

2013 FRANK P. PISKOR  
FACULTY LECTURE

# Unfinished Transition: Poetics of Social Engagement in Contemporary Spain



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Marina A. Llorente, professor of modern languages and literatures at St. Lawrence University, received her Ph.D. and M.A. in Spanish Literature from the University of Kansas and her B.A. from the University of Málaga, Spain. She has published *Palabra y deseo: Espacios transgresores en la poesía española, 1975-1990* (*Word and Desire. Transgressive Spaces in the Poetry of Spain 1975-1990*) and co-edited with Ilia Casanova-Marengo the anthology *Abuelas Hispanas: desde la memoria y el recuerdo* (*Hispanic Grandmothers: Memories and Recollections*). Her latest monograph, *Poesía en acción: poemas críticos en la España contemporánea* (*Poetry in Action: Critical Poems in Contemporary Spain*), will be launched by Baile del Sol in 2014. She has also published articles on the intersections between Hispanic literatures, gender and social justice, with a focus on contemporary Hispanic poetry analyzed under the theoretical framework of cultural studies.

Her current research addresses ethics, the politics of memory and contemporary literature and film in Spain and Latin America. She teaches elementary, intermediate and advanced Spanish language courses as well as a range of upper-level courses on literature, film and culture. She regularly directs student research projects and advises off-campus research grants. She founded the Poetry for Peace reading series in 2003, was the 2009 recipient of the Maslow Award and has directed St. Lawrence's Program in Spain several times.

## The Frank P. Piskor Lecture

The Frank P. Piskor Faculty Lectureship was created as the St. Lawrence University Faculty Lectureship in 1979. In 1980, the faculty and staff of St. Lawrence established a fund to endow the lectureship in honor of Frank P. Piskor, who retired in 1981 after twelve years as president of St. Lawrence. President Emeritus Piskor passed away in 2006.

The lectureship's purpose is to encourage and recognize original and continuing research and scholarship among the faculty, and to afford the faculty the opportunity to share their learning with the academic community. The recipient, chosen from a field of nominees, receives financial assistance to support research on which the lecture is based.

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## Unfinished Transition: Poetics of Social Engagement in Contemporary Spain

*In times of misery, why poetry?* - Hölderlin

In Spain these days, good news is the exception. The days of artificial bonanza are long past, and in reality, they never were a bonanza, despite the optimistic claims in the late 1990s of then-President Jose María Aznar of the Popular Party (PP).

Much water has flowed under the bridge since then, but the truth is that Spain's current struggles have a lot to do with that period. Like a mirage in the desert, the 1990s encouraged the belief that Spain belonged completely to the so-called "developed world." More recently the country has been shaken by all manner of crises, including the global economic crisis, but there are also national factors that have been revealing themselves for some time. The system of parliamentary monarchy that followed the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975 has begun to crack, and its philosophy of "Juancarlismo" is running out of steam thanks to the revelations about the illegal business dealings of the King's son-in-law, not to mention the embarrassing image of the King injuring himself while hunting elephants. Austerity cuts to education and health services, endless news of corruption in the political system, and extremely high numbers of evictions and unemployed (including 56.5 percent unemployment for young people) have combined to spark mass demonstrations in the streets on a regular basis. Starting on May 15, 2011, the people have built a movement based in local assemblies, a movement that has slowly gained momentum thanks to its ability to leverage existing social networks.

In this chaotic context, many commentators have spoken up to identify the historical roots of these problems. But the truth is that artists, and poets in particular, have been calling attention to them for more than

20 years. They point to a failure of ethics at the global level, echoing the claim of our colleague, Professor Laura Rediehs, that “we have let economics replace ethics as a guide to life, and in doing so, we have devalued people and the associated virtues of respect, cooperation, empathy, and compassion.

” During the 1990s, calling attention to the absence of these virtues, a new generation of Spanish social poets began to use art as a form of resistance in an increasingly dehumanized and forgetful world. In this lecture I will focus on the work of three of these poets: David González, Isabel Pérez Montalbán, and Jorge Riechmann. Their poetic works deal with problems that have their origins in Spain’s own bloody twentieth century: a civil war from 1936 to 1939, a fascist military dictatorship from 1939 to 1975, and a problematic transition to democracy.

The reality is that this transition has yet to be completed for at least two reasons. First, many of the cultural and ideological foundations of the dictatorship were never broken and remain active both at the state level and in the wider society. Second, a process of national reconciliation that would have represented a real confrontation with the past of the Civil War and the forty years of Francoism was never carried out. In this sense the Civil War itself could be viewed as unfinished, especially given that it was erased from the national imaginary during the Transition through a rhetoric claiming that revisiting the country’s violent past would only provoke divisions and that it was better to look to the future.

The 1977 Amnesty Law, which freed all political prisoners of the dictatorship while also erasing all political crimes committed by the dictatorship and its supporters, encouraged this collective amnesia. What was also forgotten is that the Civil War was a class struggle as well as a struggle between modernization and conservatism. The victory of the fascists in 1939 alienated all those who had participated in the democratizing process of the Second Spanish Republic between 1931 and 1936 and who had defended it during the three subsequent years of war. The gains won by the reformers during the Republican period, such as the abolition of the monarchy, the subordination of the military to civilian authority, the law of agrarian reform, the secularization of the state, and the 1932 divorce law, had made Spain one of the world’s most progressive countries. With its victory in the Civil War, Francoism sought to demonize all of these advances and to create a grim and dangerous

image of the Republican years. The fear of leftist ideologies, combined with the fear of reprisals against those who had different ideas during the long Francoist years, worsened after 1975 and produced the erasure of the past. This narrative effectively made it possible for the Transition to break with the period of the Republic and to create an image of a new Spain, a European Spain disconnected from the past. The Amnesty Law closed the door on any revisionist efforts, legal or otherwise.

