

Regino Pedroso:

The Human Face of the Social

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As he knew the great admiration I had for him, he once recommended to me, speaking in parables, and with the gentleness of a true teacher, as was his style, that I in no way follow his personal example, because poets should have a wing on one arm to fly, and talons on the other to defend his flight, and since he lacked the latter, things had gone very badly for him in his life.

At that time, I did not pay him much mind, since I thought a metamorphosis of wings into talons impossible, but I never forgot the lesson, not because it would be of any practical use to me, but because that image slowly revealed to me, over almost a quarter of a century, an accurate understanding of the unfortunate existence and exceptional work of this unfathomable poet called Regino Pedroso (1896).

When I met him, right at the beginning of the 1970s, he was enjoying the tranquility of a well-earned solitude, withering away in a house in Marianao, in Havana—the victim of total oblivion. Glaucoma had hardened his eyes; and from a distance of three paces, he was barely able to distinguish his interlocutor. But the enormity of his inner

vision was still evident in him. To some extent, traces of his Chinese and African ancestry hid his old age, if not its advanced stage, but the tenderness of his smile, the warmth of his hand on a stranger's shoulder and the interest with which he heard the most recent news of the world, clearly revealed that his death was not imminent. "I would settle not for having your youth, exactly, but just for being fifty years old," he said to me one day, with an inkling of that sidereal fear he had of death. Now, in the fog of his non-existence, I think I understand him better.

He never told me all the details of his life, because he was very laconic about himself. But the very brief although sharp comments he made to me about certain historical circumstances in which he unwittingly became involved, and about the people with whom he had to deal, and because of my close relationship with him for several years, and the careful and repeated reading I have done of his work, I feel qualified to state that Regino Pedroso was much more than just the first Cuban social poet, as he is considered by most (although some only do so to set him apart as an old thing, an anachronism rather

than to praise him). And, if in his country the recognition he deserves has not come from more than just the efforts of a few individuals who call attention to his transcendence, and from one or another hypocritical, pathetic, municipally minded and planned homage to him, it is not because he took on, as he did, the struggle of the poor and dispossessed against capitalist oppression (and not only that), but because he dared to speak truths that were not well-received by representatives of certain leftist sectors—because he lacked the talons with which to defend his greatness.

“I flee from fame as from a contagious ill,” he would say, in his youth (*El poeta Guillén y yo* [The Poet Guillén and I] 1929) Primarily, because he had doubts, and because he did not allow himself to be branded with the hot metal of the slave branding iron, regardless of whom the master was. But he suffered, perhaps two major tragedies: he was the cantor of the frustrated 1930 revolution, and the sharpest critic of those who in their fervor to put into practice a social utopia destroyed the only utopia possible—the poetic one.

Pedroso, who was a poet of revolutionary convictions his whole life; a rebel, a renewer, a non-conformist, someone interested in transforming life to improve it, was also a man of independent thought. He never accepted the inconsistencies and greed of the current politics. That is why he situates himself in the most uncomfortable of positions: on the one hand, he commits himself to the cause of social justice and freedom but browbeats certain representatives of these struggles who, through their deeds, contradict precisely what they preach with words; more or less the same people José Martí had already labeled as prideful, greedy types, with hidden rage, who “begin by pretending



Regino Pedroso

to be frenetic defenders of the helpless in order to have shoulders to stand upon to elevate their own status.” The key books on this issue are *Nosotros* [We] (1933) and *El ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu* [The Plum Tree of Yuan Pei Fu] (1955).

With the first book, which contains the poem “Salutación fraterna al taller mecánico” [Salutation to the mechanic’s shop] (1927) (translated to English by none other than Langston Hughes), which launched him into universality, Regino introduces into Cuban and Spanish-language poetry (why

not say it) the principal issue of the twentieth century: social struggles, confrontations between the working class and the bourgeoisie. He does so with an internationalist perspective, that is, setting himself apart from all localist or patriotic rhetoric, and with clear and valiant anti-imperialist determination. Yet, in addition –and this is extremely important–, his tone is not that of a political harangue, in the manner of so many pamphlets (so-called revolutionary poetry) that were published later; that is why those poems bore the human semblance that has been so demanded of the socialist oriented social doctrines: “I sometimes doubt and other times/throb, and tremble, and vibrate with your immense hope” (*Salutación fraterna al taller mecánico*), or “...together with those of my beclouded brotherly comrades / my image will appear in some window of life” (*Nueva canción* [New Song]).

