This book is a collection of the contributions made by Basque writers and American and European academics to the international symposium, “Writers in Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene,” held May 15–17, 2008 at the Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, in the United States. Our symposium attempted to think about the consequences of bilingualism for writers in a minority language, like Basque, in that they are located in that “in-between” of different cultural and identity communities and subjected to constant exchange and recognition of differences. One could say that practically all the current 800,000 Basque-speakers or euskaldunak who live on both sides of the Pyrenees in Spain and France are bilingual. And that this bilingualism is formed in conjunction with such widely spoken languages as Spanish and such prestigious languages in literary circles as French; languages that, in turn, have been displaced by the enormously central and legitimizing place that English occupies in the current global framework. The symposium attempted, moreover, to debate the consequences implied by linguistic extra-territorialization for many authors in a minority language, the realignment implied by the hegemony of English for all other literatures, and the options open to a minority author to get their voice heard in the World Republic of Letters. Together with the above themes, certain aspects of the academic study of a minority literature such as that of Basque completed the list of subjects we intended to examine.
Writers In Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene

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This book is a collection of the contributions made to the international symposium, “Writers In Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene,” organized by the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno, and held May 15–17, 2008 on the campus of this same university. The generous funding of the Basque Government made it possible for nineteen guests, made up of Basque writers and experts from American and European universities, to be able to debate and reflect on the challenges posed by the new global scenario for minority literatures such as that of Basque. I can only express my most sincere gratitude to all the guest contributors. The generosity of their contributions and the enthusiasm with which the debates took place made the symposium a success.

I am also indebted to the conference organizing committee, made up of the writer Bernardo Atxaga who, during the academic year 2007–8, was our William A. Douglass Visiting Distinguished Scholar, and by my colleagues Joseba Zulaika and Estibalitz Ezkerra. I appreciate most sincerely the ideas and guidance they offered me.

Finally, I would emphasize that the organization of the symposium would not have been possible without the encouragement and expertise of my colleagues at the Center for Basque Studies. Thanks to Kate Camino for all her effort and unconditional dedication. To Sandy Ott, Xabier Irujo, and Eric Herzik for all the support they afforded me from the beginning. To Jill Berner for her skill in publicizing the event. And to our team of coworkers in Euskadi, Cameron Watson and Jose Luis Agote, for the excellent work undertaken in the copyediting and design of this book. Eskerrik asko bihotzez!

Mari Jose Olaziregi
Introduction

MARÍ JOSE OLAZIREGI

This book is a collection of the contributions made by Basque writers and American and European academics to the international symposium, “Writers In Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene,” held May 15–17, 2008 at the Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, in the United States. If the effects of globalization have come to be understood most prominently at a technical or economic level—giving rise to terms such as “economic liberalization,” “single thought” (pensée unique), “interconnectedness,” “determinationalization,” and “Westernization”—as regards the social, cultural and political spheres, the tendency has been more to emphasize that the global village is not so global. Globalization is not so global after all. New “ethnic landscapes” are the most disturbing form of an unsteady and uneven world; a world in which the foreigner has become a symptom. Within this context, postcolonialism has developed theories based on concepts like center and periphery, subaltern identities, so-called borderlands thought, or the effect of Creoleness (créolité)—all concepts that have encouraged the subversion of homogenizing-hierarchical readings.

Our symposium attempted to think about the consequences of bilingualism for writers in a minority language, like Basque, in that they are located in that “in-between” of different cultural and identity communities and subjected to constant exchange and recognition of differences. One could say that practically all the current 800,000 Basque-speakers or euskaldunak who live on both sides of the Pyrenees in Spain and France are

1. Translated by Cameron J. Watson. Unless otherwise stated, all translations in the following work are by the authors and translators of the articles in question.


5. See Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994).
bilingual. And that this bilingualism is formed in conjunction with such widely spoken languages as Spanish and such prestigious languages in literary circles as French; languages that, in turn, have been displaced by the enormously central and legitimizing place that English occupies in the current global framework. The symposium attempted, moreover, to debate the consequences implied by linguistic extra-territorialization for many authors in a minority language, the realignment implied by the hegemony of English for all other literatures, and the options open to a minority author to get their voice heard in the World Republic of Letters. Together with the above themes, certain aspects of the academic study of a minority literature such as that of Basque completed the list of subjects we intended to examine. Specifically, we addressed the questioning of subjects such as comparative literature, a questioning that, in line with Gayatri Spivak’s argument in her well-known *Death of a Discipline* (2003), speaks of the need for a new focus in order to overcome the discipline’s traditional Eurocentrism. In the specific case of Basque literature, this new reformist comparatist spirit has depended on a radical transformation of official Spanish literary historiography. Recent contributions, such as those included in the essential *Spain Beyond Spain* (2005), edited by Epps and Fernández Cifuentes, have defended the need to go beyond a monolingual notion of the Spanish state, “by delving into either the place of the so-called peripheral languages and literatures (Catalan, Galician, and Basque) or the place of emigrants and exiles in Spanish literary history.”

“Writers In Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene” also coincided with the celebration of the “International Year of Languages,” a fact that undoubtedly aided the debate on the reasons, functions, and most intimate motivations behind Basque writers continuing to choose a minority (and minorized) language to transmit their creativity. Indeed, the fact is that, although we know that three thousand languages will disappear this century, it would appear that the survival of Basque is assured. This, at least, is what one deduces from David Crystal’s argument in *The Language Revolution* (2004). Specifically, the Basque language, or Euskara, would fulfill the necessary socio-historical conditions highlighted by Crystal as indispensable in assuring its survival, or at least not being placed on the “endangered languages” list. Our language clearly has more than 100,000 speakers, a political framework that (at least in Spain) defends, subsidizes, and legislates on measures intended to promote and normalize it, it has a considerable media and telematic presence, and, above all, it is clear that for many Basque speakers or euskaldunak, Euskara still forms one of their most important identity markers. Recent linguistic policies sponsored by the Basque government to support the presence of Basque on the Internet have had results that, while miniscule in comparison to the omnipresence of English, have implied a qualitative step forward for the Basque language. At present, Euskara is at number thirty-eight in the ranking of most-used languages on the Web, with Basque-language entries in Wikipedia numbering 42,200 and over 7,500 blogs in

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the tongue. For these reasons, as a consequence of global changes in a local setting such as ours, experts such as Manuel Castells have spoken of Basque culture as “a small glocal neighborhood.”

The question is, once we have banished that dreaded phantom of the death of the language, whether writing in Basque is still a task undertaken for political reasons—such as that of contributing to the construction of the Basque nation—or, on the contrary, whether Basque literature has gone through a clear autonomy process and now incorporates, among its wishes, that of literary validation by means of translation into more central languages. As Pascale Casanova argues, translation, beyond naturalization (in the sense of a change of nationality), implies littérarisation or asserting oneself as literature—building up one’s literary capital—before legitimating institutions. The latter, due to the increasing reliance on the commercial model, is in fact shifting away from Paris to what she terms the “literary Greenwich meridian.” And in a market where intellectual and publishing logic have grown apart, it is clear from the outset than an author who already writes in a “universal” language can avoid having to be validated by translation when competing for a place in the world rankings. For this reason, translations are much less common in literary production in the United States or the United Kingdom. Indeed, this low figure of translations compares starkly with the 25 percent of publishing output in the Basque language, a production numbering 1,500 new titles annually. Indeed, the central place of translations in the Basque literary system is proof of its weakness and relatively short life.

One could say that the first book published in Basque—Linguae V asconiae Primitiae (1545), by Bernard Etxepare—was born with a clear universal vocation, but also that this longing to universalize Basque literature did not take shape until five centuries later. In effect, a refrain included in one of the poems in Etxepare’s book (“Euskara, jalgi hadi mundura!” “Basque language, open up to the world!”), as well as its peritexual elements reflecting Humanistic trends of the era, tell us that Linguae V asconiae Primitiae sought to transcend the local arena. Yet it is also true that until Bernardo Atxaga’s Obabakoak (1989) was published, no other Basque literary work managed to go beyond our own literary system. The favorable reception for the twenty-six translations of Atxaga’s book

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7. Quoted in Andoni Alonso and Iñaki Arzoz, Basque Cyberculture: From Digital Euskadi to Cyber Euskal Herria (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2003), 11.
demonstrates his skill in an eagerness to break down the invisibility to which globalization submits so-called peripheral literary voices. One might consider the imaginary geography he created, Obaba, to be a place of memory in which a collective Basque memory takes shape. Constructed out of Basque legends and oral tales, this geography is broken down, at the same time, through the continual dialogue maintained with the Western literary tradition. Atxaga’s thoughts in the epilogue, titled “By Way of an Autobiography,” could not be more eloquent: “These days nothing can be said to be peculiar to one place or person. The world is everywhere and Euskal Herria is no longer just Euskal Herria but . . . ‘the place where the world takes the name of Euskal Herria.’”

Yet Obabakoak is the exception in our recent literary historiography, so that I am referring here to a work whose international projection has no equivalent in the Basque literary system. The translation of universal texts into the Basque language allowed, as in the case of other smaller literatures, the autonomy process of Basque literature to accelerate after 1980 via the incorporation of a body of modern poetics and the renewal of Euskara. However, it is also true that translations in the other direction, namely, Euskara into other languages, have been few in number (around two hundred in total). This is, then, a good example of the tremendous limitations of our literary institution at present.

In reality, the fact that Basque political institutions such as the Basque Autonomous Government did not subsidize translations of Basque literature until 2000, or that until 2008, there was no official body to promote the Basque language and culture internationally (now there is, the Etxepare Basque Institute, although as I write it is still inoperative), are clear examples that cultural priorities have been affected by political objectives. These objectives, in turn, have led to the heteronomization of literature, to use a Bourdieuan term. Even the twenty-five assistantships in the Basque language and culture spread throughout the world and in existence since 2003 have not helped to avoid the sense of insularity provoked by Basque literary institutions among Basque writers.