Until very recently, the norm in Spain was to refer to the Transition as a model process in which no blood was spilled. Nonetheless, historians and sociologists have offered critiques of this idealized picture. For example, José Carlos Monedero and Víctor Pérez Díaz have noted that even before Franco's death, the Left itself helped ensure that the Transition would take place in the way that it did. Monedero in particular highlights the fact that the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), in its famous 13<sup>th</sup> Congress held in exile near Paris in 1974, began a process of reform that sparked a major ideological change in the party. It was there that a group of young Socialists led by Felipe González proposed a shift away from Marxism and toward European-style social democracy. The young wing of the party captured the pulse of the traditional leaders and managed to get González elected as secretary-general of the party. This moment would shape the country's political future and the development of the Transition. According to Pérez Díaz:

The 1978 Constitution was the result of a pact between the Left and the Right, and other understandings (more or less formalized) were reached between the political class, the Army, and the Church. The regional agreements between centrists, socialists, and regional political elites channeled numerous regional and nationalist conflicts by creating a system of regional governments and autonomous communities. The social agreements between politicians, bureaucrats, unions and companies were effective when it came time to legitimize the economic system and apply the anti-inflationary policy of the centrist and socialist governments, reducing the level of conflict and trying to consolidate the professional associations.(27)

On the cultural level, a thick veil was thrown over the memories of the Second Republic, the Civil War and the Francoist years, and the 130,000 Spaniards buried in mass graves throughout the country were forgotten. The Transition presented itself as a division between conservatives and reformers or democrats, meaning of course that because the Left didn't want to be accused of being reactionary, it had no choice but to accept the rules of the game introduced by the young Socialists and the inheritors of Francoism who were presenting themselves as liberal centrists.

The amnesia imposed on the Spanish social fabric covered the trauma of the Civil War, preventing a process of national reconciliation and also erasing the class struggle by presenting it as something obsolete and anachronistic. In other words, in the new democratic model that emerged from the Transition, there was no room for Marxist paradigms because of course in the new Spain that was being born, there would be no working classes because all would be "modern" and "European," belonging to an immense and powerful middle class. This rhetoric was quite successful: the majority of Spaniards accepted the "pact of silence" and took the euphoric European train, leaving behind a past of which they had become ashamed or which they viewed as an obstacle. Today, however, many Spaniards recognize that the transition from dictatorship to democracy remains incomplete and that a process of national reconciliation is still needed, along with a dismantling of the Francoist traces in public institutions and society in general.

Poetry echoes these necessities and critiques the entire process. Before I begin analyzing how all of this is presented in the poems, I want to summarize the various tendencies in Spanish poetry during the past thirty years in order to contextualize the critical poetry within a framework that can help us understand the location of the poems under consideration here.

There are three basic tendencies: poetry of experience, essentialist or metaphysical poetry, and neo-avant-garde poetry of "difference" or poe-



try of conscience, or as I call it, "critical poetry".<sup>1</sup> The poetry of experience emerged in the mid-1980s in the figure of Luis García Montero. It is an intimate, anecdotal poetry addressing autobiographical themes – in short, a realist poetry that opposes an earlier trend toward aestheticism. It promoted the return to a figurative language and to narrativity, but one full of colloquialisms. In opposition to this, the essentialist or metaphysical poetry is characterized by its secrecy, expressive restraint, absence of anecdotal elements, and interrogation of the limits of language and its capacity to express reality (Mayhew 225; Bagué 72). Finally, according to Antonio Rodríguez Jiménez, the poetry of conscience also emerged in response to the dominant poetry of experience by confronting its tacit cooperation with the values of the capitalist system (cited in Bagué 87).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the critical poetry describes social conflicts, creating an aesthetic of resistance. These poems began by expressing their critique of the Transition and calling attention to the problems facing Spanish society during the 1990s. In addition, all of these critical poets are connected in one way or another with antisystemic social movements and were formed within a Marxist ideology that provides an ethical worldview.

These critical works include strong, absurd, devastating poems such as those of Salustiano Martín González (Salamanca, 1950), Jorge Riechmann (Madrid, 1962), Isabel Pérez Montalbán (Córdoba 1964), David González (San Andrés de los Tacones, Gijón, 1964), Viviana Paletta (Buenos Aires, 1967), Enrique Falcón (Valencia, 1968), Pablo García Casado (Córdoba, 1962) and María-Eloy García (Málaga, 1972), or those appearing in the *Voces del Extremo* anthologies published annually by the Juan Ramón

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1 For more information about these three poetic tendencies, see the studies of Jonathan Mayhew, Araceli Iravedra, Luis Bagué Quílez, Marina Llorente, Laura Scarano, María Ángeles Naval, Martín Rodríguez Gaona, Vicente Luis Mora, Alfredo Saldaña Sagredo, and Miguel Casado.

2 On the differences between the poetry of experience and the critical poetry, see the articles by Araceli Iravedra "¿Hacia una poesía útil? Versiones de compromiso para el nuevo milenio" and "Radicales, Marginales y Heterodoxos en la última poesía española (contra la "Poesía de la experiencia.")" and also the article by Isabel Pérez Montalbán, "Crítica de lo contemporáneo frente a clasicismo conservador."

