We must resist the temptation to think of *mu* either as an indeterminate void or as something relative and completely open to conceptual analysis. Mumon exhorts the Zen student to work at *mu*, to *become* it, rather than to understand it” (11). Furthermore, Chao-chou’s *mu* is not so much a yes-or-no answer to the question as it is a rejection of the dualistic search.

Often the koan will try to redirect the student’s mind away from the insistent seeking of enlightenment through reminders that the quotidian life and everyday mind are also a part of enlightened reality.

Case Seven

A monk asked Chao-chou, “I have just entered the monastery; can you give me a teaching?”

Chao-chou asked, “Have you eaten your breakfast?”

The monk replied, “I have eaten it.”

Chao-chou said, “Then go and wash your bowl.”

The monk was enlightened. (*Zen Sourcebook* 94)

The student is challenged to see beyond the common division of life into dualities and appreciate that daily life is the same as enlightened reality. Case twenty-three of the *Wu-men-kuan* also treats this point: “Thinking of neither good nor evil, at this instant, what is the original face of Hui-ming?” (*Zen*

Sourcebook 101). This popular koan has also been adapted in various forms, such as “What is your original face before your mother and father were born?” In either format the student is challenged to look beyond dualisms (good/evil, mother/father) to see the true nature of the self as it existed (paradoxically) before it existed.

Confrontations with contradictions often point the way beyond dualisms, such as imagining the self before the self. The temptation remains to intellectualize a response, using words to explain insight. Case twenty-four of the *Wu-men-kuan* points to another path:

A monk asked Feng-hsüeh, “Speech and silence are both inward and outward – how can we go beyond dualism?”

Feng-hsüeh said,

“I often think of Chiang-nan in March;

Partridges chirp among the fragrant blossoms.” (*Zen Sourcebook* 102)

It is interesting to note how similar Feng-hsüeh’s response is to poetry. We might wonder if the Zen master’s response indicates that the monk should seek the answer in nature, in poetry, or elsewhere. It seems that Feng-hsüeh is directing his student to avoid thinking of dualisms and instead move towards a direct, unmediated experience of reality. In a sense, both koan and poetry seek to orient the mind toward an experience that transcends language through the use of language. It is probable, for this reason, that many Zen monks wrote verses, but also answered students’ inquiries through silence, gestures, and even hitting them to wake them up.⁹

Logos versus Tao

The principles of non-contradiction, dualisms, logic, and language are also fundamental concerns in *La nueva novela*. I would like to begin analyzing the influence of Eastern philosophical thought in Martínez’s work by calling attention to the quote used as an epigraph to this investigation. In this quote, Martínez claims that “Tao” and “Logos” are equivalents yet fundamentally distinct. This one statement encapsulates many of the aforementioned principles; it is a dualism that is a logical contradiction and signals the importance of language in the West and the Way in the East. In stating that the Tao and Logos are identical but distinct, Martínez sets up a confrontation between East and West as two contrary epistemologies.

Logos can mean “word,” “speech,” or “reason” and has been applied in various disciplines with different meanings. It is well-known in the philosophy of Heraclitus, who used it to explain his ontological doctrine of flux: “Having harkened not to me but to the Word (*Logos*) it is wise to agree

that all things are one” (B50, cited in Graham n.p.). Many of Heraclitus’s sayings have been recorded by other philosophers, such as his quote about the river, relayed by Plato: “Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things pass and nothing stays, and comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river” (Plato *Cratylus* 402a = A6). Heraclitus is somewhat unique in the Western tradition for advocating for the unity of opposites (“all things are one”) and the illusory nature of the self (“you could not step twice into the same river”). In fact, Heraclitus’s material monism in which ultimate reality is essentially change or flux is astoundingly similar to the Buddhist notion of Pratīyasamutpāda (Dependent Arising), which states that there are no independent entities since everything is part of the processes of change and interdependence: “When that is present, this comes to be; on the arising of that, this arises. When that is absent, this does not come to be; on the cessation of that, this ceases” (*Samyutta Nikaya* 2.28, cited in Kalupahana 56). Despite this temporary bridge between Eastern and Western thought, after Heraclitus, the term Logos followed a distinct trajectory, associated with reasoned discourse in Aristotle’s work, and with the divine incarnate in the Christian tradition.¹⁰

