Making Visible the Invisible

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CHRISTIAN CLAESSON

Introduction

The year 2008 was a watershed moment in Spanish post-dictatorship politics and culture. Before that, the national narrative declared that Spain was a prime example of political, economic and cultural progress, from the peaceful transition to democracy in the 1970s to the politically stable and economically successful country of the 2000s (see for example Muñoz Molina 2013). Spain had surely had its problems—widespread and engrained corruption, ETA's political violence, growing unemployment and inequalities—but, on the whole, both from within and without, the country was seen as a solid western European democracy. The far-reaching economic, political, cultural and social consequences of the financial crisis of 2008, ignited by the fall of Lehman Brothers, shook Spanish society to the core: the housing bubble exploded, unemployment rose to 27% (57% among adults under 25), the general labour market was increasingly precarised, over 1.7 million people were evicted from their homes between 2008 and 2019, newly built twenty-story buildings and airports were finished but never used, emigration outstripped immigration, and prostitution, trafficking and drug abuse increased significantly (Naredo 2010; El País 2011; Universidad de Barcelona n.d.; Cúneo 2020). The crisis also sparked a wide array of grassroots mobilisation, political changes, intellectual debate and cultural activity. The massive demonstration and occupation of Madrid's central square on 15 May 2011, led to the 15M, a multifarious movement that rejected party politics and organised in popular assemblies, intent on targeting what was perceived as a political class out of touch with society and on fostering consciousness-raising campaigns. New parties were founded: the left-wing Podemos sprung out of the political energy of the 15M (and, in some way, also neutralised it), and the extreme right party Vox rose to be the country's third political power, partly as a reaction to the Catalan independence movement. In the wake of these events, writers, artists

and intellectuals studied and represented the effects of the crisis, fostering a general repoliticisation of Spanish culture (Claesson 2018b). In this chapter, I will explore how the crisis has made visible what used to be out of sight, veiled, repressed and unconscious, and how it is represented in what might be termed 'post-crisis fiction'. I will focus on the development of the concept of precarity in the Spanish context, which largely has replaced the notion of class, and how work, gender and subjectivity are represented in Isaac Rosa's *La mano invisible* (2011) and Cristina Morales's *Lectura fácil* (2018).

Spanish Precarity in the 2000s

During the 2000s, the concept of precarity was beginning to enter the critical vocabulary as a way of referring to working conditions under neoliberalism. It is described by Maribel Casas-Cortés as a "toolbox concept" (2014, 221), whose validity and use depend on time, place and from what perspective and for what purposes it is discussed and used. As Emily Hogg says, "the term's descriptive precision—the extent to which it explains actually existing social reality—is less important than the way it is put to work by individuals and groups in order to contribute to the reshaping of those social realities" (2021, 1). The term comes from the Latin *precārius*, meaning "supplicant" or "dependent on the favor of another"; a precarious person is, therefore, one who, instead of having rights and legal protection, is at the mercy of the favours of others. Precarity itself is neither Western nor contemporary—in many parts of the world it is more the norm than the exception, which has also been the case for most of the history of Western capitalism—but it is in Europe that it enters the critical and theoretical dictionary. When it is formulated as a concept, it is precisely because it comes to define the change in the labour market after the first neoliberal reforms in the 1980s. In the 1990s, Pierre Bourdieu theorises the notion and underlines the effect that job insecurity has on individual subjectivity and the possibility of collective action; the problem is not only the lack of regularity and permanence in the labour market, but also the uncertainty, disorientation and loss of meaning that this lack causes (1998, 82). The inability to anticipate the future makes existence more uncertain and leads to the deterioration of the entire relationship with the world, time and space, permeating both the conscious and the unconscious (ibid., 3). The effects of precarity, therefore, go far beyond mere working conditions, affecting the existential dimension of life.

Judith Butler's post-9/11 work is foundational in scholarship on precarity, and distinguishes between this term and 'precariousness'. Precariousness is the inevitable vulnerability of social existence, the fact that our lives are, in a sense,

always dependent on others. This meaning is established in opposition to the definition of the masculine, autonomous and free subject; this view is a fantasy, since what constitutes a body to a certain extent is its dependence on other bodies (Hogg 2021, 6). Precarity, on the other hand, is the way in which vulnerability is organised in social situations, intensified for some subjects and minimised for others, according to the corresponding political structures. Hence the value and complexity of understanding these two sides of the concept in conjunction: "it encompasses the risk, insecurity and instability that are intrinsic to sociality, but draws attention to the mutable and historically variable practices that intensify the experience of vulnerability in particular times and places and allow certain individuals and groups to evade reckoning with their dependence on others" (ibid., 8). Something similar occurs with the concept of subject, whose double condition Butler summarises in the following question: "How can it be, that the subject taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?" (1997, 10) These thoughts are developed by Isabell Lorey, in her important *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (2015). Lorey's book focuses on the Foucauldian idea of governmentality, which denotes the overlap of individual self-rule and the political rule of the nation-state, and she studies precariousness as a technique of the neoliberal era, ruling through insecurity. In this regime, the double nature of the subject is exploited: the modern individual is both active and passive, both free and subjugated, to the point where it is impossible to separate one from the other. Exposure to uncertainty and danger is not only restricted to working life, but to existence—the body and subjectivation—in general. It can open up new potential for life and work at the same time that it is a threat; it is important to remember that neoliberalism takes advantage of the countercultural rejection of Fordist labour monotony, and offers a more flexible, cultural, cooperative and communicative alternative, often centred on immaterial labour. However, it is not necessarily an emancipatory change, but rather something that is decidedly ambivalent, "modes of self-government that represent a conformist self-development, a conformist self-determination enabling extraordinary governability" (Lorey 2015, 14). As Jornet Somoza points out, the disciplinary mechanisms imposed by the neoliberal order are various: "individualismo institucionalizado, régimen de competitividad como principio básico de todas las relaciones socio-productivas, gestión del yo convertido en emprendedor-de-sí, financiarización de la propia vida, imposición de un estado securitario que decide qué vidas son vivibles"[1] (2017, 158).