Jiménez Foundation<sup>3</sup> or the *Once poetas críticos en la poesía española reciente* anthology.<sup>4</sup> All of these highlight how the poetic impulse to create an autonomous reality comes into conflict with the desire to remain socially committed in relation to the historical context that gave birth to the poem. It is in the richness of this unending struggle, a struggle that lives within the poem itself, that the act of poetic resistance makes itself visible.

This social critique refers us back to the Machadian line of “social poetry” championed by the generation of the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> Antonio Machado was a Republican poet of the Generation of 1898 who died in exile in France at the start of the Civil War. The new wave of critical poetry, however, displays the clear influence of postmodernity as well as the general

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3 Antonio Orihuela is the coordinator of the annual *Voces del Extremo* (Voices from the Margins) anthologies, each of which contains an introduction written by a poet or literary critic associated with the critical poetry. Many of these introductions address the relationship between poetry and power. For a useful discussion of this issue, see also *Poesía y Poder* (Poetry and Power) from the Colectivo Alicia Bajo Cero.

4 *Once poetas críticos en la poesía española reciente* (Eleven Critical Poets in Recent Spanish Poetry) is an anthology published in 2007 and compiled by the poet Enrique Falcón. Poems by Isabel Pérez Montalbán y Jorge Riechmann can be found here. In the introduction, Falcón writes that the anthology features the most meaningful poems of the Spain of 2007. For Falcón, these poems are “una búsqueda por una literatura de voluntad crítica y pulso resistente en tiempos de macdonaldizada pacificación e innegable injusticia social” (a search for a literature of criticism and resistance in times of McDonaldized pacification and undeniable social injustice) (11).

5 For more information about the influence of Machado in the Spanish poetry of the twentieth century, see *Antonio Machado en la poesía española. La evolución interna de la poesía española 1936-2000* by José Olivio Jiménez y Carlos Javier Morales, and *El poeta rescatado: Antonio Machado y la poesía del “grupo de Escorial”* by Araceli Iravedra.

sociopolitical developments of the past several decades. The poems I am examining here were written in the 1990s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time during which the concept of political engagement in Spain was being reinterpreted as a more direct commitment through the participation of young Spaniards in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and anti-systemic movements, as opposed to working within the structure of the Socialist, Communist, and other leftist political parties. This change can be explained in part through the influence of postmodernity at the global level and the transition to democracy and capitalism in Spain in particular. After postmodernity, nothing could remain the same. The influence of the multiple “post” movements left these poets a world in rapid transformation. All texts are children of their time, never more so than in the case of the poems we are examining here. After the great disillusion provoked by the “post” movements and the post-1968 loss of faith in stable social relationships and in scientific-technical reason, we saw in Spain new forms of social organization that can be viewed both positively and negatively. While we saw the re-emergence of right-wing youth gangs connected with sports loyalties, the work of philosopher Francisco Fernández Buey and the poet/philosopher Jorge Riechmann also pointed us toward the appearance of new pacifist, feminist, Green, anti-nuclear, and other anti-systemic groups operating within the wider European postmodern context.

The poets I am discussing here emerged when these movements of survival and emancipation were most alive and active. Their poems are saturated with the ideology that highlights these marginalized groups confronting the established order: an ideology based in the concrete reality of human beings, in their capacity to act ethically and take responsibility for their role in the world rather than living within senseless, abstract world views. The anti-systemic movements embody a transformational spirit that enables them to escape from the apathy produced by the skepticism of those times.

In recent years there have been a number of books on ethics published by a range of Spanish philosophers and professors reacting to what could be called a lack of civic spirit among Spaniards in the last few decades (García Gómez-Heras, Gómez Pérez, López Aranguren, Marina, Sánchez Cuesta, Savater). Fernando Savater, Professor of Philosophy at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, wrote *Ética para Amador* in order to

call attention to a general ignorance of ethical questions among young Spaniards. The book was published in 1991 and became a required text in many junior high schools. Like Savater, José Antonio Marina, a high school philosophy and ethics teacher who sees philosophy as a public service, believes that philosophy and ethics are essential to the process of defending the natural environment. In *Crónicas de la ultramodernidad*, Marina employs the term “ultramodernity” with three purposes: explain, improve, and transform reality. In the same way, it is possible to interpret the critical poetry as a call for attention to the problems affecting our societies and, in the final instance, an attempt to improve and transform reality.

Over the last twenty centuries, Western culture has identified intelligence with knowledge and rationality. Marina proposes a new intelligence connected with behavior, creativity, freedom, and happiness. While the older notion of intelligence leads to the sciences, the modern notion leads to ethics, or what Marina calls a “poetics of action.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, we can view critical poetry as an exercise in the poetics of action. In a globalized world marked by widespread fear, desensitizing mass media, chronic economic inequality, and violent conflicts that increasingly target civil society itself, can poetry play a role in opposing the structures that dominate us? Even when the response is negative, it still represents an effort to make social reality visible through art; the poetic art that is born of ethical commitment has the potential to call attention not only to the realities of the world we live in, but also to the possibilities for transformation.

Following in the global tradition of committed poets such as Vladimir Maiakovski, Nazim Hikmet, Anna Akhmatova, César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, Blas de Otero, Claribel Alegría, Gabriel Celaya, José Hierro, and Eduardo Galeano (whose work includes poetic prose), this poetry is born out of its context and represents an effort to make social reality visible through art. Pérez Montalbán expresses this spirit of commitment in

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6 Marina is also one of the group of authors who wrote the manual of primary and secondary education of the course *Educación para la Ciudadanía y los Derechos Humanos* (Education for Citizenship and Human Rights), approved by Decreto Real 1631/2006 on December 19, 2006, and published in the *Boletín Oficial del Estado* on May 1, 2007.

the following observation: “The poet chooses to flee from reality or to submerge herself in it; personally I am not able to write about the blackbirds singing in the trees while three quarters of the world is living in poverty” (quoted in Erasmo R.).

