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Alba as Eternal Mother: Violent Spaces and the 'Last Woman' in Manuel de Pedrolo's "Mecanoscrit del segon origen"

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Readings of the Novel: The Need for a Politico-Feminist View

Any person who has, in one way or another, come across the works of Manuel de Pedrolo, will recognize that the genres of 'science fiction' and 'fantastic literature' stand out as representative of his *oeuvre*, mostly because of the literary phenomenon represented by his iconic science-fiction novel *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*¹ (1974). A defense of the novel's inclusion in the genre in Catalonia can, perhaps, best be observed in Antoni Munné-Jordà's decision to entitle a 2006 article "Manuel de Pedrolo's science fiction: more than *Mecanoscrit* but also". However—and here I voice the same concern implicit in Munné-Jordà's title—a responsible study also needs to highlight how the popularity of this novel did not only cast a shadow over a variety of other titles written by Pedrolo in this genre—arguably thwarting reception and recognition of the breadth of his *oeuvre*—but also turned this emblematic novel into an 'untouchable' work² for literary critics.

My contribution in this article aims to draw on, and in some cases challenge, previous readings of this novel—some of them inscribed in the context of Catalan education since the 1980s—which tend to regard it as inconsistent with the global politico-aesthetic project of the writer. By highlighting how narratives of destruction and reconstruction of social space permeate the work in the form of a national allegory—aided by the author's post-apocalyptic depiction of the Catalan landscape and his use of the 'Last-Man' motif—I will also question the often idealized image, constructed by previous readings, of the female protagonist Alba as a 'feminist heroine'. In line with P. Louise Johnson's reading of representations of femininity and motherhood in some of Manuel de Pedrolo's works,³ my objection to previous interpretations is based on the writer's feminization of the nation through the figure of Alba in order to create the national allegory underlying his narrative. I suggest that, due to the writer's tendency to politicize the female body as a landscape, the violence exerted against Catalonia, as represented in his *oeuvre*, becomes analogous to a subsequent and highly problematic depiction of violence against the female characters who feature in it. From a moral and ethical perspective, the demystification of Pedrolo's militancy as a feminist writer should be a necessary step before undertaking any serious research on his work.

By means of a thorough, nuanced allegorical reading of the treatment of space in *Mecanoscrit*, I aspire to decode the writer's agenda as embedded in this fictional work. Pedrolo's own positioning on the role a writer should play within his own national literary space—illustrated by Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of *intellectuel engagé*—is often mirrored by instances in his narrative where relationships are drawn between characters and the space they occupy. Similarly, deviant representations of the Catalan landscape serve the author to invoke

collective memory through the showcasing of socio-historical events inscribed in 20th century Catalan imaginary.

With the exception of a few cases, the spaces in Pedrolo's science fiction have rarely been analyzed in direct connection with the 20th century Catalan national space. While a lot of critical effort has been undertaken by figures such as Antoni Munné-Jordà and Anna Moreno Bedmar—among others—to delimitate the extent to which Manuel de Pedrolo contributed to Catalan science fiction, none of these studies systematically connects the worlds created by Pedrolo to the socio-political situation of 20th century Catalonia. In the particular case of *Mecanoscrit*, some readings have attempted to draft connections between the post-apocalyptic world created by Pedrolo and the hopes offered by the obvious decay of the Francoist dictatorship. J. M. Hernández Ripoll closes a re-reading of the novel—20 years after reading it for the first time as a Catalan student—with the following stance:

An impossible dreamy epic dressed in tragic clothes, the legacy of an idealism as raw as carpaccio, capable of opening itself to the more curious minds of the new generations; an absolutely necessary recommendation for those who forgot that sometime ago they also dreamed of a better world. (8)⁴

The same 'dream' in Hernández's quote is echoed by a conversation between two Catalan science-fiction connoisseurs, Victor Martínez-Gil and Antoni Munné-Jordà, in which the former indicates that "when *Mecanoscrit*, was published, close to the demise of Francoist Regime, other anti-utopias were also published in Catalan: after years of immobilization, the Catalan authors foresaw the arrival of an uncertain shifting future and made their own reflections" (in Munné-Jordà 57). A more specific analysis of the different spaces featured in the novel is noted by Anna Moreno-Bedmar in her recently submitted PhD dissertation. Through an ecocritical perspective, she gives a brief account on the dichotomy between rural and urban spaces operating in the novel: "The destructive nature of mankind and the purity of Nature are discussed; as it can be seen throughout the novel, Nature becomes a place for refuge and regeneration (life), in direct opposition to urban spaces (death)" (239).

Moreno insists on the validity of this Catalan bestseller as a reading that can still appeal to 21st century readers of so-called YA (Young Adult) fiction—a claim I will address later in this article—and offers an updated contextualization of the novel, aided by Carles Porta's screen adaptation, *Segon origen* [*Second Origin*] (2015). Her arguments are not far from the ones expressed by Peter Cocozzella in his 1975 review of the novel, in which he claimed that *Mecanoscrit* was "Pedrolo's answer to the demand for a type of fiction specifically geared to

the 'youth of our time', who are, presumably, dissatisfied with such holdovers as Jules Verne, Emilio Salgari and James Fenimore Cooper" (752). Mathilde Bensoussan talks about this novel mentioning the proximity in its narrative to works such as Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1949), Robert Merle's *Malevil* (1972), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and William Goldwin's *Lord of the Flies*⁵ (75). Even if there are many possible political readings of these works that could have been connected to the Catalan context, Bensoussan highlights the absence of religious practices in Alba and Dídac's new world, noting how "we find an inverted myth of Adam and Eve: Eve is born before Adam, she's the tree of science, instead of losing Adam, she saves him" (78), and drawing on race treatment in the novel: "in the new world imagined by Pedroló there will be no racism" (78).

