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Tales of the Brick Age: Corruption and Bankruptcy in the late works of Rafael Chirbes

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Tales of the Brick Age: Corruption and Bankruptcy in the Late Works of Rafael Chirbes

The subprime collapse, the Global Recession, and the Eurozone crisis have given rise to an entire subgenre of crisis narrative in literary and visual arts, attempting to make sense of the human aspect, causes and outcomes of the largest non-war economic commotion in the West since the Great Depression. In Spain, the last two novels of the late Rafael Chirbes (1949-2015), *Crematorio* (2007) and *En la orilla* (2013)¹ have distinguished themselves for an insightful view and poignant reflections on the real estate boom and bust, which defined the economic and cultural parameters of Spain after the democratic transition. I call this period the Brick Age.²

As a metonymy, the Brick refers here to a series of interrelated factors, economic developments, social changes, evolving cultural attitudes, and substantial alterations in visual landscape and the environment, which took place in Spain from the mid-1980s to approximately 2010. It takes after the so-called “fiebre del ladrillo” or “Brick Fever”, i.e. the construction boom starting approximately in the late 90s, defining an economy largely based on real estate development and derived businesses, including tourism, along with the rapid, unsustainable economic growth it fostered, supported by the gradual imposition of neoliberal ideology and policy by the right and its implicit acceptance by the traditional left.

In the following pages I will produce a brief account of the Brick Age as a historical process in two phases, underscoring the ties of the boom and bust economy with a culture of corruption. Having established this context, I will proceed to introduce Chirbes’s novels, justify

¹ Despite having been translated into twelve languages, *Crematorio* has no English edition yet. *En la orilla* (literally “On the Shore”) has recently been published in English with the title *On the Edge*. All translations from novel passages and articles originally in Spanish are mine.

² I owe this term to my colleague and friend Antonio Córdoba (Manhattan College).

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the need for a joint analysis, and discuss the concepts and imagery that seek to account for the political, cultural, and moral context intertwined with the economics of boom and bust during the Brick Age.

The Brick Age: A Brief History

The Brick Age started in the mid-1980s, with the development of what came to be colloquially known as the “cultura del pelotazo”—roughly translatable to “fast money culture”. “Pelotazos” relate to a time where, given the right political connections with the recently elected PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party), it became easy to become rich in real estate development and related sectors, especially in the capital Madrid and the coastal areas. The “pelotazo” era culminates with the large institutional investments following the winning bids of Barcelona, Seville, and Madrid as hosts for the Olympic Games, the World Fair, and European Cultural Capital in 1992. This phase of the Brick Age is best embodied by the figures of the banker Mario Conde, whose career came to an abrupt end in 1993 under public accusations of embezzlement, and the expensive mansion shared by former minister of finance Miguel Boyer with his partner, the socialite Isabel Preysler. The house, which came to be jokingly known as “Villa Meona” or “Pissing Villa” because of its 13 toilets, embodied the contradictions between proclaimed social-democratic politics and the lavish lifestyle that involvement with the party could entail given the right connections.

After a brief economic crisis in 1993, the “get rich quick” mentality of the “pelotazo” years reignited in 1998 under the government of the conservative party. A significant change in land development laws (“Ley de Suelo”) gave regional and municipal administrations wide-ranging control over the privatization of public and rustic areas. This signals the beginning of

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what is popularly known in Spain as “La fiebre del ladrillo” or “The Brick Fever”, a long financial bubble, largely sustained by private mortgage lending, that peaked in the late 2000s, when private debt reached 1.77 trillion euros, nearly twice of the national GDP. Although the changes in “Leyes de Suelo” were ostensibly aimed at reducing real estate prices, the opposite happened. Local administrations had a double incentive to speculate with land and facilitate insider deals: first, “recalificaciones” (“re-zoning”) had become a major source of funding; second, the consequent job growth in urban development and associated services became an easy source of jobs that would have significant electoral returns for the parties in power. Early in the 21st century, Spain built about 800,000 housing units per year, more than Germany, France, and Italy combined (Velázquez-Gaztelu 166). Because of the close relationship between real estate development and the financial sector, the latter’s balance sheets were tied to an increasing amount of real estate stock, which fueled an aggressive lending policy. Galloping real estate prices, about 12-20% annualized (Álvarez 159) induced a state of euphoria among developers as well as a fear of missing out among consumers.

