

# “Mejor esto que nada”: Employment and Exploitation in Pablo García Casado’s *Dinero*

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**Abstract:** Even before the worldwide economic crisis of 2008 began, the prose poems in Pablo García Casado’s *Dinero* (2007) continued the exploration of the potential and pitfalls of socially engaged poetry already taking place in Spain during the first two decades of the twenty first century. These poems trace the visual dimensions of a range of economic interactions that link and divide bosses, employees, customers, and families, setting the stage for readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the scenes and dynamics presented by these poems.

**Keywords:** Pablo García Casado; 21st century Spanish poetry; prose poetry; socially committed poetry; cinematic techniques in poetry

The first two decades of the twenty first century have seen the publication of a series of key books dealing with the history of socially engaged poetry in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Spain. Some of them, like J. Lechner’s *El compromiso en la poesía española del siglo XX* (1968, reissued in 2004), Fanny Rubio’s *Las revistas poéticas españolas, 1939-1975* (1976, reissued in 2004), and a critical edition of Leopoldo de Luis’s *Poesía social española contemporánea. Antología (1939-1968)* (1965, 1969) prepared by Fanny Rubio and Jorge Urrutia in 2000, represented a reissuing of texts first published during or shortly after the Franco dictatorship, while new studies like Juan José Lanz’s *La revista Claraboya (1963-1968): un episodio fundamental en la renovación poética de los años sesenta* (2005) and Miguel Ángel García’s *La literatura y sus demonios: Leer la poesía social* (2012), addressed poetry from the same period. A number of other important contributions to this field have come from key poets and critics like Jorge Riechmann (1962-), Antonio Orihuela (1965-), Antonio Méndez Rubio (1967-), and Luis Bagué Quílez (1978-) and have explored not only the history of socially engaged poetry but also its possibilities and pitfalls. Individual contributions like Méndez Rubio’s *Poesía sin mundo: Escritos sobre poética y sociedad, 1993-2003* (2004) and *La destrucción de la forma (Y otros escritos sobre poesía y conflicto)* (2008), Riechmann’s *Resistencia de materiales. Ensayos sobre el mundo y la poesía y el mundo* (2006), and Bagué Quílez’s *Poesía en pie de paz: Modos del compromiso hacia el tercer milenio* (2006)

had collective counterparts in the form of the *Leer y entender la poesía* volume dedicated to *Conciencia y compromiso poéticos* (2002) and the *Voces del Extremo* poetry festivals held in Moguer and coordinated by Orihuela beginning in 1999. This comingling and coexistence of engagements with socially engaged poetry highlights the variety of forms of this phenomenon in circulation during this period as well as the continued importance of lyrical interventions in the social, illustrating what Jacques Rancière has termed the “paradoxes of political art.”

As he explains in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010), a commonly held view is that “[a]rt is presumed to be effective politically because it displays the marks of domination, or [...] leaves the spaces reserved for it and becomes a social practice” (134-35). This system relies on what Rancière defines as “the *pedagogical* model of the efficacy of art,” which “posits that what the viewer sees [...] is a set of signs formed according to an artist’s intention” (136, 135-36). “By recognizing these signs,” he explains, “the spectator is supposedly induced into a specific reading of the world around us, leading, in turn, to the feeling of a certain proximity or distance, and ultimately to the spectator’s intervening into the situation staged by the author” (136). Although Rancière ultimately critiques this common opinion regarding art’s political effectiveness, he does leave space for the subversive potential of works of art that reconfigure viewers’ modes of engagement with the visible and the sensible. Artists, in his view, “are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible,” and critical art in particular “aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation” (141, 142). While the rhetorical jump from a new perception of the world to a newfound commitment to its transformation might seem abrupt, it is in fact built upon three steps: “first, the production of a sensory form of ‘strangeness’; second, the development of an awareness of the reason for that strangeness and third, a mobilization of individuals as a result of that awareness” (142). This extension of Viktor Shklovsky’s discussion of estrangement provides a way of reading otherwise not explicitly political texts in political terms (Shklovsky 12).

Pablo García Casado (Córdoba, 1972-) is a writer who believes that poets should exhibit an emotional engagement with the scenes, themes, situations, and scenarios they present (qtd. in Duque Amusco 218). His work has been included in important anthologies like *Feroces: Radicales, marginales y heterodoxos en la última poesía española* (1998), *La Generación del 99* (1999), *Veinticinco poetas españoles jóvenes* (2003), *La inteligencia y el hacha (Un panorama de la Generación poética de 2000)* (2010) and, in English translation, *New European Poets* (2008). The appearance in 2013 of *Fuera de campo. Poesía reunida* confirmed the critical and commercial recognition that followed the publication of García Casado’s first book, *Las afueras* (1997), which received the Premio Ojo Crítico de Radio Nacional de España and was a finalist for the Premio Nacional de Poesía. In addition to this collection, which inspired *Estar en las afueras también es estar dentro*, an homage volume that appeared a decade later, *Fuera de campo* also included García Casado’s next two books, *El mapa de América* (2001) and *Dinero*

(2007), which were subsequently followed by *García* (2015) and *La cámara te quiere* (2019). Each of these collections has contributed to a poetic trajectory characterized by thematic coherence, provocative language, and a blending of voices and registers. Some of the themes explored by these books include love and sex (*Las afueras*), the visual and discursive imaginary of American road movies (*El mapa de América*), money and its role in society (*Dinero*), and the dynamics and consequences of the adult film industry (*La cámara te quiere*). A key formal turning point in this thematic arc can be traced in the use of prose poems in *Dinero*, a form that García Casado has continued to use in his subsequent collections.