As has been made clear by several of his critics,⁶ most recently in the shape of a monograph by Xavier Trill, *Pedroló i la nació (1957-1982)* (2016), Pedroló's conception of the relationship between the Spanish and Catalan territories—and consequently their literary spaces—can be better understood from a post-colonial perspective; approaches like Fredric Jameson's on Third-World Literatures become very relevant in exploring the Catalan case through Pedroló's eyes. Noting how Jameson uses the concept of 'Third-World' in "an essentially descriptive sense" (67), I use his theories under the assumption that this denomination can refer to cultures driven to a subaltern position by a more powerful (First-World) dominant one. There is an aspect in the way 'Third-World' Literatures operate according to Jameson that I find particularly useful when looking at the case of Manuel de Pedroló's science-fiction works; the literary critic and political theorist argues that Third-World texts are always allegorical and they need to be read as what he calls 'national allegories':

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (69)

The 'Last-Man' Motif: From Mary Shelley's England to Pedroló's Catalonia

An urgent question to be addressed about deviant representations of national landscapes in science fiction and fantasy narratives is whether they favor the fetishization of such spaces by the reader, or if, on the contrary, the deviance introduced by these genres is identified by the reader as signaling underlying meanings. This question becomes even more relevant in dystopian narratives whose scenarios are clearly identified with existing locations in the real world:

The science fiction or fantasy author must include enough recognizable material in his or her story so that the reader can decode the unrecognizable. The inclusion of traditional materials by these authors or the use of traditional materials to structure whole stories has proved to be a reliable strategy for connecting the reader from the everyday world with a story set in a fantastic one and for enabling that reader to decode both the worlds about which they are reading as well as the significance of that world and the actions which occur there. (Sullivan 292)

Post-apocalyptic literature has often made use of this strategy in order to connect with the reader, as the destruction of a well-known civilization provokes an intense reaction in the reader; the greater and more majestically the city stood before its downfall, the more aesthetically effective and appealing its representation is as it becomes a fallen relic. This effect is even stronger when the reader is faced with the familiarity of a known national space; the uncanny feeling of recognizing places imprinted in the reader's personal or shared imaginary calls for an even deeper attraction to these deviant depictions. One cannot help but perceive a certain beauty in the last scene of the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, in which Charlton Heston contemplates the remains of New York's Statue of Liberty half buried in the sand of what once was Liberty Island. A similar strange beauty permeates the New York represented in Richard Matheson's novel *I am legend* (1954), whose 2007 cinema adaptation shows a scenario in which "(t)he buildings in the city appear wrapped in dense vegetation, and its only inhabitants are now wild animals running between wrecked yellow cabs, the once distinctive icons of 'the Big Apple'" (Nilsson-Fernández 7). Similar images are found in the post-apocalyptic counterparts of cities like London, portrayed in *28 weeks later* (2008) and Barcelona in *Los últimos días [The Last Days]* (2013) and *Segon origen* (2015).

Extensive research on narrative driven by apocalyptic and 'Last-Man' motifs has proven that besides aesthetics, these deviant representations of landscapes are drawn by a different kind of motivation; works featuring 'end of the world' situations or post-apocalyptic scenarios have been read as responses to sociopolitical anxieties on the part of their writers. Cousin de Grainville's *Le dernier homme* (1805) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826)—both initiators of the 'Last-Man' motif—have been read as the writers' reaction to the failure of the French Revolution and the political disillusionment after the Napoleonic Wars.⁷ A 'Last-Man' novel much closer in time to Pedrolo, the cult post-apocalyptic novel *I Am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson, has been read according to its sociopolitical context. Mathias Clasen's reading of *I Am Legend* identifies a projection of Matheson's personal fears in the context of the Cold War—present in all kind of cultural products from the period—while also

extrapolating these fears to the wider universal context of human nature as a whole.⁸ Insofar as universal fears do not disappear through time but instead take different shapes according to the sociopolitical context of each generation, similar readings seem appropriate when applied to later interpretations of the same narrative. Thus, Sean Brayton reads the 2007 cinema adaptation of *I am legend* directed by Francis Lawrence in the context of the different racial discourses emerging during Barack Obama's administration.⁹

With this type of approach in mind, I suggest an analysis of Pedrolo's *Mecanoscrit* that considers the sociopolitical conditions at the time of its production—one year before Spanish fascist dictator Francisco Franco's death—and sees the depiction of post-apocalyptic Catalonia as arising from more than aesthetic or commercial reasons. To begin with, Pedrolo locates the starting point of his novel in a fictional rural town he names 'Benaura'. The first aspect denoting the multilayered nature of this space is precisely the fact that whereas the name 'Benaura' does not correlate to any existing topographic name in Catalonia, this fictional town has traditionally been identified¹⁰ with the real Catalan municipality of Tàrraga, Pedrolo's hometown.¹¹

Even if Benaura is in fact a representation of real life Tàrraga, this correlation can only be identified by readers who are familiar with this town. This renaming, however, signals an ambivalent relationship between Pedrolo and his hometown, while highlighting the town's decentralized position in a center/periphery dynamic and self-positioning himself as a peripheral writer. Discussions revolving around spatial identity in the Catalan postwar originated situations such as the one illustrated by a 1956 article by Rafael Tasis. While introducing Pedrolo to the Catalan readership, Tasis confronts the fact that Pedrolo's first six novels are set up in international locations by defending the writer—mentioning his knowledge of unpublished material by the author featuring local scenarios—in order to “respond to accusations of cosmopolitanism and uprooting that could arise if editorial fate made works located in foreign countries come to light before the more local ones, both found in the extensive unpublished corpus of Pedrolo” (334).