Tao is often translated as “Way,” and Taoism is attributed to Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, although earlier origins can be found in the *I Ching* and *Book of Changes*. Alan Watts describes the Tao thus: “There is, first of all, the Tao – the indefinable, concrete ‘process’ of the world, the Way of life. The Chinese word means originally a way or road, and sometimes ‘to speak,’ so that the first line of the *Tao Te Ching* contains a pun on the two meanings: ‘The Tao which can be spoken is not eternal Tao’” (16). Additionally, Tao is described as subtle, dark (mysterious), spontaneous, omnipresent, and operates by “wu-wei” (non-action or not-making) in *Tao Te Ching*. The concept of “wu-wei” is important to both Taoism and Zen Buddhism. Lao Tzu writes, “The Tao, without doing anything (*wu-wei*), / leaves nothing undone” (cited in Watts 132). This can be seen echoed in the Zenrin poem attributed to Bashō: “Sitting quietly, doing nothing. / Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself” (cited in Watts 134).

As seen in the poem above, Taoism was an essential component in the formation of Zen Buddhism by contributing philosophical concepts about the nature of reality. One can also observe the importance of the concept of the spontaneity of the Way in many Zen masters’ responses to their students:

Case Eighteen

Tung-shan was asked by a monk, “What is the Buddha?”

Tung-shan said, “Three pounds of flax.” (*Zen Sourcebook* 99).

Case Seventy-Seven

A monk asked Yün-men, “What is the teaching that goes beyond Buddhas and Patriarchs?”

Yün-men said, “A sesame bun.” (*Zen Sourcebook* 115).

While these answers may seem absurd, the lesson is not in the words themselves, but rather in the turning of the mind away from active searching to a state of letting go, not looking for something beyond reality, but experiencing it in its “suchness.” *La nueva novela* employs these concepts of Logos and Tao not only in the footnote used as an epigraph here but also as symbols of two distinct epistemologies that collide throughout the book. As Marcela Labraña states:

En el Tao, la verdad y la mentira, el esto y el aquello, el ser y el no-ser confluyen en todas las cosas. . . . La existencia de los contrarios en el Tao permite la aparición y desaparición de todas las entidades, incluso de las más concretas. Lo que creemos absolutamente real no es más que el producto ilusorio de la vigilancia (6)

This is the game that Martínez plays in *La nueva novela*, in which there is no center for language (Logos) or for being. Logos becomes a protagonist who falls down the rabbit hole to witness the inversion of its principles. SOGOL, the book’s guard dog (and also Logos spelled backwards) becomes lost at the intersection of Gauss and Lobatchewsky.¹¹ The book has been described as a game of contradictions (Patricia Monarca) and as a play of signifiers by a Scriptor Ludens, who deconstructs discourses through citations and collage.¹² Most interestingly to this study, Martínez offers his readers prompts and questions in the manner of Zen, which ask the reader to consider something beyond the logic of the logocentric Western tradition, such as: “Si La Transparencia se observara a sí misma, ¿qué observaría?” (42). An analysis of his work from a Zen perspective can reveal the similarities in their deconstructive methods.

Tardieu and Martínez: An exchange of koans?

Martínez begins chapter one of his book by creating a fictional encounter between French poet Jean Tardieu and himself in an exchange of questions and answers. He borrows questions from Tardieu’s “Petits problèmes et travaux pratiques” in order to establish the dialogue. Tardieu’s questions appear in regular font with Martínez’s answers bolded:

Dados dos puntos, A y B, SITUADOS A IGUAL DISTANCIA UNO DEL OTRO, ¿cómo hacer para desplazar a B sin que A lo advierta?

**- Plantéesele a A el siguiente problema:
¿Cómo haría A para desplazar sin que B lo advierta?**

(En el momento que A se concentra en el problema, B se desplaza rápidamente). (11).