The first time these thoughts had a concrete political mobilisation on an international scale was through EuroMayDay in 2001, with demonstrations that began in Italy and quickly spread to Spain and other countries. For the precarious

Posters for EuroMayDay demonstrations in Madrid, Milan and Barcelona.

at the beginning of the twenty-first century, traditional 1 May demonstrations stood for the nostalgia of a unionist past that had little to do with the present and that did not represent the situation of young people who had just entered the labour market. To some extent, the historically strong Spanish unions had lost legitimacy and support during the 1990s (partly because they were perceived as having allowed unemployment benefits cuts and the legalisation of temporary work agencies) and younger people, also wary of the unions' ties to political power, tended not to unionise (Casas-Cortés 2014, 207–209). According to Casas-Cortés, the EuroMayDay phenomenon introduced an element of ambiguity to the discourse on precariousness, criticising its negative consequences, but also showing some of its potential: "A series of emerging actors, texts, and interventions linked to EuroMayDay networks continued a resignification of precarity based on the logic of *and, and, and* … (in the sense of Deleuze's call for complex multiplicity rather than reductionist exclusion), clustering multiple and at times contradictory meanings" (2014, 210; emphasis in original). Indeed, until the last demonstration in 2011, EuroMayDay increased its ambitions: the poster for the demonstration in Madrid in 2008 mentions basic income, papers for everyone, decent housing, social rights, free culture, redistribution of work and wealth, public services and sexual freedoms as its demands.

In 2004, before the publication of the texts that are considered foundational in the study of precariousness (the works of Butler and Lorey, as well as Guy Standing's *The Precariat*), the Spanish collective Precarias a la deriva published *A la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina* (*Drifting through the circuits of female precariousness*), a truly pioneering book in its situated research of precarity. For the Precarias, precarity is the "conjunto de condiciones, materiales y simbólicas, que determinan una incertidumbre acerca del acceso sostenido a los

Cartoon by Martin Ferran depicting the mileurista.
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recursos esenciales para el pleno desarrollo de la vida de un sujeto"[2] (2004, 28). The inspiration comes from the French situationists, but here the project is given a clearly feminist cue: it is no longer about the fluid itinerary of the autonomous and free man, but about walking interviews with a series of diverse precarious women to some very specific places in a city that limit and condition experience and possibilities, and often blur the boundaries between work and life. The project's ambition was to constitute a situated and heterogeneous knowledge: "partir de sí, para no quedarse en sí (como querría el capital y el patriarcado); desobedecer las segmentaciones y fronteras del capitalismo global integrado para estar juntas y revueltas; aferrar la ciudad-empresa como terreno común y de conflicto: situarse dentro y contra (la precarización, la movilidad forzada, el acceso desigual a los recursos, la explotación, el miedo, la soledad…)"[3] (ibid., 11). More specifically, the idea of the "drifts" is to locate and map the ways of living, thinking and feeling time, space, income, communication, relational and care networks, conflict, hierarchy, risk and the body (ibid., 18). Although neo-Marxism had already pointed out the importance of immaterial work (affective, communicative, creative), especially through the work of Silvia Federici, the Precarias wanted to maintain their singularity so as not to reproduce "false homogeneities"; the conditions that determine a precarious experience vary greatly and combating them requires specific strategies. Likewise, *A la deriva* emphasises that the critique of affective and immaterial work tends to forget the feminist aspect according to which reproductive work is unpaid, but at the same time essential for the functioning of the capitalist economy. The result of the ambitious investigation of the Precarias is a very varied series of testimonies of urban life

in the neoliberal economy, with immediate strength and concreteness, which defines and studies the female experience of precarity. In this period, the term *mileurista*, popularised by Espido Freire in two books—*Mileuristas: Retrato de la generación de los mil euros* (2006) and *La generación de las mil emociones: Mileuristas II* (2008)—came to denote the young educated professional who earned only a thousand euros per month, despite having a full-time job. Only a few years later, the *mileurismo* would not be seen with pity, but with envy.

