

# The Pedrolo Year in *Hélice*

Sara Martín Alegre

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*Hélice* joins the celebrations of the Pedrolo Year, centennial anniversary of the birth of Manuel de Pedrolo (1918-1990), with the publication of the short story «Les civilitzacions són mortals» in translation into Spanish and English, both by Sara Martín. A major figure of Catalan Literature, and the prolific author of 128 volumes in all genres, Pedrolo deserves to be much better known, both among Catalan speakers and among the reading public in other languages.

The story selected, originally published in the collection *Crèdits humans* [Human Credits] (Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1957, 171-190) is an extremely interesting example of the fantastic produced by Pedrolo. Although it is not science fiction, the genre that *Hélice* is devoted to, we have decided to highlight it among the author's extensive production because its theme announces the plot developed in Pedrolo's best-known work, *Mecanoscrit del segon origen* (1974), a masterpiece of Catalan sf (translated as *Typescript of the second origin* also by Sara Martín).

While in this novel two Catalan children, fourteen-year-old Alba and nine-year-old Dídac, prepare to rebuild (and renew) human

civilization, lost to an extraterrestrial attack, in “Civilizations Are Mortal” two young Americans, detective Jim Sekrat and an unnamed girl, face the mysterious disappearance of their fellow human beings, after a strange event that can only be called metaphysical, before setting in motion a ‘second origin’. Both texts are linked by the Pedrolian conviction that no human civilization is eternal, even when they are very different from one another, and that one must always be ready for the unexpected.

The short story and the translations are here published with permission from Edicions 62 and Fundació Pedrolo, for which we are grateful.

Any Pedrolo, <http://cultura.gencat.cat/ca/any-manueldepedrolo/inici/>

Fundació Pedrolo, <http://www.fundaciopedrolo.cat/>

Manuel de Pedrolo (AELC), [https://www.escriptors.cat/autors/pedrolomde/pagina.php?id\\_sec=1873](https://www.escriptors.cat/autors/pedrolomde/pagina.php?id_sec=1873)

# Civilizations are mortal

**Manuel de Pedrolo**

It was late, maybe a little past ten. Jim Sekrat could afford this luxury, though: he was a sort of national institution. As he boasted. He knew almost by heart the complete works—so far—of Mickey Spillane, Mikey Roscoe, and Adam Knight, among others, which, of course, afforded him a great perspective on his work as a private eye. All that, however, turned out to be useless on that day.

After taking a shower and shaving meticulously, he toasted some bread, boiled an egg, and, once he got some cups of coffee ready, he enjoyed an unhurried breakfast during which he lit the first cigarette of the day. To be precise he had smoked the first one around three, before going to bed. But for Jim Sekrat, with much sense, the day started when he got up and finished when he dove into the sheets.

The radiant light of a cloudless day, absolutely spring-like, entered through the unshuttered window on Right Street. Across the street, one could glimpse many open windows through which the rooms soaked up the vegetable breath oozing from the trees planted along the sidewalks.

It must be said, though, that Sekrat paid no attention to the visual spectacle, quite dull after all, nor to the habitual smells. As he smoked and ate breakfast, he could still use his hands to turn the pages of the hefty

newspaper, with a typical American dynamism. To be specific, he did not quite read the whole paper; just the headlines. If they ever spoke about him, that was different. His vanity, quite natural, forced him then to miss not a single word. Today, in any case, his name was nowhere to be seen and the paper was soon done with. Sekrat rose, went to the kitchenette and served himself another cup of coffee. He drank it voluptuously.

Then, he took a glance at the clock and decided it was time to visit the office on Transit Avenue. Before that, though, he had to make a professional call and, not to waste any more time, he took the phone and dialed the number for his office. Molly should have been already for a while behind her typewriter.

Nobody answered his call, however. Apparently, he was wrong: Molly was not in the office, something unprecedented. He determined, nonetheless, not to worry, hanged up the phone, put on his jacket and left the small apartment on the fifth floor.

He never had the patience to wait for the elevator and, so, as he did every day he climbed down the stairs, taking two steps at a time, because he was still young and full of energy.

Once downstairs, he crossed the empty lobby, and reached the street. The problem was...



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There was no street!

He stopped in his tracks, and found himself inside another lobby very similar to the one he had just left, for all the buildings in the street were almost identical. He turned around instinctively and looked... anywhere!

That was peculiar: between him and the lobby of the building where he lived, there was just the threshold, which was at the same time the threshold of the building he had just entered. Inexplicable.