Evidently, the function that Basque literature had until almost the mid twentieth century—to contribute to the creation of the Basque nation and identity—is not now, not in the least in fact, its main focus. Looking from today’s perspective, those highly ideologized debates that surrounded the work of Basque authors such as those that penned “Olerkariak” (1930–36), the poets of the Basque literary renaissance, seem distant. The 1930s marked a decade when people thought that a “national” poem could save Basque literature. Indeed, it was for this very reason these same authors paid such attention to writers like the Provençal Frédéric Mistral, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1904, and supported his contribution to increasing the prestige and visibility of a minority language (in his case, Occitan). But since then, Basque literature has never been, for any of the different Basque governments (and all of them

12. See Olaziregi, Waking the Hedgehog.
with a nationalist component during the period 1979–2008) a cultural element that might bestow visibility in the global utopia, nor a production that might be legitimated by the winning of the supreme international award, the Nobel Prize. In short, Basque literature has not been a means of situating the Basque Country in the global scenario. For this reason, the award created to honor people and institutions that have disseminated the image of the Basque Country throughout the world, the Universal Basque Award, has only once been given to a writer, out of the sixteen winners since it was established in 1997. In fact, following Mark Kurlansky’s list in *The Basque History of the World* (1999), out of the different people and things that, within the global context, have been awarded the Basque stamp of authority via this honor—Basque cuisine; the best known Basque sport, jai-alai (Basque handball); our most famous religious figure, Saint Ignatius of Loyola; and our excellent Basque sculptors Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida—no writer and no literary work in Euskara has ever been included. One might say that literature written in the Basque language has never been considered by our political leaders as a potential passport to universalize our culture. Jaume Subirana makes a similar point regarding the Catalan literary sphere: “when Catalan identity achieves international status, language, that key historical element, becomes a hindrance, a problem.”

The Bilbao Guggenheim museum is the best example of the fact that the cultural policies favored by Basque nationalist governments have also been influenced by the dominant market logic in the new world scenario. A desire to regenerate the great Basque metropolis, Bilbao, and transform it into a city geared toward services that would make it attractive to tourists led Basque politicians to “fall” (according to Joseba Zulaika) for the seductive charm of Thomas Krens. Yet this desire was also based on locating Bilbao “within the global culture of travel and consumerism, bridging transatlantic distances, linking New York with Bilbao, and thereby facilitating traffic in modern art, museum franchises, tourism, and reformulated urban images.” It was precisely this visibility and profitability that justified the major local investment underpinning the project; a project that (it is worth mentioning although just in passing) has helped to put the Basque Country on the world map not just for the so-called “Basque troubles”—that is, the terrorism of ETA—but for an architectural landmark, a masterpiece, whose artistic attraction was unquestionable. Kurlansky (1999) mentions the fact that 85 percent of published news items about Basques in the United States referred to the terrorism problem.

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current data on hand, but there is no doubt that the Basque Country, and especially Bilbao, have achieved a degree of visibility thanks to the impact of what has been termed the first global museum.

The Present Volume

I will now turn to a brief presentation of the contributions the reader will come across in the present volume. I should point out that I will avoid lengthy descriptions of the literary and academic merits of the contributors, given that the reader can consult brief resumes for each at the end of the book.

The work is divided into two main sections. The first of these includes the contributions of six Basque writers that took part in the symposium. These are reflections imbued with strong autobiographical content in which the authors themselves reflect on their trajectories, the help they have received and the difficulties they have faced in these, the motivations surrounding writing in the Basque language at present, the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to a small literary community such as the Basque one, and the process of self-translation; all issues that, especially explained from the perspective of the writers themselves, are of unquestionable interest. The second part of the book includes the contributions of recognized scholars from American and European universities to the symposium. Specifically, there are ten articles whose wealth of subject matter and epistemological analyses helped to achieve (and exceed) easily the objectives we had earmarked for the symposium. I would observe, finally, that both sections of the book are arranged alphabetically according to the contributors’ last names.

The section devoted to Basque writers begins with the French Basque poet Aurelia Arcocha and her article, “Writing in Basque in a Global Space from the Periphery.” The author defines herself as transnational and says that she belongs to the periphery of the periphery, in other words, to the literary subfield made up of Basque literary production in the French Basque Country. Her own autobiography is shaped by spaces and maps filled with stories of emigration, of family memories marked by violent conflict on both sides of the Pyrenees. Arcocha is an author close to borderland thought, a writer who, beyond territorial attachments, opts instead for a linguistic and identitarian in-between status, and claims to belong to both the Basque literary landscape and to the Francophonie, a contested term today. This author concludes her piece by calling for a global space that encourages an intelligent policy of translation and a resistance to uniformity; a global frame that attempts to preserve the cultural memory of not only central tongues, but also those of minorities.

As is the case in his poetic creativity, a reflection on personal and collective identity is at the core of Rikardo Arregi Díaz de Heredia’s contribution. Hence the telling title, “I Do Not Know Who ‘I’ Is.” In an article full of personal anecdotes, Arregi’s text speaks of variable identities, identities that are constructed and deconstructed, contradictory feelings of belonging, and of small communities that, as in the Basque case, may
be swamped by a certain political surrealism due to the importance of essentialist attachments, stereotypes, and appearances. Here we come face to face with a poetic voice that contends that writing in Euskara is an act of freedom, creative activity that, according to Arregi, must flee the typical image of a writer in a minority language, from the supposed exoticism that this language imprints on the writer. Arregi breaks free of essences in order to embrace definitions based on performativity.

It was a happy coincidence that the most universal Basque author of all time, Bernardo Atxaga, was the William A. Douglass Distinguished Scholar for the academic year 2007–8 at the Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno. In “The Cork and the Anchor,” Atxaga addresses certain issues that might truly secure and strengthen a literary institution such as the Basque one. With the authority of someone with his international trajectory and projection, the author dissects the questions behind the reasons why a writer like him continues to write in the Basque language, the advantages and disadvantages implied by bilingualism, and the limitations that a weak literary institution such as that of Basque might have when it comes to motivating and promoting its authors. The solid grounds that Atxaga searches for in order to secure the Basque literary system point to what without doubt is the most important flank of any literary system: that of having a sufficiently large readership. After analyzing the influence that extra-literary (or ideological) reasons have been able to exert on our literature, Atxaga concludes by offering a worrying diagnosis on the current reality of our literary system, and affirming his wish that the autonomy of our literature should be, ultimately, a reality in the near future.

“Identity, Language, Creation (An Autobiographical Vision)” is the title of the article by the writer of children’s and young people’s literature, Mariasun Landa. Hers is a trajectory that, in the same way as most Basque authors, understands the importance of self-translation, an experience that, she contends, has been positive in her case in that it has enabled her to live in two languages, inhabit two universes, that of Castilian and that of Euskara. Specifically, her article centers on a personal reflection on her own bilingualism. For Landa, Euskara is the “regained” language, a language she listened to and grew up with at home, but never learned as a child. Landa locates childhood memories in the post-Spanish Civil War years, during the harsh repression of the Franco regime. Within this context, Castilian was an imposed language, the legitimate language, but also the language in which she discovered her first literary passions. The desire to heal the “linguistic wound” that she felt inside, to recover a language that in reality never belonged to her, led her learn Euskara and begin a successful literary career in the language.

In “Five Reasons for Writing in the Language of the Neighborhood,” the writer Miren Agur Meabe offers an autobiographical journey. Her childhood was marked by defenselessness and repression of the language, a language that, with time, has managed to pull through and establish itself, as in the case of Meabe herself, as the bearer of a free, modern, and rehabilitated poetic voice that seeks to challenge, among other things, stereotypes about women. For Meabe, writing in Euskara is an act of love, commitment,
and autonomy in the global context. In sum, it is an aesthetic act that does not imply isolation and that out of which one might constantly build bridges by means of translation. Here, then, we come across an author who stands by her belonging to the Basque community, and whose poetic activity does not stray too far, in my opinion, from the Mallarméan notion of striving for the purest form of the tribe’s words.

The Basque writer Iban Zaldua’s “Eight Crucial Decisions (A Basque Writer is Obliged to Face)” closes the first section of the book. Although, because of his trajectory as a short-story writer in the Basque language, one might have expected a Decalogue, Zaldua reduces to eight the decisions a writer in Basque is obliged to make when embarking on a literary career. These questions, referring to the decision to choose a minority language to transmit one’s ideas, worrying about a limited number of readers, the influence that nationalism has on creativity in the Basque language, and resorting (or not) to an autonomous literary tradition that, one feels, is limited, are laid out in a style laced with irony. The tricky question of what stance a writer in the Basque language should adopt regarding ETA concludes his observations. Zaldua argues in favor of a commitment by Basque writers to help resolve the conflict, or at least to lend what little they can to put an end to the violence. Literature is a useful medium for Zaldua because of its capacity to open up cracks and question our perception of the real.

As noted earlier, the second section of the book is made up of contributions by professors invited to the symposium. Nerea Arruti’s analysis of the presence of the so-called “Basque troubles” in current Basque literature shapes her argument in “On the Lightness of Being: The Conflict of Belonging in Basque Literature.” She begins her article by underscoring the pressure or burden that terrorism implies for the creative capacity of artists who, as in the case of the Basque Country or Northern Ireland, must work in a politically violent context. In order to illustrate this idea, Arruti contrasts two images that serve as a metaphor for two phases of any supposed resolution of the conflict. The first, taken from an extract of a short story in Matters of Life & Death (2007) by the Irish writer Bernard MacLaverty uses the image of the elephant in the sitting room to underscore the burden imposed by political violence on the society it refers to. The second, taken from the documentary La pelota vasca (Basque Ball, 2003) by the Basque filmmaker Julio Medem, employs the light image of a bird in flight to suggest weightlessness, the relief that would be implied by any hypothetical resolution of the conflict. For Arruti, Basque literature has addressed the Basque conflict for some time now and, in this sense, the evolution from works that once narrated stories about/of terrorism to those that now attempt to narrate the dynamic of an omnipresent violence in the Basque context is especially noteworthy. Here we see literary creation that approximates a palimpsest by which the arguments of previous Basque authors are deconstructed—works that now, ultimately, at heart perform the tension or the shift from familiar to treacherous territory.