Spanish fiction was largely oblivious to the underlying conflicts of Spanish society: on the one hand, the consequences of neoliberal capitalism and any sort of class antagonism; on the other, the narrative of Spain's peaceful and unproblematic transition from an almost forty-year-long Fascist dictatorship to a capitalist, liberal democracy (for a study on the presence of Francoism in Spanish society today, see Faber 2021). Referring to pre-crisis fiction, David Becerra Mayor talks about "la novela de la no-ideología," novels that displace any kind of class conflict in favour of individual and subjective accounts:

> La novela española actual reproduce, inconscientemente (y acaso muy conscientemente, cuando la *carrera literaria*, las ventas, la fama, el reconocimiento público, etc., predominan sobre la escritura), la ideología del capitalismo avanzado al desplazar las contradicciones radicales del sistema por otras asumibles por su ideología. La novela de la no-ideología borra las huellas de lo político y lo social para ofrecer una interpretación de la realidad en que todo conflicto se localiza en el interior del sujeto. Este desplazamiento de las tensiones sociales hacia las pulsiones subjetivas contribuye, por defecto, a la construcción imaginaria de un mundo perfecto y cerrado, aconflictivo. Esto es, el "Fin de la Historia."[4] (2013, 65)

Becerra points out that this not only applies to novels set in the present, but also in the past: for example, the popular Civil War novel rarely focuses on ideological conflict, but rather uses the War as a setting for individual dilemmas, or even as a dramatic backdrop for thriller or romantic stories (Becerra Mayor 2015). However, there were exceptions. Belén Gopegui thoroughly investigates the ideological bearings of Spanish society in fictional form in *Lo real* (2001), as well as the possibilities of real class struggle in *El padre de Blancanieves* (2007). Marta Sanz places her fiction on the intersections between class, gender and subjectivity in *Susana y los viejos* (2006), and from a more bodily-situated perspective in *La lección de anatomía* (2008). Isaac Rosa studies the ideological cover-ups related to the transition to democracy (in Spanish, significantly, capitalised as *la Transción*) in *El vano ayer* (2004) and to the Spanish Civil War in *¡Otra maldita novela sobre la guerra civil!* (2007). Rafael Chirbes, the most meticulously realist of these four writers, relates the political tensions by the time of Franco's death in

La caída de Madrid (2000), the dreams of revolution in *Los viejos amigos* (2003) and the construction bubble in *Crematorio* (2007); his 2013 novel on the corruption in Spain, *En la orilla*, was awarded the prestigious Premio Nacional de Literatura and hailed as the great novel of the crisis (Rodríguez Marcos 2013). Particularly interesting are two books published under a pseudonym: *El año que tampoco hicimos la revolución* (*The Year We Didn't Make the Revolution Either*, 2005), published by the collective Todoazén (two writers and one economist, all anonymous), and Fernando Díaz's *Panfleto para seguir viviendo* (*Pamphlet to Keep on Living*, 2007). Todoazén's book is a chronological collection of hundreds of authentic newspapers clippings from 2003 that, read together as a continuous narrative, display a country sleepwalking toward economic and social catastrophe, making clear that anyone who was surprised by the 2008 crisis had not read the papers carefully. The *Panfleto*, on the other hand, is a hard-hitting story of a youngster who, out of lived experience and autodidact ideological schooling, realises that aggressive political militancy, or even taking up arms, is the only way to break the current neoliberal chokehold. The fact that both books are published anonymously points to the reluctance of Spanish society to face the growing tensions in the country (Bértolo 2015). Despite the generally apolitical tendencies of Spanish literature, then, these novels are testimonies to the fact that there was a staunchly political pre-crisis literature, a literature that laid bare the ideological underpinnings, social inequalities and class frictions of contemporary Spanish society.

The 2008 Crisis

If the 2000s were the decade in which precarity became part of the working conditions under the neoliberal regime in the Western world, in the 2010s, it has spread throughout society on a much greater scale. The situation has deteriorated for the already vulnerable and has fully reached a middle class that believed itself to be protected; the gig economy has turned many workers into day labourers, without stability, security or access to the welfare system; and migration flows have provided an army of the needy as cheap labour. Some critics deny the existence of a new precarity, arguing that precarity has always been and always will be, plain and simple, the condition of the working class under capitalism (Di Bernardo 2016), but it seems certain that the situation has changed for the worse for large part of the population in the last decade. If anything, the concept of precarity has spread far beyond the labour sphere, being "una condición social y geográficamente determinada que se plasma, de manera visible (a veces obscenamente), en una multitud de coyunturas laborales, educativas, sanitarias,

migratorias, habitacionales y salariales, pero también psicológicas, afectivas y simbólicas"[5] (Álvarez Blanco and Gómez L. Quiñones 2016, 12). Among these precarities, "también hay que tener muy presente la precariedad para imaginar, pensar y actuar coherentemente contra la precariedad"[6] (ibid., 14).

The 2010s began with the economic recession as a result of the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and ended with the COVID-19 pandemic, that is, beginning with one crisis and ending with another. The crisis of 2008 has not led to an economic and social recovery, a return to the "normality" of before or, much less, the advent of a "more humane capitalism." If the events of recent years have revealed anything, it is that "normality" will never return. Moreover, it is even necessary to ask whether that era—a relatively stable Fordism managed by a welfare state that offered security in exchange for labour in the post-war era—was so normal or if it was, instead, a historical anomaly that in Spain lasted about thirty years and in a handful of Western countries a little longer. Luisa Elena Delgado uses the concept of psychoanalytic fantasy, the one that "hace posible e imposible a la vez la identificación colectiva"[7] and that "no es la antagonista de la realidad social, sino, por el contrario, su condición preexistente, su pegamento psíquico"[8] (2014, 68) to characterise that supposed Spanish normality from which the conflicts of national identity and the Franco dictatorship have been suppressed. The same could be said of "normality" before the 2008 crisis: what are now longed for as times of abundance and stability were actually inflated by loans and disguised by a "left" that had long since ceased to have the interests of the people as their greatest concern, with clearly appreciable cracks. As Palmar Álvarez Blanco and Antonio Gómez Quiñones state, "sin el teatro alucinado de auto-representaciones y auto-celebraciones, sin ese retablo de las maravillas del progreso en la (post)modernidad ibérica, no se entiende la *belle époque* de la nueva España democrática y de su experiencia cotidiana"[9] (2016, 14).