But what came before would have lacked value if those verses had not been organized in a novel way, which in this case does not mean they lacked rhyme or meter, as is actually the case, but rather that Pedroso, using certain experiences of the European vanguard (principally Mayakovsky) and a bit of Mexican Stridentism and Ultraism, creates unusually innovative language. And, not just because he masterfully uses words till now considered non-poetic, like *mandarria* [sledgehammer], *yunque* [anvil], *polea* [pulley], *válvula* [valve]..., since as he, himself, affirms, the mechanic’s shop is “more than just a reason for words,” but because his words becomes provocative and rebellious when they are made distant from a certain refinement certainly well known to him. It is no coincidence that he learned his craft in the Modernist school, and the poetic object seems elaborated not by a miniaturist’s tool but by an iron sledgehammer. Poems today

are not sculpted in marble or ebony; they are hammered out like iron from a forge. They are soldered and mixed with even scrap iron, always leaving upon them the indelible human imprint of the artist: “Valves would wear out and you would replace them;/if the steering wheel got rusty, you adjusted it even more;/you polished pistons to prevent rust;/but you, yourself, wore out and no one replaced you” (“Elegía en hierro” [Elegy in Iron]).

It goes without saying that the book caused a stir when it was published and was celebrated by many renowned Cuban intellectuals, but it also found an adverse response in the dictatorial government of the time and conservative social groups. In 1934, anyone who owned a copy of the book was sentenced to a six-month prison term. Even in 1957, Cintio Vitier, from the *Generación de Orígenes* [The Origins generation] and the Island’s most revered critic, announced that there had never really been any “social” poetry in Cuba (the quotes are his) because after the publication of “*Salutación fraterna al taller mecánico*,” “this poem, with its ideological content, would be considered “concretely” “communist poetry”” (*Lo cubano en la poesía* [The Cuban in Poetry] 1957). As if one could disqualify a poetic text because it is based on mystic, spiritualist, animistic, social or materialist concepts.

On the other hand, Regino Pedroso never was a communist, at least in the sense that he was never a member of that party, although, as a worker, he participated in his class’s struggle for rights. The poet Rubén Martínez Villena, leader of the Communist Party, founded by Julio Antonio Mella, when it was still an active, that is, a revolutionary organization, was Pedroso’s best friend and the first to fervently extol his extraordinary poetic and human qualities:

“Whosoever saw the worker in his resounding workshop, perspiring and imperatively stooped over the resistant stubborn material, just like so many other workmates, probably would not suspect that within that noble and rough figure burns the malignant and subtle fever of beauty that consumes the artist.”

“Semblanza crítica de Regino Pedroso”
[Critical Perspective of Regino Pedroso]

Diario de la Marina, October 30, 1927

In later books, particularly in some of the texts in *Los días tumultuosos* [The Tumultuous Days] (1934-1936) and, above all, in *Más allá canta el mar* [Beyond Sings the Sea] (1939), Regino Pedroso would further tune the strings of his lyric instrument, which in great measure would go beyond the direct social references and somewhat rudimentary nature it possessed in *Nosotros* [We]. The basically labor-oriented horizon of those poems broadens, more and more, as a result of new experiences and his expanding cultural universe. For example, there is a poem in *Los días tumultuosos*, “Canción despedazada” [Broken Down Song], in which his feeling that his peers reject him, harass him, deny him, is present. But it also expresses the certainty that man changes by circumstance and that after evil, good, and justice regret could and should prevail:

“Tomorrow under the dawn of an enthusiastic world,

bitter, regretful, you will come to me:

—I was deaf, unjust, insane—you will cry out in the wind—;

I chased you on land, in the sky, on the water;

I hated you and denied you at night,

I gave you no peace or sleep;

I always chased you.”