It is precisely a concept of cultural identity connected to performance and recognition that underpins “The Astigmatic Vision and the Perception of Minority Literatures”
Introduction

by L. Elena Delgado. After an introduction in which the author undertakes an evocative journey through her own biography, a life replete with diverse landscapes, cultures, and accents, Delgado goes on to analyze the hierarchies and inequalities that govern the global scene in many forms. Her argument considers, among other things, the fallacy of universalist humanism and (following Walter Mignolo) warns of the need for a “decolonization of knowledge and scholarship.” In this context, Delgado highlights the current importance of deconstructing the concept of Spanish literature, a deconstruction that might allow for the inclusion of different literatures of the Spanish state within its analysis. Delgado’s inspiration is a metaphor employed by Pascale Casanova, namely that of astigmatic vision, and she defends its use when pinning down the so-called peripheral literatures of the Spanish state. This is an understanding of astigmatic vision that, far from any negative connotations, underscores the need to learn how to look, to promise to do so, even when one knows that there will be gaps.20

Another epistemological itinerary underpins “Charting National Identities: The Excursion Mode,” by Luis Fernández Cifuentes. He starts by highlighting the paradox surrounding travel literature. On the one hand, it is a type of literature that cultural critics and historians are paying more and more attention to, because they understand it to be one of the principal mechanisms for developing modern identity since the Renaissance. On the other, literary histories—whose limits and goals, Fernández Cifuentes reminds us, are ultimately determined by a sense of national identity—have devoted little time to travel books, especially during the modern era. Fernández Cifuentes attempts to lessen this disengagement between literary history and travel literature, through a call to analyze the complex interaction between nationalism and modern travel writing in Spain’s national territories. His study begins with travel books written by Enlightened foreign travel writers in the nineteenth century, then analyzes the Orientalization of the Spanish condition present in such well-known works as Washington Irving’s *Alhambra* (1832), and charts the rise of new types of travel books—so-called excursion or “excursión” books—that began to appear around 1840. According to the author, these books differed from the restrictive perception of the country given by foreigners and offered a differentiating, multiple view of the nation. An overview of nineteenth-century Spanish travel literature completes the article.

If travel literature can be analyzed for its contribution to the idea of nation, literature in general, and Basque literature in particular, might be a space out of which one might begin to break a monolithic conception of the Basque nation. This is Annabel Martin’s argument, at least, in “Critical Basque Studies: A Place for Literature in Postnationalist Identity.” Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the author defends the “minor” status of Basque literature, and affirms the curative ability of literature to heal wounds and mediate, a process that converts both reader and writer into “a stranger within one’s [own] language.” This ability, in a conflictive political context such as that of the Basque

case, can be vital to the extent that it promotes a conception of Basqueness beyond exclusive and monolithic nationalist notions. In this regard, Basqueness would not be a “thing” but, rather, the outcome of a process “leading to profounder understanding of the complexities” involved therein. Martin believes Basque literature can contribute to the creation of a new public sphere constructed on the foundations of pedagogy of peace. The work of authors such as Julia Otxoa or Bernardo Atxaga would be an example of the kind of literature that articulates a tone of the necessary reconciliation in the Basque context.

From the Basque context, we now move to the Catalan case and the lucid reflections of Xavier Pla in “Josep Pla: Localism, or a Complete Way of Viewing the World.” He takes as his starting point T. S. Eliot’s essay, “Unity and Diversity: The Region,” and especially the notion of “satellite culture.” Pla argues that Catalan culture is not a satellite culture, and among the reasons that support this contention is the impact of Catalan literature within the global context. One universal Catalan author, Josep Pla, serves to exemplify this argument and to demonstrate the importance of the Catalan language as a stimulus to dialogue with other cultures in the world. After demonstrating Pla’s unconditional connection to the Catalan language, the article considers the local gaze that ran through his work, a gaze that blended people and landscapes, and that only the mother-tongue, Catalan, was able to reveal. Supporting localism and arguing in favor of an absolute identification with a landscape and surroundings does not mean, according to the author, that Josep Pla was a local author. On the contrary, his universality took inspiration, precisely, from that rootedness in his own local milieu.

In “Post-Hispanism, or the Long Goodbye of National Philology,” Joan Ramon Resina defends a universality that depends on diversity. The crisis of Hispanism, and that of its academic matrix, national philology, are at the center of Resina’s lucid analysis. To arrive at a conclusion, the Catalan academic compares Elogi de la paraula (1903) by Joan Maragall with the idea of national philology founded in Spain by Ramón Menéndez Pidal. While the former invoked “the cosmic resonance of every language, the subtle meaning that ‘the earth’ imparts to words,” the latter set himself up as a representative, according to Resina, of a philological tradition “that suppressed the shimmer of language and erased human contingency.” Resina contrasts both perspectives by employing concepts such as Nietzsche’s “real history,” what Foucault termed “effective history.” It is by addressing diversity and finishing with the belief in the superior value of dominant languages that Resina argues in favor of a transformation in Hispanism that must respond to different demands, according to the sphere of action. If the crisis being experienced by Hispanism in the United States is marked by the nagging ethical concern with the marginalization of cultures and social groups, in the Spanish state a similar crisis stems from suggesting a new Spanish philology (to the extent that it hopes to be Spanish) that truly brings together the cultures of the Spanish state.

Now that we have raised the topic of the different cultural and identity communities in the Spanish state, one would have to say that, in recent years, there has been a
clear increase in the number of works addressing relations and translation among these communities. Arguments such as those of Arturo Casas, following concepts such as Itamar Even-Zohar’s “Iberian interliterary system” and Dionyiz Durisin’s “interliterary community,” have attempted to establish a theoretical-methodological framework from which to tackle this subject.\footnote{See Arturo Casas, “Sistema interliterario y planificación historiográfica a propósito del espacio geocultural ibérico,” \textit{Interlitteraria} 8 (2003): 68–97.} Undoubtedly, translations among different literatures in the Spanish state offer an interesting body of work with which to determine the hierarchies and interferences among these different literatures, as well as the inequalities that govern the above-mentioned Spanish interliterary system. It is precisely one dimension of these translations—namely, that of the invisibility of the translator—that Mario Santana explores in “On Visible and Invisible Languages: Bernardo Atxaga’s Soinujolearen semea in Translation.” Santana follows Lawrence Venuti in his call for a pedagogy of translated literature that calls attention to the fact that “the language of instruction is not impartial in its representation of foreign texts.” And with this goal in mind, Santana examines translations of Bernardo Atxaga’s \textit{Soinujolearen semea} (2003, \textit{The Accordionist’s Son}) into the different languages of the Spanish state. The fact that this book is the only narrative work awarded the Critics Prize in Spain that has been translated into all the languages of the state demonstrates, for Santana, not only the popularity of the text, but also its iconic status as a materialization of an ideal cross-linguistic literature in Spain. Santana’s article ends with an analysis of the novel’s paratexts in Castilian, Catalan, and Galician, and reflects on the importance of language and translations in the work’s plot. He concludes by arguing that translation of Atxaga’s novel into Spanish might perfectly well be considered “as a dissident work that resists assimilation into the majority language and forces the strangeness of the Basque original upon the reader of the translated text.”

Another element that, in the case of minority literatures as well, has been established at the creative center of literary production in recent years, is memory. Memory recovery that functions as an antidote to the utopia of globalization and as a nucleus of new ethnic maps, a memory recovery that according to Alfredo J. Sosa-Velasco is one of the cultural obsessions of our age. In his “Memory, Past, and Writing in the Global Scene: Bernardo Atxaga’s \textit{El hijo del acordeonista} and Carme Riera’s \textit{La mitad del Alma},” he analyzes the relationship that memory, the past, and writing have in the Basque and Catalan minority literatures. After a brief introduction reviewing the evolution of different memory discourses, an examination of the objectives fulfilled by a restitution of the past in Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels completes his contribution. Both novels are considered, following Pierre Nora, as “sites of memory” or places where memory takes shape and “where individual memory survives by connecting it with the present through oral and written tradition.” Sosa-Velasco concludes by contending that both novels force us to think about the connections between individual and collective memory, and allow us...
to understand that testimony is the best way of accessing the past, as well as the best method of achieving the present need to communicate with others.

“What happens to the cultural production and the languages of a nation when that nation becomes the victim of a siege, and as a result of that siege, the country’s intellectuals are expelled or leave of their own will?” is the important question beginning Michael Ugarte’s “Exile, Dissemination, and Homogenization: The Case of Equatorial Guinea as the Space of a Minority Literature.” Here we encounter a postcolonial reading of the literary reality of Equatorial Guinea, a reality that is still tied closely to the territory this African nation was once a colony of: Spain. Ugarte explores the attitude of the Spanish publishing industry to writers from Equatorial Guinea, an attitude that, far from helping, perpetuates the invisibility of voices from that country. Of special interest are his comments on the novel *El llanto de la perra* (2005) by Guillermina Mekuy, a novel that portrays a variety of mishaps and sexual adventures of its protagonist, Eldaina, who was born in Africa but emigrated with her family to Madrid when she was young. Ugarte has no hesitation is pointing out the striking marketing strategy that accompanied the novel, a strategy that left no doubt as to the colonizing attitudes of those who came up with it.

The book concludes with an article by Teresa M. Vilarós-Soler, whose title, “Salvador Espriu and the *Marrano* Home of Language,” indicates the object of her study: the work of Salvador Espriu (1913–85), one of the most important Catalan writers. Espriu himself highlighted the pessimistic tendency running through his work, considering it to be a meditation on death. However, we must place this pessimism and desperation in context, namely, that of the brutal Francoist repression of the Catalan language. In his eagerness to breathe life into the repressed Catalan language and culture, Espriu took inspiration from the Jewish spiritual archive and, especially, the *marrano* history of Spain. It was, precisely, thanks to Judaism that Espriu was able to unite, according to Rosa M. Delor, myth and history. Espriu compared the destruction and considerable intolerance that followed the Spanish Civil War with the persecution and genocide of the Jews in Spain. Vilarós-Soler examines Espriu’s *marrano* writing, and compares it to the *marrano* register conceptualized by Alberto Moreiras.

With this, the time has come to end this introduction and invite the reader to examine the following contributions in this book. As I have tried to make clear in the text above, the sentiments expressed here attempt to deconstruct stale and homogenizing readings, and encourage new lines of creativity and research that establish a real dialogue with largely ignored literary traditions. Moreover, such dialogue should not ignore the power of literature to establish a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity. *Hala bedi!*
Bibliography


Part I:
CREATION (WRITERS)
Choosing to write in Euskara or Basque, a nationless minority language located within a consolidated Western European state like Spain, whose national language is Spanish, and doing so in the sphere dominated by world language, world music, and world literature may seem a bit strange. It is rather like someone swimming against the current, resisting the “uniformization” of globalization. The Spanish State is divided into several autonomous communities, and Euskara (the Basque language) is an official language (along with Spanish) of the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC), which is comprised of the provinces of Gipuzkoa (Guipúzcoa), Bizkaia (Vizcaya), and Araba (Álava). The community has its own editorial network, culture, finances, and authors. In the same vein, a literary system whose neurological center is Gipuzkoa exists in the BAC. It is important to note that the Basque community is also comprised of another province, located inside the same state as the BAC, but not within the same autonomous community: Navarre. Navarrese writers are somewhat peripheral in relation to those of the BAC, but in reality, they share the same world culture, the same state, the same co-official language (Spanish), the same national capital (Madrid), and the same literary system with the BAC. Authors who chose to write in minority languages like Basque have the opportunity to achieve considerable renown and recognition at both the national and international level, thanks to the various national prizes awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Culture in

Translated by Caroline Whiteman, 2008.
Madrid. Such were the cases of Bernardo Atxaga, Unai Elorriaga, and Mariasun Landa, to name a few.