Since it was indeed so, he took the packet of Camels from his pocket and put a cigarette in his mouth, without lighting it, as he tried to think, desperately. One needn't think hard, though. The thing was quite clear: the street was missing!

'Let's see, let's see!', he told himself, to calm down.

Because, of course, that was impossible. You could not just leave the house where you live and find yourself next in the lobby of the building across the street. Evidence, though, was evidence. And, unless all his senses deceived him...

He moved some steps back and found himself again in his own lobby. Nothing, not even the suspicion of a street between the two entrances. 'But the street is there', he told himself. Although he had not intentionally observed this, he knew very well that, while he had breakfast, there was daylight in his room, and even a small ray of sunshine. That meant that there was an open space behind the window. A truly open space since the opposite building was as tall as the one he lived in. Therefore, if the two buildings had been as close as they appeared to be now, he should have seen no light at all: his room should have been in the dark...

His puzzlement kept him there, unable to make up his mind, looking this way and,

then, that way. The worst thing was that he was alone, there was nobody there, absolutely nobody to share this strange state of affairs with if only to make some remark, which is always comforting. He was alone, as if everyone else had disappeared. Not even the elevator operator was there, he noticed then.

'I need to make sure', he suddenly whispered, taking a decision.

He entered the lift and set it going. A few seconds later he rushed like the wind out of the landing on his floor and into his room. And he was right: the room was full of light.

He approached the window, opened it, and leaned out. Absolutely: there, a few yards below, was the street, and across it the houses on the opposite side, all neat and normal, like every day... Or not. Not really. There was something quite different: no one was passing through the street, either vehicles or pedestrians. It was simply stripped, something he had never ever seen, for Right Street was an important artery, animated day and night.

But, well, that was relatively unimportant. What really mattered was that the essential things still existed in the same reassuring way as usual. His house, the street, and the other buildings.

What had happened, then?

He threw away the cigarette, unlit in his mouth, and left the room again. The elevator was still on his landing and this time he rode it downstairs.

A few seconds later, crossing the lobby, he understood, taking into account the light seeping in from the door, that the situation down here had not changed at all. And he noticed something he had first missed: the entrance was illuminated because the electric light was on.

Hesitant, but yet certain about what



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would happen, he moved once more towards the door. There he stopped again, seeing a girl in the lobby of the opposite house. He didn't recall having seen her before, but soon found her quite pleasing. Her expression, though, was far less pleasant. She, it seemed, had just also discovered the absence of the street between the houses.

When she noticed him, she turned round and now both regarded each other. After a few silent moments, she asked:

'But what's going on?'

Possibly other words were needed to express properly the singularity of that situation. But, then, its very enormity made reacting with less trite words practically impossible; her words were simply the ones we use when something feels weird rather than wonderful. He replied with the same simplicity:

'I don't know.'

They looked around, as if they had lost something, until she said:

'And the street?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'I should think that the street is in the same place', he explained after a pause. 'At least, if you look from the window...'

The girl regarded him as if she didn't understand.

'You mean that...'

'Yes, I have just put my head through the window and I have seen the street...'

'Then... How do you explain this?'

'I don't.'

And that was the truth.

'But', she insisted, 'if it exists from above, it must also exist here, down below...'

'Usually, it should.'

'What do you mean, usually?'

'I mean that you're right, the street cannot exist and not exist at the same time. But...'

The key to this affair must be behind that but. She, however, seemed reluctant:

'These things', she noted, 'cannot happen.'

'Perhaps', he granted. 'The question, though, is that we cannot get out... Just a second!' he exclaimed. 'I forgot the back door...'

With no need for previous discussion, both walked that way. They went round the elevator's box, down the corridor that led into the entrails of the house, and, after turning right, they reached the back door. As usual, it was closed, but it could be opened easily from the inside.

Apparently, nobody in the building opposite theirs had thought of this alternative since their door was closed. Of course, there was no space at all between the two houses that could be called a street. The buildings were joined together.

'That's peculiar...', Sekrat said.

As he used a thoughtful tone but looked nonchalant, the girl watched him attentively:

'Do you think so?' she asked.

'Yes', he said. 'As you can see, here there are two doors, though the houses are attached: our door, now open, and that of the opposite building, closed...'

'And so.'

'And so, on the other side', and he pointed at the main entrance, 'there is only one. That is to say, there is no door, just one threshold, the same for both buildings... I wonder whether this means anything...'

But she had no patience and was in no mood for these speculations.

'Who cares? We need to find out how to get out of here. This is some trap...'

He pondered this for a long time with a brain trained to discover the exit out of the most complex mazes.