There is another text in that book, “Hermano negro” [Black Brother], whose

meaning is rooted in the poet taking up the race problem not as a folkloric theme, which was very much the fashion those days (“...in Paris, and in New York, and in Madrid, and in Havana,/all full of Bibelots,/black strawmen are being made for export”), but rather as it actually is—a serious and sad expression of discrimination that is felt doubly because, as it involves blacks, it is not only a racial issue but a social one, too: “It is not just because of your color; it is because you are/under racial prejudice/an exploited man.”

Of course, this is not a poem that lends itself to singing and dancing to its rhythm but rather to considering and feeling the tragedy it represents. And, even though it is often included amongst other so-called Negrista or Afro-Antillean poetry, wise Fernando Ortiz, the man who penetrated most deeply into the worlds of black Cubans, said of it, and all of Regino Pedroso’s work, what most certainly had to be said:

“Pedroso’s poetry is mulatto because of its author; but not for its language, nor for its technique or the sectional discrimination of its topic. Pedroso speaks his poetry with human fullness. His language is the highest within its expressive possibilities; his rhythms are not drums and maracas but anvils and hammers, his metaphors are not of flesh but steel...Pedroso’s societal inspiration has universal repercussions. His song “Hermano negro,” which is his blackest, not for its language but for its topic, for its grumbling and intermittent and quietly rhythmic cadence, could be written by a raceless man, by a man from a cosmic race...” (*Revista Bimestre Cubana* 1936).

In 1935, when he worked at the editorship of *La palabra* [The Word], the first official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, he was one of the six editors of the

journal *Masa* [Mass], the official publication of the Liga Antimperialista [The Anti-Imperialist League]. The poet went through an experience that would prove determining for his later life: imprisonment. Sentenced to six months for the crime of “seditious propaganda,” political prison would be for him a horrifying example of just how low human nature could go, not so much for its rigor, not for the honorable punishment one might receive for defending a just cause—a beautiful notion—but for the moral horrors he witnessed and suffered there.

In his own words, he recalls:

“If the shop was forge and sweat, for me prison was something like the first canto of Dante’s immortal book. Having seen it for 180 days in its carnal and spiritually bare morality, the promiscuity that was inflicted on men did not reveal to me the beauty of Belvedere’s Appolo or David’s Michaelangelo. This human clay did not help me find in it the idealistically elevated perfection I’d seen in dreams and marble. Few, from the thousands of souls with which tyranny had filled the country’s dungeons –during the March strike– were those who were able to maintain intact my hope in a beautiful future. I saw the indeterminate countenance of anguish and came to believe that there were things more painful than hunger and more despairing in life than fear of death.”

Vida y sueños [Life and Dreams] (1972)

Upon leaving prison, the poet kept close ties with the communists. This is obvious because in 1937, he is an editor for the newspaper *La palabra* [The Word], and because in that same year, Juan Marinello, a top notch intellectual and principal figure in that party, who had been in prison with him, does not hesitate to affirm that “with every day that passes, Regino Pedroso will increasingly be our Revolution’s songster” (*Literatura*

Hispanoamericana, Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1937). Notwithstanding, his distancing from the positions of that party is also evident.

In “¡Vencedor!” [Victor!], written to his friend Pablo de la Torriente Brau, who died in combat as a soldier in the Internationalist Brigades that defended the Spanish republic, it said: “You are one of those who is beyond a party./You are among those who encourages beyond any given class./You belong to the eternal race of Men” (*Días tumultuosos*).

Más allá canta el mar [Beyond Sings the Sea], came out of his prison experience, and from what for him was the disastrous defeat of the revolutionary process. It is a different book, an intellectually mature and expressive one, in which the poetry itself, unqualifyingly takes flight like a wounded eagle, to contemplate, from the singular heights that can be reached only through lost illusions, the greatnesses and horrors of human life. Thus, it is not social reality that causes the poet’s reflections but rather something greater, at least for poetry: man as a being.

Now there is an all-out struggle with poetry’s eternal topics: time, death, history, man’s destiny on Earth and something that, in my opinion, would be enormously important in his latest poems—bitterness and disenchantment with knowing human nature—a frustration that will be resolved some time later, in a fortuitous irony. With ethics as a measure of justice in human relations, with contradiction as a seed of truth, and truth as something a bit blurred and unobtainable, and hope not precisely as a material objective but rather as a utopia of happiness, as the only plank of salvation in this great shipwreck in which one sees social and individual life paddle towards an un-existing shore. Despite all this, though, he maintains his

faith in man and still has a certain romantic notion that he has had for some time.