By revealing and calling attention to current social, political, and economic conditions and their concrete impact on individuals through a lens marked by filmic aesthetics, the thirty-eight prose poems that make up García Casado's *Dinero* situate themselves within and extend an already established tradition of socially engaged poetry in Spain. Reviews of this collection generally point to its non-dogmatic character while recognizing that this quality does not preclude the presence of social critique (Rico 19; Villena, "Lírica" IV; Villena, "Poesía" 60). Luis Antonio de Villena cautions against seeing this collection as a return to the social poetry of the 1950s and 60s, framing it instead as an example of "una poesía realista, que tiene en cuenta la vida corriente y lo narra todo para que de lo entredicho brote la poesía agridulce de la desesperanza" ("Lírica" IV). Villena also sees in these poems a lyrical quality, a key characteristic traced by Francisco Díaz de Castro in his framing of García Casado's texts as "unos poemas en prosa cuya cualidad lírica se acentúa gracias a la retórica de la depuración, a la sugerencia precisa, al juego de personas verbales, a la música del metro tradicional que se deja oír en los momentos justos" (33).

The prose poem can be an especially apt vehicle for rethinking the visible and the sensible in an era marked by especially rapid changes in technology and an ever-increasing emphasis on the visual, since, as Marta Agudo and Carlos Jiménez Arribas explain in the introduction to their anthology of Spanish prose poetry produced in Spain between 1990 and 2005, "[e]l poema en prosa [...] viene marcado por la búsqueda de nuevas expectativas de lectura, nuevas rutinas visuales, nuevas formas de considerar el hecho poético" (13-14). Rather than framing prose poetry negatively through the absence or lack of verses, Agudo and Jiménez Arribas instead argue that "pese a que el valor representativo del párrafo se base en una ausencia, la del verso, y sea portador, por tanto, de un significado negativo, el lector que se acerca a él lo valora justamente en su afirmación, es decir, como *presencia*" (14). This presence is made up of "la estructura paragrafática y, en consecuencia, su constitución oracional" (13), providing shape, structure, and identifiable formal elements for the reading of prose poetry.

The prose poems that make up *Dinero*, grouped in three sections ("Con el sudor de tu frente," "Trampas," and "Colmenas"), rely on a cinematic framing and presentation of the scenes delineated for and presented to readers. In particular, these poems employ the framing and staging of shots, close-ups, zoom outs, editing and cutting to create, frame, and arrange images in strategic ways. In the case of García Casado's early poetry,

Isla Correyero asserts that his poems “son como esos videoclips independientes en los que con poquísimos recursos económicos se consigue un retrato completo de lo que quieren narrar. Y lo hacen con ingenio y arte” (126), while Antonio Lucas frames his work as “una experimentación lúcida que tiene uno de sus cimientos no en el cine exactamente, sino en algo más concreto: en la confección de un fotograma sin volutas” (9-10). The presence of these techniques in García Casado’s work dovetails well with his work as the director of the Filmoteca de Andalucía in Córdoba, a position he has held since 2008. Visuality and the blending of different media also played a role in the release and promotion of *Dinero*, in the form of a website featuring a video including photographs by Thomas Canet and a public recital featuring projections of these same images and guitar accompaniment by Jesús Requena.

Recalling the three-part progression outlined by Rancière in which the production of strangeness and awareness of it are employed to inspire social change, I propose that García Casado’s work exposes, explores, and exploits the strangeness created by the economic underpinning of society and its often-violent material impact on society and people. The poems that comprise *Dinero* employ a variety of different perspectives to depict a larger market volatility that trickles down through the everyday experiences and existence of a variety of figures. In short, these poems present both the visible and invisible economic relationships and dynamics that govern contemporary social life in Spain and rely on chains of economic interactions encompassing employers, employees, and customers as well as the impact on families associated with these economic transactions.