The real estate bubble was further intensified and given more life by a correlated “infrastructure bubble,” partly fueled by EU convergence funds, and, more importantly, by easy credit issued by the national and foreign finance industry. The national government, but even more so regional and local administrations engaged in a frenzy of transportation developments, construction of cultural facilities, as well as tax incentives for entertainment and private development complexes. This period became notorious for its “airports without planes”, high-speed rail connections boarding an average nine persons per trip, bankrupt theme parks and “Ciudades,” entertainment complex projects dedicated to topics such as arts, cinema, circus, the motor world, or Don Quixote. Like many major residential developments, these massive projects

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were often adjudicated to corporations connected with the different administrations, and carried an electability benefit for their proponents.

Following the bubble's end, Spain suffered consequences similar to other countries: socialization of massive losses incurred by the financial industry, and, like other indebted Eurozone associates, draconian austerity measures whose cost was endured by pensioners, the unemployed, people in dependency situations, and public workers. There are some distinct factors peculiar to Spain that aggravated the crisis further, though. Spain has a much higher average unemployment and lower median salary than other OECD countries, affecting mostly the population under 30. Unlike other countries, repossession of assets *does not cancel a debt*, meaning that many families owning underwater mortgages or whose residency was auctioned still owed money to the bank after eviction. More than 400,000 evictions took place from 2009 to 2016. The suicide rate spiked, becoming the first non-natural cause of death in the country.

The demise of Spanish savings banks is another distinctly Spanish dimension of the crisis illuminating the connection between the real estate frenzy and corruption. Originally non-profit financial institutions, many tracing as far back as the 19th century, savings banks specialized in banking for small and medium enterprise, individual consumers, local developments, and philanthropy. As public interest entities, many of its chief administrators were political appointments. During the later stage of the Brick Age, many of these appointments went to individuals with little to no experience in finance, further aggravating mismanagement and cronyism.³ After the bubble burst, 48 of 50 savings banks had disappeared. The banking system

³ Two particularly egregious cases of mismanagement, for example, were those of Miguel Blesa (Caja Madrid), whose only ostensible merit was having been a childhood friend of

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consolidated through purchases of distressed financial institutions overseen by the political establishment, becoming a near-oligopoly in which three firms now concentrate 60% of the national sector. Starved for capital, most major banks, most notably Bankia (formerly Caja Madrid) allegedly engaged in a massive scheme selling convertible stock to individual investors who believed they were purchasing fixed-income products. 700,000 people fell prey to the largest alleged fraud in Spanish financial history. Many of the alleged victims were elderly and/or mentally incompetent persons.

Rafael Chirbes: The Author and His Late Works

Although hardly alone in its excesses, the autonomous community of Valencia became the more representative of the bubble in the public imagination, particularly in its association with uncontrolled coastal developments, outlandish transportation and cultural infrastructure projects, and political corruption. From this same region hailed Rafael Chirbes, who became a nationally acclaimed author late in his career with his last two novels, *Crematorio* (2007) and *En la orilla* (2013), which have, respectively, a corrupt coastal real estate developer and a bankrupt latecomer to the bubble as their main characters. Although the author resisted the denomination, both novels have come to be known among most critics as the “novelas” or “díptico de la crisis” (e.g. Villamía Vidal 407; Basanta 152-159; Barjau and Parellada call the novels a “Mediterranean diptych,” 20), as a representation of the two sides of the boom and bust Brick economy.

conservative President José María Aznar, or Narcís Serra (Caixa Catalunya), former defense minister with the PSOE government.