Más allá canta el mar is a full, comprehensive book. In it, Regino creates what one might call an account, not a retelling of his life and the convulsive era in which he had to live most of his youth, in which “Tempests passed through those days/that did not see past impulses. / And in lands now naked with truths, / pure voices and useless apostles / under a reemerging false deity/were in flesh and light crucified.”

This is “Cantos nuevos y gritos naufragaron” [New Songs and Shipwrecked Shouts]. But the most terrible thing for him, who had known the revolutionary leadership of Martínez Villena, author of the poem “La pupila insomne” [The Sleepless Pupil], who died young from deteriorated health due to social struggles, was his awareness that “Men with voices of clay were later/those who without faith traveled the dead lands/proclaiming light with blind eyes” (*Las agonías* [Agonies]). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the highest moment in this poetry collection is in texts like “El ciclope” [The Cyclops], in which one can see traces of Rubén Darío, not only for its language but because in some way it evokes that famous poem to Roosevelt: “A great cyclopean clamor, civilized and barbarous, can be heard when his colossus-like chest exhales,” and in “Elegía del hombre infinito” [Elegy to the Infinite Man], with its apocalyptic tone and cosmic roots: “Perhaps I have dreamt it, or maybe I have lived it./But in some land, I have seen Hunger die.” Additionally, one can discern in this text the things that would cause him the greatest pain in his life and his principal reason for complaint: loneliness and man’s ingratitude: “...And together/ those who yesterday had followed him and those who had denied him/stoned him.”

With this poetry collection, with which he won the National Poetry Award, Pedroso once again drew interest and inspired admiration in many people with recognized poetic sensibility. For his sharpness and the generosity of his judgments, it is important here to cite Mexican poet Efraín Huerta, for whom the marine and loving message of this book was “rare, strange,” and he praised it because in it he found a “powerful dose of honesty and loyalty” and because:

“[When] a book like Pedroso’s is published, one feels at peace with the world.... There are some poems in this book that positively transform a certain notion of ours about Cuban poetry.... Now, optimism springs from anguish and from desperation. It is no longer the shriveled canto of a sweating black mass, nor the hymn that becomes a lamentation. Poetry, precisely Cuban poetry, is the master of another voice: a voice with Ruben Darío-like flashes in *El ciclope*, or like the other, which emerges from the stupendous poem *Elegía del hombre infinito*, where hope, battered, will give way to what has been eternally announced” (*Lecturas*, México, D.F., 1940).

Beginning in 1937, Cuban political reality suffers substantial changes, owing, in great measure, to world events. In 1938, the Communist Party is legalized. In 1939, communists turn out for elections held to elect a Constitutional Assembly. That same year, something occurs that can explain pretty clearly what is happening in the country: the Havana City Council publishes a poetry anthology by Regino Pedroso that contained the very same five poems that only five years earlier had fetched him a prison sentence. In his explanation of the deed, the city mayor said: “We have unflinchingly published a book of verses by our great poet, Regino Pedroso, despite the revolutionary and

extremist audacity of many of its poems.” A year later, the Constitution of 1940 is approved and, with the support of communists-turned-socialists, Fulgencio Batista, whose long history of repression and crimes against leftist forces was already known, rose to power.

Evidently, the poet is not part of that process in which the (earlier defeated and now dismantled) revolution is replaced by politics or, worse yet, sometimes, by politicking. He does not aspire to a representative or senator’s seat, or to the mayoralty of his hometown, as well he could have. Instead, he withdraws to work as a librarian in a humble juvenile park whose name, ironically, is ‘José Martí.’ Thus, he immerses himself in the introspection of meditations and doubts, and embarks on a long path of political solitude from which he will definitely never emerge. One reason for this is that the bourgeoisie never really accepted him (the hypocritical praises of Havana’s mayor were politically motivated); another is because the communists and socialists, with their inability to allow criticism from within, as Gramsci suggested, didn’t forgive him, either. Even in the mid-1960s, in one of the many, long and (for me) instructive conversations he had with Juan Marinello or with me, when I asked him (fully aware of the labyrinth I was entering) about the person and poet Regino Pedroso, he answered that the former was a ‘minor’ figure and that the great revolutionary poet was someone else, forgetting what he had written in 1937.

