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## ***Stretching the Limits: Pedroló's Detective Fiction*** **José F. Colmeiro**

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## STRETCHING THE LIMITS: PEDROLO'S DETECTIVE FICTION

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A characteristic trait in all of Manuel de Pedrolo's literary production is the struggle against conformity, stretching the limits of the established order (legal, moral, intellectual) and vindicating what has been repressed and excluded by the norm. Pedrolo's particularly subversive attitude, from a moral and literary point of view, results from a dialectic of reality and desire originating in the author's personal discontent with the anomalous historical circumstances in which he had to live (the post-war years of harsh political, cultural and linguistic repression) and his desire for a radical change of that reality. Not surprisingly, his attitude situates him clearly outside the safe limits of the social and cultural order of his time. From this marginal position Pedrolo embarks on a double subversion, ethical as well as esthetic, that vindicates political, cultural and linguistic non-conformity. This is perhaps best exemplified in his experimentation with detective fiction.

I am limiting this discussion of Pedrolo's fiction to four of his novels that best fit into the genre of detective fiction and whose production covers a time span of some twenty years: starting with his 1954 novel *L'inspector fa tard* (The inspector arrives late), *Joc brut* (Foul Play) published in 1965, *Mossegar-se la cua* (To bite one's own tail) in 1967, and finally in 1972 *Algú que no hi havia de ser* (Someone not meant to be there).

Throughout these novels, the subversive practice of the author is displayed in three different interdependent levels which challenge the power of the established order. To maintain the geographical metaphor appropriate to the subject of this discussion, it is possible to say that the illegal trespassing of the limits imposed by the center-periphery demarcation is accomplis-

hed on three different fronts: the full restauration of the repressed Catalan language, the critical reevaluation of the underrated genre of detective fiction, and the moral defence of the marginal sectors of society, the victims and transgressors of social order. Based on this threefold vindicative argument that seeks the reversability of the present situation, Pedrolo proposes in his fiction a radical inversion of the repressive status quo.

On a first level, the vindication of the «marginal» Catalan language stands out. As in the rest of his work, here Pedrolo takes on the linguistic dominance of «central» Castillian and the repression suffered by his language, especially harsh during the years of the Franquist regime. His amazingly prolific and varied literary production in Catalan, which apart from the detective novels here discussed also includes his experimental fiction as well as his existentialist theatre of the absurd, might well be considered altogether as an individual attempt to neutralize the officially imposed restrictions on the Catalan language and culture, and thus reverse the center-periphery situation.

Conscious of the real danger of losing his language, and with it his cultural identity, Pedrolo affirms the necessity for a complete normalization of the Catalan language in all social and artistic areas in order to secure its own survival. The process of linguistic normalization envisioned by Pedrolo necessarily implies the recuperation of the so-called «popular» literary genres, which while excluded from the literary canon, enjoy a central position among the reading public at large, a fact that does not escape Pedrolo's attention:

Em sembla que, quan tenim por de perdre la nostra llengua, més aviat hauriem de voler escriure obres «populars», ja que allò que ens interessa és allunyar el perill d'extinció que correm i no pas deixar únicament obres «significatives» que, un cop eliminats culturalment, seran una pura curiositat. (*The Spanish Sleuth*, 62).

Nevertheless, the serious commitment to his language and culture does not fully explain by itself Pedrolo's extensive expe-



rimentation with the detective novel. His daring enterprise of writing «marginal» detective novels in a «minor» language like Catalan must not be seen as some kind of self-imposed exclusion or reinforcement of his own liminality. On the contrary, it responds in fact to a double objective of comprehensiveness that attempts to reverse the center-periphery polarity: on the one hand, the ethical necessity of accomplishing the global normalization of the repressed Catalan culture and literature, and, on the other hand, the esthetic need to achieve a narrative totality as a writer that includes so called «minor» genres like detective fiction.