The atmospheres created in these poems and rhetorical structures and techniques used to create them remind us of the texts that Germán Labrador Méndez has termed “historias de vida subprime” (571). These accounts of the experiences of those affected by the economic crisis are akin to *microrrelatos* for Labrador Méndez, and the question of how and where they circulate plays a crucial role in their political effectiveness (568, 566). In general terms, this critic considers life stories to be “una tecnología de imaginación política [...] que permite que se piensen y vean cosas que antes no eran visibles, ni pensables” (562-63). This “technology” relies on some of the assumptions regarding political art discussed by Rancière, since, according to Labrador Méndez, “[e]sta capacidad de la *historia de vida* de hacer visible lo que antes no era visible tiene que ver con salir de círculos personales, familiares, grupales, locales, a espacios que sean de tipo público. Gracias a ese movimiento surge la posibilidad de obtener efectos políticos, en la medida en que una audiencia, de pronto, es asaltada por vidas que desconocía y que de pronto *conoce*” (566). This form is not without its limitations, though, since it cannot add a human element to normally impersonal larger processes without integrating the lives in question into larger schemes and narratives governing how lives are understood (564). By including elements of both poetry and prose, García Casado’s texts seek to avoid totalizing representations without sacrificing comprehensive accounts and images of economic exchange and the multiple people involved in these exchanges.

These people and their perspectives appear in the form of monologues, dialogues, and conversations that seek to explain—and in some instances explain away—larger economic machinations, justify inequality, and account for a seemingly inherent and even inevitable need to settle for less than ideal working conditions. Perspective and narrative point of view are crucial for the construction of these texts insofar as they show that people speak from a certain point of view—often tied to a job—and that any given situation includes multiple perspectives and voices. The use of both individual and purportedly collective voices in the form of first-person singular and first-person plural perspectives highlights the different degrees to which individuals and groups are affected by economic situations and raises the question of who can speak on behalf of the groups in question and defend their interests. The potential risk involved in employing forms akin to what we might call a “grammatical solidarity,” though, is that of co-opting the shared struggles of employees into a discourse of larger economic trends representing an equalizing force of sorts among employers and employees, thus blurring the boundaries between and privilege of certain members of these groups.

Once we determine who is speaking in these poems, determining who they address is critical because “to read a poem,” William Waters argues in *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, “is [...] to enter an underspecified communicative act” (8), since “poetry [...] enacts—for us, as readers, now—not so much a stable communicative situation as a chronic hesitation, a faltering, between monologue and dialogue, between ‘talking about’ and ‘talking to,’ third and second person, indifference to interlocutors and the yearning to have one” (7-8). This sort of instability is multiplied throughout *Dinero's* poems since each seems to present its own communicative situation, many of which include a “you” addressed by García Casado's speakers. Any discussion of the pronoun “you” or any of its surrogates should necessarily incorporate a discussion of the reader, Waters argues, since “it avails nothing to discuss poetry's pronouns without involving the question of the reader's experience” (14), in particular because “we as readers may feel in second-person poems, in a poem's touch, an intimation of why poetry is valuable, why it matters to us, and how we might come to feel answerable to it” (2). Such a feeling can be especially strong “because *you* tends to hail; it calls everyone and everything by their inmost name. The second-person pronoun is address itself” (15). Even in cases when specific interlocutors are named in poems like those that make up *Dinero*, the sheer volume of instances of “hailing” can lead to a situation in which “[t]he *you* that (perhaps) calls to the reader [...] makes palpable poetry's claim on being read, [...] its claim to make an accidental reader into the destined and unique recipient of everything the poem contains or is” (15), in the process drawing readers into the scenarios and predicaments presented by these poems.

The texts I will discuss in the present study focus on both large and small constituencies and range from clearly defined and often mediated work environments towards representations of money and its impact beyond clearly delineated and isolated work contexts. The primary focus of my analyses, though, will be the



difficulty of securing and maintaining gainful employment, the hardships and degradation imposed by employers upon their employees, and the complex dynamics that accompany collecting debts. As we will see, Pablo García Casado's poems employ twenty-first century means of literary production to present twenty-first century issues surrounding employment and economic survival, in the process both informing readers and potentially encouraging them to act upon their surroundings.

### **“Así está el mercado”: Uncertainty and Un(der)employment**

While the first two poems I will discuss share the same title—“Profesional”—they present very different perspectives. The scene presented in this pair of poems that open García Casado's collection is an all-too-common one: the laying-off of a group of employees in favor of a cheaper labor force. The first poem begins with a third-person description in the preterite of the actions of a person we later discover is the boss, who, the poem's anonymous speaker explains,

[l]legó puntual a la sala de reuniones. Dibujó una curva descendiente e hizo preguntas que nadie pudo responder. Confirmó todos los rumores, los planes para los que no contábamos. Habló muy claro y sin alzar la voz, no se detuvo en las valías personales, no dejó una puerta abierta. Rápido y limpio, mejor así. Teníamos dos horas para recogerlo todo, a la una se incorporaba el nuevo equipo. (11)

The definitive and matter of fact style of firing these employees is highlighted by the clear-cut division between the use of a series of verbs in the preterite at the beginning of sentences and clauses to signal the boss's actions and the use of the imperfect in the poem's final sentence to present the tasks imposed upon the employees, both old and new. The questions the boss asks are framed metonymically within the context of the abstract economic picture painted by a graph he draws, showing how concrete individuals are caught up in larger economic systems. Although only one individual is speaking in this poem, this person seems to speak as part and on behalf of a larger collective group of soon to be unemployed workers. The absence of a clear addressee or interlocutor leaves the reader in a precarious situation as potentially either overhearer-eavesdropper or intended addressee-interlocutor.