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Crematorio takes place in the fictitious coastal city of Misent (an image of the real life city of Benidorm), the center of a major development boom in Valencia. It is centered on the figure of the local real estate mogul Rubén Bertomeu, whom we find in the middle of a traffic jam, back from hospital after the death of his younger brother Matías. The novel has a “choral” structure, composed of a series of stream of consciousness chapters. Most of the plot discusses Bertomeu’s ascension in business at the cost of betrayal of his earlier political and aesthetic ideals, but also details the complex psychological folds of different family and underworld connections stubbornly entrenched in the justification of their own corruption and self-interest.

En la orilla, translated into English as *On the Edge*, shows a relatively simpler narrative scheme. In the opening chapter, Ahmed, an unemployed immigrant, is fishing in a *marjal* or *albufera* (inland freshwater marshlands characteristic of the Valencia region), when he discovers the decomposing remains of two corpses semiburied in the mud. This false thriller-like opening is followed by the extensive, 400-page long chapter dedicated to the last 24 hours in the life of 70-year old Esteban, manager of his old father’s carpentry shop in the fictional town of Olba, on the edge of the marshlands. Esteban became enticed to invest in a failed massive residential project from a local developer. Alone, with his carpentry business closed, hounded by debt and criminal liability, Esteban plans the killing of his father and dog and his own suicide while he reminisces about his life. His lengthy monologue is punctuated by briefer interventions from some of his now unemployed workers or families, as well as Liliana, the Colombian maid who used to care for Esteban’s father. The epilogue is another brief monologue from the absconded developer Pedrós.

Crematorio and *En la orilla* demand a joint interpretation. Put side by side, both novels replicate a structure of boom and bust. The central characters, Rubén Bertomeu and Esteban,

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represent a similar contrast as the top and bottom feeders in the predatory chain of the Brick economy. Both Ruben and Esteban, are dominated by resentment and feel unrecognized. Esteban's profession ironically follows through with Rubén's view of the world as a "carpenter's table" (319), showing its eventual collapse. *Crematorio* ends by evoking "a sickly-sweet odor, like carrion, impregnating the air" (415), while *En la orilla* opens with the discovery of two decomposing human carcasses half buried in the marsh grounds. *En la orilla* replicates the stylistic approach of *Crematorio*, described by Arana as a double narrative axis detailing the subjective experience of history through evaluation and recollection of the characters, along with an account of their economic activities as a definition of the present reality (167). Through this procedure, which Chirbes described as "calligraphy exercises over Benjamin's patterns" ("La estrategia," 32), surfaces one of the more salient themes of both novels: the tainted or corrupt historical origins of wealth.

From Tainted Wealth to the Fiction of the Autonomous Self

Chirbes said in an interview that "there is no innocent wealth," and that this concept constitutes the basis for his narrative inquiry. Both novels abound in references to excrement, violence, or misappropriation at the root of major developments or fortunes. In many ways, the origins of wealth seem small-scale reproductions of the neomarxist theme of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey). Bertomeu, formerly a Marxist himself, represents the origins of his business in terms of primitive accumulation (57). His former associate Collado, recovering from burns in the hospital after a fallout with the local Russian mafia, recalls how Bertomeu used to say that for plants to grow, ash and excrement are necessary nutrients (55). Rubén recalls how the capital to build his own real estate empire was created by facilitating the smuggling of

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cocaine into the country within the bellies of imported horses (47, 65, 409). To justify himself, Rubén refers to the customers in a restaurant who do not wish to see the violence that brings their meat to the table (192-93), or, more in line with his own profession, the violence underlying the Hausmanization of Paris: “Today is the same as Haussman’s era: who doesn’t like the Paris that was born out of corruption? Who remembers Paris with its narrow alleys and houses with wooden beams and pointed roofs? Today that would be a pretty medieval theme park” (366).