Renaming Tàrraga may be Pedrolo's attempt to exert some power over his home town; it is Michel de Certeau's belief that, when proper names are given to places, they negatively control them (104). Thus, this could be Pedrolo's way of controlling Tàrraga, of creating his own version of it, somehow detaching it from the unavoidable reminder of the writer's aristocratic background that the city represents:

An even worse were those illustrious grandparents I was meant to look up to. Dignity, responsibility. Long face. Credibility. Guts. All of this, though never told, was constantly thrown up at my face. It wasn't acceptable. in the

moments of depression and lucidity—always hand in hand—I would promise myself I would never be illustrious, I would never want any dignities, I would flee from any kind of honours... (García, *Pedrolianes* 10-11, original ellipsis)

The sentence used by Marc Augé in his work *Non-places* “(t)o be born is to be born in a place, to be ‘assigned to residence’” (53) seems very appropriate to describe Tàrrega’s enslavement of his most famous writer as expressed above; in the French text Augé plays with the double meaning of the expression ‘résidence forcée’, which in English refers both to ‘assigned to residence’ and ‘domiciliary arrest’. The latter meaning can be applied to Pedrolo’s feelings about Tàrrega; during his childhood, the town saw the demise of the few aristocratic families left at the turn of the 20th Century—the de Pedrolo i Molina family was one of them—who were forced out of power by the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurs—the ‘petitbourgeoisie’ or ‘fadristerms’.¹² Being on the wrong side of these social changes did not only impact on Pedrolo’s attitude towards class struggle and inform his narrative, but it can also explain his ambivalent attitude towards this town. Therefore, it is the constrictive nature of this place that moves Pedrolo to create Benaura, an ideal and intimate space modelled by the author to detach the place from any undesired associations to his aristocratic background. Benaura is the place of Pedrolo’s childhood memories, the place that saw him leave for Barcelona out of teenage rebellion in the 1930s but also—as we will see shortly—the place of desolation and despair after the fascist bombings of 1936.

Mecanoscrit tells the story of Benaura-born characters Alba (14) and Dídac (9), the only survivors of an alien attack that eradicates life on Earth. With a clear biblical resemblance to the story of Adam and Eve,¹³ the plot sees the couple fighting for survival as they become aware of their role as the new parents of humanity. The novel starts with Alba saving Dídac from drowning in a pond located on the outskirts of the town; a couple of town bullies had deliberately thrown the boy in after subjecting him to racial abuse because of his skin colour. Being underwater at that precise moment saves both characters from the annihilation being carried out on the surface. Unfortunately, everyone they knew in the outside world has perished in the attack, thus the next scenes in the book narrate their walk through the once familiar streets of Benaura, now reduced to piles of debris and corpses.

If we go back to real life 21st century Tàrrega, a walk through its old quarters becomes completely different depending on whether or not the wayfarer is familiar with the novel *Mecanoscrit*. Those born before the turn of the millennium—more likely to have read the work in school—will probably smile at the discovery of a church at the epicenter of the old city (Plaça Major) whose name is none other than Santa Maria de l’Alba. If the wanderer is a little more

informed and walks a few meters south from the square to Carrer Major number 5, they will stand in front of Manuel de Pedroló's house—a three story building whose façade is now covered with 'estelades' (Catalan independence flags). As the documentary by García and Lloreta proves, this is also Alba's house in the novel (the adjacent house is also Dídac's). It is fascinating how the fictionalization of locations in literary works easily succeeds in conveying meaning to the real locations they mirror. An example of this phenomenon can be observed in Werner Heisenberg's account of a trip he made with his colleague Niels Bohr to Denmark's Kronberg castle—the main location of Shakespeare's famous play *Hamlet*; the chronicle includes a reflection that Bohr made when both physicists were wandering within the castle's walls:

Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines Hamlet lived here? As scientists we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together. The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. (51)

This is why Tàrrega's old centre retains that same—almost mythical—quality of places belonging to both fiction and reality; both the historical and the fictional partake in shaping the collective perception of this Catalan town. Fictional Benaura and real-life Tàrrega collide at this specific point; the Dantesque spectacle: “and everywhere, half buried by the rubble, inside the unmoving cars and in the streets, there were bodies—a huge amount, all of them with their faces contorted in a strange grimace and yellow-pink skin” (Pedroló 352), meets the streets of Tàrrega destroyed in 1938, in the aftermath of a heavy bombing operation by Italian and German Fascist aviation troupes on April 5th. The fictionalization of this significant historical event magnifies the writer's own personal experience of the conflict, while also engaging directly with Catalan collective memory of war; Tàrrega was only one of over a thousand Catalan municipalities bombarded during the Spanish Civil War.¹⁴ Pedroló's depictions of the postwar devastated landscapes in Catalonia are encrypted in the young couple's vision of the disaster affecting the fictional territory that was once Catalonia—including its once magnificent and culturally vibrant capital, Barcelona—then reduced to ruins.

Surviving Censorship: Alba as Cultural Regenerator

Mecanoscrit can be considered a 'Last-Man' narrative inasmuch as the whole plot is sustained by the almost complete decimation of the human species.

But an equal tragedy lies with the demise of human-built structures that once carried meaning and were recognized and owned by the inhabitants of the site, reassuring a sense of community. As “a space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things” (Lefebvre 83), the total disconnection between signifier and signified of these sites does shake the very foundations of social space; its existence is only secured if there is a community making use of and interacting in it. When Lefebvre talks about the way in which the “sites of Troy, Susa or Leptis Magna still enshrine the superimposed spaces of the succession of cities that have occupied them” and assumes that “no space ever vanishes utterly, leaving no trace” (164) he must do so on the basis that this “trace” does necessarily require human agency to be identified. The use of the ‘Last-Man/Woman’ motif in this novel draws on the fragility of human existence in post-apocalyptic Catalonia—thus bringing this agency near to extinction—and evokes the possibility of the disappearance of a culture, together with the language it speaks, which is, in the case of Catalan culture, a fundamental trait of its identity.