With respect to the first objective mentioned, Pedrolo's detective novels were a conscious individual attempt to collaborate in the creation of more favorable conditions for the success of that desired cultural normalization, and the preparation of a broadly based public willing to read in Catalan. With his detective novels he also sought to expand the body of literature written in Catalan, to further the literary self-sufficiency for the Catalan reading public in all literary genres — majors and minor — as well as to serve as a possible model to other Catalan writers, a project which unfortunately had no immediate results.

On the other hand, Pedrolo's incursion into detective fiction is also a result of his conscious desire to explore a variety of fictional modes and experiment with different narrative techniques; his artistic development follows a logic of constant narrative challenge in search of a desired «obra completa». Pedrolo has repeatedly explained that his interest in this genre is owed above all to his inclination towards experimentation and his desire of creative plenitude: «més que res, volia completar-me. La novel·la policíaca posa tot de trampes peculiars, i és bo d'exposar-s'hi» (Coca, 36). His determination to achieve a narrative totality, «aquell desig de no deixar gaires coses al marge» (47), also prompted his decision to explore the science fiction genre and even to consider the theoretical possibility of writing a love story or «novel·la rosa», a possibility nevertheless consciously rejected

due to the total conformity and false resolution of conflicts presented in these novels:

També podria fer això que s'ha convingut d'anomenar una novel·la «rosa», però m'emprenyen, aquestes obres; són tan alienadores: Perquè de fet, què és, una novel·la rosa? Un atzucac que acaba en un «happy end» en el qual es lliga tot allò que no es pot lligar en els termes que aquest tipus de novel·la presenta. No crec gaire en els bon acabaments, jo. Sóc del parer d'en Marcuse, que diu que l'optimisme és reaccionari (Coca, 37).

Pedrolo's continued interest in detective fiction should be clarified. He openly rejected the traditional or formal detective novel, the positivistic and rationalistic *roman-problème* exploited by Conan Doyle and his multiple successors, whose only rationale rests in the final solution of a mysterious enigma and implicitly celebrates the re-establishment of the legal, social and intellectual order. For Pedrolo, this type of detective fiction is yet another formula of «happy ending», like the despised «novel·la rosa»:

Aquests detectius que entenen de tot, que tant són especialistes en escarabats sagrats com en peces de ceràmica, i que en tenen prou de trobar un cabell en un plat de sopa que s'estava menjant la víctima al moment de l'assassinat...

No, aquesta idea tan fabulosament intel·lectualista de la cosa policíaca m'interessa poc (Coca, 30).

Against this traditional detective novel, so «orderly» for the importance given to the pseudo-scientific method of investigation, the respect for society's laws and mores, and its rigid formal pattern, Pedrolo prefers other newer subversive forms, particularly the American «hard-boiled» detective novel, as created by Dashiell Hammett and developed by Raymond Chandler, with all its crude violence and social criticism that denounce the corruption of the system and question the established order.



Well before its late discovery by the Spanish public and critics in the 1970's and 1980's under the umbrella term of «*novel·la negra*», Pedrolo clearly shows his preference for this critical and subversive trend within detective fiction, which proves once and for all that «*la novel·la policíaca vehicula alguna cosa més que la simple aventura de lladres i serenos*» (Coca, 31). With this conviction, Pedrolo takes the initiative of vindicating the detective novel in Catalunya — like Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares in Argentina during the 1940's with respect to the traditional ratiomative detective novel. He introduced to the Catalan reading public new forms of detective fiction (the roman noir, the psychological suspense thriller) thus inviting the reevaluation of the genre. It was his admiration for the masters of this narrative form that led him to direct between 1963 and 1970 the new specialized collection «*La Cua de Palla*» from Edicions 62, which would present in Catalan some of the best «*serie noire*» detective novels produced by American and European authors (such as Hammett, Chandler, Ross MacDonald, Le Carré and Simenon), some of which he translated into Catalan himself.