Although this question is much more mathematical and precise in nature than traditional Zen koans, Martínez's response shows a shift in perspective to deconstruct subject/object dualities. Points A and B effectively become subjects in his answer. Compare this to Case Twenty-Nine of the *Wu-men-kuan*:

In front of the Sixth Patriarch, a temple pennant was blowing in the wind, and two monks were arguing. One claimed that the wind was moving, while the other insisted that it was the pennant that was moving, and they could not come to an agreement. The Sixth Patriarch said, "It's not the wind that is moving; it's not the flag moving; it is your minds that are moving." The two monks were amazed. (*Zen Sourcebook* 104)

Likewise, in this koan, the subject/object distinction is dissolved in order to reveal the illusory barrier between the objective and subjective worlds.

In another dialogue with Tardieu titled "Pequeña cosmogonía práctica" (also the original book title for *La nueva novela*), Martínez includes the following prompt: "Construya un mundo coherente a partir de NADA, sabiendo que: YO = TU y que TODO es POSIBLE. / (HAGA UN DIBUJO)" (33). Tardieu's task leaves the reader dumbfounded since intellect has nothing to grasp onto in creating a coherent world out of nothing where the most basic rules of logic do not apply. Martínez's response is humorous in viewing the loss of duality (in a world where "I = YOU") as a potentially fatal problem for the ego. Since the "I" cannot recover its object of desire ("you"), it ends its life. Martínez's second solution, a four-image comic strip, is also a humorous twist in which the "I" turns the revolver on the image of the other, shooting the portrait. In this way, the Chilean poet's answers demonstrate a clever unravelling of the problem. In a similar mode, Martínez's questions challenge Tardieu (and the reader) to confront problems that defy intellectualization:

Tardieu, suponga que el ESPACIO y el TIEMPO
son las dos lentes de un par de gafas.

¿Qué SUCEDE SI USTED TAPA O CIERRA UN OJO? (37)

Space and time are such elemental concepts, and yet quantum physics has shown that their nature and interconnectedness are far more difficult to grasp than they seem. Martínez's question is strikingly

similar to Hakuin's "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" koan. By eliminating one of the essential elements in the equation, the mind is paralyzed into a peripheral search for meaning.

In the next problem, Martínez treats the subject of persistent identity in an unusual case of reincarnation:

Tardieu, Usted fue un gato y tuvo una dueña.

SE QUERIAN MUCHO.

HAN PASADO CIEN AÑOS DESDE ESA ULTIMA VIDA.

Ahora Usted es la dueña y ella es su gato.

¿Cómo HACEN PARA RECONOCERSE? (37)

We could ask, like Heraclitus, whether it makes sense to talk about continued existence through time since different waters flow, and the river and ourselves have changed. Martínez extends the analogy through reincarnation, asking if an anagnorisis is possible once two subjects (a cat and the owner) have exchanged places. This reminds me of Case Thirty-Five from the *Wu-men-kuan*: "Wu-tsu asked a monk, "Ch'ien and her soul were separated – which is the real Ch'ien?" (*Zen Sourcebook* 106),) since the question challenges one to conceive of an essential self beyond being. Martínez's problem is also similar to Case One from *The Blue Cliff Record*, which relates a famous interview of the first Zen Patriarch, Bodhidharma:

Emperor Wu of Liang asked the great master Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?" Bodhidharma said, "Empty, without holiness." The Emperor said, "Who is facing me?" Bodhidharma replied, "Don't know." (1)

In Zen, and in much Eastern philosophy in general, the idea that the self is an illusion caused by perception and that the true self is empty is not a new idea. In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha declared: "The world is empty of a Self and anything belonging to a Self" (4.54). We cling to our personalities (the five *khandas*, or "aggregates")¹³ because our actions and consciousness provide a sense of continuity in our experience. However, if the self is essentially empty, the only aspects that would be reborn in Martínez's problem are these aggregates. The Chilean poet's scenario is a humorous play on the notion of persistent identity that shows how the erasure of the self makes it difficult to recognize an essence of the self in a new form.