In what follows, I will define what could be called Spanish 'post-crisis fiction', rather than the occasionally used crisis fiction (or *novela de la crisis*). As I discuss elsewhere (Claesson 2015), the latter label is perhaps too restrictive, since it seems to refer (as in Rodríguez Marcos 2014) to a relatively uniform subgenre of novels that include the crisis and its consequences as their main topic. Some commentators question whether the Spanish crisis has actually ended, since the social and economic situation of the country is still considerably worse than before 2008. Nevertheless, a crisis is, by definition, something sudden and decisive—a turning point—so, in that sense, it is more accurate to say that Spaniards are living the consequences of the crisis rather than the crisis itself. Likewise, the 'post' prefix does not entail an overcoming of the effects of the crisis, but rather the questioning or reconfiguration of these effects, as a way of understanding the changing social, cultural and political landscape. The post-crisis novel, then,

would be a novel that attempts to understand the social, cultural and political changes by questioning the effects of the crisis, and not merely fiction that registers the consequences without further consideration.

La mano invisible: the Narrativity of Work

One of the most thorough, researched, overwhelming and insightful novels ever written on the phenomenon of work in Spain, Isaac Rosa's *La mano invisible* (*The Invisible Hand*, 2011), also stands as a bridge head between the before and after the crisis: it describes the labour situation of the 2000s, with mostly traditional jobs and a subjectivity formed during the years of a relatively functional welfare state, but points toward a more precarious future—and toward fiction's heightened interest in work and class issues. In this novel, we follow twelve unnamed workers—a bricklayer, a butcher, a car mechanic, a cleaner, a secretary, a programmer, a bartender, a security guard, a jack-of-all-trades, a telemarketer, an assembly line worker and a seamstress—while they are really at work, through all their movements, pain, monotony, stress, tiredness, pride and rivalry, but also their own reflections on the work they are performing as well as on the meaning, place and function of work itself. The particular circumstance of these (manual) workers is that they are not doing at all typical work in a typical workplace; they perform the same tasks over and over again—the bricklayer builds a wall only to tear it down, the butcher slaughters only sick animals that are thrown away, the car mechanic takes a car apart only to put it together again—in an enormous warehouse, lit up by spotlights and in front of an audience. Nobody knows neither the organisation nor the rationale behind the setup, but it becomes a major event over several months, with large audiences and discussions among intellectuals, academics, trade unionists and the general public in newspapers and on television. Is it a performance, a piece of theatre, a circus, a protest or perhaps a publicity campaign? Can the workers actually be said to be working when their labour does not lead anywhere, even though they are paid and their bodies hurt at the end of an eight-hour workday? After a first few weeks of stable work, the invisible employer raises demands that causes frictions and conflicts in the group, both in front of the audience (who love the sight of conflict) and during the after-work drinks. At the end, the rising tempo, the sense that the workers are taken advantage of and the diminishing audience leads to resignations and finally to a complete shutdown, and neither the characters nor the readers ever learn who was behind the whole thing.

Among other things, the novel is an exploration of the dynamics of visibility and invisibility of the modern labour market. The title is of course a nod to Adam Smith's market metaphor (never more than a utopian liberal idea), but more spe-

cifically to the opaque labour relations under neoliberal capitalism. The workers are hired by a temporary work agency and never meet any managers—they do not know who the employer is, nor, indeed, what kind of employer it is. Each time they drag their feet or silently protest against an already utterly meaningless task (typing fewer pages or building fewer walls than expected) they are penalised through a salary reduction. It is not until several months later that they discover the supervisor has been right among them: the programmer is surveilling his co-workers' every step, in order to develop a computer programme to improve labour efficiency. The programme is aptly called Panoptic, as a reference to Bentham's panopticon, and particularly to its application to modern-day working life, as predicted in Shoshana Zuboff's now classic *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power* (1988). Surveillance is moreover exercised by the audience of the spectacle: invisible behind the powerful spotlights, they laugh, boo and urge the workers to talk less and work more.