Catalan scholar Edgar Illas has analyzed the different responses that Catalan intellectuals had to the risk of extinction of their language, from Gabriel Ferrater in 1953 to Carod Rovira’s *El futur del català* (2005), arguing that “(e)ven if these texts express assert the imminent death of Catalan language, their ultimate objective is not to certify the language’s demise, but motivate Catalan speakers to trigger a popular and political reaction towards the ‘salvation’ of Catalan language from such an agonic situation” (2). I am inclined to say that Pedrolo’s *Mecanoscrit* uses the same rhetoric by giving a hyperbolic diagnosis of the critical situation of the Catalan language and culture during the 20th century; by leaving the fate of its survival in the hands of two children, the writer is creating awareness of the challenges faced by a minority culture and calling for further implication of society in reconstructing the Catalan social and literary space after years of dictatorship. The only enemy who may jeopardize this symbolic cultural regeneration is precisely the agent behind the original destruction. The alien invaders, though hardly present in the narrative, are depicted in a very negative light in the novel. We see how Alba, when seeing one of the creatures, “was glad that it looked like that because it would be easier to kill it” (399); here is its almost comic description:

Their blood curdled in their veins for this was a face right out of a nightmare. The very flat face had three eyes: one of them equivalent to a human forehead, the other two lower down; they were just three holes in a wall with no protecting eyelids. On the lower side of the face what should have been the nose, mouth, and chin formed a pig snout which matched the skin colour and gave the face a stupid air. (399)

The 'nightmarish' complexion of the alien, together with the airborne nature of their attack,—the opening scene with the alien flying saucers implies the attack is perpetrated from above—allow us to read this alien invasion as an allusion to the above mentioned fascist attacks to Tàrrrega and other Catalan territories.

However, Pedrolo's aim in this novel is not to represent the dictatorship period in detail —he does that in other science-fiction works such as the allegorical *Totes les bèsties de càrrega*—but to speculate on the future of the nation. It is as if, by submerging the two characters in that womb-like¹⁵ pool, Pedrolo spares them the horrors of the Civil War and the subsequent near to four decades of dictatorship. In a way, Alba and Dídac seem to suddenly wake up in the 1974 Catalonia Pedrolo writes the novel in, a time in which, despite Franco's ongoing illness and the subsequent debilitation of the regime's structures of power, there was no secure indication of the direction the political situation would take. The womb-like pool protects metaphorically Alba and Dídac from the horrors of the Civil War and Postwar years—evening them up to the Catalan Millennials born in democracy. There are references, however, to the acknowledgement of these repressive times by “Alba, whose father had been in jail despite never having murdered, robbed or swindled anyone” (361), that may explain her position on certain topics such as religion, but in general terms the characters seem to have a relatively naïve vision of the past.

Nonetheless, the relative innocence of the characters towards the sociopolitical complexity of their nation's past does not seem to alter their immediate response to the situation they face; besides their instinctive fight for survival in an almost uninhabited world, they become active agents in the protection and regeneration of the Catalan social space by prioritizing the recovery of as many books as they can find in the debris. It then becomes evident that Pedrolo, as an intellectual, believes the reconstruction of social space in post-Franco Catalonia must begin with the recovery and regeneration of the literary space inserted in it. The arbitrary choice of the works of literature to be saved by Alba and Dídac—who lack any political agenda or prejudiced views on genre, ideology or authorship of the works they collect—presents an inverse mirror of the persecution of Catalan language literary works by Francoist censorship, which heavily affected the author's career.¹⁶ Even when Alba is tempted to destroy books she finds dangerous:

She told herself, nonetheless, that she had no right to destroy the books as they would be a source of knowledge for future people about their ancestors. Actually, she had no right to destroy anything for, if she did so, she would then fall into that category of fanatics often mentioned by her father. They burned everything they didn't like or that contradicted their

opinions; they were people whose belief in themselves was not strong enough to respect others' ideas when opposing them (...) She would keep the books, then. And she was pleased with the kind of father hers had been, for he had gone to prison so that she herself would be able to decide today. (459)

Thus, Alba and Dídac's role as re-constructors of the Catalan nation cannot be divorced from their social status, as they are Pedrolo's way of offering a micro-representation of the transforming 20th century Catalan social and cultural context.

The social status of the two characters in this novel has a direct effect on their attitude towards the demise of civilization. Rather than being city children raised in an environment devoid of nature, Alba and Dídac's rural upbringing in Tàrraga gives them an advantage when surviving post-apocalyptic Catalonia. Regarding the pre-catastrophe social status of their families, not much is said, except that Alba's father may have had trouble with justice due to his ideas and that they owned a discreet small vegetable garden. In Dídac's case, a reminder of the reality of economic migration during the 20th century can be noted as his mother "had gone abroad to find a job in service and got herself pregnant by a black man" (353). Besides this quite problematic reference to Dídac's father and a further one showing the couple's relief at the fact that their son is born "the exact colour the boy had wished for, neither white nor black, but a lovely light brown as in suntanned" (469), Dídac is Pedrolo's response to the consolidation of the immigration wave from sub-Saharan Africa observed in the 1970s in Catalonia (Casas); with the portrayal of a second-generation immigrant fully educated in Catalan and given a Catalan name, Pedrolo acknowledges the important role that the 'nouvinguts' (newcomers) could potentially play in strengthening the 20th century Catalan identity.¹⁷

