

Manuel de Pedrolo

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by Carme Ballús

Manuel de Pedrolo i Molina was born in 1918 in L'Aranyó, in the La Segarra region of Catalonia, and spent his childhood in Tàrrega. An only child who devoured books, he had his sights set on studying Psychiatry from a young age. In 1936, when the Spanish Civil War broke out, he fought in artillery on the Republican side. Post-war, as was the case for many civilians, his previous plans were left in ruins.

Already married, he settled in Barcelona in around 1946. He dedicated himself to various jobs to make a living in the difficult post-war period: selling fruit, an insurance broker or working in a tourist information office. He later worked as a literary adviser, translator and proof-reader. In *Darrers diaris inèdits, Blocs 1998 - 1990* (Last Unedited Diaries, 1998 - 1990 Notebooks), Pedrolo talks of how these occasional jobs made him reflect upon the human condition: "...during those years in which I worked as an 'investigator' I spoke with people, men and women, from all manner of social classes and they confided in me many things. From that time must come my belief that people like to confide in a stranger who lends them a friendly ear and who shows themselves to be understanding."

However, his greatest passion was writing. He always wrote in Catalan, despite the difficulties that it comprised for publication during the early years of the Francoist regime, during which the Catalan language was persecuted and silenced. Due to the censorship and repression that Catalan culture suffered under the Francoist regime much of his work was published many years after the date which it was written. This is the case of, for example, *Cendra per Martina* (Ash for Martina), written in 1952 and published in 1965.

From 1974 he was able to dedicate himself more intensively to writing, which he alternated with translations, editorial work and collaborating with the great majority of the magazines which were published in Catalan at the time: *Ariel*, *Canigó*, *Oriflama* and *Serra d'Or*.

He translated authors such as John Dos Passos, Jack Kerouac and William Faulkner, collaborating thus in the introduction of North American literature into Catalonia. Attracted by crime fiction, he directed Edicions 62's collection of detective novels *La Cua de Palla* (The Tail of Straw—a Catalan expression meaning to be guilty and to get found out sooner or later) collection until 1970. Pedrolo himself provides an excellent example of the genre with *Mossegar-se la cua* (1968) (Biting Your Tail).

During 40 long years he wrote and published over one hundred pieces, mainly creative works of prose, short stories, novels, essays and plays. The genre in which he invested most was the novel, an

area through which he explored a most diverse array of themes and styles. His most read novel, not least as it has been on high school reading lists, is *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (Manuscript of the Second Origin). The most widely read does not, however, mean the best, as many of Pedrolo's other novels have a similar, or superior, point of interest. This could be said to be the case for *Cendra per Martina* (1965), *M'enterro en els fonaments* (1962) (Burying Myself in the Foundations), *Joc brut* (1965) (Foul Play), *Totes les bèsties de càrrega* (1965) (All The Beasts of Burden), *Aquesta matinada i potser per sempre* (1980) (This Morning and Maybe Forever), or the *Temps obert* (Open Time) series of novels which he started in 1963. The latter was devised by Pedrolo as an infinite and unfinishable cycle of work. It consists of eleven novels, all of which have the same character, Daniel Bastida, as a protagonist and for whom each novel in the series explores a different possible life.

His wish, which he stated on more than one occasion, was to create an extensive body of work which touched upon many themes, a 'document' of the reality which surrounded him, and also to experiment with all possible techniques and genres: crime fiction, science fiction, erotic writing, realism... His primary thematic interest in his novels is freedom, especially a lack of it. This theme is a constant, although the way of detailing and expressing it evolved over the years he was active. Pedrolo usually presents reality through a combination of detailed, highly realistic, descriptions with highly unlikely, sometimes absurd, situations. His pessimistic view is afforded a hint of optimism only in the situations where people are alone and unite to fight for an ideal.

He experimented with a variety of techniques, often playing with and distorting the coordination of space and time. An example of this type of literary work can be found in the collection of short stories *Trajecte final* (1975) (Final Journey). On other occasions he plays with the contrast between the characters, who are logical and credible, and the absurd situation in which they find themselves.

He declared himself an agnostic and was neither a great fan of social occasions nor of being seen at large group events. Nevertheless, through his civic engagement and criticism of the development of political parties, he exercised a notable influence in certain sectors of Catalan society during the 1970's and 1980's. To illustrate this, a transcription from 24th January 1988 from his *Darrers diaris inèdits* in which he criticises the attitude of the Madrid central government towards Catalan autonomy:

"It is normal that public spending increases day by day. 146 unconstitutionality resources on the Catalan government's laws and decrees cost a great deal. But the Spanish government says that, economically, it's been a very good year. Altogether, including unemployed workers, we can allow ourselves the luxury of a group of judges and other civil servants who have been charged with the task of refining, until they've polished (and they most certainly have "polished" it) the autonomy the Spanish government authorised us to have".

Manuel de Pedrolo won 23 literary prizes, even being awarded the *Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes* in 1979 in recognition of his literary journey. He died in Barcelona on 26th June 1990.

Translated by Katherine Reynolds