The second poem entitled “Profesional” provides another view of this same scene and its aftermath, in this case from the point of view of the boss, who uses a combination of present tense verbs and gerunds to describe how his now former employees

[v]an recogiendo los objetos personales, las fotos de sus hijos, una carta con mi firma que turbará sus sueños: el beso tras la firma de escrituras, el azul de las pruebas de embarazo. Todas las horas esperando en el coche bajo el sol y la lluvia, esperando nada, soportando las llamadas de los clientes. *Esta máquina*

*es una mierda, no sirve para nada, ¿qué hay de la garantía?, quiero mi dinero.* Todas las mentiras en nombre de la empresa y de sus hijos. Oigo arrancar sus vehículos, les oigo maniobrar en el aparcamiento, demorándose. (12)

This second vision of the same scene offers readers a combination of visual and auditory elements and can be divided into three sections, the first and last of which each comprise one sentence and take place in the present. This present features the now ex-employees collecting their personal effects, which include the letter—bearing the boss's signature—that represents the termination of their employment and has clear repercussions for these ex-employees and their personal lives. In a match-cut of sorts, this initial signature sparks a flashback to a kiss following a seemingly more positive signature accompanying the purchase of a residence—a significant financial commitment—before jumping again to the blue indicator on a home pregnancy test whose color might be similar to that of the ink of the signatures mentioned earlier. This focus on the pregnancy test is then juxtaposed with all of the work and difficulty people have endured to provide for the children featured in the photographs that would have been facing employees while they were on the phone with angry customers.

The emotive impact generated by the confluence of visual and auditory stimuli in this case has an intriguing counterpart in the poem's final sentence. The fact that the boss hears—but does not see or perhaps does not want to see—his employees begin to drive their cars away could, on the one hand, be seen as evidence of a shift from a visual engagement with the scene of employees leaving to an audible one, perhaps representing an attempt by the boss to distance himself from the situation, both by not looking at his employees and by downplaying his role in their firing by referring only to the presence of his signature on the letter instead of the act of him signing it. One could also argue, though, that such an effort to distance himself from the situation and its consequences has the opposite effect, since placing the ex-employees out of frame ends up calling attention to the implicit visibility of the boss in frame—and his act of hearing, but not necessarily listening—while the consequences of his signature and actions are audible. The title and content of the pair of poems entitled "Profesional" both point simultaneously to big picture economic phenomena as well as the experiences of individuals who, whether they want to or not, form part of these larger systems. Both poems also leave readers feeling a sense of uncertainty and instability resulting from the sudden lack of employment.

While the poem entitled "Una nueva filosofía" begins and ends with a slightly more stable situation, it is nonetheless haunted by a sense of underlying uncertainty and precarity that leaves readers wondering whether the poem's title should be taken at face value. The situation of workers within a family unit to which they are held accountable structures this text in which the speaker seems to feel an obligation to explain—and perhaps even justify—his or her new job to an interlocutor. While the interlocutor in this case seems to be an unnamed person whose well-being depends in some way on that of the speaker, echoing Waters's discussion of lyric address, the

unstable and ambiguous communicative contexts traced thus far in *Dinero* leave open the possibility that readers of “Una nueva filosofía” might also feel like addressees of this speaker. This dialogic scenario is played out as a dialectic between contingency and hope tinted by an overall tone of resignation. The poem’s speaker both highlights and downplays the temporary nature of the new job, explaining that “[n]o es mucho para empezar, de momento es lo que pueden ofrecerme. Es sólo temporal, hasta que salga algo mejor” (17). The speaker’s role in this case appears to be a particularly passive one, since he or she relies on the hope of a better opportunity that an undefined “they” can offer in the future. This passive role is further developed in a more direct appeal to the speaker’s addressee that uses apostrophe to frame the speaker’s helplessness as the result of “the market” and “competition”: “Tienes que entenderlo, así está el mercado, hay mucha competencia. Mejor esto que nada” (17). Abstract concepts like these are used to present scenarios in which workers are expected to be happy to have any sort of employment at all and find themselves at the mercy of the larger economic system in which they must necessarily participate (to the extent that it will actually let them truly do so).

Articulating the benefits of the opportunity to achieve professional success by climbing one’s way up the corporate ladder is the next rhetorical tool the speaker employs to convince their interlocutor of the benefits of the new job. Such a discourse, at least in this case, reinforces passivity by requiring the employee to “[e]mpezar así, desde abajo, que te valoren profesionalmente” (17). This way of presenting such a process of professional advancement incorporates the speaker as a grammatical object and uses the subjunctive mood to present the possibility and hope—but by no means a guarantee—of professional success. The one doing the “valuing” in this case is the boss, who appears in the poem’s next sentence when the speaker explains that “[e]l jefe está contento conmigo, quiere hacer un equipo sólido. Una forma nueva de trabajar, por objetivos, una nueva filosofía” (17). While the reader is not privy to the addressee’s reaction to the hopeful tone of this description of the new work situation, it seems reasonable to imagine a certain degree of skepticism from readers who have read the pair of “Profesional” poems that precede this one, in particular when it comes to the reference to the boss’s desire to create “un equipo sólido,” as they would have already witnessed the act and impact of replacing one “equipo” with another.