Sexualized Motherhood and the Nation: from 'Last-Woman' to 'Last-Mother'

Another decisive aspect is the way in which Alba's femininity becomes a central element Pedrolo draws on to reinforce the national allegory throughout the text; the specific situations the author decides to put this female character through, together with the actions performed by and against her throughout the plot, become instrumental in the assertion that narratives of the destruction and reconstruction of 20th century Catalan social space permeate *Mecanoscrit*. Traditional readings of femininity in this novel emerged as a response to the privileged presence of a text targeting¹⁸ teenage audiences in secondary school teaching from the early 1980s, and managed to inscribe a very specific image of

Alba as a resourceful and strong young woman with whom female readers could identify very easily in the Catalan literary imaginary. As Màriam Serrà put it in the opening words of her exhibition “Des d’uns ulls d’home. La dona en la literatura de Pedroló”:

Thus, the Pedrolian woman is an entrepreneur, a fighter with a clear mind; she has full control of the situation, no matter how adverse; she decides over her own body, her own life, her own future and that of humanity; she is way more than a free woman, she is a free being. And this is not an isolated case, of only one or a few works, but a constant quality of his oeuvre that grows over time. (3)

When presented with the iconic image of Alba driving a tractor on the cover of the second edition of the novel, an “unique female protagonist fighting for survival in a devastated post apocalyptical Catalonia, one cannot help but evoke the image of *La Liberté guidant le peuple* by Eugène Delacroix (1830), an eternal Romantic depiction of a powerful woman that will always stay in our minds as the idealized representation of Freedom” (Nilsson-Fernández 2015 57). This image is also recalled by Sara Martín Alegre in the introduction to her trilingual edition of the novel, arguing that “brave Alba became for us 1980s Catalan girls a simply wonderful role model. This felt, at the same time, very natural. We were then so young that we just did not know about the many restrictions limiting girls in post-Franco Spain and Catalonia (and that still apply)” (342). Thus, Alba became—on the surface—a role model for female Catalan students born at the turn of the century; “a heroine whose dilemma is her own and the entire humanity’s survival, and due to this she fights and overcomes the taboos and roles traditionally attached to women” (Ballús). However, this idealized representation of Alba as the “mother of the new humanity” clashes with Pedroló’s own comments on the subject; when interviewed by a group of Catalan students who asked him questions about the popular novel, statements such as “of course I chose a girl and I provided her with some exceptional skills (...)” (*Pedroló entrevistat* 38) clearly undermine Alba’s empowerment as a young woman and deny her resemblance to any plausible female representation.

More significantly, in *Mecanoscrit* gratuitous over-sexualized descriptions of Alba’s body become the norm, and rather than contributing to the development of the plot, seem to confirm Louise Johnson’s claim that “Pedroló is locked into erotic excess in a way that is difficult to reconcile with his professed pro-feminist stance” (38). Even if Johnson’s conclusion comes as a result of her analysis of other science-fiction works by Pedroló (see footnote 3), I argue this is no different in the case of *Mecanoscrit*; not even ten pages into the novel, we find fragments with graphic descriptions of Alba’s partial nudity such as “and then, forgetting

that her blouse no longer covered her breasts, she started running down the path” (351) and “jump over a high wall tearing her shorts almost completely—now held together only by the seam—” (352). As Geraldine Cleary Nichols notes, these portrayals render Alba as “a teenager who parades half-dressed through the book’s pages” (264), with the only purpose of highlighting the sexual nature of her body while engaging the reader in voyeuristic practices. As Johnson notes by quoting Susan Rubin Suleiman, descriptions of such a kind may provide the author with “a continual source of sexual excitation stimulating the writing process” (384).

Noticeably, there is an absolute absence of similar depictions targeting the male body of Dídac throughout the novel, and we indeed find a very well defined pattern in Alba and Dídac’s interaction according to their gender roles. The assertion that “‘woman’ is always potentially ‘mother’ in Pedrolo, but rarely is ‘man’ also ‘father’” (42), followed also by Nichols when she notes how Alba “nurses him (Dídac) when he gets sick, teaches him, washes his clothes, cooks for him and, above all, broods him, awaiting his sexual maturity so that she may be transformed into the complaisant mother of a new human race” (264). Alba becomes the complaisant mother figure the very moment she saves Dídac from drowning in the lake, as their age difference prompts Alba to take the role of Dídac’s deceased mother—Alba is then fourteen and Dídac is only nine. The boy’s relative coming of age—Dídac is barely fourteen when they both have sexual intercourse—does not free Alba’s from the mother role, but simply converts it to that of the “potential mother” first, to later become that of “the mother of Dídac’s child”. The moment he realizes she is pregnant, we observe his over-protective take on the “father” role in comments such as “—Now that you need to take care of yourself I won’t let you do any heavy tasks” (452), which stir some of the few moments of tension between the two characters: “they sometimes quarreled for ridiculous reasons, such as one morning when Alba found that the boy forbade her from swimming, afraid that she might harm the fetus” (453). What is clear is that, rather than trying to analyze Dídac’s new role in depth, the author chooses to focus completely on Alba as a mother instead, and uses the boy’s innocence as a prism from which to see Alba’s behavior during her pregnancy. He talks about “a melancholy, tearful phase” (462) in which Alba’s motherless condition is highlighted: “he was most disconcerted by her occasionally invoking her mother who, Alba whined, would have kept her company and given her advice” (462).