'As I have told you', he finally said, 'I have



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seen the street from the window. I wonder now whether it exists again if someone looks... I mean down here. For, obviously, as I looked through the window I was upstairs and have no idea about what was going on here...'

He stopped, for the girl was breathing with difficulty.

'Listen', he continued, 'there is something we could do: stay down here and I'll look again through the window...'

The girl didn't seem too keen. She was perhaps a bit afraid of being left on her own in that apparently deserted building.

'You don't like the idea?' he asked. 'If the street reappears you can get out then...'

'All right', she said. 'But what about you?'

He was up to scratch:

'Don't worry about me, I'm used to all kinds of things. Besides, one of us should get outside rather than neither... Oh, now that I think about it, perhaps you might help me!'

'How?'

'When I looked through the window a while ago, I saw there was nobody on the street...'

She opened her mouth.

'What!?'

'That's right: there was no one. It occurs to me that if this street reappears while someone is looking it might also be the case that it is still present when someone walks on it, do you understand?'

The girl was now very excited.

'Yes, yes, of course!' she said. 'You mean that I could stay on the street so that it still exists when you come back down...'

'Exactly!'

Her enthusiasm, though, waned as quickly as it appeared.

'But this cannot be', she said. 'Neither one thing nor the other.'

'But we lose nothing trying', Sekrat replied.

He was right and she knew it. While she walked to the front door, he again rode the elevator to his floor. Once again, he rushed to the window; the street was there, down below, as lifeless as before.

An instant later, he spotted a person: the girl. That was correct, then! The street could not deny itself to onlookers.

She raised her head and scanned the windows until she found him. He leaned out and raised his arm. She saw him then and waved back. Sekrat signaled that he was going downstairs. Then he left his room and rode the elevator again.

Downstairs, though, a bitter disappointment awaited: the street was gone again. After the success of the first part of the plan, he was so convinced that all would be as he expected that the setback left him truly frustrated.

For a long time he remained by the threshold, uncertain about what to do or plan. He didn't move until he realized that the girl must be still waiting for him in the street.

He then took the route back to his room.

'Perhaps she's gone', he told himself as he approached the window.

But no. She was faithfully standing on the sidewalk, now looking towards the main door, that door that didn't exist from the inside.

To call her attention, Sekrat started shouting, but it seemed that his voice didn't reach down below as she did not turn her head. Then the young man withdrew into the room and looked around. He took the first object he noticed: a glass ashtray, actually quite heavy.

With this object in his hand, he leaned again outside the window. Checking that she



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was once more staring at the door, he dropped the ashtray.

He saw how startled she was by the noise. The aim of the maneuver was accomplished: she looked up.

He signaled to her that he could not get out, and she must have understood perfectly, for at once she marched towards the main door.

‘No, no!’ he shouted, understanding what she intended.

But the girl had already gone inside. Sekrat again rushed down. A few moments later, they were both together by the threshold.

‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘I could not leave. But you shouldn’t have returned...’

‘Why not? One of us can always leave...’ she said, sensibly.

‘Yes, of course. But now... Listen!’ he said. ‘What happened when you went in?’

‘What do you mean, what happened?’

‘Yes. Did you see the street vanish, the houses get fastened together...?’

She shook her head.

‘I’ve seen nothing. The moment I set foot inside everything was as before, as if the street had never existed...’

He wiped his forehead and took another cigarette. He offered one to his companion and both lit them.

‘I don’t know what to think’, he finally said.

‘What’s really odd’, she said then, ‘is that I should think we are alone in the building, perhaps even in the city...’

‘Yes’, he agreed. ‘I hadn’t thought about it but it’s true that... Perhaps something has happened to them!’ he blurted out.

He suddenly turned round and strode towards the first door you could see: the janitor’s.

He knocked but nobody answered. He insisted, with the same result. He turned then the knob. The door opened and Sekrat, followed by the girl, entered the apartment.

‘Mijauhull!’ he shouted. ‘Mijauhull!’

But Mijauhull was not there, as he convinced himself after checking all the rooms.

In silence, they left and started searching the whole building. They were definitely the only neighbors left.

‘I don’t get it!’ Sekrat had to exclaim again. ‘Unless...’

He checked his watch, now pointing half past eleven.

‘Unless...’ she said.

‘It’s a bit late’, the young man explained. ‘Usually, by this time of the day, what am I saying?!, by the time I got up, past ten, everyone is at work...’

‘But not everyone has a job...’ she observed. ‘And Mijauhull should be here. And the elevator operator...’

‘Yes, sure’, Sekrat replied. ‘They should be here, of course...’

A reply, on the other hand, of no use at all to solve the mystery.