The invisibility also applies to work and workers themselves—the hand that cleans the toilet, slaughters the animal, sews the shirt—in modern society. To the middle class, mainly working in the service sector, it may seem as if things grow by themselves. Thinking about the audience, whom he labels 'work tourists', the bricklayer wonders whether they ever reflected upon who actually built their buildings:

> si alguna vez al llegar desde la calle levantarán la vista y al ver el edificio se preguntarán cómo fue su construcción, cómo aguantaron el frío y la lluvia hombres subidos a un andamio para enfoscar la fachada; si alguna vez han dedicado un solo pensamiento por pequeño que sea a quienes se esforzaron, se fatigaron, sudaron, se dolieron y desgastaron sus cuerpos para hacer posibles esas paredes, ese techo, esa escalera, ese hueco del ascensor por el que alguna vez cae un albañil que nunca será recordado con una placa de agradecimiento en la entrada a la casa; incluso si se les ha ocurrido pensar que ese edificio lo hicieron hombres, no se hizo solo, no fueron las máquinas ni trajeron módulos prefabricados, como esas parejas que se compran un piso y cada domingo van a ver cómo avanza la obra, y al no ser día de trabajo ven de una semana a otra que la casa va creciendo como si lo hiciera sola[10] (Rosa 2011, 31–32)

On another level, the novel is an attempt to fill the perceived void of actual working fictions in literature, the presumed *inenarrable* or even inhumane quality of work, epitomised by a quote by José Luis Pardo included as a postscript to the text:

> Ciertamente, hay muchas narraciones que transcurren total o parcialmente en lugares de trabajo, pero lo que estas narraciones relatan es algo que ocurre entre los personajes *al margen de su mera actividad laboral*, y no esa actividad en

> cuanto tal, porque su brutalidad o su monotonía parecen señalar un límite a la narratividad (¿cómo contar algo allí donde no hay nadie, donde cada uno deja de ser alguien?).[11] (379)

In *La mano invisible*, working workers occupy centre stage in a double sense, both literally on the warehouse stage in front of the audience, and as the main characters of the novel we are reading. Fiction fertilises and multiplies the meaning of the work at the centre of the novel. On the one hand, the fictional setup of the labour produced (or reproduced) in the warehouse makes us reflect on what work is and whether it still counts as work when done in an unproductive setting, which, in turn, leads to a whole array of questions as to what actually constitutes a productive and meaningful job, and whether there is any real difference between this staged work and David Graeber's 'bullshit jobs' (2018). On the other hand, the fiction of the thoroughly researched representations of work that make up the novel denotes a real break in the hegemony of mainstream fiction. Carmina Gustrán Loscos relates this to Jacques Rancière's idea of the distribution of the sensible—"the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it," that is, "the delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (2004, 7–8). "Placing precarious workers on a stage," argues Gustrán Loscos, "disrupts the distribution of the sensible" (2020, 44), and gives these otherwise unheard workers a voice with which to stick out from that which is normally only perceived as noise. Moreover, she also talks about work as a fiction in itself—a story that is told to us about power relations that are constructed and therefore might be upset and changed (ibid., 47). In some sense, what is questioned is work itself, although this idea is never fully articulated.

However, even more central than workers is work itself. Intermixed with the reflections on the work situation, daydreaming, associations and memories are descriptions of the labour performed, often mimicking the monotony of the working situation: "Redonda, cuadrada, redonda, cuadrada, triangular, rectangular, triangular, rectangular, mira el reloj para ver cuántos segundos tarda en tomar una caja, llenarla y ponerla en su sitio, redonda, cuadrada, redonda, cuadrada, triangular, rectangular, triangular, rectangular"[12] (ibid., 64). The novel gives voice to twelve workers in twelve chapters—the thirteenth worker represented, the prostitute, is significantly *not* given a voice and is not a part of the performative setup—and each chapter is narrated almost in one breath, without dialogue quotation marks or question marks, although dialogue and questions abound (see the bricklayer quote above as an example). The free indirect speech

throughout the text makes for a realistic testimony ordered by the discipline and irony of the narrator, a sort of stream of consciousness, with page-long sentences and few paragraph divisions, that overwhelms the reader and puts her in the situation of the worker. Sometimes, as in the case of the telemarketer, the monotony of work is the monotony of language itself:

> Buenas tardes, podría hablar con el señor Herrera Abad, por favor. Encantada de saludarle, señor Herrera. Le llamo para. No, no es una venta telefónica. No, no voy a ofrecerle ningún. Disculpe, buenas tardes.
>
> Buenas tardes, podría hablar con el señor Herrera Acosta, por favor. Encantada de saludarle, señor Herrera. Le llamo para pedirle su. Sólo serán cuatro minutos, señor Herrera. No tiene que. Disculpe, buenas tardes.
>
> Buenas tardes, podría hablar con el señor Herrera Agudo, por favor.[13] (ibid., 117)

The representation of work at a concretely textual level is, ultimately, what makes an identification with these unnamed workers in their daily routine possible. Work may be missing even in working-class fiction, like that invisible hand that moves the story, as Pardo suggests, but here it is the core of the novel.

Published in 2011, Isaac Rosa's ground-breaking novel has come to be read as post-crisis fiction, standing at the beginning of the stream of novels that in some way deal with conditions and consequences of the crisis, but it refers to a labour situation in place well before the crisis. *La mano invisible* certainly depicts precarity, uncertainty and ever-increasing productivity demands, but also more general, work-related issues such as monotony, boredom, class, community, unionisation and exploitation. It thus straddles the Spanish crisis: it narrates a general working situation, especially poignant in the 2000s, but also opens up for the novelistic production of the 2010s. For all its irregularities, such as the performative setup, it relates a fairly regulated work situation. The novels published in the 2010s focus more on the lack of work, refusal to work and irregular work, as well as the general social consequences of the crisis.