Despite the hope and optimism expressed by the speaker regarding the upside of this new situation, a period of austerity will be necessary in the meantime, for, as the speaker explains, “[e]ste mes tendremos que apretarnos un poco. Es lo que hay, míralo de otro modo, no está tan mal. Al fin y al cabo es dinero” (17). Beyond ending with an appeal to the overarching need to settle for what is available given the difficulty of the market and overall economic conditions, the speaker also ties him or herself to the addressee and places both figures together in this situation by way of a first-person-plural verb. This forced grammatical participation calls to mind Suzanne Gearhart’s reframing of Louis Althusser’s discussion of interpellation. This form of implicit interpellation would seemingly differ from Althusser’s generally negative vision of



this phenomenon, though, which is based primarily on the figure of the policeman who hails a suspect (129-31). Even if the scenario presented in "Una nueva filosofía" avoids interpellation's explicitly negative connotations, it still suggests a similar sense of force. The force in question comes from an unlikely and friendly source but is interpellation nonetheless, since, as Gearhart explains, for Althusser "the fundamental nature of hailing, the form of hailing that concerns the subject and constitutes the subject as subjugated, is always the same" (184).

**"Si te vas ahora no vuelvas a pedirme trabajo":  
Unethical Demands and Everyday Degradation**

As the two poems we will explore next show, even those who have jobs face hardship and must live with the uncertainty associated with the stability of their job. These texts also articulate the costs in terms of lost dignity associated with certain work environments. The multiple voices, perspectives, and figures appearing in the poem entitled "Hostelería" are tied together by a cinematic structure that employs a combination of images and angles to create a picture of the complex interactions between employee, customer, and boss within the larger context of an established sector of the economy, in this case the hospitality industry:

Rosa está fregando la cocina. Su marido ha soportado toda la noche las bromas de los *socios*, dile a tu mujer que suba un momento, ¡que venga con los guantes de goma! *Que no les falte de nada*, nos dice el jefe muy serio mientras abre la caja registradora. Cuenta las monedas y los billetes, puedo escuchar cómo se doblan suavemente en su cartera. *Así no podemos seguir, voy a tener que cerrar un día de estos. La cosa está muy mal.* Con el miedo en el cuerpo seguimos barriendo bajo las mesas. (22)

The series of figures presented in this poem begins with "Rosa," whose persistent work in the present of narration echoes the continuous harassment received by her husband from the so-called *socios*. This first sentence describing Rosa's actions is followed by a cut to one depicting these *socios* speaking, which is itself framed by a flashback to the boss's instructions that these customers receive whatever they request. This next scene, framed by the presence of the boss and his words, also reveals that the speaker and source of our knowledge of the scene being represented belongs to an undetermined "we" forced to look on while the boss counts the money in the cash register and puts it in his wallet. While we know that the speaker is not Rosa, her husband, or the boss, we know little else about him or her, including to whom he or she is speaking and presenting the scene in question.

An especially important voice in this case, though, is that of the speaker's boss. By only italicizing his words and not those of the *socios*, the text ends up placing a sharper focus on the boss as the ultimate source of inequality in the poem,

highlighting the problems that result from the boss-employee dynamic, although the customer-employee dynamic and the difficulties associated with it also play a key role. The poem in fact begins with the customers and not the boss, although he is implicitly present through his establishment of a hostile work environment and his privileging of profit over his employees' dignity. The boss's statement regarding the economic hardships his business faces accompanies the image of him counting and putting the money from the cash register into his wallet. Placing his statement immediately after the removal of money from the register highlights the difficulties purportedly faced by a "we" that could lead to his obligation to close his business, creating a sense of fear in his employees.

The "we" in which the boss includes himself differs from the later one represented by the employees who close out the poem, though, exhibiting the darker side of first-person-plural interpellation posited by Gearhart. This bookending of the poem with the experience of workers represents a clear focus on their perspective, which includes the mistreatment presented within this frame. By the poem's end readers encounter a greater collectivization of workers in the form of an albeit somewhat ambiguous, if inclusive first-person plural perspective, as opposed to the more detached third-person perspective employed at the beginning of the poem before readers learned that the speaker was one of the workers. The poem's compelling final image of workers continuing to work, sweeping up with fear in their bodies leaves readers with a sense of the blend of uncertainty and fear faced by the figures in both "Hostelería" and other poems in García Casado's collection. It is not immediately clear, though, whether this fear comes from their boss, the *socios*, the possibility of being unemployed if their place of business closes, or a combination of these factors. While the mistreatment of employees taking place in "Hostelería" happens in a clearly-defined work setting, what happens in the poem that follows it in *Dinero* takes place after work.