The concept of corrupt origins of wealth is taken on even more pointedly in *En la orilla*. Carcelén categorically defines Chirbes’s interrogations here “an archaeology of evil”, summarizing “Today’s social violence is the legacy of the criminal violence of the Civil War winners [...] There is a continuity between the dark fortunes sordidly obtained during the dictatorship and the easy money of today’s unscrupulous businesspeople” (12). These arguments are made concrete in the spaces of the marshland and the “important people” gaming table at the local bar, specifically the now old children of the Marsal and Bernal families. The marshland incorporates a wide array of metaphorical significations, both positive and negative. In its collective, historical dimension, it represents the rot and decay upon which episodes of originary accumulation are based. The marshland is a sort of national *id*, the site of an original sin, and also the more shameful dimension of the (fictitious) local prosperity—it used to be the dumping ground of Bernal’s father’s asphaltic felts factory (41-42). These crimes against the environment connect with earlier crimes against humanity. The marshland is the spot where the *falangistas*, chauffeured by Francisco Marsal’s father, a local store owner, hunted down the last pockets of local resistance after Franco’s victory. It is also the spot where the bodies of opponents of the regime or people whose properties were coveted by some of the war winners were disposed of. Esteban notes Francisco could have asked his father how they ended up owning the local

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mistelera (*mistela* is a type of sweet wine), and what happened to the original prewar owners (58-59). Esteban concludes “programmed aggressions to the swamp were a mix of military strategy, political revenge, and economic plunder” (98). The fourth player, Justino, represents the transformative capacities of corruption. Formerly an organizer of the migrant teams that were sent for seasonal migration in central and northern Europe, whose pay and supplies he scalped, and whom he kept in exploitative conditions of cold and hunger (63-64), today he exploits Maghrebian, Sub-Saharan and Eastern European labor toiling in the Spanish fields, a sordid “zoo” of informal labor, marginality, insecurity, and exploitation (249).

In Chirbes’s materialist poetics, though, the originary sin does not transfer to later generations. On the contrary, Esteban reflects, “if money is useful for something, it is to buy your children’s innocence (...) Money has, among many other infinite virtues, a detergent quality” (79-80). With bitter irony, Esteban thinks of the content, rounded facial features of Francisco’s father, as though sculpted after gaining the benefits of calculated acts of harassment and local terrorism, “a calculated toll for growth, a rite of passage” (80). The son, Francisco, reaps the material benefits and network connections of the family, but in changing times their Francoist allegiance becomes “his nightmare, his shifting grounds, [they were] the people that brought to light his shame, *the semiburied cadaver hidden under any recent fortune*” (185, emphasis mine). Thus, he resorts to his own private transitional ritual, a formal and intimate repudiation of his father’s values by spitting on his father’s picture wearing a *falangista* uniform while his continued enjoyment of the advantages of money and “certain discreet recommendations” ensures a “second generation wealth increment” (195).

Crematorio and *En la orilla* are not factual chronicles of the real estate boom or the financial crisis. Rather, they consist of an interrogation of a larger context: a past historical

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violence and appropriation in connection with a cultural vapidness and moral ruin in the present. Most critics have tended to appreciate in this moral ruin the roots of the present economic catastrophe (most explicitly Arana 169; Carcelén 13; García Larisch 11-12; Ryan, 94; Selig np). Fernando Valls even ties the novel with a premodern moralistic tradition from Manrique to Calderón de la Barca (143-45). I would be more inclined, however, to view the process in an opposite direction. The political and economic structure sustaining the Brick Age facilitates the triumph of a neoliberal ethics and its consequent cultural and moral shortcomings. These ethics restrict freedom of conscious action to the search of monetary benefit, while aspirations to transcend oneself by way of aesthetic expression, intellectual inquiry, community engagement, or care for others are dismissed as hypocritical, retrograde, sentimental, or inefficient. From this perspective, Marta Sanz cannily describes Esteban as “part of a sociological amalgamation with petroleum-like consistency where our mobility and capacity to act become progressively more limited,” and compares him and his circumstance to a fly debating itself in a cobweb (217).

Thus, both novels illuminate how certain historical and political conditions created the Brick economy, which in its turn helped define aspirational lifestyle standards that created a particular morality and worldview. Ironically, that tainted prosperity creates an unlevelled playing field that sustains itself upon the restrictive neoliberal concepts of the self as a self-contained, individual agent pursuing rationally its own particular utility maximization.