Martínez's "LA CASA DEL ALIENTO" also treats the subject of persistent existence through time to demonstrate a very Zen principle – that the terms of past, present, and future are linguistic constructs that result in paradoxes when applied to external reality. In this text, he writes,

- a. La casa que construiremos mañana
ya está en el pasado y no existe.
- b. En esa casa que aún no conocemos
sigue abierta la ventana que olvidamos cerrar.
- c. En esa misma casa, detrás de esa misma ventana
se baten todavía las cortinas que ya descolgamos. (90)

Martínez creates a scenario in language that reveals the absurd results of taking the division of time into units too far. This argument can be found in the writings of the first-century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna:

1. If the existence of the present and future depends upon the past, then present and future should be in the past.
2. [For] if present and future were not there, how could present and future be dependent upon the past?
3. Moreover, without dependence upon the past, there is no occurrence of present and future. Thus, present as well as future times would not exist.
4. In the same manner, the remaining two periods (of time), as well as (concepts such as) above, below, and middle, etc., or identity, etc., should be characterized. (cited in Kasulis 19).

Nāgārjuna employs a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that demonstrates that linguistic terms are dependent on each other for their meaning and that positing them as external realities leads to untenable paradoxes. Martínez's poem makes the same point, albeit in a more playful way.

Texts mobilized for deconstruction

Like Jacques Derrida's concept of "différance" (the meanings of words come from their synchrony with other words within the language and their diachrony between contemporary and historical definitions of a word), Zen Buddhism also posits that the center of language is empty because it is always a self-referential system used to designate reality. Kasulis explains, "words (and the concepts

based on them) are ultimately *empty* and to be mistrusted as a medium for fully understanding the nature of experience” (12). In Martínez, there is a similar distrust of language that manifests itself in aporias, paradoxes, contradictions, absurdisms, and deconstructions. As he said in an interview, “Soy un poeta apocalíptico. Creo en el fin de una época. Se perdió la imagen sólida del mundo. Los conocimientos acumulados sólo han servido para la confusión. Nuestra confianza en el lenguaje también se ha perdido. ¡Cosa terrible!” (*Poemas del otro* 67). Despite this negative characterization of the loss of trust in language, *La nueva novela* oscillates between comedic and tragic tones. Sometimes even the same text can be seen as comical, tragic, then comical again, as the reader delves further into its layers. A conclusive interpretation of any given text is always delayed by the labyrinthine context of the book that envelopes the text, illuminating and obscuring it at the same time.

Eugenia Brito, Patricia Monarca, and Rioseco are some of the primary critics to signal the deconstructive processes of *La nueva novela*. In a sentence that echoes Kasulis’s description of emptiness in Zen, Brito notes how Martínez’s book subverts the logocentric Aristotelian tradition: “Ninguna de las categorías de la lógica aristotélica, ni la causalidad, ni la condicionalidad, ni la disyunción, etc., servirían para captar las verdaderas posibilidades sobre las que ella [la realidad] descansa” (29). Monarca identifies in the deconstructive process a correspondence in the dissolution of Logos and being, since the former is responsible for organizing and articulating being:

La “deconstrucción del logos” invita a romper con el modo convencional de pensar, considerando que desde comienzos del filosofar existe . . . una conexión indisoluble entre el ser, como tema propio y específico de la filosofía, y el logos, como la reunión de todo ente, que viene reproducida en el pensar humano, en cuanto que este mismo ordena al ente a su esencia en el ser y lo traduce al lenguaje (Muller y Halder, 1981: 277-278). (qtd. in Monarca 150)

Likewise, Rioseco argues that Martínez’s poetic machinery is deconstructive and anti-Aristotelian through the subversion of philosophical principles: “Esta lógica ‘causalista’ es subvertida a través de otra lógica que se postula contradictoria, muchas veces sin sentido, paradójal o simplemente absurda. Una lógica antiaristotélica que postula la abierta violación al principio de no-contradicción” (173). Martínez’s deconstructive project has a similar process to a Zen koan in the sense that it subverts causal logic, creating an impediment to the rational mind, which undermines dualisms and one’s sense that language is a transparent medium for communicating reality.

Martínez’s questions, just like Tardieu’s questions and Martínez’s corresponding answers, reveal the instability of language by showing how things can be created in language that are impossible

for the intellect to conceive. Much like the practice of Zen koan, the reader is confronted with contradictions and logical impossibilities that send one searching for alternative methods of understanding. These strategies are not only apparent in the series of questions and answers with Jean Tardieu, but traverse the space of the book, popping up in different forms. In a text called “EL OIDO,” for example, Martínez describes the operations of the ear thus:

1. El oído es un órgano al revés; sólo escucha el silencio.

2. Si el oído no fuera un órgano al revés, es decir, un órgano hecho para escuchar el silencio, sólo oiríamos el ruido ensordecedor que producen las galaxias, nebulosas, planetas y demás cuerpos celestes en sus desplazamientos a través de los enormes espacios interestelares.