Pedrolo's artistic use of the narrative conventions of this particular type of detective novel, however, cannot be fully explained as responding to a purely utilitarian purpose or to the merely technical challenge of a virtuoso. Pedrolo saw in this genre a powerful corrosive agent — ethical as well as esthetic —, that was a perfect vehicle to denounce the ambiguous morality of the established order, its corruption and injustice, while at the same time employing a new narrative language in reaction to the traditional, formal detective novel. The subversive moral and ideological principles are articulated within the equally subversive esthetic of the hard-boiled detective novel, with its quintessentially anti-heroic protagonists, its sordid atmosphere, its crude language, and heavy doses of violence and sex, an explosive combination that Pedrolo was able to adapt to Catalan post-war reality.

This formula of detective fiction, besides permitting Pedro-

lo's work to reach a broader base of readers, is at the same time an ideal instrument to call attention to the marginal squalid world within the great industrial city; the conventions of the genre allow the author to take the reader for a tour of the underworld and the sordid urban sections inhabited by losers and outsiders, a definitely marginal and antiheroic population (defeated by the war, by the economic injustice or by a combination of both) and to denounce that reality.

Pedrolo experiments in his detective novels with a variety of narrative strategies to establish from the beginning a feeling of complicity between reader and criminal (such as the psychological introspection of the criminal characters, using their own perspective either as the narrative point of view or as a dramatic counterpoint). The pathos is reinforced by the fact that the protagonists in these novels are generally not career criminals but ordinary people who, due to some unusual circumstances, have become involved in a crime. The narrative interest does not rely on the hero as a criminal outcast; on the contrary, it focuses on the human being and his tragedy, emphasizing the overwhelming social and psychological motivations which have led him to transgress society's rules and which will ultimately determine the outcome of the conflict. By witnessing the complex transformation of a lawabiding citizen into a lawbreaker, the reader will have a better understanding and feel compassion, perhaps even empathy, towards the marginal transgressors of the social order.

As we get acquainted with the psychological motivations and social circumstances that explain the criminal actions of the characters, we begin to see them less like criminals and more like victims. In the careful construction of the narrative, the unexpected discoveries and melodramatic revelations about these characters tend to emphasize their basic role as victims, as much for the unfair treatment received from society as for their own alienation from society and their inability to overcome adversity. For instance, Xavier Rius in *Joc Brut* has been a victim of



foul play in more ways than one: since his father fought and died on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War, he has painfully experienced from his early childhood harsh political oppression, social exclusion and economic injustice -the common fare of those defeated in the war and their families; after the war, his mother's life savings were lost in a real state scam that forced them to live in precarious conditions from there on; and, to make matters worse, he later fell prey to the schemes of a woman who used him to kill her husband. In *L'inspector* the protagonist is an old office worker who, as his name Miserachs implies, has always lived a miserable life, characterized by routine and poverty, without any hope of ever changing or escaping the sordid conditions of his life. In *Mossegat-se...* we get acquainted with the young medical student Antoni Portell who, desperate over the lack of financial support to finish his studies, collaborates in a bungled kidnapping. We later discover that his accomplice Gloria has been a victim of sexual abuse and social discrimination, when her past suffering is revealed to us in a final melodramatic twist (a single mother, herself daughter of a single mother, abused by her stepfather, and blackmailed by her employer who has forced her into this caper). We have to feel some sympathy for these characters. Ernest in *Algú...* is an idealist who wants to help those unjustly persecuted and who believes in the possibility of creating a more just society where compassion will prevail over greed. What all these characters have in common is that they are victims of a society that has treated them unfairly. The oppressive environment in which the protagonists have lived their sordid lives is dominated by pressing economic needs, precarious living conditions, the routine of their menial jobs and the general dissatisfaction in their lives, almost without any possibility of escaping their condition of social outcasts, alienated from society. In view of these adverse circumstances the act of rebellion against the norms of society is not only understood and justified, but the social system begins to appear as the real cause of the criminal activity.