‘But...’

He had to stop for he didn’t even know what he wanted to say.

‘We could check the other house’, she suggested then.

‘Sure.’

There was this hope. That is, hope of what? Perhaps not of finding out anything but of making sure that they were not the only two victims. A hope, in any case, that was shattered one hour later, when they found no trace of any living being in the whole building next door.

‘And now?’ she said once the search was over.

He was so exasperated that he started laughing.



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‘And to think that my job consists of solving enigmas!’

Since she was looking at him puzzled, he added:

‘I’m a private detective...’

‘Why don’t we try something else?’ the girl suggested. ‘I look through the window and you leave the building...’

‘And what good is that? In that case, you’ll be a prisoner.’

‘But, once outside, you might discover something that explains this mystery... You’ll always do better than me!’

He was quickly seduced by her idea.

‘Sure, why not?’ he said. ‘Fine then, I’ll go out. But, won’t you be afraid all alone?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘I’ll manage’, she said.

‘Wonderful girl! Don’t leave the window’, he warned her then, ‘and in about one hour, ok?, I’ll be back whether I have discovered the reason for all this or not...’

Later, while she went up to her room on the third floor, he stood before the door, ready not to miss any detail of the transformation that would soon take place the moment she looked outside her window.

Despite his concentration, however, he could discern no prodigy. Perhaps because very foolishly he had stayed inside the building. The fact is that time was running and nothing was happening. Impatient, he took a step forward, crossing the threshold.

And then he found himself on the street, just like that.

He called himself all kinds of names, but the mistake could not be undone. Then he raised his head to seek the girl out. As he had done, she waved and he waved back. Then he thought of something which had nothing to do at all with the situation:

‘I don’t know her name...’ he mused.

He decided to ask her later, when he returned, and started moving along the street. He was the only passerby. He could spot no one else at the window, just the girl. The shops on his side were closed. The city looked dead. It had just died, for it didn’t show yet any signs of decay.

Regarding the doors of the buildings, some were open, some close, at random. Half-way through the street, he stopped before an open door but dared not go inside and just peered in, standing on the sidewalk. As he expected, there was nobody.

‘But what the hell happened to all the people?’

This was most marvelous, even considering the whole range of prodigies. If the natural order of things had been altered and people had disappeared, why on Earth had he and the girl been spared?

He turned round to check whether she was still at the window. There she was, a consoling figure in those moments.

‘Perhaps we are alone in the world’, he thought.

He stopped again because he had reached a side street. This was also empty. For a few seconds, he hesitated whether to go that way or keep to the street he was on. But what did it matter? He shrugged his shoulders.

Just then he heard a shout. Excited immediately, he looked up and down. Nothing. Nobody. He heard the shout again as he scrutinized the windows.

He had to strain his neck to finally see, on a sixth floor, the unidentifiable face of a man leaning outside a window, his upper body hovering dangerously above the void.

He waved to signal that he had seen him. But once he did that, what next? How could he help him?

The other, though, evidently full of confi-



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dence now that he had found out he was not alone, had already left the window. Sekrat easily guessed that he must be going down towards the main door.

He located the entrance corresponding to the building and stood outside. He felt the impulse to go inside but checked it because it might be impossible to leave. He, thus, just waited for the man to appear on the other side.

Only, this didn't happen. He could clearly see the lobby and the interior of the building but the other seemed to have vanished on the way down. Nonetheless, he was quite convinced that the man was in the entrance waiting, as he himself was.

He approached the door.

'Are you there?' he asked.

'Yes, yes', someone replied though the man's powerful voice, strong enough to be heard from a sixth floor, now seemed to come from a far away place.

'Who else is there in the building?'

'None else, I'm alone. But where are you? I can't see you...'

'I can't see you, either. Strange things are happening', he added childishly, as if the other man didn't know first hand.

'I haven't seen anyone the whole morning', the man said. 'Where do you come from?'

'It's a long story', he said. 'Listen, I'll try to get you out of here. I'll get one hand inside the building. You take it...'

He did that but time passed and he felt no touch.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

'What do you mean, what am I doing? I'm waiting for your hand...'

'But it's here!'

'Well, I don't see it...'

Sekrat pulled it back.

'Don't worry', he said; 'we'll find some other way... Listen, have you moved at all?'

'No', the voice said.

'What can you see before you?'

'The house across the street...'

'Go there...'

Silence followed.

'Are you there?' Sekrat asked then.

There was no reply.

'Of course' he told himself, if he's gone to the other house...

He crossed the street and rushed towards it.