Post-Crisis Fiction

In the last part of this chapter, I will briefly review how Spanish fiction[14] has responded to the precarity that has permeated society over the last ten years. Both Isabell Lorey (2015) and Precarias a la deriva, among others, underline the double face of precarity: it is associated with fear and profound uncertainty, but there is also a potential for making structural changes that may lead to a more

just society. The same applies to literature on precarity, which both represents and challenges contemporary insecurity. On the one hand, there is a testimonial trend of narratives, generally realistic, that integrate precarity at the level of content and make visible the life circumstances of the precariat, recounting the multitude of consequences that the 2008 crisis has had from a human and situated perspective. In these cases, the capacity of the novel as a genre is used to put the reader in the place of the ordinary person, to humanise a crisis that tends to be abstract, to animate the testimony with the tools of fiction, and to be a counterpart of the many essays of all kinds that analyse the crisis from a general perspective and from above. In this sense, "la precariedad, novelada siempre desde un multiperspectivismo interseccional y multiescalar, se transforma en un *locus* de enunciación privilegiado desde el cual es posible *replicar* a la *hibris* del gran metarrelato supuestamente anónimo de la crisis, definiendo la movilización como procedente de una territorialidad en forma de 'planetaridad situada'"[15] (Bonvalot 2019, 201). On the other hand, although these aspects are clearly intertwined, there are texts that integrate precarity at the level of form, experimenting with the techniques and strategies they employ. This type of text is "un conjunto que se inclina cada vez más hacia el mestizaje de los géneros, de los lenguajes y de los planos comunicativos, y que convierte la reflexión metaliteraria en un espacio propositivo y propulsivo"[16] (Rossi 2021, ii). These texts reflect the disorientation, uncertainty and ambiguous and complex functioning of ideology also at the textual level, what I elsewhere have called "precarious narratives" (Claesson 2016; Claesson 2018b). Sometimes these novels create a "sense of equivalence": "The affect of crisis moves out from the narrative and is felt as a kind of reading experience. In this way the reader is able to image lines of affinity that are capable of extending the connection between the reader and the character to precarious subjects beyond the textual encounter" (Connell 2021, 29). Consequently, the text can create a subjective awareness of the situation that, based on the concept of precariousness as an operative notion, has the possibility of functioning as a place of political action (ibid., 30). In this sense, as Hogg asserts, what matters about artistic texts is not primarily what they say about precarity, but the way in which they forge new ways of seeing and describing, new possibilities of perception and new forms of representation, to break down some of the stagnant political structures and hegemonic narratives of the contemporary moment (Hogg 2021, 13).

The Spanish post-crisis has undoubtedly grown into a literary subgenre and a research field of its own. Nere Basabe (2018, 24–27) identifies six mayor literary categories: (1) novels on labour and existential precarity, often in a testimonial register, as in Javier López Menacho's *Yo, precario* (2013) or Elvira Navarro's oft-quoted *La trabajadora* (2014); (2) critiques of consumer society and explorations

of modern subjectivity, as in the fiction of Sara Mesa and Javier Moreno; (3) fictions on the migratory experience, as in Miguel Ángel Hernández's *Intento de escapada* (2013); (4) political activism, as a testimony to the wide array of grassroots movements that spread throughout Spain in the aftermath of the 15 May demonstration in 2011, as in Pablo Gutiérrez's *Democracia* (2012)—a key reference in Spanish post-crisis fiction—or Alberto Olmos's *Ejército enemigo* (2011); (5) rural exile stories, even called "the new rural novel," of urbanites who flee the city and all its ills to relocate (with a Wi-Fi connection) to the countryside; and (6) re-interpretations of the past—to the *movida* years of the 1980s, the Transition, the Franco dictatorship, the Civil War—in the wake of a crisis that shook the foundations of both Spanish society and historiography. To these categories, we might add novels on reproductive work, gender and class, like Elena Medel's *Las maravillas* (2020), or fiction that questions or openly shuns work, as in Santiago Lorenzo's best-selling *Los asquerosos* (2018), work tourism, as Munir Hachemi's *Cosas vivas* (2018), or novels of revolutionary violence, as in Bruno Galindo's *El público* (2012) or one of the greatest achievements of the post-crisis fiction era, Diego Sánchez Aguilar's *Factbook: El libro de los hechos* (2018). Federico López-Terra adds that, in addition to the crisis *in* the story, we also have the crisis *of* the story, signalling a halt in the production of meaning, where "la crisis como interrupción tanto de narrativas personales como colectivas derivó en la incapacidad de los sujetos de dotar de continuidad narrativa su propia historia, de hacerse con el relato"[17] (2018, 123).