Behind the guise of harmless detective stories we discover in these texts a veiled but radical questioning of the moral values sustained by society in order to secure its own perpetuation. These moral principles establish without any ambiguity the clear limits that separate good and evil, equating them with submission to the law on the one hand and its transgression on the other. Pedrolo undertakes a revision of the ethical parameters that define traditional concepts of innocence and culpability, justice and honesty, and rule what is acceptable and what is not so. These terms, like good and evil, are not absolute and invariable but relative and reversible; their boundaries shift and blur as they are subject to close scrutiny. A particular type of transgression punishable by society's rules might be justifiable and even praiseworthy under a different code of values that would take into account the basic injustice on which the social system is constructed.

With this in mind, several problematic questions arise from the reading of Pedrolo's novels of detection: Who is the real culprit and who the real victim? The one compelled to commit a crime or the one who provokes him to do so? The hopelessly marginal outcast or those who have cornered him into that position? Who is really to blame? The working student who commits a crime, like Antoni Portell, in order to pay for his studies or the society that has neglected its obligation?

The reversibility of these concepts has been tested in the long literary tradition of the Robin Hood type or the generous bandit who robs the rich for the benefit of the poor, a topic that Pedrolo adapts to modern society and incorporates in his detective fiction. In *Algú que no hi havia de ser* the protagonist, Ernest, a badly paid Catalan translator of detective novels turned bank robber, altruistically offers all his share of the loot to several centers of medical research. Moreover, he ends up joining the gang of delinquents of an unnamed subversive organization that defends those unjustly persecuted. The conduct of these idealistic delinquents is justified in the name of a great cause:

«ets un romàntic, com nosaltres» Ernest is told by his initiator in the organization (326). From a different moral angle, in *Mossegar-se...*, the investigator Serra ends up pardoning Antoni Portell, the poor medical student, when he finally realizes that the alleged criminal is actually a victim of society's indifference and neglect. The investigator-narrator notices the noble objectives of the young student and recognizes in him «una víctima que si aconseguia el títol de metge, i no en dubtava, tornaria bé per mal a la societat que, perquè era pobre, l'acorralava amb una crueltat inconscient» (191-2). Serra holds a personal moral code that shows more compassion and understanding than the one sustained by society, and accordingly he defends the weak and oppressed while accusing the powerful, conceding somewhat ironically that «parlava un llenguatge romàntic i passat de moda en un món de taurons que només pensaven a devorar-se» (191).

The moral defence of the protagonist who does not conform to society's norms, the ordinary person who has committed a crime out of necessity, under pressure or for a just cause that will ultimately redound to society's benefit, contrasts with the firm accusation of the criminal actions of other secondary characters who have absolutely no excuse for their crime but are not punished by society. The profiles of Antoni the student in need or Gloria the victimized and blackmailed woman in *Mossegar-se...*, both involved in a kidnapping and two accidental deaths, are opposed to the dark figure of the powerful and insatiable industrialist Jordana, the real culprit behind the criminal operation. The delinquent conduct of an ordinary person of essentially good moral character tends to be viewed more favourably when juxtaposed to the actions of other undoubtedly reprehensible criminal characters lacking scruples and without excuse, who are moved exclusively by their extraordinary ambition of power and money: the industrial tycoon in *Mossegar-se la cua* who is capable of destroying people's lives in the pursuit of his ambitions of power; the gang of professional criminals in *L'inspector fa tard* that persecute and finally kill the poor clerk-turned-



thief that had come upon them in the robbery of the factory; or the evasive femme fatale in *Joc Brut* who deceitfully uses the naive protagonist to murder her husband with the promise of a later marriage, but runs away with her lover after receiving her inheritance. Their faults prove to be much more serious, more revolting, for their lack of compassion and humanity, but these actions do not receive the appropriate punishment that they would deserve in a just society. Still, above this group of criminals and assassins yet another even bigger delinquent appears, an anonymous, collective and ubiquitous protagonist that mistreats the weak, excludes the defeated, and subjugates the poor with cruelty and indifference: society itself.