As if seeking to isolate themselves from a consciousness of the guilty, corrupt origins of wealth, both Rubén, the rich developer at the top, and Esteban, the broke, indebted parvenu at the bottom, manifest an acceptance of the neoliberal paradigm of the *homo oeconomicus*, an autonomous, rational, self-interested individual looking for his own financial gain. More so Rubén, who is shown early in the novel in the comfortable isolation of a luxury car equipped

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with tinted windows and an AC, seemingly impervious to the traffic mess in an environment that he has largely created. He declares apodictically “me, with myself” (13), a declaration of individual independence not unlike Ayn Rand’s self-obsessed capitalist heroes.⁴ This independence, however, belies a notable loneliness and a deep resentment. Rubén relates his involvement with Mexican cocaine distributors and later with the rising Russian mafia to his mother’s refusal to transfer some of her lands in support of his early local development dreams. He condemns Silvia, his daughter, for her political and intellectual affinity with his deceased younger brother Matías, whom he disparagingly treats as an educated, idealistic, but immature and ineffectual man, who later in life abandoned all action to retreat in his ecological agriculture business and political discussions in the local town bar. Their affinity is signified by a toy replica of a late 19th century coffee cargo ship, which Rubén compares disparagingly with Silvia’s Mediterranean trips in Rubén’s real yacht and his having funded her cosmopolitan education across the world’s major cultural capitals.

Meanwhile, Esteban partakes in a similar individualism. He claims that all his life’s struggles end “in the kernel of myself” (160). He harbors a series of late life resentments, too. He believes he has lived dwarfed by his father’s resentful discipline. He endures a long-living regret about his first love Leonor aborting their child before leaving the small town to pursue her ambitions as a chef, reappearing later in Madrid as the life partner of the more promising, better connected and moneyed Francisco Marsal, his childhood friend. Esteban justifies his ill-fated venture as a late life attempt to overcome his many vital disappointments. Yet while indulging in abundant doses of self-pity (his lack of opportunities in his youth, Leonor aborting his child,

⁴ For a psychological-ideological interpretation of Bertomeu’s isolationism, see Arana 168-69.

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Leonor's and Liliana's abandonments), the mistrust, and sometimes open contempt towards his employees highlights his inability to sympathize with others, even in the more difficult moments. Of Álvaro, son of his father's war comrade and longest employee in the shop, he says: "This son of a bitch, what does he want? He wants me to cry for him when I refuse to cry for myself?" (240). The resentfulness with which he refers to his father's dependency, "articulated mannequin" (30), "fatherly Tutankhamen" (267), "broken tamagotchi" (268), "in his handicapped condition, the Old Man continues to condition my life, imposing activities upon me, marking time periods" (32), reveals a dark view of codependency as a consequence of family living.

And yet despite his proclaimed individualism, Esteban still seeks a paternal-erotic relationship with Liliana, his father's caretaker. The relationship between both is fraught by imbalances and subterfuge. Esteban, who already fancies himself rich thanks to his venture with Pedrós, declares "the only evil is poverty," and justifies his giving money to Liliana with a pseudophilosophical justification echoing the philosopher Ortega y Gasset's dictum: "I am myself and my circumstance" (140). The twisted interpretation of Ortega's quote,⁵ known to most Spaniards with a formal education but probably unknown to a less educated foreign migrant, underscores Esteban's paternalism: "therefore, consider I am the money that allows to finance your circumstances," "the self without money is nothing but an empty shell" (140). With this self-serving justification, Esteban represents himself as money penetrating the empty, precarious self of the Colombian migrant Liliana, abused and exploited by her good-for-nothing husband, fulfilling her—and yet paradoxically contributing to sustain her precarious situation,

⁵ "I am myself and my circumstance, and if I don't save my circumstance, then I can't save myself," 757.

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since he is providing funds that will inevitably end in Liliana's husband's hands. Interestingly, Liliana acknowledges this money, not as gifts but as "loans," and says Esteban "can take a seat while waiting for me to return them" (401). Claiming to be in default implies here a paradoxical declaration of independence. Acknowledging that money as a gift or payment would imply the continuation of Liliana's subordination to Esteban as a makeshift daughter or as paid provider of an emotional service. Accepting that she is in monetary debt, even if she does not intend to return it, cancels their affective pretenses while she worked for Esteban and asserts the migrant worker's equality before her native employer.