At the thematic level, we see in the work of these poets a clear critique of social inequality, environmental destruction, and Spanish society’s failure to carry out a proper reconstruction of historical memory of the experiences of the Civil War and the Francoist period. For example, David González addresses the “pact of silence” in his poem “Historia de España (Nudo)” (“History of Spain (Knot)”) from his 2004 book *Anda hombre, levántate de ti (C’mon, Man, Get Up)*. The poem describes the final moments of one of the people assassinated and buried in mass graves throughout Spain during the Civil War and the first days of the dictatorship:

### “Historia de España (Nudo)”

Un nudo. Esto, explica la anciana,  
fue lo último que hizo mi padre  
con sus propias manos. Un nudo.

Piénsalo.

Es lo último que hace ese hombre  
con sus propias manos.

No estrecha entre sus brazos  
a su madre, a su hermano o a un amigo.  
No acuna en ellos a su hija recién nacida.  
Tampoco le acaricia las nalgas a su mujer,  
ni le acaricia los pezones, los pechos,  
las mejillas, el pelo tan siquiera... No,

con ellas, con sus propias manos,  
lo último que le permiten hacer a ese hombre  
antes de fusilarle  
y arrojarlo a una fosa común es

Un nudo, repite la anciana  
para las cámaras de televisión

de un canal de historia. Historia  
de España: de un tajo,

el enterramueitos cortó el cordel  
que el padre de la anciana  
se había atado alrededor del tobillo  
para responder así a la pregunta  
que horas antes le había hecho su mujer:

*¿y cómo vamos a distinguir tu cuerpo  
entre todo ese montón de cadáveres?*  
Mientras aparecen los títulos de crédito,  
la anciana le da un beso al cordel,  
y luego devuelve a su caja de pino  
este nudo  
que todavía nadie, repito, nadie, se ha molestado  
en deshacer.

**“History of Spain. (Nudo)”**

*A knot. This, the old woman explains,  
was the last thing that my father made  
with his own hands. A knot.*

Think about it.

It's the last thing that that man made  
with his own hands.

He didn't hold his mother  
tightly in his arms, nor his brother nor a friend.  
He didn't cradle his recently born daughter in them.  
Nor did he caress the buttocks of his wife,  
nor her nipples, nor her breasts,  
her cheeks, not even her hair... No,

With them, with his own hands,  
the last thing that they let that man do  
before executing him  
and dropping him in a communal grave was

A knot, the old woman repeats  
 in front of television cameras  
 belonging to a history channel. The history  
 of Spain: from one cut,

the buried dead cut the string  
 that the old woman's father  
 had tied around his ankle  
 to respond to the question  
 that hours before he had asked his wife:

*and how will we distinguish your body  
 from among the mountain of corpses?*

While the credits appear,  
 the old woman kisses the string,  
 and later puts in her pine box  
 this knot  
 that still no one, I repeat, no one, has bothered  
 to undo.

(44-45, trans. Karen Sesterhenn '11)

Right from the title of the poem, the history of Spain presents itself as protagonist. The word "knot," in parentheses in the title and appearing anaphorically three times throughout the poem, leaves the reader with the image of an almost Gordian knot that someone needs to untie. The use of the imperative "Think about it," directed to "you" – the reader – implicates us powerfully in a front-row position, a device sharpened by the image of the television screen on which the old woman tells her story. As with Chinese boxes, one inside the other, we are presented with other memories of different historical moments that exist on the same level in the poem. First is the memory of the mother of the old woman, who asks her husband before dying how those left behind will recognize his body amidst all the other corpses. Second is the moment in which the victim ties the string before being shot. Third is the old woman, daughter

of the assassinated man, who recalls on the television screen the death of her father. Finally is the memory of the speaking voice that narrates the moment of viewing this television program, and the knot as the great protagonist of History (with a capital H) and the memories of the moment that Spanish society preferred to bury during the Transition. But with the passage of time, the memories return when they are least expected, and the knot appears tighter and tighter because no one has tried to untangle it for fear of confronting the injustices of a violent past.

The message of Gonzalez's poem is clear and direct: the families of those assassinated and buried in mass graves deserve to be recognized and the bodies need to be exhumed so that they can be properly identified and re-buried with dignity. The Law of Historical Memory that went into effect on December 27, 2007, could give the daughter in the poem the possibility of learning the history of her father. "History of Spain (Knot)" was published in 2004, while the debates about the Law of Historical Memory were developing after the Socialist Party took power in March of that year. From then until the publication of the law, there have been many attempts to tighten the knot in order to prevent anyone from untying it. For example, the Republican Left voted against the law in Congress because it believed that the text should have recognized explicitly the crimes committed under Francoism. The right-wing Popular Party also voted against, but obviously for the opposite reasons. For this reason the law stumbled several times in the Congress before finally going into effect. One day, perhaps, the knot will finally be untied if the Law of Historical Memory is actually implemented: if, for example, a Museum of the Civil War is created; if there is an open discussion of what to do with the Monument of the Valley of the Fallen, a mausoleum where Franco's remains are buried; and if Spanish society definitively accepts the challenge of pursuing a real process of national reconciliation. For many, this would be a fundamental step toward the creation of a mature democracy.