On the other hand, writing in Euskara in a truly peripheral area like Iparralde, the Northern Basque Country (or French Basque Country), with another state and national language (French), is very complicated, and quite different from that of the BAC. France bestows various literary awards but none of them, not those of the Ministry of Culture, nor the Goncourt, the Femina, or the Renaudot, is open to works written in so-called “regional languages” and translated or rewritten in French. Merely considering the validity of anything written in a “regional language” is virtually impossible at present in the French state, which chooses to only award legitimacy to authors whose works are published by the big French publishing houses. Traditionally, and this is still the case today, the central system does not deign to interest itself in any “sub-literature” written in a “langue régionale.”

In my particular case, the difficulties associated with the Basque literary system and those within the French literary system, neither of which in theory have anything in common, are thus intensified. Indeed, one of the effects of globalization is precisely that: unifying problems and erasing traditional hierarchies, causing upheaval in concepts like “French literature,” “Francophone literature,” and “regional literature,” which up until now have been so well-defined. Effectively, globalization “decentralizes” and it is worth noting that in 2007, a group of French-language writers from all over the world signed a manifesto calling for a “literature world” in French.

My article will hinge on establishing three interconnected and shifting specialties with boundaries subject to constantly changing perspectives: First, narrative or authorial spaces, because they are the starting point, the reason for which I have been invited to this symposium organized by the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Reno and because it is the “now”; then, autobiographical spaces because they are related to authorial spaces and are the “yesterday until today”; and finally, a space that I have decided to call extra clusus, in reference to Roman surveyors like Hyginus Gromaticus.

Extra clusus as a topography seems to perfectly materialize the challenges faced by peripheral literature within globalization: it is an extra space (meaning a new territory) located outside the territory organized by the limits (states) but at the same time clusus because it is enclosed within a larger territory—in this case, a global territory, a space filled with questions born of and from the perspectives in and from which I write: “today, facing the future.”

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1. “Langue régionale” or “regional language” is not the term employed by the Spanish state to refer to Basque, Catalan, or Galician.
2. From the French “décentrer,” according to the use employed by Nicole Lapierre, Pensons ailleurs (Paris: Stock, 2004).
Writing Strategies

From my position as a French citizen and author writing in a regional, unofficial language like Basque, a language granted the dignity of being co-official on the other side of the international border I live on, this has become even more of an issue since I decided to publish in French. The following paragraphs show the main characteristics making up the stages of this itinerary.

The literary strategy I have employed during these last few years (2001–2008) is based on migration and, more specifically, crossing borders. First, in 2001, in order to escape the peripheral literary field of the French Basque Country that, in my view, is actually becoming more of a “literary subfield,” I merely continued along the same path I began in 1993 when I published my first book with the Pamiela publishing house in Navarre. Basically, I crossed the bridge. I lived only a few feet from the French-Spanish border and quite simply, I crossed the “Santiago International Bridge” on foot. Euskadi (the Basque Country), the Spanish state, and, more precisely, Gipuzkoa begins in the middle of this bridge. I took the Avenida de Iparralde (formerly known as the Avenida de Francia) and knocked on the door of the Alberdania publishing house, located in the outskirts of Irun, and only a few hundred feet from the border. It was the only way I could think of to try my luck in the heart of the central Basque literary system, or in other words, in Gipuzkoa (BAC). My initiative was successful and Alberdania published my book at the end of 2001. I believe, however, that they had rather poor reasons for publishing my book in that it was somewhat of a hybrid, defying categories.

I embarked on part two of my journey more or less in the same vein. Between 2001 and 2006, when I was rewriting a part of the book in French, my other literary language, I decided to try take a chance in Francophonie in order to escape Hexagonal6 prejudices with regard to its “regional” languages; and basically, in order to avoid suffering the prejudices of the Jacobin literary system.7 This time, I traveled across France and crossed the Franco-Belgian border to arrive in Brussels at the l’Atelier du heron publishing house. My manuscript was accepted and thus I was able to publish a French version of Septentrio.

5. When speaking about the space that French Basque writer Ixaro Borda occupies in the Basque literary system, a system that is also part of the larger literary world, Ur Apalategi observes that Ixaro Borda is an author from the periphery (the Northern Basque Country) of a literary field (the Basque Country) that is itself peripheral to the world literary system. See “Champ et sous-champs littéraires basques à travers l’étude d’un cas concret: l’œuvres romanesque de l’écrivaine Ixaro Borda,” in Le statut de l’écrit. Afrique-Europe-amérique latine, actes du colloque du même nom, ed. Christiane Albert, Abel Kouyouuma, and Gisèle Pringnitz (Pau: Presses Universitaires de Pau, 2008).

6. The “Hexagon” generally refers to continental France, which has roughly the form of a hexagon.

7. In the context of the French Revolution, a Jacobin originally meant a member of the Jacobin Club (1789–94), but even at that time, the term Jacobins had been popularly applied to all promulgators of extreme revolutionary opinions: for example, “Jacobin democracy” is synonymous with totalitarian democracy. In contemporary France this term refers to the concept of a centralized republic, with power concentrated in the national government at the expense of local or regional governments. Similarly, Jacobin educational policy, which influenced modern France well into the twentieth century, sought to stamp out French minority languages that it considered reactionary, such as Breton, Basque, Catalan, Occitan, Alsatian, Franco-Provençal, and Flemish. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacobin_%28politics%29 (last accessed July 6, 2009).
in 2006 (a remodeled version of the original 2001 Basque text) in the only free space that allowed me to publish my work as a “normal,” transnational author, within a precise literary theme, that of the voyage and nomadism. I undertook this journey because I wanted to avoid at all costs the demeaning and condescending double label that the French literary institution, defined “by the positions of power represented by the publishers, the media and the university,”8 would have forced me to assume: namely, that of a French author writing and publishing in one of the “regional languages” of France; that of a regionalist author; and that of a regional author with French citizenship writing and publishing in French, but in the context of the “Atlantic Pyrenees”9 or in “Aquitaine” or any other Hexagonal region—which is to say, “en province,” as opposed to in the Parisian publishing houses that have come to symbolize the French literary institution.

**Autobiographical Spaces**

I am French Basque, born in the Lower Navarrese valley of Baigorri (Saint-Étienne-de-Baïgorry), near a river that seemed enormous to me when I was a child and a highway a little over a mile from the center of the town. The river descends from the jagged peaks that form a mountain range and that border the Baztan, a Pyrenean valley lost between 1512 and 1530 where my mother was born. The highway snakes around to the valley’s end, toward Banka (Banca), Aldude (Aldudes), and Urepele (Urepel), home of the famous bertsulari or improvisational oral poet Xalbador, who used to greet my deceased father with a verse. And it further descends toward the karrika (literally meaning “street,” but a word that implies the wider sense of an urban area) of Baigorri, my father’s hometown. Later, following the highway and the river, one arrives in Baiona (Bayonne), the capital of Lapurdi (Labourd), and the Atlantic coast. Continuing along down the coast is Hendaia (Hendaye), a resort town next to Txingudi Bay and its Bird Island. Opposite, the town of Hondarribia (Fuenterrabía) and the Donostia-San Sebastián airport are bordered by a long beach of fine sand from which one can see the lighthouse of Biarritz on a clear day. My whole family moved there when I was ten years old and my siblings were five and two. Hendaia is an important frontier town with significant international traffic, via both the highway and railroad. Spain and France meet here, as well as the Basque provinces of Lapurdi and Gipuzkoa, the Atlantic Pyrenees and the BAC. In this map I hear and speak two languages that, in my personal experience, never cross: Euskara is the language I have always spoken at home and I learned French in school at the age of four or five. When we moved to Hendaia, my house was like a linguistic island, surrounded by a whole that communicated exclusively in French.

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9. The Atlantic Pyrenees is one of a hundred (96 in continental France, 4 overseas) départements, the French equivalent of a state or province.
Other maps were gradually added to this primordial one. The highway descended into the center of Baigorri instead of continuing to Baiona and veered toward the left, passing in front of the church, the cemetery, and rising along Izpegi, crossing the border and descending once more into the Baztan, crossing this valley and continuing on toward Iruña (Pamplona), capital of the ancient Kingdom of Navarre. To me, Iruña was the city where my Aunt Bibiana, my mother’s sister, lived. She was the queen of a hortus located in the Ansoain neighborhood, full of roses and a large variety of plants. It must have been a sacred place at some point because in the 1970s, a mud profile of some person or ancient divinity, perhaps a Roman one, and pieces of a broken container were found there. Everything would disappear, however, during the 1980s with the construction of high-rise buildings on the site.

After I turned six, the highway extended even further south, toward the Navarrese Ribera region, crossing stranger and more unknown lands that I was unfamiliar with, Mediterranean lands with different colors, new odors, and with a distinct sense of space that fascinated me. There I had my childhood friends Merceditas, Inma, Ana, Asun . . . I remember our expeditions into the Ribera countryside, along the shores of the Ebro river, which seemed enormous to me, along the Bocal canal . . . It was there that I first came into contact with a strange language that I could not understand: Spanish. Playing with my friends, I learned to speak Spanish with a Navarrese accent. I also remember excursions into the lands bordering Aragon, toward Malon and Zaragoza.

Other maps came into my life as well: the Bizkaian valley of Orozko where my paternal grandfather was born; the 1930s map of “Euzkadi” that my maternal grandfather, a staunch anti-Francoist, had hidden in the Baztan mountains during the Spanish Civil War and the years that followed and which today I have at home; foreign maps such as Juan E. Parra’s Argentine pioneer map of the area where my paternal grandfather Tiburcio lived; Chile, where my Aunt Justa and Uncle Bitorio had migrated to and from where we received regular letters; California, where they had previously lived and where our neighbors in Baigorri, the Martiarena brothers Benat and Jamatit, often traveled on account of their position as owners of half-savage horses that they let me ride. To me, California was symbolized by a wonderful cowboy saddle that one of our neighbors had brought from there. There were also darker geographies: the concentration camp in Miranda de Ebro where my father’s older brother Jean was interned after having escaped to avoid capture from the Nazis (he was part of the Evadés de France) and before he went to Casablanca to meet up with De Gaulle’s French troops. There were also Germany and Italy (pictures, postcards), where my father went at age twenty-two with the French army during the last few months of World War II in 1945.

Beginning in 1994, even more maps came into my life: Canada and the United States, with Montreal and Quebec as new centers of interest that served as points of reference for me and drastically transformed my geographic and literary sense of space.