Resentments and Visible Hands

The resentment of Rubén and Esteban points to a web of both literal and symbolic debt. Chirbes has said that Rubén Bertomeu is inspired by Benito Pérez Galdós's Torquemada (Armada np; Hermoso np). The infamous 15th century inquisitor was turned by the 19th century novelist's imagination into a usurer and financier, metaphorically burning people's souls through debt. Torquemada incarnates the paradox of the monetization of public and private life in the capitalist economy: a hateful character attracting universal condemnation, on whom both a decaying aristocracy and an aspiring urban bourgeoisie depend, in order to keep up with lifestyle and appearances. A century and a half later, the usurer has become transfigured in the real estate mogul embodying the *id* of Spanish post-transition culture. Rubén Bertomeu represents the abandonment of all aesthetic and political commitment for the sake of monetary benefit, often at great cost for the community, competing businessmen, and the environment. Despite his many victories over his surroundings, he still resents a lack of recognition: with the exception of his young wife, Bertomeu's family relations manifest opposition to the pragmatist and materialistic

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values that he represents, yet every one of them owes their current situation to his wealth and influence.

By contrast, the carpenter Esteban finds himself at the lower rung of the entrepreneurial ladder, bankrupt, in debt with providers and employees, legally liable for the falsification of his senile father's signature and for misappropriating the carpentry workshop's capital. He claims that by mercy-killing his father in the marsh, he is satisfying an old debt: he is restoring him to the last space of resistance where some of his comrades went to make a final stand after the end of the Civil War. Considering Esteban's individualism, his lack of empathy for the suffering of others, and the monetary and legal debts he has incurred, it would seem that claiming to satisfy an old symbolic debt is little more than a self-serving excuse. Yet, I think that the position in which Ahmed (ironically, one of Esteban's former employees) finds the bodies—unrecognizable, semiburied in the marshland grounds—is particularly relevant. As I said, the *marjal* evokes in this novel an extensive set of significations, most notably as the space of the primeval violence and predations sustaining the town's fortunes. Insofar as the marsh is also a metaphor of the nation and both characters appear semiburied, another sociohistorical interpretation is warranted. In a Spanish context, the body buried in an unmarked grave necessarily points to the many victims of Francoist repression during the Civil War and the postwar period. But semiburial implies both survival and death, visibility and invisibility, a different kind of victimhood, or perhaps the unfinished life or personhoods resulting from the cultural trauma following the Civil War. Esteban is an unsympathetic character: petty, selfish, and vindictive. Yet, in spite of his defects, he is also a victim of a cultural orphanhood resulting from the impossibility of conciliating his youth expectations and openness to the world with the traumatic experience of his father, a representative of the silenced losers of the Civil War. Germán Labrador expresses it

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in Benjaminian terms: “How to approach the father’s voice and the child’s memory? How to weave together the losers’ stories *when the enemy has never stopped winning*, therefore interrupting them, over and over?” (233, italics in the original).⁶ Lacking a solid sense of self-identity, he has absorbed cultural habits that became entrenched in the dictatorship and have not been overcome in the transition to democracy, such as the implicit assumption that access to power comes associated with personal benefits, or a cronyist approach to business backed by an authoritarian or corrupt state. These values have not been overcome in the transition to democracy. Rather, economic prosperity has boosted them and solidified the position of those who espoused them and received its benefits earlier on—through socioeconomic background and/or ideological affiliation.

Another significant part of Ahmed’s discovery is how two dogs fight over a hand that’s detached of one of the bodies (22-23), a metaphor of work and creative capabilities being seized, exploited, abused, or plundered by predators. These predators take the form of the *falangista* units imposing their order at the end of the Civil War, originators of a line of abuse and influence that leads to the politically connected climbers, speculators, and embezzlers of modern finance. The latter is embodied by Pedrós who, at the end of the novel, is to be carried away to “Paradise” aboard a Garuda bird (the corporate logo of the main Indonesian airline).