The memories that present themselves in the poems of Isabel Pérez Montalbán speak to us from a present that is clearly committed to recovering a past never fully forgotten by those who lived it, nor by their children and grandchildren who heard the stories that others wanted to forget. Thus in the 14 poems in Pérez Montalbán's *Los muertos nómadas* (2001), the protagonists and their terrible experiences come to life in front of the reader and negate this mode of forgetting to which Spain



was subjected during the Transition. The narrator recreates them so that they can stop being nomadic ghosts of the past and finally rest in peace once their existence and that of their experiences have been recognized and given a just place in the history of Spain. The poems describe the extremely difficult life of these people. But in the final instance, we are dealing with a poetic language, and their experiences speak through the language of the senses. *Los muertos nómadas* includes a poem titled "Clases sociales" ("Social Classes"), in which the childhood of a father during the Francoist period is presented in all its rawness so that this experience can be recognized and accepted by all as legitimate:

### "Clases sociales"

Los pobres son príncipes que tienen que reconquistar su reino.  
Agustín Díaz-Yanes. *Nadie hablará de nosotras cuando hayamos muerto*

Con seis años, mi padre trabajaba  
de primavera a primavera.  
De sol a sol cuidaba de animales.  
El capataz lo ataba de una cuerda  
para que no se perdiera en las zanjas,  
en las ramas de olivo, en los arroyos,  
en la escarcha invernal de los barrancos.  
Ya cuando oscurecía, sin esfuerzo,  
tiraba de él, lo regresaba níveo,  
amorado, con temblores en las manos,  
y alguna enredadera de abandono  
en las paredes quebradizas  
de sus pulmones rosas  
y su pequeño corazón.

En sus últimos años volvía a ser un niño:  
Se acordaba del frío proletario,  
—porque era ya sustancia de sus huesos—,  
del aroma de salvia, del primer cine mudo  
y del pan con aceite que le daban al ángelus,  
en la hora de las falsas proteínas.  
Pero su señorito, que era bueno,

con sus botas de piel y sus guantes de lluvia,  
 una vez lo llevó, en coche de caballos,  
 al médico. Le falla la memoria  
 del viaje: lo sacaron del cortijo sin pulso,  
 tenía más de cuarenta de fiebre  
 y había estado a punto de morirse,  
 con seis años, mi padre, de aquella pulmonía.  
 Con seis años, mi padre.

### “Social Classes”

The poor are princes who have to take back their reign.  
 Agustín Díaz-Yanes. *No one will talk about us after we've died.*

At 6 years old, my father worked  
 from spring to spring.  
 from sun to sun he took care of the animals.  
 The foreman tied him from a cord  
 so he wouldn't get lost in the ditches,  
 in the branches of an olive tree, in the streams  
 in the winter frost of the precipices.  
 When it started to get dark out, without effort,  
 he pulled on him, brought him back wintry  
 blue with cold, shivering  
 and scars on his hands,  
 and some creeping plant of abandonment  
 on the fragile walls  
 of his pink lungs  
 and his little heart.

In his last years he became a boy again:  
 he remembered the proletariat cold,  
 (because it was already part of his bones),  
 the aroma of sage, the first mute cinema  
 and the bread and oil that they gave him at the angelus,  
 at the time of the false proteins.  
 But his master, who was kind,  
 with his skin boots and rain gloves,

once took him, in a carriage,  
 to the doctor. He doesn't remember  
 the trip: they took him from the farm with no pulse,  
 he had a fever of over 104 degrees  
 And he was about to die,  
 At 6 years old, my father, of that pneumonia.  
 At 6 years old, my father.

(13-14, trans. Joseph Tabolt '07)

The poem's epigraph belongs to the famous film *Nadie hablará de nosotras cuando hayamos muerto* (*No one will speak of us after we are dead*) (1995), which also features the theme of the reconstruction of historical memory. After reading the poem, the reader notices that it has accomplished exactly the opposite of what the film's title claims: the narrator has immortalized in the poem the experiences of his father so that no one will ever be able to deny their existence. It is a narrative poem that presents us with a portrait of rural, postwar Spain, when the children of peasants needed to work long days in subhuman conditions. It highlights the animalization of the child by the foreman, who ties him up in order not to lose him, exposing us to the abandonment and vulnerability of the protagonist. At the same time, the internalized servitude of the child is juxtaposed with that of the father who remembers, with the narrator's implicit irony, the child who heard the story: "But his master, who was kind, with his skin boots and rain gloves..." The contrast between the well-dressed master, protected from the rain, and the child exposed to the elements all day long in terrible conditions emerges in a tone that is ironic but not combative, intensifying the rawness of the experience that is mediated by a beautiful lyricism full of sad but rhythmic images (such as "some creeping plant of abandonment" of the lungs). Once again the sense of isolation of this child, exploited and treated like an animal, contrasts with the lovely manner with which children of six years are supposed to be treated. The references to the color white made through

the noun “frost”<sup>7</sup> and the adjective “wintery” represent the innocence of the child and the proletarian cold acquired during a hard childhood. The cold and the child’s innocence, expressed with the language of the senses, fill the poem’s conclusion and take over the life of this man despite the image of the heat provoked by the pneumonia that nearly killed him at six years old. The sensation of cold permanently closes the story of the father’s life. There is nothing more to say.