10. On the Evadés de France, see http://www.effelle.fr/francais-libre/evades-de-france (last accessed August 18, 2009).
**Extra Clusus Space**

As I noted, according to Hyginus Gromaticus the *regio extra clusus* is a geographical area located outside (*extra*) well-defined areas (cultural and living areas) but inside another, larger space that is also defined (*clusus*). In order to find my place in the world, in the *regio extra clusus*, I have to first draw the borders of the two literary fields in which I locate myself: firstly, the peripheral French Basque sub-system dependent on the central Basque literary system of the BAC; and secondly, the French literary system and its corollary, the Francophone literary system which is, at this moment, in a phase of transformation.

Today, the peripheral French Basque literary system constitutes a subfield in relation to the central Basque literary system. French Basque writers tend to organize themselves into a system that is parallel to its central counterpart. The central system, on the other hand, tends not to take into account the French Basque system or its writers (despite the French Basque writer Itxaro Borda winning the 2001 Euskadi Prize), considering them to be on the sidelines or unclassified. In fact, they are *outside* the central system in which the “real” authors that “count” move. Indeed, for Ûr Apalategi, the awarding of the 2001 Euskadi Prize to Itxaro Borda only served to reaffirm the center. In other words, the center needs to acknowledge a peripheral system occasionally in order to reaffirm its own existence. In keeping with the current evolution, it is clear that the central Basque literary system, in addition to the existence of its own internal borders within the Spanish state (for example the existence of the Bizkaian dialect, or the geographical periphery formed by Navarrese writers), will probably tend to encourage the reinforcement of the periphery made up of the French Basque writers from Iparralde.

The French Basque writer today must face an internal linguistic problem: writing in his or her own peripheral dialect such as, for example, the Navarrese-Lapurdian dialect, which has a rich literary tradition and was the literary center from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries until the nineteenth century; writing in Zuberoan, a northern dialectical subcategory; or in Unified Basque (Euskara Batua), taking into account that the “texture” of the “unified” language can vary according to the dialectical sub-strain. Today, for example, writers of the central Basque literary system write in and express themselves in a unified language that is basically a derivation of the Gipuzkoan dialect (locutions, lexical fields, certain verb forms), with certain elements borrowed from Spanish.

It is not easy to avoid the tendency toward “ghettoization” of the periphery in a country like France that refuses to award official status to any of its regional languages. The small Basque-speaking population in Iparralde lives in a diglossial situation that tends to favor the “de-Basquization” of its youth. However, the fact that new institutional

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11. See ibid.

12. The translation is our own. See ibid.
structures came into existence during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the French Basque Country that granted financial aid for works published in Euskara (with some help from the Basque government’s Department of Culture from the central Basque system) favors the involvement of authors in schools and can be helpful any time that the diglossial situation of the French Basque population of the area is threatened in the inter-Basque literary system (much like the situation in Quebec, Belgium, or along the French-Swiss border, for example). This is the only way to facilitate the creation of a dynamic Basque literary space, both single and plural and polyphonic, for the next few years.

In both Septentrio and the poetic chronicles I have written weekly in the BAC-based newspaper Berria since 2004, I have opted to write in Unified Basque. However, there are underlying Navarrese-Lapurdian elements, as seen in the lexicon, sentences, and rhetoric, and words borrowed not only from Spanish but also from French and English so that the text can reach—and writing in Berria has been very helpful for me in this aspect—the central Basque reader without alienating readers from the peripheral French Basque Country.

In considering French and Francophone writers, the aforementioned debate that began with the March 2007 publication in Le Monde of a manifesto signed by various writers and titled “For a World Literature” seems to me of the utmost importance. This manifesto was an impetus for further interventions that only served to highlight the contradictions/differences between the central French literary system and peripheral writers.

In December 2006, when I published another version of Septentrio in French in Belgium after a rather difficult strategic path, I believe that I successfully escaped the labels and categorization that the French literary system would without a doubt have fatally imposed on me: that of a “French regionalist author,” a “regionalist,” a writer expressing herself in a “regional language” (which for a writer coming from the central French system is unviable).

13. Christian Vandendorpe confirms that, “The ‘Francophone’ label would be acceptable if it actually meant the whole of French-language literature, which in theory, it should do. But in reality, this designation does not encompass French-language literature that is already part of an important literary institution. Thus Quebec, like Switzerland and Belgium, has created a local institution that supports the work of writers with scholarships, tax money, editorial and distribution structures, academies, [and] literary criticism reviews, as well as manual and study programs. In these countries, this has facilitated dynamic creativity and resuscitated a relatively important literary event in which readers frequent bookstores and literary expositions in order to find their favorite writers.” See “De la francophonie à la littérature-monde,” @analyses, Comptes rendus, Francophonie, October 11, 2007, at http://www.revue-analyses.org/document.php?id=858 (last accessed July 6, 2009).


This escape has been made possible by the L’atelier du heron publishing house. Written in French, Septentrio does not have any localist connotations, as it appears within the Peregrins collection, a collection dedicated to geo-poetic itineraries. This opportunity granted me access to the space traditionally labeled Francophonie, a relatively important issue in France today. Indeed, Francophonie enjoys a position as “mother of arts, arms and laws” and, despite the changing perspectives prompted by globalization, continues to give out “its lights, as universal benefactor, concerned with bringing civilization to the cities living in the shadows of civilization.”

For the group of writers who signed the aforementioned manifesto, Francophonie is the final incarnation of colonialism and there no longer exists any exclusive link between the country (France) and the language, the colonial pact is broken and the freed language now belongs to all: according to those who signed the manifesto, a “literature world” has just been born.

But what is Francophonie? Christian Vandendorpe asks the question in the following way:

According to the Treas de la langue française, the term “Francophonie” designates “the whole of the French-speaking population, and, more precisely, the ensemble of French-speaking countries.” In this sense, France would be considered a part of Francophonie, as are Quebec, Belgium and Senegal. Nevertheless, in reality, this term usually has a much more restricted use. As Jacques Godbout notes with his usual insight, “despite their theoretical contentedness that Francophonie exists, the inhabitants of the Hexagon do not consider themselves to be a part of it.” Tahar Ben Jelloun adds, “The ‘métèque’ [a demeaning term for “foreigner,” especially of Mediterranean origin] writer, who comes from elsewhere and is expected to confine himself to his slightly displaced status with regard to “real” French writers, is considered a part of Francophonie. This over-cautiousness on the part of the metropolis and this lack of opening up are particularly insulting to writers who contribute to the dynamic nature of French literature by contributing a direct resonance from the real world, where the combination of cultures increasingly blurs national borders. But the French literary institution and above all the distribution circuits and book promotions are outwardly confined to internal production. Now that the twenty-first century has really begun, the question becomes whether or not French-language works will be considered legitimate within the Hexagon.”

It is evident that the word Francophonie has not died out, but nevertheless the controversy to which I am alluding is significant because it implies a “literature world in


18. The translation is our own. See Vandendorpe, “De la francophonie à la littérature-monde.”
French.” In this much wider, tolerant, and open space, “emerging” literature (en émergence) or “postcolonial” literature would attain a real visibility. One would hope that this newly-named space (that would also include the Hexagon) would also respect the diverse literary systems that include a “minority language” (langue minoritaire) or “regional language” (langue régionale) or “less-diffused languages” (langues les moins répandues), as they are called (the variety of names reveals a certain unease that exists today in the Hexagon): namely, literature in Basque, Occitan, Breton, Corsican, and so on.19

The questions with regard to the status of French and Francophone literature allow us to better understand the challenges faced currently by diverse national literatures. In other words, states themselves are today submerged in the global space of a “literature world in English” that tends to convert their literatures into “local,” “regional,” or “minority” literatures. At the same time these same literatures find themselves within a shrunken space, if we consider the dimensions of the global world. In this way, a French language that until now has been very internationally visible thanks to its various cultural networks and prestigious writers/authors sees its visibility greatly reduced within the global market. Moreover, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, the emergence of new countries with languages that now have national language status has facilitated the apogee of literary expression in minority languages as has occurred with Basque literature, which until recently was confined to the local spectrum but is now open to the world.

In addition, globalization affects not only the linguistic aspects of Francophone literature in general but also more specifically, for example, the themes addressed by African Francophone writers. This is because African writers reject the “African-ness” that Western society and the French literary institution seem to expect from them.20 Christiane Albert, quoting Abdourahman Waberi, observes that, “With a little bit of exaggeration, one could say that writers used to want to be mainly considered black, whereas today people want to be seen as writers, above all. This is a notable change.”21

**Conclusion**

In the global world that demands visibility and profitability, non-English-language literature has a tendency to be viewed as local or “minority” literature. And literary expressions in minority languages like Basque are a fortiori facing the same danger. It is thus necessary to face this problem in two ways: one must first approach the global space

19. The literature written in the various Creole languages of the Hexagon’s DOM-TOMs (Département d’outre-mer-Territoire d’outre-mer, Overseas department-Overseas territory) generally belongs to the Francophone space. DOM-TOMs are French territories and former French colonies located outside of continental France.


21. The translation is our own. Ibid., 57.
intelligently with regard to the translation of texts into English, and any other language that is deemed opportune, all the while resisting “uniformization” by saving the cultural traditions expressed in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic, the foundation of the Western collective memory; at the same time, one must do everything possible to ensure that the memory of each minority language is preserved and transformed into part of the global patrimony.
Bibliography


CHAPTER TWO

I Do Not Know Who “I” Is

RIKARDO ARREGI DIAZ DE HEREDIA

Again

It is noon on Sunday and I’m leaving home to go to my mother’s. The cold wind forces me to pull my cap down harder so I don’t lose it. I start down the last street; two young people come up to me, showing clear symptoms of still enjoying their Saturday night. When I get closer, one says, waving two fingers as if he were holding a cigarette, “¿Tienes . . . un cigarro? One . . . one cigarette, please . . .” “Yeah, sure, here you go,” I answer, a little surprised by his linguistic doubts, from which Basque is of course dismissed. The guy is “happy” thanks to the cigarette and to the various substances his body is trying to metabolize. He goes on: “Tú eres . . . tu eres . . . fucking great . . . ok.” I’ve been up for several hours and I’ve already metabolized everything I needed to metabolize. “Ok, ok,” I calm him down, I calm myself down. “Tú eres . . . where are you from?” “I am Basque,” I am surprised at my own conviction and the reassurance with which I say it. “Fucking great . . . you’re not a foreigner . . . fucking great.” The effects of certain substances on the level of friendliness toward strangers is well known. I move away.