3. Los sonidos, ruidos, palabras, etc. que capta nuestro oído, son realmente burbujas de silencio que viajan desde la fuente emisora que las produce hasta el órgano receptor de silencio que es el oído. (108)

This juxtaposition of sound and silence might remind us of the unnamed monk’s question to Feng-hsüeh, “Speech and silence are both inward and outward – how can we go beyond dualism?” Martínez’s syllogistic text plays with the duality of speech and silence, much in the vein of his oft-quoted poem about pájaros speaking in “pajarístico”: “A través de su canto los pájaros / comunican una comunicación / en la que dicen que no dicen nada” (89). Martínez deconstructs the linguistic exchange by suggesting that it is actually silence that serves to tell us whether communication is working or not. Likewise, in bullet point “C” in a text titled “LA AUSENCIA DE SU OBRA,” Martínez states: “El silencio escucha silencio / y repite en silencio / lo que escucha que no escucha” (92).

A variety of other examples illuminate Martínez’s deconstructive technique, such as his use of paradox in juxtaposing the quotations “Nada es real” (Sotoba Komachi) and “Todo es real” (André Breton), his absurdist analysis of a nonsense poem “Tareas de poesía,” and playful visual deconstructions of objects, like “Meditaciones sobre René Magritte”. This last example is particularly comical in the way that Martínez ironizes the deconstructive process itself through parody:

3 MEDITACIONES SOBRE RENE MAGRITTE

a M. Foucault

(Mis propiedades)



(93)

Here the representational fallacy that Magritte exposes in *La trahison des images* is laid bare by “deconstructing” words into their pieces and expecting their pieces to also refer to reality. The word “pipa” is divided into “pi” and “pa” alongside the two pieces of the pipe as if words were reflections of reality and could be similarly divided. The dedication to Foucault is key here and probably refers to his essay “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (1976), in which Foucault argues that Magritte’s painting is an unraveled calligram that demonstrates the deconstruction of word and image. Thus, Martínez riffs on Foucault’s analysis of Magritte’s work, showing that an even more radical deconstruction leads to a humorous absurdity.

Language (Logos) is to my mind the central protagonist of *La nueva novela*, but the disorientation that it experiences makes it difficult to describe the result of its deconstruction. If we

look at the endnotes of Martínez's book, we find that Sogol (Logos) has disappeared and we are left only with his remains. As Rioseco has noted, it appears that Sogol has broken free: "Lo que realmente tenemos de Sogol son sus "restos," sus "pertinencias": un silbato para llamarlo, su correa y un collar, los cuales aparecen abiertos como si Sogol se hubiese escapado" (222). Just like Sogol's remains, with the relationship between signifiers and signifieds deconstructed, we are left with the flotsam and jetsam of language. Should we "build a coherent world from nothing," as Tardieu/Martínez propose? The very existence of *La nueva novela* suggests that there is something worth creating from the detritus of Western civilization.

Conclusion: Rimbaud – another way out of the West

The result of the deconstruction of Logos is liberation – Sogol has escaped – but the resultant freedom of language is more confusing, and perhaps terrifying than its reification. Martínez laments the loss of faith in language and yet also uses it as a source for ludic creation. The free play of signifiers resulting from the dissolution of Logos presents an opportunity to construct a new kind of novel, poetry not written in "the language of common sense" as Verlaine said of Rimbaud's verse, but rather as a "derangement" of the senses. It is not so much Rimbaud's verse, but rather his rejection of the West and its poetry¹⁴ that Martínez appropriates in his work. "El desorden de los sentidos" (Chapter 7 of *La nueva novela*) and "El barco ebrio" (one of the "tareas de poesía") are the ethos that he explicitly derives from Rimbaud. Martínez finds analogies in other authors, such as Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, nonsense poetry, and the fall of Alice down the rabbit hole, to supplement the disordered vision and deconstruction of Logos.