The references to memory are found specifically in two lines: “he remembered the proletarian cold” and “He doesn’t remember”. In analyzing this, certain questions emerge regarding the narrator’s decision to tell this story in particular: what effect is produced by reading about these terrible events from the perspective of the present Spanish democracy, when it is assumed that all of this has been overcome, that there are no longer children suffering exploitation and abuse in Spain? And why does the Right in Spain not want to remember all of this? Confronting the past would mean naming those responsible, recognizing the injustices and crimes they committed against the weakest members of the society, in this case a six-year-old child. We must accept that the nearly 40 years of Francoism were horrible for many Spaniards, typically those belonging to working-class families and families that lost the Civil War. The father recalls the permanent sense of “cold” of his childhood, a sensation that becomes an intrinsic part of his life. The narrator qualifies this cold as “proletarian,” a choice that refers us back to the poem’s title, “Social Classes.” Again the poem takes us to the Civil War as a class struggle, not simply a struggle of political ideologies or atheists vs. Catholics. The losers of the conflict that ended in 1939 were mainly workers or those who defended the rights of workers and who suffered strong state repression during the Francoist years. Within such a framework, this poem is an act of resistance in the face of the silence regarding critiques of the Civil War and the Francoist period. The poem addresses memories of a part of the history of Francoism that many would oppose remembering. Nonetheless, these nearly dead memories are like nomads that walk loosely in a

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7 The use of the noun “frost” recalls also the well-known poems by Miguel Hernández written before he died in prison at the beginning of the dictatorship. In an interview during the summer of 2007, Pérez Montalbán explained to me that Hernández’ poetry has influenced her work powerfully.

sea of forgetting, waiting their turn to float. They demonstrate how the social fabric of the Spanish democracy, subjected to a general amnesia, suddenly confronted certain acts of resistance representing works of art that addressed these themes. It is in this moment that the trauma of the Civil War, the dictatorship and the lack of national reconciliation with the past become self-evident, festering like an old wound that remains open and infected. A fair process of facing history at the national level could cure this wound and enable the society to look to the future having made peace with the past.

Another of the themes appearing in these poems of critical conscience is the critique of the ideological change undergone by Spain's socialists, for example in Pérez Montalbán's poem "Polilla en los ochenta" ("Moth in the 1980s") from *Un cadáver lleno de mundo* (2010):

### "Polilla en los ochenta"

Los felices ochenta pasaron por mi cuerpo  
 igual que la polilla en los armarios,  
 destruyendo la fibra sedosa de un tejido,  
 proclamando que al fin la arruga es bella.  
 La esperanza nos hizo envejecer deprisa  
 y espuela el desencanto en carne de labranza  
 sobre la piel iba arando los surcos  
 como ácaro ingeniero de caminos.

España socialista disparaba a las águilas  
 que volaron de caza en la Plaza de Oriente,  
 quemaba un manifiesto, renunciaba a su credo,  
 se ponía el smoking sobre la vieja pana,  
 de moda estuvo el lino.  
 Y en los cócteles  
 se servía el olvido en alta copa.  
 Sin saberlo, pisábamos la postguerra y sus tumbas,  
 y bajo los zapatos todo el suelo era sangre  
 sobre alfombras de arroz de Kampuchea.  
 Festivos los ochenta, la amargura

hibernó su alquitrán hasta el agosto olímpico.  
De las medallas robé un resplandor  
con el que maquillarme la derrota. (43-44)

**"Moth in the '80s"**

The happy '80s went through my body  
the same as the moth in the closets  
ruining the silky material of a fabric,  
announcing that finally the wrinkle is beautiful.  
Hope put years on us quickly  
and spurs the disappointment in flesh of fields  
was plowing the furrow over the skin  
as a civil engineer mite.

Socialist Spain shot eagles  
that flew in the Orient square,  
burned a manifesto, renounced its creed,  
put on the smoking over the old corduroy jacket,  
linen was in style.  
And in cocktail parties  
they served the forgetfulness in high glass.

Without knowing it, we stepped on the postwar and its graves  
And under the shoes all the ground was blood  
on rugs of Kampuchea ricefields.  
Festive the '80s, bitterness  
hibernated its tarmac until the Olympic August.  
From the medals I robbed a glory  
which makes up for me the loss.

(trans. Marina Llorente)

The critique of the “pact of silence” during the Transition<sup>8</sup> and the ideological shift of the Socialist Party are presented here clearly and directly in order to conclude with the ironic reference to the huge expenses in 1992 when Spain hosted the Olympic Games in Barcelona and the World’s Fair in Seville along with celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the *conquistadors* on the American continent. For many, these three celebrations signified Spain’s consolidation as a member of the wealthy and modern First World in the hands of the Socialist Party.

Let’s recall a bit of history: socialism took power in 1982 when Felipe González was elected President for the first of four terms, concluding his mandate in 1996. Through this period the Socialists put into practice their break with their Marxist origins and their embrace of the European social democracy that was in vogue during the 1980s. It was then that the welfare state became the perfect, idealized symbol of the González government, combining democracy and capitalism. The poem shows these changes through the voice of a narrator perceiving those times from the perspective of the present. The verbs “shooting,” “burning,” and “renouncing” suggest a violence suffered by the narrator during those years, but above all, in the use of the first person plural in the line “Without knowing it, we stepped on the postwar and its graves” we are confronted with the forgetting of the Civil War and the dictatorship suffered by the entire society. The bloody history of the 20th century was left behind while Spaniards took the train of Europe, dreaming that finally being European was going to make them modern and well off. Nonetheless, the ticket for this train referred to the social class to which every person belonged, so the train cars were not equal for all, as the narrator’s experience demonstrates in these poems. The socialist political

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8 For critical studies of the Transition see, among others, Vicenc Navarro *Bienestar insuficiente, democracia incompleta: sobre lo que no se habla en nuestro país*; J. Trullén, *Fundamentos económicos de la transición política española: la política económica de los acuerdos de la Moncloa*; J. Tusell, *Historia de España en el siglo xx: la transición democrática y el gobierno socialista*, and J. Tusell and A. Soto, *Historia de la transición (1975-1986)*.

class, formerly proletarian, began to dress itself well, eat well and drink well, but the rest of the defeated, like the poetic narrator, were never able to enjoy the “happy 1980s”.