This is not the first time this has happened, it’s not the first time I’ve been taken for a foreigner in the Basque Country. I often feel that my national identity either dissolves or solidifies according to circumstances I have not yet been able to identify. So, I was taken for an Englishman in Donostia-San Sebastián and Madrid (“You speak Spanish very well for a foreigner!”) not just once, but many times; for an Englishman in Germany, for a German in England; for a Hungarian on an Italian train (which my interlocutor deduced

Translated by Zador Traductores-Christina Werckmeister.
from the language, Basque, in which the book I was reading was written); for a Czech in Paris when I was overheard speaking this language, Basque, with a friend; and even for an Israeli in a small town in Costa Rica, which offended one of the friends I was talking to, of course in Basque, who is a fervent anti-Zionist. The list is so long.

**Identities**

Before talking about national identity, or linguistic identity, or even before talking about my identity as a writer (which is very juicy too), I feel obliged to talk about my personal identity, which has so many faces to it that it may actually be a non-identity; especially when people in the very city I was born in see me as a stranger. Schopenhauer said that there is no emptier pride than the vanity of belonging to a certain people or nation. I don’t think I’ll ever run that risk. After hearing so many people doubt me, I’ve ended up doubting myself too.

My first doubts started a long time ago: the moment I became conscious of the fact that my name was the same as my father’s I began to doubt my own personal existence; I began to understand that my own personal identity was going to have to be built up with resolute determination, that it was going to be hard work. Of course, that confusion of names reached its most terrible point during my adolescence, when the names written on letters, spoken over the phone, or whispered in the streets, were so important; when they were too transcendental. The fact that it is our custom to use two surnames, the father’s and the mother’s, didn’t help matters for people, since my father’s complete name, Ricardo Arregi Ortiz de Zarate, and my name, Ricardo Arregi Diaz de Heredia, were both confusing. Those compound surnames, so characteristic of the small Basque region from which I come, Araba (Álava), don’t help to clarify misunderstandings. I started to use the Basque spelling of my name, Rikardo, during that confused adolescence in which I tried to know whether I was worthy of a distinctive name by which to identify myself; I needed an identity.

The next mix-up emerged when I published my first texts in the Basque language. I soon realized that there had already been another Rikardo Arregi in Basque literature. A Rikardo Arregi that was already dead when I began writing and that may deserve a space here so that other people can know about him.

This Rikardo Arregi was born in 1942 and died when he was twenty-seven years old, on the day Armstrong and Aldrin first stepped on the moon, when the dictator Franco was still alive. He wrote mostly essays and newspaper articles and his main concern was teaching Basque-speaking people to read and write. Today there is even a prize for Basque journalism named after him, and his hometown, Andoain, has a street called Rikardo Arregi.

So because of all this, the first poem I read in Basque, or the first one that comes to mind in my imagination, is *Nire izena* (My Name), by Gabriel Aresti. It had such an impact on me that it almost hurt. It was as though Basque literature was welcoming me in, talking precisely about names, about lost names written on gravestones, about
forgotten names. Much later, another poem, this time by Pushkin, and about names written on gravestones in a language that nobody understands, also seemed both too beautiful and too painful at the same time. I recreated it in a poem for my book Kartografía (Cartography, 1998):

Zer esan nahi du zuretzat nire izenak?
Oroigarri bakarra
paper batean utziriko aztarnaha hila
hilaritzaren antzera,
letra arraroz idatzita
inork ulertzen ez duen hizkuntzabatean.

What does my name mean to you?
Just a memory,
a lifeless trace left on paper,
like an epitaph
written in strange characters,
in a language that nobody understands.

Back then, people asked me whether I was related to this Rikardo Arregi, whether I had anything to do with him. I felt frightened, surrounded by living or dead people with the same name as me. The publishers decided that my complete name, with both surnames, would appear in that first book of poems I wrote. But the confusion remained. On one occasion, a Slovenian writer looked at me as if I were some kind of zombie because he had seen on the Internet that Rikardo Arregi had died years ago. My publisher in Spanish decided that Spanish readers would not know anything about the other Rikardo Arregi. Nowadays, publishers, critics, and university professors discuss with me how I should appear, as if I were somebody else: je est un autre (I’m somebody else). Rimbaud, old chum, it seems I understand things less and less, or more and more, who knows?

I’ve begun here with doubts about my national identity. One should point out that Basque men and women, when they first meet someone, and after asking their name, always ask, where are you from? In France, they ask, tu fais quoi dans la vie? to find out what you do for a living (and about your economic situation), but we (now I identify myself) ask about your origins. We can often guess where someone is from by their accent or their dialect. Other times, you offer profuse explanations about your own origins, your parents’ origins, or when you learned the language: in the family? Was it only spoken by one of the parents? Was it learned in an ikastola (Basque school)? And you talk about feelings of belonging. Even when you answer a question in a survey, you can choose from several options: I feel more Basque than Spanish, more Spanish than Basque, Basque and Spanish, Basque and Navarrese, French and Basque, just Basque.

Another anecdote. A year ago, I started to go to English lessons; after about a month, I heard some classmates speaking in Basque about notes, homework, and books,
so I joined in the conversation. One of them couldn’t believe her ears; she asked me again and again whether I was speaking in Basque (in fact, the conversation was taking place in that language), whether I was Basque (that is, whether I was born in the country), whether my parents were Basque. We walked for half an hour and she kept asking me the same questions. But you don’t look Basque, this was her main argument or her main obsession or concern. But those words encode a great part of the meaning of our world. Perhaps the most important thing is not to be, but to look like. There are large parts of the province where I was born that do not look like the Basque Country; that’s what everyone says (this looks like Castile); a large part of the Basque Country does not look Basque; it does not correspond to the landscape that has become so stereotypical. Anyway, many Basque people don’t look Basque. It has become a commonplace these days to talk about the diversity of Basque society, but all this talk about obvious diversity hasn’t caught on in our mentality. We may know it but I doubt we actually experience or live it. There are Basques that don’t speak Basque, Basque-speaking people that aren’t nationalist (more and more every day I think), people who come from all kinds of backgrounds that speak Basque; the variations are endless. Well, perhaps not endless, but there are at least as many variations as there are people. Still, the situation does undergo its changes. Many people in my city (which has two names, one in Spanish and the other in Basque) thought I was born in a more Basque-speaking place since, until now, being from Vitoria(-Gasteiz) and speaking Basque did not seem to quite match. Until a short time ago, to speak Basque was to be abertzale (a patriot or nationalist) by definition. Today, and due to one of the minor controversies we are so fond of, some patriots denounce those who, despite writing in Basque, are Spanish, work for the Spanish and, what is even more surreal—again, despite writing in Basque—are supposedly against the language. To begin talking about literature, we should note that surrealism or a certain kind of political surrealism—speaking in imprecise terms—was the most prestigious literary trend in Basque poetry during the last third of the twentieth century.

One does not know for certain whether one is Basque or not, or when it is that one is Basque, or whether one looks like what one is, or when it is that one looks like something or other. Although I try, it’s almost impossible for me to define the criteria regarding the issue of looking like or not looking like a Basque. Life, of course, unstoppable and cruel as it is, reminds us time and time again of the diversity of everything. But Basque people are obstinate (another immemorial platitude) and we’re still at a loss on this issue.

Speaking Basque and being a patriot, as I’ve already said, have gone hand in hand. On this issue, what you say or the decisions you make on your own are not as important; what’s important is, as is almost always the case, what others say and decide for you. On the same day and in more or less formal venues, at ten in the morning I heard someone say I was not a very patriotic person while at six in the evening another person said I was too patriotic.

Having always heard so many doubts and questions about my identity, I’m not worried anymore; I’m simply fascinated to see how far it can go. It doesn’t matter to me now
I Do Not Know Who “I” Is

The question of my name wasn’t my only problem in the literary world. I’m invited to the University of Santiago, in Galicia, to talk about poetry or criticism. I’m told someone will be at the airport waiting for me. I arrive a little nervous, look around, the rest of the passengers have already gone; they’ve found their suitcases and friends. Little by little, I’m left alone, and there is no embarrassing sign with my name. Suddenly, I see two people who seem to be (well, I too am guided by prejudice and appearances) writers, call them intellectuals, or whatever, I don’t know; they look at the passengers, they appear to be looking for someone. I walk toward them. “Ah, here you are, you don’t look like a poet.” This is the first thing I hear, and I almost, almost prefer it. The word poet has so many negative connotations. Moreover, as somebody once said, one is a poet when one writes what we call a poem. But it’s still annoying not to look like a poet when you’ve been invited somewhere precisely because you are a poet. You feel almost like a fraud, as if you were letting people down, as if you didn’t quite make the grade.

Neither Basque, nor Basque-speaking, nor a poet. I don’t look like anything. To top it off, I remember that, on two different occasions and in two different cities, the bouncers at two gay pubs took the time to explain the nature of the pubs I was about to enter, since I didn’t look . . .

But, here I am before you, invited as a writer, as a poet most certainly, and in the Basque language. I have no other choice than to assume, even vindicate, that I’m all of these things for a time; that, for a time, I assume this avatar, which doesn’t bother me, and that it’s not the first time.

In recent years, I’ve had the chance to take part in translation seminars, book presentations, and readings outside the Basque Country. My main fear in those places is probably receiving questions about Basque politics or, more crudely, about terrorism. I have the impression that this is the Basque Country’s most striking export. But it isn’t the question I’ve had to answer most frequently. Fortunately, the young European poets I’ve met were more interested in literature and the political issue was left in second, third, or fourth place. Nevertheless, I’m aware of the fact that politics are an important part of our lives and that they’re always reflected, in one way or another, in the literature we produce. The most common questions are about the language, so I have had to patiently explain that Basque is not like Catalan, that it is not a Romance language, that it is not a Celtic language. I’ve had to slip and slide along the most repeated stereotypes about the language and I’ve had to talk about the Caucasus, the Berbers, and Atlantis. I could hardly recognize myself talking about those things. I’ve even had to comment on the
by now irritating phrase by Voltaire about how the Basques are a people who sing and
dance at the foot of the Pyrenees. Nobody seems to remember that this sentence appears
in a philosophical tale by Voltaire entitled “The Princess of Babylon,” which is set about
1500 BC. All this business about the antiquity and the mystery of the language is of no
interest to me when I put on my Basque-writer’s clothes; it doesn’t solve anything for
me, it doesn’t help me. Moreover, quite often it’s something against which I am forced to
intervene. Basque is a language in which people communicate with each other, write and
read (although not very much). A standing stereotype about the antiquity and mystery
of the language brings many people to ask about its oral tradition, specifically about the
oral tradition of the verse improvisers. In this tradition, I am part of the so-called public
at large, and it doesn’t interest me much as a writer of poems.