The poet emerged from that fifteen-year process with barely one long poem, *Bolívar, sinfonía de libertad* [Bolívar, Symphony of Freedom] (1945), which possessed, with regard to its content, a hopeful romanticism but was rather linguistically extemporaneous. He would not publish another book for

ten years, when what I consider his definitive poetry collection appeared: *El ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu* [The Plum Tree of Yuan Pei Fu], which in large measure signaled the end of his poetry writing.

The group of poems in this collection is extremely difficult, due to its hermeneutics, its relative lack of direct antecedents in the Cuban poetic tradition and, particularly, Western culture. In addition, though, it was a very polemical book at that time.

Even today, Cuban critics prefer to ignore it, despite the fact that, in my opinion, it is one of the profoundest and most solid collections of poems ever written on the island (since I believe that poetry should be absorbed by its readers). It expresses, like no other, truths about the historical-cultural reality of Cuba never before exposed. Furthermore, it does this without resorting to a medieval notion of the carnivalesque, which was conceived from mostly superficial elements, and has been so exploited for the benefit of foreign consumption. It also does this without another naïve, idyllic and romantic notion; one that we Cubans have bought in to almost completely, one that sees the island as an earthly paradise leading us to imagine social utopias, that is, unobtainable dreams, when that notion has been taken seriously. Thus, this text means to be realistic in that it deals with reality and proposes to search for a social truth. Had this happened, Regino Pedroso would not have stopped being the social poet that revealed himself to us in *Nosotros*.

The *sainete* (one-act farce) has always been our culture’s preferred form of theatrical expression because, among other reasons, Cubans, from very early on, latched on to the idea that *choteo* (a sort of subversive ridiculing) was an idiosyncratic trait of ours, without understanding or attempting to ignore

the other part—the tragic nature of our collective actions or, if one prefers, of our social action as a nation. I say ‘tragic’ because we are seduced by the heroic role without understanding that we are playing out our heroic behavior on the social stage exactly like a theatrical tragedy, in the Aristotelian sense of that term, since a tragic hero exists because his life slips away on the slippery slope of a fatally wrong destiny, without being able to prevent it.

For some strange reason then, at some moment, someone will try to explain, political life in Cuba, which was always circumstantial, since we Cubans never really knew bourgeois democracy was expressed as a sort of comedy. Yet, from the very beginning, the revolution, which has been our inevitable destiny, came into being as a true tragedy. That is why when the revolution became political, like after 1898 or 1936, many of the old revolutionary actors—who in their historical misfortune did not die in battle or went to it firmly believing in the benefits they would later garner, turned into politicians and thus, changed their role from heroes to comic players able to wittingly and unashamedly swell the specter of power. Or, worse yet, how many did not live beyond the false heroics? And Regino Pedroso was the first poet to become fully aware of it, to personally experience that awful truth. But, he also had the valor to write it and publish it:

“—Teacher, is the hero of TsingTao a hero?

—My child, the hero of Tsing Tao is a hero!

Full of scars is his epic underbelly; the papers exalt him, the writers strengthen him;

the people revere him, pay tribute to his fame; he has a saber of gold and medals on his chest...

Oh, disciple, the hero of Tsing Tao is a hero!

—But, wise Teacher, such beautiful scars he did not earn in battles: upon jumping a fence, in a move that a thousand tongues softly predicted he earned a scar; another glorious star, on a soft bed a surgeon gave him—in his only battle he put wings on his heels—; and the other scar...oh, wise Teacher, is the hero of Tsing Tao a hero?

—My child, all effort is a battle and sometimes it has been triumph to fly in defeat.

Not only in purple do peoples shine, nor only in heroic death can immortal marble be won.

History does not sing the greatest feats; and there is more than one epic deed that the world ignores!

How knows how much heroism there is in jumping a fence, my child, if it is done for one’s country!