A landmark event in the evolution of the genre was the surprising choice to grant the Premio Nacional de Literatura to Cristina Morales's *Lectura fácil* in 2018—born in 1985, she is the youngest woman writer to receive the prize. The prize is state-sponsored, bestowed by the Ministry for Culture and Sports, which "promotes a specific type of individualism that allows the state the annual opportunity to publicly appropriate the writer/citizen's labour for its own purposes, which are, of course, 'nationalistic' in the sense that the prize serves to promote literary value that is presented as representing the nation" (Perret 2015, 78). What the novels that have won this award have in common is that they are not "too militantly 'Other' from the state's perspective" (ibid., 83), but rather subscribe to the idea of a Spain that aligns with the political consensus formed by the transition to democracy and the Constitution of 1978. Strikingly, *Lectura fácil* is the complete opposite of the novels that normally receive this award. The novel tells the story of four intellectually impaired women living in a group home in Barcelona, in which different voices and genres coalesce and mirror each other—first-person narratives, court hearings, minutes from anarchist collectives in which the characters are involved, libertarian fanzines and the texts written in the mode of "easy reading" designed for people with reading or

other intellectual impairments. On one level, it criticises a regime of Foucauldian biopolitics, in the way it deconstructs "el modo en que los dispositivos del Estado operan en la institucionalización de los cuerpos de quienes no encajan en la normalidad y la heteronormatividad construida"[18] (Becerra Mayor 2021, 145). Here, another kind of Panopticon is installed, in which bodies and behaviours deemed deviant are controlled by the State through sterilisation and medication as well as apparently well-meaning measures such as welfare checks (with a set of demands), reading groups (where reading and writing is controlled) or integral dance, which is inclusive of individuals with and without disabilities (but where difference is, paradoxically, homogenised). On another level, it is a furious attack on post-crisis Spain—or even Spain as state formation—in which almost nobody is spared. The political critique is expressed especially by Nati, who was about to complete her PhD in sociology when she suffered a nervous breakdown triggered by her pathological inability to tolerate class differences, capitalism "non plus ultra" (ibid., 139) or especially the racist "facho-machos" (fascist-machos) that dominate Spanish society, and through the discussions in the anarchist collective that are given ample space in this long novel.

Lectura fácil may be considered the most thorough anarchist critique of Spanish post-crisis society to date, although it looks slightly different from more conventional (if that is the right word here) anarchist writings. As such, it channels the most radical political energy of the 15M, the massive, horizontal and loosely bound movement that started with the occupation of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid on 15 May 2011. The fact that the novel was awarded the Premio Nacional, in spite of the character and history of the prize, seems to be an acknowledgment both of the force of the post-crisis novel in general and of the sprawling and radical legacy of the 15M movement. David Becerra calls the novel an example of *intransitive literature*: a literature that does not commit to a previously defined goal, that does not aim to overtake power (as would be the case of transitive literature), but rather to de-activate power from the margins, freeing itself from the mechanisms that discipline bodies and subjectivities, leaving room for anyone to discover the possibilities by exploring previously unknown territories (2021, 142). Likewise, when analysing the 15M, Amador Fernández-Savater underlines what he calls "la fuerza de los débiles, cuyos ingredientes son la activación de los afectos y los vínculos, la elección autónoma de los tiempos y los espacios, el valor de la igualdad y la pluralidad"[19] (2021, 66). The strength of the weak, therefore, is "una guerrilla-movimiento: un ecosistema, una red autoorganizada, un *mundo en marcha*"[20] (ibid., 76). This is what Standing (2011, 2021) is aiming at when he talks about the precariat as a class-in-the-making: it will never be like the working class, with its physical meeting places, unions, faith in progress, pride and revolutionary potential, but it can indeed constitute a common sensibility,

a destituent force, a rhizomatic network, a shared condition. Morales's *Lectura fácil* goes beyond the focus on precarity so common in Spanish post-crisis fiction and hones in on precariousness and governmentality: by portraying a group of women who struggle against (or just are outside) institutionalised individualism, competitiveness as a core principle of society, self-entrepreneurialism, financialisation and the imposition of the security state, she questions the disciplinary mechanisms that are both a condition and a result of neoliberal society. Instead, the novel argues (if it argues for anything) for the acknowledgment of our mutual precariousness, for the strength of the weak, for resistance in multiplicity, for democratic horizontality and for a refusal of work and productivity. As such, Morales's novel becomes the most radical expression of thinking and fiction in the post-crisis, post-15M era.

As we have seen, there was certainly political fiction and thinking before the crisis, but it was scarce and tended to be buried under the narrative of an economically prosperous, democratically normalised and culturally homogeneous Spain. The crisis and the massive politicisation that followed—mainly through the 15M—made it much more difficult for writers, critics and scholars, as well as for society as a whole, to look the other way. It also became relevant to pinpoint the political potential of post-crisis fiction. Maria Ayete Gil defines the political novel as one that, with all the aesthetic resources of fiction, intends to intervene in the consensus view of reality, breaking the division of the common with the aim of revealing the possibility of a different, more just world (2021, 161). The political post-crisis fiction, in contrast to a fiction that merely registers the effects of the crisis, would thus be novels "que traten de visibilizar cuestiones derivadas de la ruina económica, moral, social y política invisibilizadas por el discurso oficial; que traten de señalar causas, culpables y contradicciones, o de imaginar, bien salidas, bien mundos alternativos"[21] (ibid., 202–203). The post-crisis novels that are truly political, then, are those that highlight the cracks in the hegemonic ideology, point to the possibility of other worlds and other subjectivities, and make visible the invisible. Spanish post-crisis fiction both depicts a political awakening in society and imagines a way forward.