'Are you there?' he asked when reaching the entrance.

'Yes, I did as you told me.'

Sekrat was mystified. The man had crossed the street without neither of them noticing a thing. And, yet, the street existed, he could see it, was walking on it...

'We'll try something else' he said. 'I'll lock the door of the other building and then you can try to get out...'

'But how?'

'I don't know how. Just try to get out. Simply move forward, ok?'

'Well...,' the other one said, not too sure.

Sekrat crossed the street again and, stretching his hand careful not to step out of the street, he took one of the metal bars of the door and, with great effort, managed to close it. He crossed again.

'Done. Can you see it?'

'Yes.'

'Ok, then, try to cross.'

He waited, in tension, almost apprehensive.

'I can't', the man finally said. 'Since the door is locked...'

'But there's the street...'

'Not from here', the man said pitifully.

'I see...'

But then he had an idea that excited him mightily. Since the man had crossed from





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building to building he was now in the same block where he and the girl lived. If he could manage to get them together passing through the buildings from the inside...

'Listen', he told the man. 'Go up to one of the apartments and lean outside the window. Wait for me there until I return. About ten minutes...'

'But...'

'Do as I tell you.'

'Tell me what this is about', the other said.

'Let's see...', but he stopped because he quickly realized that, if that was the way to help the girl to get out the man had to remain of necessity inside. The two of them could not leave together. 'I can't waste time explaining. Just go to the window and stay there.'

'And how do I know you'll be back?'

'Haven't I tried to help you get out?'

'Yes', the other granted. 'All right, then.'

'It won't take more than ten minutes', he repeated, and left as fast as he could.

The girl was where he had left her, gazing at the street. He made a friendly, cheery motion and, without thinking twice, he entered the house.

When he left the elevator he found her on the landing.

'It seems there are other people in the same situation, after all', he told her. Then he explained what he intended to do.

'Go up to the rooftop and start crossing the buildings until you reach the second one on Clorys Street. It's there. Go down, straight onto the street, just in case he... Then we'll try to get him out.'

The girl understood at once the situation, also his new familiarity with her.

A few moments later, once the window maneuver was finished, Sekrat was once more outside and she was climbing the stairs towards the rooftop.

Sekrat went back to the side street. The man had followed his orders. When seeing the young man his face, until then distorted by anxiety, recovered the lost balance of its features.

'Not even ten minutes!' Sekrat shouted.

The other was at a first-floor window, and could hear him well.

'Now what?' he asked.

'We need to wait for a while. Don't leave the window.'

'Easy for you to order me about, being outside!' he protested.

'I'll do all I can to get you out', Sekrat promised.

'But I don't see what we lose... Hey, hey!' he suddenly shouted.

The girl, fast as a hare, was already leaving the entrance of this house. The first thing she did was to start laughing.

'Oh, isn't this wonderful!...'

'Hey, hey!' the man insisted. 'What's this? How come she's out?'

Waiting for no answer he abandoned the window hastily.

'Wait, wait!' the young man cried.

But it was no use. The other could not hear him.

'He might do something foolish', Sekrat said. 'He's seen you get outside and since he knows nothing about this matter of the window...'

'You haven't explained?'

'I haven't, as you can understand. First, I wanted you to get out...'

'Well, anyway, when he realizes it is impossible, he'll go back.'

'If...'

He could never finish the sentence because the noise of a heavy body hitting a solid object interrupted it.

'What was that?' the girl asked.

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Sekrat ran towards the building.

‘I told you he’d do something stupid...’

He waited some seconds, crossed the street, approached the other door and opened it. No other noise could be heard. He crossed again.

‘Hey!’ he yelled.

There was no reply.

‘He must have returned upstairs’, the girl said.

They waited. They waited for a long time. Yet nobody showed up at the window. No one replied to their cries, either, when they approached the two doors, each of them one.

‘What could have happened to him?’ the girl asked.

‘I don’t know. I’ll get in and check...’

‘No, no!’ she exclaimed anxiously. ‘And what if you can’t get out then?’

‘But he can be badly hurt. He hurled himself against the closed door...’

She, peering inside the lobby, took his arm and pressed it.

‘Look!’ she said.

Sekrat did as she requested. Then he saw that the man was lying on the floor by the door, motionless.

He took one step but she held him back.

‘No, no!’ she urged. ‘Can’t you see he’s dead?’

‘How do you know?’ he asked.

‘First we could not see him...’ she just explained.

He nodded his head.

Two minutes later, holding hands, they left the city together. They trusted they would find other living cities. If there were none, they still had the countryside. And the two of them, to begin again.