The focus of this novel on Alba’s motherhood is hardly disturbed by Dídac’s fatherhood, as not very long after the baby is born, Pedrolo decides to kill off the male character, leaving Alba in a very similar situation to the one presented at the first pages. The cycle starts again and Alba becomes the mother of a son who in another twelve years—as clearly hoped by her during the last lines of the novel—will help her to become a mother of a new child. Thus, it

becomes very clear in Pedrolo's account that not only does motherhood become Alba's expected primary role in the novel—as would normally be the case in a 'Last-Man' narrative whose characters are trying to repopulate the world—but also an enterprise in which failure is not an option; the catastrophic effects of such failure are presented through an old woman the couple encounters while sailing along the Italian coast:

She was in a sort of cave built by the rubble, where there was only a camp bed with tangled clothes and a cradle which she rocked as she sang softly. Inside the little crib you could see a few bones; those were so tiny that they could have only belonged to a child of under two. (448)

The reader learns that the old woman's insanity stems from the traumatic experience of her baby's death, probably from an illness or malnutrition. The devastating effects that the inability to fulfil the role of mother have on this character serve only to reinforce, by contrast, Alba's motherhood; lost in her lunacy, the lady approaches Alba offering the tiny bones of the dead baby, gesturing towards her milk-swollen breasts, as if under the assumption that they could still nurture her lifeless baby.

Pregnancy poses, nevertheless, little obstacle to the writer's focus on the sexualization of Alba's body; Pedrolo describes at length Dídac's reaction to her burgeoning sexuality during this period, as on occasions she “woke up all languid and tender, eaten up by an absorbing sensuality as if all of her was an erogenous zone vibrating with a sustain, voluptuous fever” (462). This sexualized depiction of pregnancy continues throughout the novel, reaching its climax after Alba gives birth, her first thought being about sexual pleasure: “She knew now something nobody had told her and which she had never read in any specialized volume; during childbirth a woman could feel a massive, voluptuous ecstasy” (468).

Most problematic, however, is the tendency observed in other works to connect these acts to violence; “the novelist's fixation with the processes of childbirth, with woman as mother, or potential mother, and the violence that may be done to the rituals surrounding procreation” (Johnson 39). However nuanced this association may be in the case of this post-apocalyptic novel when compared to others such as *Totes les bèsties de càrrega*,¹⁹ there is still a fragment with a clear reference to this type of violence in which Alba is under the threat of being raped by a group of strangers the couple comes across on an Italian island. Unlike the more graphic scene in the 1985-6 television adaptation,²⁰ the novel does not describe an actual sexual assault against Alba, but still emphasizes the obscene behavior of the attackers, who “didn't bother to conceal the exhilaration provoked by the presence of a girl like Alba, quite the opposite, as the youngest one was masturbating” (440), nor their clear intentions: “the two men exchanged some

words almost violently without taking their eyes off Dídac. They clearly intended to kill him before forcing themselves on the girl” (442).

Despite the fact that this episode highlights the writer’s inability to avoid erotic excess in his narrative—works which are exempt from these excesses are very rare in his corpus—it is my belief that there is also room to read the female body as a metaphor of the Catalan nation in this novel; an analysis that looks at geo-locating²¹ instances in which Alba’s body is at stake will give us insights on how her body relates to the 20th century Catalan body politic and the forces playing with and against it. As the national allegory created by Pedrolo is not only sustained by the post-apocalyptic scenery in which the characters interact but also through the deliberate stress on the figure of Alba as mother/nation, examining the chronology and location of the processes surrounding Alba’s motherhood is fundamental to interpret Pedrolo’s rationale in creating this work.

Consider for instance the moment in which Alba’s body transforms from being “an olive-skinned fourteen year old virgin” (349) to “an olive-skinned eighteen-year-old pregnant woman” (457).²² As we have previously observed, everything in *Mecanoscrit*—and more specifically in Alba’s character—revolves around the concept of creation and conception. If we add to this the fact that the structure of the novel resembles that of biblical texts (see footnote 13) we can argue that Alba is the author’s own interpretation of the Virgin Mary. Again, representations of this kind are not unique to *Mecanoscrit*; Johnson’s words on the female character in *Crucifeminació* can in a way be applied to the way in which Alba’s virginity is perceived in the novel: “the virgin martyr has been subsumed into the eternal womb which now becomes itself a focus of adoration. Devotion is sexualized, woman understood metonymically as womb” (42).

The exact location where this ‘virginal status’ changes is on a beach in the coastal town of Tossa de Mar, eighty kilometers north of Barcelona. Tossa is not only the place of Alba and Dídac’s sexual awakening but also their last contact with Catalan soil before heading towards foreign territory in their trip along the Mediterranean coast, “a landmark in their lives since, as she recalled, four months ago they had landed there as children and, embarking again, they were a man and a woman” (456). From this moment on, Alba’s potential motherhood becomes the object of a dispute between two opposed male forces, Dídac on the one hand, and, on the other, the Italian aggressors²³ they will soon meet somewhere close to Manarola. In fact, only two days before this encounter, close to Nice, Alba “woke up, her bikini stained with blood. She was both glad and sad because she would not really have minded getting pregnant” (440), suggesting that the moment of conception—probably in Taormina—took place at around the same time of the attack.