Maybe that’s what the world expects from Basque writers: exoticism, antiquity, mil-
ennial traditions, forgotten quotes by Voltaire or Montaigne—the one in which, talking
about communication between human beings and animals, he finally says: “It’s no great
wonder that we don’t understand them (we do not understand the Basques or the trog-
lodytes either).”

In the postmodern global world, it’s tempting to achieve a certain level of notoriety
by falling back on the specific exoticism that Basque may have, but I think the risk of
slipping into mystifications is extremely high. Ethnography is one thing, literature is
another. In Basque literature, there is a melancholic yearning for a supposedly lost world,
which neither history nor archeology confirm and which, in its most delirious extreme,
has gone as far back as the Neolithic Age. But the Basque Country is a quite normal
place in Western Europe: cities, industries, natural parks, technological areas, highways,
shopping malls, and so forth. Only 3.5 percent of the population works in agriculture or
livestock rearing, but we like to see ourselves at cheese or potato festivals wearing typical
outfits, and the public television channel organizes reality shows that try to recreate rural
life a hundred years ago.

Pretense. A word that we use more and more to talk about ourselves. People use
it when talking about Basque literature, about our literary system too. I used to worry
more about this issue, but now I think it suits our time: more look like and less be.

What Does “I” Write?

So, what do I write if I have not much “I”? I decided to write in the Basque language and
I don’t quite remember the mechanisms that led me to this decision. It’s true, at first I
did write some poems in Spanish, when I was fifteen—horrible poems, to be sure—but I
soon decided to do it in Basque instead. Perhaps it was a way of building an identity for
myself, which I needed; a personal, political, cultural, and collective identity, but it was
very hard; I published my first book of poems when I was thirty-four years old. It wasn’t
easy to make an avatar for myself as a Basque poet, and until I read Izuen gordelekuetan
barrena (In the Shelters of Fear) by Joseba Sarrionandia, I didn’t dare write what I wanted
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to write. I was able to avoid having to struggle with the identity of the young poet, and I’ve always been happy about that.

I guess it’s easy to figure out that I’ve written and write many poems using monologues, that is, placing the poem in another’s voice. When one isn’t very sure of being who one appears to be, a good resource is to adopt other personalities, other masks, other voices. The word I’m most afraid of using is probably ni (I in Basque) and I can guarantee the reader that ni can be anything. In the book of poems I am currently writing, Paul Valéry’s phrase, Il y n’a pas de vrai en matière de moi (There is no truth in matters of I) will have an essential place. And it isn’t a question of aesthetics, of decadence or philosophy. It is not a posture and it certainly isn’t an imposture. It’s a vital question, a question of everyday experience, which comes up again and again. Maybe I should give up literature and become a Buddhist monk and obliterate the ‘I’ still left in me after the fire of annihilation, but I don’t see any of my avatars doing these things.

I don’t claim to have an exclusive insight into this business of questioning one’s identity. It seems to me that this happens to most people in our postmodern world. Readers ask compulsively whether the novel or the poem they have read is real, whether the things it mentions have really happened, whether they have any autobiographical elements. Nowadays, people like memoirs and confessional books more than ever, I think. Beyond curiosity and the hunger for gossip, which have always existed, the reader seems to want to find individuals. This is a huge paradox: in the kingdom of individualism, there appear to be fewer and fewer individuals. Maybe many of us feel less and less like individuals. The best, or the worst, part is that we like it.

Spanish, English, and Other Languages

It’s not easy for me to introduce myself as a Basque poet, since I have my own doubts about my personal identity, my identity as a poet and as a writer. But lately I’ve had to shoulder all these identities. Some of my poems have been translated into Spanish, English, and other languages. Bernard Cassen’s article about the dictatorship of the English language is problematic.¹ I’m not so sure that writing in a particular language determines the concepts that are to be expressed in that language, nor, of course, an exclusive conception of the world. English is the language of former President George W. Bush, but it is Noam Chomsky’s language as well; and the concepts and worldviews of these two individuals could hardly be more different. In my experience in the translation workshops organized by the Literature Across Frontiers program, English was simply a bridge-language we used to understand each other. Literature Across Frontiers is an organization that promotes the understanding and exchange of literature written in European and Mediterranean languages with very few speakers (whether they are totally official and national like Slovenian, Latvian, or Maltese, for instance, or have other kinds

¹. See Bernard Cassen, “Un mundo poliglota para escapar a la dictadura del inglés,” Le Monde diplomatique 111 (January 2005).
of administrative status depending on the countries where they are located, like Basque or Catalan).²

The dissemination of Basque literature outside its own linguistic field is very recent, and it undoubtedly started with the work of Bernardo Atxaga. I say outside its linguistic field because there are many Basque people who only speak Spanish or French. In fact, I think that many translations of Basque works into Spanish take that fact into account (that there is local Basque market), and recently publishers that traditionally published in Basque now want to attract that potential audience. I think translation into Spanish is a fairly obvious path for Basque writers from, let’s say, the Spanish Basque Country. There are already several Basque poetry anthologies in Spanish and several branches of the Instituto Cervantes are extremely interested in Basque poetry.³ I particularly remember the interest of Instituto Cervantes centers in Manchester, Ljubljana, and Vienna, but there are others such as, recently, the one in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The Manchester branch even contributed to the publication of Six Basque Poets in 2007.

We must admit that the temptation to use the English language is great, not only because it can reach the English-speaking audience, but also because, as Dubravka Ugresic (a writer from the former Yugoslavia) says, English is today what Latin used to be: a language for communication among people from very different backgrounds, and this is very important in Europe. It would be difficult for a potential Slovenian reader to come across Basque literature unless there was a bridge-language. I might not have used the best example because, in fact, there already is an anthology of Basque literature in that language: Etzikoa: Antologija sodobne baskovske književnosti (2006); and another anthology exclusively for poetry: Bramil bom očetovo hišo: Antologija moderne baskovske poezije (2007).⁴ Thanks to the English language as a bridge-language, I recently saw Basque poems in Welsh in the magazine Tû Chwith. Some might stifle a chuckle hearing these languages mentioned, but for a writer in the Basque language—indeed, I think, for any Basque speaker—all of this is very important. I’m convinced that we’ve developed a kind of sensitivity toward other languages that, like Basque, have a relatively small number of speakers. We disdain nothing. It’s true that I feel extremely satisfied when I see my poems in Spanish, English, German, or in any other of the “major” languages, but one finds a special pleasure when seeing those undecipherable words. And anyone with a minimum amount of literary sensitivity will be interested in the literature written in that language. The best is not always in English. I dare say, for example, that the most interesting gay poets now are probably in Europe and writing in so-called minority languages.

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². See www.lit-across-frontiers.org (last accessed July 7, 2009).

³. The Instituto Cervantes is a public organization created in 1991 to promote the Spanish language and the cultures of Spanish-speaking countries. See http://londres.cervantes.es/en/default.shtm (last accessed July 7, 2009).

Provisional End

For the time being, I intend to continue cultivating this avatar of the Basque poet; by this I mean, precisely, that of a person who writes poems in Basque. This is my essential avatar, although people complain (it’s incredible) that it has been a long time since I’ve published a book of poems in Basque. I have no doubt that it will be in that language and it will be poetry. I'll put up with the ridiculous question all writers in Basque have to put up with stoically: why do you write in Basque? If you want a Basque writer to take a disliking to you, all you have to do is ask this question. The best answer I’ve heard recently was given by Jokin Muñoz. He said he writes in Basque because he feels like it, and because he writes better in Basque than in Spanish. To the question “why poetry?” the answer would probably be the same: because I feel like it and because I write poetry better than anything else. I also have an avatar that writes op-ed articles in Basque, and another one that coordinates a reading workshop that meets once a month to talk about a book written in Spanish or translated into Spanish at the library in Arrasate-Mondragón, one of the most abertzale (nationalist, patriotic) towns in the Basque Country. And I even had an avatar that wrote op-ed articles and literary reviews in Spanish. And here I am, trying hard, groping at a way to explain “myself” in my own mother-tongue. Writing poetry in Basque is a kind of freedom, and since it is a freedom, since it is freedom, it becomes a permanent exercise in building “I”s (it is necessary to be able to say “I” in plural) and others at the same time. It may not be very Basque according to certain criteria. By the way, I wouldn’t mind knowing whether anybody knows what “Basqueness” consists of. I’m always ready to learn and even if I’m not capable of becoming a Basque, I’d be more than happy to look like one. When all is said and done, that’s what really matters: to appear to be. I would really like to look Basque and to stop having all these little problems.

Bibliography


All authors who write in a minority language at some point find themselves struggling to answer a basic question: Why do you do what you do? Why do you write in a language that few understand, instead of choosing any one of those occupying a central orbit in the solar system of languages?

In our case the question, simply expressed, is “Why Basque and not Castilian?” And the question is always accompanied by a critique of the Basque language itself. It has been almost a century since Miguel de Unamuno’s well-known conference on the scientific and literary inviability of Basque, and the notion was even then quite old. Our first author, Bernard Etxepare, took on the problem in his famous “Kontrapas”: “Bertze jendek uste zuten ezin eskriba zaiteien, orai dute forogatu enganatu zirela” (Many people believed that it could not be written; now they can see that they were mistaken).1 It is evident, too, in Axular’s famous argument from his prologue to Gero: “Baldin egin balitz euskara az…” (“If as many books had been written in Basque as in Latin, French, or other languages, Basque would be as rich and accomplished as they are”).2 If I may add a third example, let us consider the translation competitions held in the Basque Country in the years before the Spanish Civil War. Their objective was none other than to test the language, “confronting” it with the work of classical authors such as Virgil and Cervantes.

Translated by Maria Colbert.


The issue of Basque’s inviability has become a cliché over time. Is there any Basque author who has not tackled it? Has there ever been a year in which opponents of minority languages kept quiet and, when discussing Spain, did not cite Unamuno? I do not believe so. Nor do I foresee any improvement in the future. I am not an enthusiast of uchronias, but if I were to write something set in an alternate history, surely there would be a Catalan, Galician, or Basque writer who, facing a journalist, a professor, or a critic, would attempt to explain the basic question: why he does what he does, why he writes in a language that, if I may return to the astronomy metaphor, is but a remote asteroid, far from the three or four central celestial bodies. At times the inquiry is direct, at others, subtle. But it never goes away.