The poem entitled "Construcciones Luque" opens with a reference to money and specifically the act of collecting it. Where this poem differs from many of the others in García Casado's collection, though, is that the ones collecting money in this case are the company's workers. The range of voices that make up this text are joined together by that of the poem's speaker, who initially presents himself as forming part of a "we," thus highlighting what is at stake in economic relationships. The poem employs an overarching filmic structure made up of different discursive and grammatical shots. Unlike the other poems discussed thus far in this study, this one is divided into two paragraphs. This division separates both time and space, using ellipsis to intentionally withhold certain information from readers and perhaps from the speaker's partner as well.

Although the poem's first two sentences focus on workers standing together and asserting their contractual rights, the rest of the first paragraph quickly becomes much more about the boss and the power he exerts over his workers:

Habíamos terminado la obra y hacíamos cola en la caseta. Íbamos cobrando según lo convenido, ni un céntimo más, tú esperabas noticias pegada al teléfono. Luque llamó para invitarnos a una copa, *hay que celebrarlo*, y entramos en una de las casas que habíamos construido. Champán, coca por todas partes, putas bailando en la escalera. Rubén hizo amago de marcharse, *me tengo que ir, me esperan en casa*, pero Luque dijo, si te vas ahora no vuelvas a pedirme trabajo. Todos conocíamos a Luque y sabíamos que iba en serio. (23)

The cut from the speaker and his fellow workers waiting in line to the “you” he apostrophizes introduces an absent addressee waiting anxiously by the phone, the same phone used as part of a match-cut to set up the call made by “Luque” in the next sentence. Just as the period separating these two sentences serves to both sever and connect these two shots, the second comma in the poem’s second sentence effects a cut from the worksite to the “tú” waiting beside the phone. Commas in the third sentence highlight Luque’s words and connect his call to an image of his workers doing his bidding and entering one of the homes they had built to “celebrate” their accomplishment. The sort of celebration Luque had prepared becomes apparent with the series of quick glances presented in the next sentence, leading to a confrontation between “Rubén” and “Luque.” This confrontation, framed in filmic terms by the offset dialogue and commas suggesting cuts from one to the other, is then summed up and given greater weight by the paragraph’s final sentence regarding prior knowledge of Luque and his personality.

What might perhaps get lost in the middle of this block of text beginning with workers merely waiting to get paid for their labor and the explicit intimidation by their boss through his control over their future employment opportunities is the situation of another group of workers presented in the poem. The prostitutes presented in the quick shots give readers a vivid visual sense of the sort of “celebration” about to take place and are framed in the context of both drugs and alcohol, as an element on an equal plane with the first two. A reward of sorts, these prostitutes also work, and work for a wage established before services are rendered. In the way they are used by Luque, though, they also come to symbolize the price he exacts from his employees in terms of their autonomy and dignity. In Rubén’s case there is a clear dilemma between the long-term financial well-being of his family (resulting from his potential future employment with *Construcciones Luque*) and his emotional and personal commitment to his family (now threatened by what Luque is demanding of him). Although the focus of this dilemma is squared securely on the highlighted image of Rubén, the reader cannot help but wonder about the feelings of the poem’s speaker, who, posited as one of the “we” who know how serious Luque’s threat is, might not be brave enough to attempt what Rubén did. As readers we already know that there is a female “tú” awaiting an update from the speaker, an absent potential interlocutor who has not yet received the anticipated phone call because the one made by Luque took precedence.

While the poem does not tell readers what decision Rubén made, it seems clear enough that the speaker opted for continued job security and stayed at the

“celebration,” since the blank space on the page separating the two parts of this poem represents an ellipsis of sorts, leaving off with Rubén’s dilemma regarding whether he should stay or return home and picking up with the speaker’s arrival at his own home. The grammatical solidarity exhibited by the abundance of first-person plural forms in the first paragraph has now given way to a situation faced by the speaker alone: “Cuando llegué a casa te encontré durmiendo en el sofá con la tele encendida, los tacones de aguja esperaban vacíos en el dormitorio. Guardé el dinero en el cajón y me fui a la ducha. Luego, ya en la cama, me susurraste al oído, *¿trajiste el dinero?*” (23). The division between these two parts of the poem parallels the one between the common concerns shared by all workers presented at the beginning of the poem and the individual repercussions of exploitation foreshadowed by Rubén’s actions and Luque’s reaction. The coming to fruition of this dialectic takes the form of a series of visual shots highlighting the absent “tú” introduced earlier, objects metonymically related to her, the money the couple needs, and the speaker’s efforts to wash away the remnants of whatever took place in the interim between the poem’s two sequences.

Commas, periods, and clauses are again used to separate and sequence these images connected through metonymy. The image of the woman sleeping on the couch intermittently illuminated by the television quickly jumps to a shot of the empty shoes belonging to her. Even if the poem’s final image holds the potential to return to or establish at least a semblance of familial order, it instead ends up highlighting what is most pressing when the woman only asks if the speaker has brought the money home. Perhaps she does not know what took place during the celebration staged by Luque, does not want to know, or does know but the overwhelming question of financial security overrides any other concern.<sup>1</sup> This poem, like the box presented in its second paragraph, thus opens and closes with money. What transpires between these two images, though, is a complex and nuanced account of the many ways money affects individuals and the real cost associated with earning it.