The contrast between happiness and defeat in the poem functions through a voice that is ironic, yet gentle, leaving the reader with a bitter taste. In effect, the Spanish Transition was not what it aimed to sell through the happy face of the cultural movement known as *La Movida*, the smooth incorporation of the country into what was then called the European Common Market in 1986, or the attempts of the Socialist governments to convert Spain into a welfare state. Many books, articles, and documentary films from that era embody well the hopeful image of those years as well as less festive narratives that show the sad data of young deaths by drug abuse and also the high unemployment numbers due to the process of industrial restructuring that Spain underwent. This critique, however, had not appeared so directly in poetry until the 1990s.

An equally critical, but also more hopeful touch appears in the work of Jorge Riechmann, who provides a powerful argument for the role that poetry can play in addressing the kinds of problems associated with Spain’s unfinished Transition. In his essay “*Empeños*” (“Efforts”) published in the journal *Zurgai*, Riechmann begins by explaining that for him, poetry has two dimensions: one is vertical, characterized by an investigation into the poet’s own consciousness; and the other is horizontal, armed with words that give testimony to what is happening in the world. In his poetry, Riechmann is determined to unite or, in his words, “awaken” these two poetic dimensions. For him, the poetics of critical conscience merges with the poetics of alienation, and only in this way does it produce the poetry needed to awaken the world we live in. In all of his work, he reveals an interest in the problems, particularly the ecological problems, of a globalized world; from this world emerges the poem that manifests itself as social commitment and organizes itself with



a deep, ethical reflection born of knowledge.

Riechmann is Professor of Moral Philosophy at the Autonomous University of Madrid, and the philosophical discourse strongly permeates his poetry. Indeed, it can be said that all of his writing contains a manifesto of ethical behavior in the face of a world in which we are seeing, in his words, "the damage to the biosphere and the undermining of the autonomy of the human being" and "the effort of political and economic powers to undermine the very alternatives that would save us" (2010, inside front cover). In the face of such an extreme situation, Riechmann writes from the critical dimension that is inherent in the creative act, but combined with a desire to build linkages between the living and the inanimate:

La poesía se puede pensar como un arte de los vínculos de manera además muy profunda. Digamos que eso tiene que ver con la naturaleza metafórica del lenguaje humano y con ese poder de las metáforas para aproximar realidades que pueden estar muy alejadas. La poesía como un arte modularmente lingüístico y con esa naturaleza metafórica del lenguaje se ve claramente su papel de arte de los vínculos. Pero también la ecología, que es una disciplina científica, la biología de los ecosistemas, y el ecologismo, la actividad social informada y guiada por valores ecológicos, por valores de cuidado, por valores de respeto por las realidades naturales también tiene que ver con esa categoría de vínculo.

Poetry could be considered an art of linkages in a very profound way. This has to do with the metaphoric nature of the human language and the power of the metaphor to approximate distant realities. Poetry is an art form grounded in language and which uses humans' metaphoric nature to formalize its role as an art of links and connections. But also, in ecology, which is a science, the biology of the ecosystems, and the conservation environmentalism, the informed social activity about ecological values, values of respect and nature conservation, are all interwoven in the idea of artistic interconnections and links. (Interview, Madrid, July 2012, trans. John Collins)

For “another world is possible” is not only a political slogan, but the experience of poetry itself. In “Empeños” Riechmann addresses the function of poetry, the civic responsibility of the writer, and the role of the rest of the citizens who struggle for survival and emancipation. He marks the “structural immorality” of the West in three dimensions:

1. El abismo de desigualdad Norte/ Sur: seres humanos de primera y de tercera categoría. Un *apartheid* planetario, en beneficio de los menos. (The abyss of North/South inequality: human beings of first and third class. A planetary apartheid that benefits the few.)
2. El modo de vivir como si la presente fuera la última generación en un planeta de usar y tirar: *après nous le déluge*. (The mode of living as if the present were the last generation of a planet to be used and thrown away: after us, the deluge.)
3. Un discurso de derechos humanos y valores universales, sistemáticamente contradicho por la práctica. (A discourse of human rights and universal values, systematically contradicted by practice.) (2003, 18, trans. John Collins)

In this situation, combining ethical values and aesthetics becomes very difficult, but not impossible. According to Riechmann, the poet must look for new paths of poetic communication, for example, introductory poetry programs in elementary and secondary schools, websites with poems read by the authors, exploring the links between music and poetry, poetry readings in public places, and non-conventional publications for people who don’t normally read this genre. Riechmann is convinced of the power of poetry and demands from the poet a commitment to the work of transformation of the status quo, necessary in order to save the life of the planet. His poems do not *approach* the world; rather, they *are born* of it, of a world in which the laws of capitalism prevail completely in the moment that the mass media put the citizenry to sleep with their consumerist, alienating messages. As a result, in his opinion “all poetry is political; every poem takes a position (voluntarily or involuntarily, through commission or omission) in the struggles, the horrors, and the hopes of its time” (1990, 26).