Reproduction and the Future of the Catalan Nation

I suggest then that there is a very important turning point in this specific moment of the novel, in which a fight for the future of the nation arises, a combat described in reproductive terms and whose outcome is to be decided between male actors: Dídac, representing the new Catalonia and the figure of the 'nouvingut' and the aggressors, reminding the reader of the difficulties faced by Catalan as a minority culture in a position of subalternity. The landscape for this fight is none other than Alba's body, and the triumph of Dídac over the strangers may symbolize Pedrolo's idea of how Catalonia should overcome the long period of oppression. Seeing Alba's body as landscape in the national allegory created by Pedrolo acquires particular importance when Dídac's character is erased from the equation during the last moments of the novel, as Mar—the male child born from the union of this young couple—will grow up like the Catalonia envisaged by Pedrolo, who has a mother/nation but not a father/state. By killing 'the father' in his narrative, Pedrolo is alluding to the ultimate objective of the Catalan nation according to his militancy: resistance from that position of subalternity with the hope to eventually emancipate from the oppressive political and cultural control of the Spanish state. A different reading may consider Pedrolo's Catalonia in *Mecanoscrit* functioning as the utmost utopian nationalist fantasy, in which Alba's reproductive power serves the growth of a new Catalonia free of non-Catalans. As Johnson reminds us, "women as mothers and child-bearers are traditionally and inevitably integrated into the ideological structures of nationalisms" (37).

However, the 1974 Catalonia—still oppressed by a fascist regime—that Pedrolo projects in his novel has very little regard to the race purity of its nationals. The idea conveyed by the author is that of a second generation Catalan of African descent, Dídac, choosing to respect Catalan culture and literature—hence the recovery of books—and contributing to the building of the nation—on the lines of Francesc Candel's thesis in *Els altres catalans* (1964). If for Johnson "the literal and symbolic import of the mother figure" in *La creació de la realitat, punt i seguit* "foreground the distortion of social and personal relations under totalitarianism" (39), I argue that the presence of such a figure in *Mecanoscrit* responds to Pedrolo's awareness of the opportunities of cultural recovery posed by the eminent decay of the regime.

Unfortunately, the pro-feminist stance attributed to Pedrolo suggested by some of the traditional readings of the novel are very much disproved by a more accurate observation of the mother figure depictions in this science fiction tale. Even if it is not the place in this article to analyze Pedrolo's more complex and often undervalued science fiction novel, *Aquesta matinada i potser per sempre* (1976),²⁴ the objectifying of the main female character almost mirrors the case of *Mecanoscrit*; her exchange as a sexual object in order to reconcile two times and

cultures—past and future, alien and human—is only one of the many instances in which endorsing the author with a feminist position is out of the question. As Johnson suggests referring to *La creació de la realitat, punt i seguit* renderings of motherhood connected to violence may “also point in a far more oblique manner to unresolved tensions underlying Pedrolo’s militancy, to the confused interpenetration of conscious invention and unconscious, trauma-induced, fixation” (39) and could, it may be argued, derive from the author’s personal attempt to come to terms with his own estranged experiencing of motherhood.²⁵

Conclusions

Throughout this article, I have attempted to validate the political reading that encompasses Pedrolo’s use of the female body as a geographical canvas, while questioning the canonization of the novel and the influential figure of Alba as a 20th century Catalan feminist icon. By means of this exercise, I have reached the conclusion—already indicated by Johnson—that Pedrolo’s excesses respond to the ambivalent nature of both his personal and ideological circumstances. What is more, his use of the national allegory in connection with the defiling of the female other can be extrapolated to the way in which, in post-colonial literary contexts, the occupying culture forces itself upon the colonized other—by means of feminizing and objectifying it.

Pedrolo’s violent portrayals of motherhood may function as acts of resistance under the shadow of the unwanted father figure personified by the Spanish state and ultimately by General Franco, but they most importantly illustrate a crisis of masculinity in the heart of 20th Century Catalan culture. Nonetheless, a deciphering of the spaces in which this violence is performed conjures notions of historical memory that legitimize Pedrolo as the ‘organic intellectual’ figure he embodied; the infinite possibilities Alba and Dídac are presented with in this ‘second origin’—as the only survivors of post-apocalyptic Catalonia—are reminiscent of the ‘new beginnings’ promised by the advent of post-dictatorship times.

Notes

¹ From this moment on, I will use the abbreviation *Mecanoscrit*.

² Despite being one of the best-selling novels in the history of Catalan literature, *Mecanoscrit del segon origen*’s arena has been secondary schools. However emblematic the novel may be, academic studies on the work are very rare.

³ In her article “Some Thoughts on Pedrolo: Estrangement, mothers and others” (1990), P. Louise Johnson mainly discusses *Totes les bèsties de càrrega* [*All the Beasts of Burden*] (1965/1967), *Crucifeminació* [*Crucifemination*] (1981/1986) and *La creació de la realitat, punt i seguit* [*The Creation of Reality, period*] (1984/1987).

⁴ The translations of Catalan quotes into English found in this article are provided by the author of the article himself with the exception of quotes from *Mecanoscrit*, taken from Sara Martín Alegre's 2016 translation.

⁵ It is relevant to note that Goldwin's *Lord of the Flies* was translated into Catalan by Pedrolo (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1966).

⁶ See Arbonès and Coca.

⁷ Referring to Grainville, Fiona J. Stafford notes that “the bloody course of the French Revolution, with which he had initially sympathized strongly, had left him disillusioned, while in the post-revolutionary backlash against radicals, he appears to have become something of a social outcast in his native town of Amiens” (201). In a similar way, Kari E. Lokke sees Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* as “her apocalyptic response to the horrors of the French Revolution, the subsequent carnage of the Napoleonic wars, and the metaphysical and cultural uncertainties attendant upon Romantic-era attacks on religious and political authority” (116).

⁸ For Clasen, Matheson “was afraid of nuclear war, of predation, of being all alone in a dangerous world. While the first fear is a highly context-dependent one, the second two generalize across cultures and times” (317).

⁹ Brayton analyses how the US white nationalist idea of racial difference, disorder and the state being connected is reconfigured in the film adaptation, while noting a “curious connection between racial conflict and the dystopian imaginary, one that is often understated in cultural studies of race and representation” (67).