How could one who did such a miracle not be a hero?

If he did not deserve an epic’s bronze halo, would he have a saber of gold and medals on his chest?

Oh, disciple, the hero of TsingTao is a hero!”

Nevertheless, of course, this a truth expressed not with the actual linguistic crudeness of a worldview—so rooted within us—in which things are a certain way—which each of us maintains as valid—or, to the contrary, that they are not. That is, what we have here is a truth expressed not with the blow of dogma’s long-word but with the subtle, double-edged razor of dialectics: “Teacher, what is political wisdom?/... according to shared experiences,/the truth that yesterday was to deny the present; / although you once again deny what you confirm tomorrow” (“Enseñanza dialéctica” [Dialectical



Regino Pedrosa

Teaching]) or (and this is the most interesting), from the perspective a well-learned Chinese philosopher in which truths emerge from that dual and binary totality, impossible to fulfill and indefatigable in its action, in which opponents exist only in an equilibrium that was already present in the historical unfathomability of the Tao.

From that view, human life is not seen as a (tragic or comic) drama, in whose finale we would have to find the catharsis of weeping or the evasion of laughing. Regino looks at man with a subtle, ironic grin, as if everything that happened was predestined not by the gods but by nature, from which human beings, as an irrevocable part of her, cannot

escape in actions, despite his or her frequent belief to the contrary:

And be humble, my child;
humbleness bestows good fortune.
Be like the stones in the rivers
polished, smooth, flat
that sing as they trip in the currents,
from so often sinking, always tumbling.

And if a tall barrier blocks your way,
attempt no force, go around the wall;
there is nothing that man knocks down that
he later doesn't rebuild.

And don't ask, nothing ask, disciple:
the response to nothing is nothing.

Prudent in words and cautious in conduct,
any fish from many seas,
under different waters tries to be different;
one should be more various, pluriform, in
life:
on the outside everything changes, not in its
nature.

(“Yuan Pei Fu despide a su discípulo”
[Yuan Pei Fu Dismisses His Disciple])

That is why in *El ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu*, the poetic discourse is structured in an unusually different manner. Its lines are not configured in more or less independent units or in strophic groupings; neither does direct language prevail in them, which is understood as a lack of tropes. The same is true of symbolic language, in which the reiteration of figurative elements tends to determine the poetic content of the text. In this collection, each poem functions as a totality of indivisible meaning, as does the image that emerges from all that, which is foreshadowed and achieved through the poem's tone. In addition, though, since each poem relates to the

entirety of the collection in a sort of successive narrative, the super-objective of the book –as Brecht might say– is lost if all its parts are not considered.

One more thing: Regino avoids any emphatic or instructional tone, and uses more supposed than real dialogue, –so well exploited by Plato, in a philosophical sense– as a way to present social and human truths that are, above all, poetic truths. In that search beyond a contradictory duality, in which a supposed Chinese teacher and his disciple exchange ideas, the questions can possess an implicit answer or the answer may remain as a question. Inasmuch, there is no place for categorical or definitive expressions since their conceptualization occurs within a surprising and effective relativity in which perfections and imperfections are indistinguishable. That belief in dialogue as a possibility for finding the only truth possible, when it concerns human beings, is another one of the subtle lessons the poet leaves to us.

Whosoever does not understand life as an eternal contradiction, as a perpetual search for equilibrium, as a disheartening perplexity when finally facing the problem of

what truth is and who has it; whosoever does not see humanity's existence as a future in which historical cycles are repeated, always assuming some other form; whosoever ignores that one can affirm something by denying it and that one can deny by affirming; whosoever has not come to believe that man is a fragile and capricious creature that is the same everywhere, would not be able to fully understand the Regino Pedroso who slumbers in the shade of *El ciruelo de Yuan Pei Fu* [The Plum Tree of Yuan Pei Fu]. To reach this collection's deepest profundity would be like acquiring a superior capacity to understand, dispassionately, and sheltered by an ironic smile, how man moves through social and political life, because, as Lao Tse said of the Tao:

In its profundity resides the origin
of all things
It softens its coarseness
dissolves the confusion
tempers its splendor
and identifies with dust.