In spite of this critical indictment of society — and the moral defence of the marginal and oppressed in their non-conformity with the rules of an oppressive society — the transgression of the limits imposed by the established order in Pedrolo's detective fiction seems to be an enterprise forever doomed to failure. The strong scepticism that pervades these novels undermines the possibility of success of any subversive action against the interest of society. Clearly, the serious problems presented could not be happily resolved without the risk of making a fantastic oversimplification or mere revolutionary slogans. We should also remember that, for Pedrolo, the optimism associated with the happy ending, no matter from which side, is always reactionary precisely because of its conformity. The pessimistic scepticism emerging from these novels is akin to the characteristic existentialism of the postwar years, as it is provoked by a pervasive feeling of angst and the absurdity of living without any discernible objective or hope. As new avatars of Meursault, the alienated protagonist in Camus' *L'étranger*, these transgressors of society's laws discover only too late that they are just marginal pieces within the complex organization of society, fallible and vulnerable human beings dominated by an ironic fate, incapable of escaping society's rules; they are defeated once again, cornered, overtaken by the unfortunate turn of events and incapable of

controlling the unplanned consequences of their actions: his plans fail and backfire (the accidental death of the kidnapped victim in *Mossegar-se...*), he discovers that he has been used by his accomplice (the femme fatale in *Joc brut*), or in an ironic turn, the thief sees his loot threatened by other thieves (as it is the case in *L'inspector...*, *Algú...*). The delinquent, relentlessly cornered, sceptic and hopeless, finally understands and accepts the absurdity of his enterprise and the true nature of his defeat. He rejects the perverse power of money, which has motivated his crime and caused his misfortunes, and which constitutes the true scale on which society measures its individuals; money has now little value for him; the poor thief Miserachs decides to surrender his loot to his persuaders; the medical student Portell and the secretary Gloria return the ransom money to its owner; Ernest Serra, the translator — turned bank robber — turned defendant of the underdog, gives his share of the robbery to several centers of medical research for liver disease. In the end, the individual once again has been a victim of society, from which he cannot escape:

l'individu... ha caigut en una trampa preparada ja d'abans de la seva naixença i dins la qual morirà, una trampa que el condemna a la misèria, a la rutina, que limita els seus horitzons i el converteix en un ser carregat de deures i sense cap dret, espoliat per una circumstància a la qual no ha contribuït i que el minimitza... (*Joc brut*, 50).

These negative overtones do not weaken the radical moral critique of society undertaken by Pedrolo; nor are they an obstacle in his vindication of the marginal and excluded by the established order.

Pedrolo has been successful in stretching the limits on the three main fronts that we have pointed out at the beginning of this discussion; he sought to vindicate a repressed language and culture, his own; he intended to reevaluate a literary genre excluded from the canon by going beyond the «cops and robbers»



formulaic conventions; he attempted to question the moral values of our society as they relate to the concepts of order, justice, and crime. I think the author has achieved his goal. By bringing the marginal to a central position, Pedrolo has been able to effectively reserve those polarities.

With the relative perspective permitted to us by time as we enter the end of the decade and consider the remarkable social and cultural developments experienced in Spain in the last fifteen years, the renewed energy of Catalan language and culture, the general revaluation of literary genres like the detective novel, previously ignored and now thriving among the Catalan writers and readers (as shown in the recent creation of several specialized collections in Catalan and the emergence of young Catalan detective novelists such as Jaume Fuster and Maria Antònia Oliver), we may agree, even if Pedrolo would judge it reactionary, that it is possible to see the future, at least of detective fiction in Catalan, with a certain degree of optimism.

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