¹⁰ In the short documentary *Pas a pas, mot a mot* Xavier Garcia and Natàlia Lloreta guide us through the different places in Tàrraga that have a direct correspondence with locations in the novel. Drawing on descriptions of the landscape taken directly from the novel, the documentary presents evidence such as Alba's house in the novel being in fact the writer's own family house in Tàrraga as well as the pond where the story begins being identified as ‘la peixera de les planes’. ‘L’Avinguda Raval del Carme’—the first street in destroyed Benaura the children see—is shown in this documentary using real pictures of the Tàrraga bombings (see note 14).

¹¹ Manuel de Pedrolo was actually born in l'Aranyó, a tiny rural town located 20 kms away from Tàrraga. However, this was purely a decision taken by his father, who wanted him to be born within the walls of the de Pedrolo i Molina's family castle, located in that town. The family itself would normally live in Tàrraga at that time, a city that saw the writer grow up and return every summer as an adult—even after he moved to a flat in Barcelona's Carrer Calvet in the 1960s.

¹² For more on ‘fadrister’ see Trepàt.

¹³ *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* is presented in a very particular format that resembles a biblical text. It consists of five different “Quaderns” (notebooks) whose universal themes (destruction and salvation; fear and longing; departure and conservation; travel and love; and finally life and death) could feature any religious book's index. Besides, we also find the paragraphs in each ‘Quadern’ numbered, in the same style as biblical verses.

¹⁴ Balcells claims that Francoist bombings affected at least 1,062 Catalan municipalities.

¹⁵ I wish to clarify that the use of ‘womb’ as a metaphor for the underwater protection that saves the main characters is not in any way gratuitous, but responds to Manuel de Pedrolo's fixation with motherhood. It is interesting to note that, even at this initial stage, the possibility of Alba saving Dídac and becoming a heroic female figure is rapidly thwarted by the author's mimicry of

the mother and son connection in the womb, illustrated by Dídac's submerged protected stage, surrounded by amniotic fluids in a embryonic-like environment.

¹⁶ On the way Francoist censorship affected Pedrolo's works, see Moreno-Bedmar (2007), Torres and van den Hout.

¹⁷ For an in depth study on the subject see Candel's *Els altres catalans*.

¹⁸ Pedrolo himself never intended the novel to address teenagers; his constant search for new narrative techniques led him to write it "without worrying to much about who the reader would be; I only wanted to look like it had been written by a young girl. A quite exceptional girl, perhaps, but a teenager nevertheless" (in García *Epistolari* 724). It was Josep Maria Castellet, the literary director of Catalan based publishing label Edicions 62 who, aware of the novel's attractive science-fiction story, its plain and accessible language and the fact that a teenage audience could easily empathize with the two teen protagonists, decided to publish the novel in the series *El Trapezi*, marketed for adolescent audiences.

¹⁹ The opening scene in *Totes les bèsties de càrrega* describes a bizarre surgical operation performed on the main character's mother, involving the simultaneous removal of her reproductive organs, a heart's ventricle bypass and a brain surgery involving electrodes. The room in which all of this is performed is warm, dirty and crowded by several individuals who are not even involved in the actual operation. Their unprofessional behaviour and obsession with paperwork—the doctors even sign forms while performing the surgery—turns the whole situation into a Dantesque scene.

²⁰ In TV3's adaptation of the novel, the scene in which Alba and Dídac are attacked by the three survivors in an island shows how the attackers manage to knock Dídac unconscious to the floor and capture Alba. It is only after they have partially undressed her and are about to sexually abuse her that Dídac manages to come back to consciousness and frees her from the attackers.

²¹ Geo-location of the sites in the novel *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* has been achieved as part of this article's author curated Digital Crowdsourcing initiative *Pedrolo Digital* (<http://pedrolodigital.cat/>). A digital map of the locations appearing in the novel is available thanks to the collaboration of Irish students of Catalan Language modules at the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies, University College Cork, Ireland.

²² At the beginning of each of the five books (*quaderns*) of which *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* is composed, Pedrolo uses the same formula—whose words have become significant to the novel—to describe Alba's age and her status as a virgin, a pregnant woman, or a mother respectively, together with a repeated allusion to the tone of her skin being brown "bruna". Thus, we have TT/1: "(1) Alba, an olive-skinned fourteen-year old virgin", TT/2: "(1) Alba, an olive-skinned fifteen-year old virgin," TT/3: "(1) Alba, an olive-skinned sixteen-year old virgin," TT/4: "(1) Alba, an olive-skinned seventeen-year old virgin", TT/5: "(1) Alba, an olive-skinned eighteen-year old pregnant woman" and the final paragraph of TT/5: "(61) And I, Alba, an eighteen-year-old mother" describing Alba's age and sexual status throughout the novel.

²³ It is perhaps noteworthy that Italy was one of the nations who aided General Franco's bomb attacks to different Catalan cities, mentioned before in this article.

²⁴ In the article "Escrivim la terra: Spatial Allegories in Manuel de Pedrolo's *Aquesta matinada i pots ser per sempre*" (2016), I consider the author's use of radical disjunctions of time and space in this novel, which in my view elucidate specific spatio-temporal junctures embedded in Catalan historical imagery. I argue this is part of Pedrolo's attempt—throughout his *oeuvre*—to reconstruct the 20th century collapsed literary and socio-political Catalan space in the aftermath of the Franco regime.

²⁵ Manuel de Pedrolo's mother died after complications in the birth of his younger brother Ramon, resulting in both being raised by an aunt. Both Xavier García (*Pedrolianes* 32) and Trepal (22),

describe the impact that her particular education—following French trends that were unusual in Tàrraga—had in the estrangement of Pedrolo's brothers from other schoolmates.

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