Notes

1. "[I]nstitutionalised individualism, a regime of competitiveness as a basic principle of all socio-productive relationships, management of the self as self-entrepreneur, financialization of one's own life, imposition of a security state that decides which lives are liveable."

2. "[S]et of conditions, material and symbolic, that determine an uncertainty about sustained access to essential resources for the full development of a subject's life."
3. "[S]tart from oneself, so as not to remain in oneself (as capital and patriarchy would like); disobey the segmentations and borders of integrated global capitalism to be together and revolt; grasping the city-company as common and conflict terrain: situating oneself within and against (precariousness, forced mobility, unequal access to resources, exploitation, fear, loneliness…)."
4. "The current Spanish novel reproduces, unconsciously (and perhaps very consciously, when literary career, sales, fame, public recognition, etc., prevail over writing), the ideology of advanced capitalism by displacing the radical contradictions of the system by others that could be assumed by that ideology. The novel of non-ideology erases the traces of the political and the social to offer an interpretation of reality in which all conflict is located within the subject. This displacement of social tensions towards subjective impulses contributes, by default, to the imaginary construction of a perfect and closed, unconflicted world. That is, the 'End of History'."
5. "[A] social and geographically determined condition that is reflected, in a visible way (sometimes obscenely), in a multitude of work, educational, health, migratory, housing and salary situations, but also on a psychological, affective and symbolic level."
6. "[W]e must also keep very much in mind the precarity that makes it difficult to imagine, think and act coherently against precarity."
7. "[I]t makes collective identification possible and impossible at the same time."
8. "[I]t is not the antagonist of social reality, but, on the contrary, its pre-existing condition, its psychic glue."
9. "[W]ithout the hallucinatory theatre of self-representations and self-celebrations, without that 'marvellous puppet show' of progress in Iberian (post)modernity, the belle époque of the new democratic Spain and its daily experience cannot be understood."
10. "[I]f ever, upon arriving from the street, they look up and, when seeing the building, wonder how it was built, how men on scaffolding to plaster the façade endured the cold and rain; if they have ever given a single thought, no matter how small, to those who toiled, tired, sweated, ached, and wore out their bodies to make possible those walls, that ceiling, that stairway, that elevator shaft where a bricklayer sometimes falls down who will never be remembered with a plaque of gratitude at the entrance to the house; if it has even occurred to them to think that this building was made by men, it wasn't built by itself, it wasn't machines or prefabricated modules, like those couples who buy a flat and go every Sunday to see how the work progresses, and, since it is not a work day, from one week to the next they see the house growing as if by itself."
11. "Certainly, there are many narratives that take place totally or partially in workplaces, but what these narratives relate is something that happens between the characters outside of their mere work activity, and not that activity as such, because its brutality or

monotony seem point out a limit to narrativity (how to tell something where there is no one, where everyone ceases to be someone?)."

12. "Round, square, round, square, triangular, rectangular, triangular, rectangular, she looks at the clock to see how many seconds it takes to take a box, fill it and put it in its place, round, square, round, square, triangular, rectangular, triangular, rectangular."
13. "Good afternoon, could I speak to Mr. Herrera Abad, please. Pleased to greet you, Mr. Herrera. I call you to. No, it is not a telephone sale. No, I will not offer you any. Excuse me, good afternoon.
    Good afternoon, could I speak to Mr. Herrera Acosta, please. Pleased to greet you, Mr. Herrera. I'm calling to ask for your. It will only be four minutes, Mr. Herrera. You don't have to. Excuse me, good afternoon.
    Good afternoon, could I speak to Mr. Herrera Agudo, please."
14. The term 'Spanish' refers to the language rather than to the country as a whole, since there are a large number of novels published in Spain written in Catalan, Basque and Galician. A more accurate denomination would thus be "Spanish Post-Crisis Fiction in Spanish" but, for the sake of stylistic elegance, I use the conventional term. See my article "One Country, Several Literatures: Towards a Comparative Understanding of Contemporary Literature in Spain" (Claesson 2018a) and *Novela política en la España plurilingüe*, a collection of edited essays that study post-crisis political fiction published in all the official languages of Spain (forthcoming in 2024).
15. "[P]recarity, always fictionalised from an intersectional and multi-scalar multi-perspectivism, becomes a privileged locus of enunciation from which it is possible to reply to the hubris of the great supposedly anonymous meta-narrative of the crisis, defining the mobilisation as proceeding from a territoriality in the form of 'situated planetarity.'"
16. "[A] set that leans more and more towards the miscegenation of genres, languages and communicative planes, and that turns metaliterary reflection into a propositional and propulsive space."
17. "[T]he crisis, as a disruption of both personal and collective narratives, resulted in the subjects' inability to provide narrative continuity to their own story, to take hold of the narrative."
18. "[T]he way in which the devices of the State operate in the institutionalisation of the bodies of those who do not fit into normality and constructed heteronormativity."
19. "[T]he strength of the weak, whose ingredients are the activation of affections and ties, the autonomous choice of times and spaces, the value of equality and plurality."
20. "[A]a guerrilla-movement: an ecosystem, a self-organised network, a world on the move."
21. "[T]hat try to make visible issues derived from the economic, moral, social and political ruin that had been obscured by official discourse; that try to point out causes, culprits and contradictions, or to imagine either solutions or alternative worlds."

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