The hand ravaged by the dogs points to an underlying value system in both novels, a materialist ethics that defends the daily work and contact with the material object worked before

⁶ See also Ryan for whom the parental absence and lack of attention problematizes the formation of a coherent masculine identity in Esteban (87). Thus, the son represents a nationwide condition where masculinity has been molded by the conjunction of capitalism and war, a topic explored in other narratives of the postwar generation.

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the abstract, diffuse quality of modern finance and investment. Rubén mocks the old fashioned concept of work of his father, for whom the “maker” of a house is the one who builds it, not the surveyor or the architect. The father does not understand that in modern society it does not matter who “makes” things, but who brings in the capital. Ironically, Rubén comes to face his counterimage in the form of his voracious nephew, the stock trader Ernestito: “Uncle, it’s time to jump from the heavyweight of concrete to the lightness of pure economy” (370). While Rubén can afford condescension towards his daughter’s seemingly outmoded and sentimental values, he feels symptomatically unable to contest the financialization of the economy, embodied by his nephew, the “little shark” gobbling up appetizers. Rubén only laments his lack of energy before this “predator that guarantees the continuity of our species, where (...) only the most ruthless, cruel, and voracious sons of bitches survive” (371).

This laborism is shown more pointedly in Esteban’s father’s lost notes, which recall his own father’s words during a visit back from the Civil War front: a man is nothing without the consciousness that he has of himself, a man makes himself, and anyone not knowing what he’s made of and what’s the composition of what he uses and transforms with his work is nothing, a mule. Particularly, the rebel generals are brutes, they believe workers are tools at their service, “they don’t know the worth of what they use, only its cost, the money they’ve paid” (347). The drives for exploitation and ownership that drove the rebel generals connect them to types of the present like Justino, specialized in organizing trains of exploited migrant workers, Pedrós and associates showing off that they earn money just by sitting at developer’s banquets (ostensibly for “keeping things organized,” 428-30), Bernal polluting the marshland with asphalt fabric leftovers, or Francisco Marsal educating the taste of people newly arrived to money.

According to Labrador, work in Chirbes

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serves to evoke the foundational Marxist artisan scene, where man would not be alienated by nature (which he transforms directly with his hands), nor in relation to the fruits of his work (which would belong to him), nor with respect to himself (because every artisan is patron and worker). (...) In the process, he creates new, useful, durable forms (234)

But this laborism is not exempt of contradictions. Esteban's father remembers his times in the Arts and Crafts School, particularly a teacher's loving exposition on the qualities of clay: adaptable to the hand, malleable, an extension of the human being's own material quality per the Biblical narrative, demonstrating that "thanks to intelligence and work, the fragility of man and clay becomes resilience" (354). The tragic irony, however, is that this same clay is what constitutes the brick, the product symbolizing the mass construction frenzy that has brought about the ruin of Esteban and, by extension, of the Spanish people.

As a conclusion

As though avoiding the environmental, economic, and moral wreckage of the Brick Age, the protagonists of both novels are blinded by resentment. Rubén Bertomeu feels unrecognized. He represents his corruption as a personal sacrifice undertaken in favor of his family and local economic development. He sees himself as a misunderstood man with a clear and coherent vision comprehending the material, rough base of external beauty and refinement. This base manifests through cement and brick as malleable, light, resilient construction materials. *En la orilla* further extends these topics. Esteban's late life, ill-advised venture, which ends up costing him his fortune and his life, also springs from the resentment of finding himself outside of the paradigms of success of the Spanish neoliberal boom, whose historical roots trace back to the

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predatory, murderous instinct of the dictatorship and its supporters. Esteban's insights at the end of his life, while self-serving, suggest that the recognition of an ordinary evil is the necessary premise to any regeneration and symbolic restitution for the misappropriations of the past and the present—against the vanquished and marginalized at home, exiles and expelled people, the dispossessed, exploited migrants, even the careless fools who persuaded themselves there was room for them in the feast of economic predators.

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