The most prolific image in *La nueva novela* is Rimbaud, whose portrait appears six times throughout the book. More than the French symbolist's poetry, what Martínez takes from him is the rejection of traditional poetry, and perhaps poetry altogether, as Rimbaud ceased writing at the age of twenty to travel the world. Martínez follows in the footsteps of Rimbaud, but instead of repeating Rimbaud's iconic gesture of abandoning poetry, Martínez creates a new path in creating deconstructive texts with the words of others, and essentially, transforming into an Other.¹⁵ Rimbaud's significance is no doubt Zen-like in the way that he represents a deconstruction of the self ("Je est un autre"), an escape from logocentrism, and a search to experience the "suchness" of reality. In the figure of Rimbaud Martínez finds a way out of the West from inside of it. By becoming his own Other, Martínez is able to undermine the Western literary tradition, opening up a new kind of poetic exploration of language and its possibilities.

Notes

¹ See Marcelo Riosco's "Juan Luis Martínez y las intertextualidades orientales. El caso de la página en chino y los trigramas del *I Ching*" in *Martínez Total* (2016).

² See Marcela Labraña's "La nueva novela de Juan Luis Martínez y la cultura oriental" (1999).

³ In the essay "Satori," D.T. Suzuki writes: "Satori may be defined as intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to intellectual and logical understanding. Practically, it means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind" (*Essays in Zen Buddhism* 230).

⁴ "Autobiography" in *Zen Sourcebook* (21).

⁵ The text is reproduced using the original typography. Readers will note the absence of accent marks for capital letters in Spanish that would normally be accented. They are intentionally left this way to respect the author's text.

⁶ Riosco further notes that Buddhism itself can be seen as a form of poetry (279).

⁷ Pérez Villalón likewise argues that the paradox can be resolved by looking at Hui-neng's message of non-existence: "Me parece que la paradoja . . . debe leerse en función de la convicción budista de que la realidad que percibimos como tal no es sino una ilusión" (72).

⁸ In his essay "Juan Luis Martínez: The Novelist of Nonexistence," Scott Jackson argues that: "Martínez uses these techniques [the fusion of multiple fields of study, the incorporation of mathematics and physical objects] to underscore the theme of non-existence, especially as it pertains to logic" (134).

⁹ Lin-chi, considered to be the founder of the Rinzaï school of Zen, which focuses on sudden enlightenment, is often portrayed as holding a stick, since his enlightenment came from receiving beatings, and he would hit students to encourage them to break free from illusions caused by words (*Zen Sourcebook* 43).

¹⁰ The Gospel of John begins: "In the beginning was the Word (Logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

¹¹ Scott Jackson: "Sogol, an anagram of *logos*, which disappears at the intersection of Gauss and Lobatchewsky avenues, that is, at the point where Euclidean spaces meet. Martínez is clear that a dog in one geometry cannot be seen from the other geometry" (Jackson 136).

¹² Riosco defines the Scriptor Ludens thus, "el Scriptor ludens no se restringe solamente a la combinatoria lúdica de elementos heterogéneos. La operatoria del Scriptor ludens va más allá, tiene una dimensión política, impugna o directamente destruye otros discursos" (15).

¹³ The five *khandas* or aggregates are the following: 1) *Rupa* – material form, 2) *Vedana* – feeling, 3) *Sañña* – perceptions, 4) *Sankhara* – dispositions or actions, and 5) *Viññana* – consciousness. (Holder xvii).

¹⁴ Martínez was one of many authors to draw influences from the East in the 50s, 60s, and 70s in Latin America, although his departure from Western poetry may be the most radical. Other authors include Juan L. Ortiz, Hugo Padeletti, Arturo Carrera, Pablo Neruda, Alejandro Jodorowsky, Javier Sologuren, Alfonso Cisneros Cox, José Watanabe, Noigandres, Sergio Medeiros, Octavio Paz, Leonora Carrington, Alberto Blanco, César Dávila Andrade, and Rafael Cadenas.

¹⁵ En *La última broma de Juan Luis Martínez: No sólo ser otro sino escribir la obra de otro* (2014), Weintraub reveló que los poemas líricos de "Poemas del otro," los cuales habían sido atribuidos a Martínez durante más de una década, eran de hecho traducciones del francés de poemas de otro Juan Luis Martínez (sin acento), un poeta suizo-catalán.

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