From his first publications in the 1980s to the present we see in direct form, on the one hand, the need to change our problematic world and, on the other hand, his confidence in the transformative power of poetry.

This last idea is linked with his defense of the ethical commitment that he has adopted throughout his poetic corpus. Riechmann declares himself a “modest poet of the human condition” (1990, 93), grounding himself in an ethical choice in favor of clear values that make it impossible to accept a decorative role for poetry in the context of an inhuman world; this is, for him, what it means to be *indignado* (indignant).

The author’s commitment to linking poetry with ethics has its roots in a number of influences. In *Poesía practicable (Usable Poetry)*, Riechmann identifies as the most important artistic adventures of the twentieth century the work of the Parisian surrealists during the second half of the 1920s, along with that of Bertolt Brecht and the “material aesthetics” group at the beginning of the 1930s. For him, these artists and thinkers, in addition to the members of Hans Eisler’s group such as Walter Benjamin, share common roots:

1. “La función social del arte o la aspiración de unir arte y revolución. (The social function of art or the desire to unite art and revolution.)
  2. Las relaciones entre arte y vida que formarán un público nuevo participante activo en los procesos artísticos. (The relations between art and life that formed a new public participating actively in the artistic process.)
  3. La socialización de la poesía. (The socialization of poetry.)
  4. La producción artística colectiva. (Collective artistic production.)
  5. La superación de la estética de la representación que de paso a una estética de la Producción. (The overcoming of the aesthetics of representation, giving way to an aesthetic of production.)
- (1990, 87, trans. John Collins)

In this sense we are dealing with a poetry of resistance against a dehumanized world. His lyricism is socially active, in line with the best examples of the art of resistance. Barbara Harlow, in her seminal study *Resistance Literature*, on the subversive influence of poetry in the cultural and political changes promoted by liberation movements in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East during the last decades of the twentieth century, explains how despite the fact that the social and the personal have displaced the political in literature and cultural studies in the West, the emphasis in resistance literature is on the political, the sphere that has the power to change the world (30). The work of Riechmann meets

this requirement; it is above all political, declaring itself in what he suggests is a revolutionary opposition to the status quo. In his poem “La existencia lujosa” (“The Luxurious Existence”) from *Poesía practicable*, he expresses this in the final lines:

Vamos a permitirnos querer ser  
 esa palabra que mancha:  
 con toda la modestia y todo el duelo del mundo  
 revolucionarios.  
 Puesto que somos-hay consenso-superfluos,  
 Vamos a permitirnos el lujo de ser  
 acaso necesarios.

Let’s allow ourselves to want to be  
 the word that stains:  
 with all modesty and all the grief of the world,  
 revolutionaries.  
 Because we are – and there is consensus – superfluous.  
 Let’s allow ourselves the luxury to be  
 perhaps needed.

(177, trans. Marina Llorente)

“Revolutionaries” and “needed” are the designations that Riechmann demands for the identity of poets and, by extension, the poetry they produce. On this point, there is room to ask, what is the character of “necessary” for this poetry? This is a question that he poses in “Otro Ritmo Posible” (“Another Possible Rhythm”), the final poem of *Poesía practicable*, in these terms:

**“Otro Ritmo Posible”**

Un buen verso  
 No sacia el hambre.

Un buen verso  
 no construye un jardín.

Un buen verso

no derriba al tirano.

Un verso  
en el mejor de los casos consigue  
cortarte la respiración  
(la digestión casi nunca).

Y su ritmo insinúa otro ritmo posible  
para tu sangre y para los planetas.

**“Another Possible Rhythm”**

A good verse  
does not satisfy hunger.

A good verse  
does not build a garden.

A good verse  
Does not topple the tyrant.

A verse  
in the best of cases can  
stop your breathing  
(almost never your digestion)

and its rhythm insinuates another possible rhythm  
for your blood and for the planets.

(179, trans. Alan. E. Smith<sup>9</sup>)

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Despite the low numbers of readers of poetry, Riechmann defends

9 Translation can be found in *International Poetry Review*. XXXII, 1 (Spring 2006—Special Issue: Spain’s Poetry of Conscience): 43-44.

the ancestral power of poetic discourse as a transformer of reality. He recognizes the impossibility that poetry alone could do away with social injustices; nevertheless, he proclaims the possibility that the poem can awaken in readers the desire to change the world, a potential that is inherent in the poetic act from the moment that it arises in the world, an unjust world that needs to be transformed.

In the poems of Riechmann, the necessity of transforming our problematic world is highlighted explicitly. Similarly, in the poems of David González and Isabel Pérez Montalbán we find specific problems that Spanish society has not yet confronted, or has not confronted adequately, owing largely to the fact that they present themselves through desensitizing mass media that don't examine them with the rigor that they demand. These are poems that send us back to the social poetry of the 1950s, but without falling into the mere repetition of formulas; they are also products of postmodernity. There is a clear intention in these poems to transform reality, and also the intention to reflect on history.

The hopeful voice of Riechmann, the rescuing of historical memory in González, and the critical voice of Pérez Montalbán coexist with other poetic voices, such as the dominant voices of the "poetry of experience," and many others that make up the panorama of recent Spanish poetry. Nonetheless, I believe that it is in the poems of the authors I have discussed here that the problems of contemporary Spanish society are presented most clearly through a critique of a political transition that can be considered unfinished. All of this is examined from a perspective of ethical rigor. In sum, it is a "poetry of action" that demonstrates deeply the influence of social movements. Approaching a poetry this complex and valuable, I believe, requires an interdisciplinary approach that reveals the depth of its significance and the transformative possibilities that it embodies.

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