### **“No puedes hacerme esto”: Debt Collection and Glocal Economics**

One factor that has contributed to speakers’ lack of control over their financial situations and professional futures in the poems discussed thus far is their status as employees who have to answer to a boss. As poems like “Kuwait” and “Trampas” will show, though, even those who have their own business are also ultimately subject to the control of others in the form of debt. Rather than employing the perspective of one of these business owners, these poems instead offer readers accounts of attempts by their creditors to collect money that present a series of ethical dilemmas. The

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<sup>1</sup> Another potential explanation for the exclusive focus on money in her query is that she herself has a job that requires degradation and the loss of dignity, a possibility suggested by the stiletto heels that sit empty in the bedroom.

ultimate focus of these two poems, then, is less on how much money people owe and more on the ethical cost of collecting money in the first place.

The phone conversation presented in "Kuwait" is punctuated by a series of four appeals made by the speaker's interlocutor for additional time to pay back money he owes the speaker, and it is thanks to the third one that readers learn that the speaker is named "Alfonso." It is worth noting that even though everything the poem tells us is filtered through the perspective of its speaker, readers ultimately end up learning more about the man with whom he speaks than about "Alfonso" himself. This is particularly the case with regard to each person's financial situation. Even if the speaker's initial request for payment does not appear in the poem, it can be inferred from the appeal for more time to pay with which the poem opens: "*Dame una semana*" (20). This same appeal will appear again near the end of the poem. What readers encounter between the two instances of this request is a multilayered account of the phone conversation that employs flashbacks and reflections that contextualize both Alfonso's demands for payment and the factors that make it difficult for his interlocutor to pay the money he owes.

In contrast to what we might expect from a situation like this, readers end up getting a more detailed picture of the difficulties associated with repaying this money than they do of the factors motivating the need to collect on the debt. This picture is painted as much—if not more—by Alfonso's memories, experiences, and flashbacks as it is by the things his interlocutor says that are then reproduced in the account of the conversation that makes up "Kuwait." Both types of information appear immediately after the first request for more time to pay: "Yo lo he visto sudar en el garaje, ayudando con la carga, *uno más y nos vamos*. Seis camiones, 100.000 litros al mes, una gota en el mar de petróleo. Me dice que está esperando que paguen los suecos" (20). These three sentences present the speaker's interlocutor and his efforts as admirable given his relatively limited footprint within the larger context of the petroleum industry. The vivid image of him sweating as he works alongside his employees attests to his commitment and efforts to keep his business going while some factors—like others paying him—are beyond his control. The reference to having to wait for his Swedish partners to pay him is echoed by Alfonso's declaration that he cannot wait any longer: "Pero llega el martes, Suecia no paga, y yo, mira, no puedo esperar, voy a tener que cortarte el suministro" (20).

The relative value of the series of mitigating factors that have been articulated up to this point comes into stark relief when the deadline to pay what he owes arrives and he still has not received the money he would use to pay Alfonso. Despite occupying more space on the page than the speaker's allusion to the deadline, these circumstances do not carry as much weight as the overarching need to pay does, leading the speaker's interlocutor to declare that "[n]o puedes hacerme esto" (20), a statement with which the speaker agrees. This agreement appears in the form of an extended reflection and flashback that makes up approximately a third of the poem and is not directed to or shared with the speaker's interlocutor: "y lleva razón, es un



buen tipo, de los que ya no quedan, un tipo con las manos llenas de grasa. Uno de sus camiones cayó por un barranco hace tres meses, siniestro total, el chaval se ha quedado tetrapléjico. No tenía papeles. Aquí no ha pasado nada, dijo el hermano, pero quieren su dinero y eso es justo” (20). To a certain degree, this aside echoes the sequence that followed the appeal for more time with which the poem opened, beginning with a positive characterization of the man’s work ethic and character in terms that appeal to traditional qualities associated with working class masculinity, followed by a larger focus on his business using one of his trucks as an anchor.

Even if it is not clear whether the account of the accident offered by the poem’s speaker was told to him by his interlocutor during this phone conversation, for readers it ultimately ends up being linked to the appeal in the form of a question that follows this articulation of mitigating circumstances: “¿Puedes entenderlo, Alfonso?” (20). There are multiple things that could be understood in this situation, though, as well as multiple ways of understanding them. While one could glean from these factors an understanding of what makes paying “Alfonso” the money he is owed difficult, one could also come away with a desire to receive money that one is owed, which seems to be what the poem’s speaker ultimately takes from the situation: “Llevo dos meses esperando, te había dicho el martes, ¿verdad?, teníamos un trato, ¿no?” (20). The poem’s final three sentences employ a combination of language and verbal expression that is not quite language to flesh out and tie up the tensions that have underlied the poem up to this point: “Su respiración al otro lado, *dame una semana*. Lo siento, tío, no soy Dios. Y colgué” (20). Two instances of speech in this case—asking for an extension and its denial—are bookended by an act of breathing that communicates the desperation felt by the speaker’s interlocutor and the physical act of hanging up the phone and ending the call. On its face, this gesture represents the end of the conversation, but the poem’s mere existence signals the implicit presence of a subsequent internal conversation that “Alfonso” has with himself regarding what has just transpired, a conversation overheard by readers who are left to explore the ethical dilemmas—both explicit and implicit—at work in this poem.

If “Kuwait” highlighted global and macro-economic effects, “Trampas” (which belongs to the section in *Dinero* of the same title) presents the local effects and impact of collecting money, illustrating the scale of economic impact from top to bottom. This poem presents an interaction marked by a visual engagement with space, people, and interlocutors and inverts the dynamic used in “Kuwait” with respect to whose voice is highlighted by italicizing language attributed to the speaker. On the surface, the speaker’s task seems to be a relatively simple one: collecting money owed. As was also the case in “Kuwait,” though, this purportedly simple job becomes more difficult as the poem progresses and we encounter what could be defined as explicit “trampas” to avoid paying the money and distract the man collecting it alongside more subtle and implicit “trampas” that present this man with potential ethical dilemmas.

The poem’s first two sentences offer readers a clear picture of the situation described in the poem and what is at stake in this case: “Dice que no está, que se fue

de viaje. Está nerviosa, me ofrece un café, *no gracias*, deben mucho dinero y yo he venido a cobrarlo" (34). In the poem's next three sentences the speaker surveys the surrounding scene and finds implicit "trampas" that have the potential to make him feel conflicted with respect to his efforts to collect money: "La hija mayor está viendo dibujos animados, *El Rey León*, a mi hijo le encanta, se sabe todas las canciones. Los niños aprenden rápido. El pequeño me mira desde la trona con la boca llena de papilla, muy serio, con los ojos azules de su padre" (34). While the first sentence presents a common, nested gaze in which the speaker watches the woman's daughter watch *The Lion King*, the gaze joining the speaker and the woman's son is a mutual and reciprocal one, leading to a scenario in which the speaker's attempts to objectify his surroundings make him the object of the gazes of the little boy, the readers of García Casado's poem, and perhaps his own in the form of a reflection in the child's eyes. The brief yet powerful sentence joining these two acts of looking ends up offering a potentially ambiguous statement regarding children's ability to learn: "Los niños aprenden rápido." While one reading of this declaration would connect it to the speaker's son's ability to learn all of the songs in a classic Disney movie, one could speculate about other things children might learn quickly and how they learn them. Whether he likes it or not, it seems like the poem's speaker will play a key role in teaching these children about their family's financial hardships.

The speaker's internal commentary on the younger child's eyes and their similarity to those of his father leads to a match-cut of sorts to an exchange in which the child's mother explains that her husband manages the family's finances before the speaker presents her with a document bearing her signature: "Mi marido es quien lleva las cuentas, dice, yo no sé nada de papeles. Le entrego un documento firmado por los dos" (34). The introduction of this document inspires an extended contextualization by the woman of her family's financial situation, her husband's role in it, and the impact of his absence on the family: "sí ésta es mi firma, dice, él dijo que no me preocupara, que era bueno para los dos, bueno para los niños, que todo se arreglaría. Él y su negocio de *barcas de recreo*. Lleva dos meses fuera, le he dejado mensajes al móvil, pero no responde. Los niños preguntan por su padre, dónde está papá, dónde está papá, y no sé qué decirles" (34). These mitigating circumstances notwithstanding, the poem's speaker is ultimately not moved by the case presented to him and closes the poem by declaring that "[t]odo eso está muy bien, señora, pero ahora hablemos de dinero" (34).

While the worldwide economic crisis that began in 2008 certainly brought the issue of economic inequality to the forefront in Spain and sparked renewed discussion of the possibilities of political commitment in Spanish literature, it is important to acknowledge that these questions were already being addressed by both new and reissued studies of post-war and post-Franco poetry. New poetry collections like Pablo García Casado's *Dinero* have furthered these explorations of the potential of socially engaged poetry in the twenty first century. As its title signals, money permeates each and every poem included in the collection, leading Manuel Rico to argue that what its poems have in common is a view of "el dinero como necesidad y como condena"

(19). These poems focus on money and its complex interaction with the livelihood and daily lives of people, presenting the employee-customer-boss dynamic from multiple angles as well as the effect that money and its absence has on families. Even when they take on the voice or perspective of a boss or a person collecting money from others, these poems ultimately focus on the challenges faced by those who owe money and those who have to sacrifice their dignity to make ends meet. The range of voices and perspectives featured in these poems are filtered through a cinematic lens that avoids a monolithic and direct tone and recognizes how social and economic systems and conditions have changed in the current century. The texts that make up Pablo García Casado's *Dinero* present an intriguing model of how poetic texts can explore polyphonic forms and audiovisual conventions to trace, examine, and interrogate the forms of economic exchange and interaction in twenty-first century Spain and encourage their readers to do the same.

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