Those who write in English or Spanish also face questioning, for inquiry, one could affirm, like sex, is a part of human nature, and a universal one. But the issues at stake are different. These writers are never interrogated about the language they use unless they switch from one sun to another—from Spanish to French, for example, as in Héctor Bianciotti’s case; or from a planet or satellite to a sun—from Catalan to Spanish, as Terenci Moix did in his day. Yet even in those cases, the tone of the inquiry is rarely negative.

Not even in the most blissful ignorance can a writer of a minority language completely forget the pressures around him. The problem of his language is a part of his life, of his journey toward the finished work, “of his search for the blue flower,” as Novalis would say. And he has no easy solution, because his position differs from that of the politician, who can get away with a rhetorical nod to the importance of a language while living a publicly accepted double life in which the language of privilege is not the one he praises, but, rather, the other, supposedly alien one. In the writer’s case, lies do not work. What might satisfy a politician—such as a Volapük—cannot satisfy him. He must answer truly, to others and to himself.

He cannot give a simple explanation. “I write in a minority language because it is mine,” he may declare. But his interlocutor will not be satisfied by such a spare explanation. “True,” he will reply. “But the other one, the majority language, is also yours. In fact, you and I are even now using it to communicate.” Faced with this objection, the writer may say, “The minority language is very important to me.” Then the interlocutor will ask: “Why is it important?” And it is not easy. It is not easy to give a good answer, to answer with truth and to answer to oneself.

Why is the Basque language important? Important to me, to other writers, to the Basque people in general?

Because of the way I was educated and the environment in which I was raised, I had always accepted one reason, which I no longer believe. A language is important, I was told, because it carries its own unique worldview. If a language is lost, so, too, is the vision, or at the very least one of the elements that makes this world richer for its differences. If Euskara were to disappear, the loss would be felt not only by Basques, but by
everyone, by all of Humanity. For a time, this argument in defense of the language was termed “ecological.”

But one fact is undeniable: the constant growth of the world and its representation. This growth is exponential, an economist would say. Symbolic universes are infinite in number; they always have been because the human experience is so vast that it cannot be enumerated. If this is the case, then does the loss of one point within the infinite matter? How are the majority of the people of Brazil, the United States, or China affected by the loss of a language spoken by only 800,000 people? Besides, Basque would never be entirely lost given the thousands of books written in the language, texts that may indeed mirror the particular vision of the Basque people.

Then again, one cannot simply assume the association between a particular language and a genuine worldview as if it were a matter of fact. It may be true that great thinkers, such as Wittgenstein and Frege, defend this perspective; yet equally distinguished speakers remain in the opposite camp too, and so the question remains unresolved.

I write in Basque, but my work is not grounded in considerations of this nature. They do not work for me as a writer, nor do I believe that they can work for others. Or even less for society. These considerations are of a material that resembles cork rather than an anchor; they are incapable of preventing a language from being swept away by what we call the “flow of history.”

Why is language important? Why is the lingua navarorum, the language of the Basques, important?

There are many who, putting aside all philosophical inquiry, turn to what they have closest at hand: their own wishes, their will. “It is important to me, and that is enough of a reason. I do not have to explain anything to anyone.” Writer Koldo Izagirre turned this response—Euskaraz eta kitto! (In Euskara, and that’s that!)—into a slogan, and led many Basque citizens to identify with the Joxe Azurmendi poem so often cited in the 1970s, “Manifestu atzeratua” (Belated Manifesto),

But we wish to be free / is that my fault? / They tried to give us a tree from Gernika, / a false blank check, / as if the desire to be free were a sin, / but despite that, we, quite simply, wish to be free. / That is what we want, that is all. / This is the latest deception: / they have led us to believe / before from outside and now from within / that it is our responsibility to justify our wish to be free.³

Without a doubt, it is a strong poem, a resounding slogan, an argument seemingly without rebuttal. It is bulletproof. Who has the right to interfere with the lives of others, or to restrain the will of the people?

However, this argument is problematic in several ways.

First of all, putting into practice the vision of Joxe Azurmendi or Koldo Izagirre requires constant effort. Abdelfattah Kilito wrote that the soul of a language, its motor, what brings it to life, is Repetition, and that speaking is in large part a repetition of what we hear and what we read. In our case, speaking—or to speak by repeating—at times requires the effort of translation, when we try to express in Euskara what we have heard or read in Castilian, in French, or in English. However, at other times it implies speaking with discomfort—when a person among the listeners is excluded from the conversation—or it implies speaking twice if an interlocutor knows the language, but not very well. I once wrote, “To be Basque is to work overtime.” I was referring to my experience within the Basque Country. We should not forget that it is a minority language even in its own territory.

What I am discussing now is a truth that we all know from experience: over time the constant effort becomes intolerable. Even a hero strong enough for one act cannot perform a thousand. Heroism loaded with desire is intensive; when it must be made extensive, it fades.

I met a man who entered a burning house and risked his life to save the data compiled for a Basque dictionary, the first to be published after the Spanish Civil War. But, alas, in his day-to-day life the man later proved incapable of using the dictionary that he had saved. He never wrote even a single line in the language he so loved. In truth, he never fully learned it. There are so many like him: heroes for a day.

One might surmise that writers can best resist the constant current that threatens to sweep away their language, since historically they have been so politically engaged. However, when we look at our recent literary history, we can see what has happened. Lizardi, Gabriel Aresti, and Jon Mirande wrote and published very little. Jon Mirande abandoned literature and the Basque language explicitly; Gabriel Aresti did more or less the same; many others who began publishing during the 1960s were never heard from again. Furthermore, a book of the significance of Gabriel Aresti’s Harri eta Herri (Stone and Country) was originally published in a bilingual edition. The same is true of the most important book of the period before the Spanish Civil War, Lizardi’s Biotz begietan (In the Heart and in the Eyes). The will to act heroically was great, but it was not enough.

It might appear that the problem of writing in a minority language is circumstantial, since Gabriel Aresti, Lizardi, and Mirande all lived in periods of strong opposition to literary creation in Basque. How many university students could have read Harri eta Herri exclusively in Basque during the 1970s? Very few. However, the circumstance of low Basque literacy exacerbated a centuries-old difficulty; it did not create it. The difficulty existed, as I have said, during the lives of Etxepare and Axular. And it continues to exist in the present day.

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One of my experiences may illustrate the current state of the problem. When I decided to collect a series of short essays in a book, *Lista de locos* (List of Fools), I realized that a great majority of the texts were written in Castilian. I had noticed the imbalance much earlier, but was surprised at its degree. In soccer terms, the score was 12 to 3. After the initial shock—those of us who became writers in the 1970s are shocked when we perceive a distance from the maternal language—I assessed the numbers: three of the twelve texts in Castilian were written upon requests that originated in another country, and the language choice was based on the need to translate the pieces. Of the nine remaining, four had been written for magazines or newspapers in Spain, and the other five for conferences outside the Basque Country. The three texts written in Basque had not been requested. They were all self-assigned.

The imbalance was resolved when translator Asun Garikano put the texts originally written in Castilian into Basque. The texts were later included in a book called *Groenlandiako lezioa* (A Lesson from Greenland). It required a tremendous effort, but the experience allowed me to better understand what was happening with the use of Basque as a literary language. The origin of the problem, it turns out, lies not only in the strength of the Spanish and other national literary institutions, which are able to request more and request better, proposing topics of interest; but it lies, also, in the weakness, the lack of dynamism, of the Basque literary institution.

The latter came as a surprise to me, like the discovery of a landscape that has been rendered invisible in its familiarity. But as I reviewed the papers, I observed that my entire career had provided few opportunities to use Basque for topics of objective merit. Of the many conferences to which I have been invited in the last twenty-five years or so, the majority have focused on the same overwrought topics: the situation of Basque literature, the history of Basque literature, linguistic unification and Basque literature, and so forth. My self-motivated work, then, was not written on a whim, but rather as a means to foster thought and to continue to learn.

Under circumstances in which the selection of a language requires so great and so varied efforts, desire alone may provide, *ad hoc*, a kind of patch—as in *Groenlandiako lezioa*, for example—but it cannot sustain a long-term project. It is but another cork. Neither the Basque language nor its literature will prosper in this manner.

There exists, furthermore, another important objection to the point of view of Joxe Azurmendi and Koldo Izagirre. Desires do not necessarily band together in the same direction. In the case at hand, one could oppose—and indeed many have opposed—the desire to live in Basque with a conflicting one, arguing: “I want nothing to do with the Basque language.” (A third-rate, right-wing, politician expressed such an opinion on Basque television: “Why should I learn Basque? Why not Afghani?”) In places that have

reached only a precarious political equilibrium, the defense of a language based on desire does not bode well for the future. Those who do not sympathize with the cause see it as the result of childish whim. Resisting the current of the majority language requires something more solid than cork.

I would like to digress now to refine a point. When I confront the question of the anchor and the cork, and debate the foundations of a minority language and its literature, I am not thinking about individuals, but about society and, more precisely, literary society. The issues at stake are very different.

In the case of the particular individual, of a particular writer, the choice of language need not be dramatic. It does not matter whether the language he selects to begin with is a minority language, an asteroid a hundred light years away from the inner stars, since there is an artifact, a rocket ship—an aerodynamic cork, if you will—capable of crossing sidereal space in just a few months. The name of the artifact: at times Translatio; other times Traductio; or, in its sweetest form, Tradutrice.

It is that simple. The possibility of translation exists, made all the more real by the fact that the immense majority of those who write in asteroid-languages know at least one sun-language and can complete the task themselves. And so it is false to consider us, for example, writers of just one language. We are writers of two languages. Whether or not we use them at the moment we create literature depends on many factors. But the possibility is real. We operate in two linguistic and literary systems at the same time, and the rocket—Translatio, Traductio, Tradutrice—is always near; at times, close to home. Therefore, the \textit{ad hominem} question directed at a specific writer does not make sense. \“Why do you write in Basque, a language which is spoken by only 800,000 people?\” The answer could be: \“Because either way, if needed, I could turn to the others, Spanish or French.\” The minority language does not limit a writer, because it is always linked to another.

I have come across only one exception in my entire life: a writer from Eastern Europe who lived in Spain. He could express himself in Spanish, but he did not know the language well enough to write in it. Yet his country—apart from its political problems—was far away and among the smallest in his part of the world, with a very limited literary market. He found the idea of writing in his own language absurd. He did not want to. What he wanted was to write in Spanish. But he could not do it. I remember him as a man of a sad countenance. I know that, with the help of a friend who was a translator—one of the few capable of the job—he managed to write a novel. But the situation was untenable because the translator, the aerodynamic cork who might have saved him, had other work and could not give him much time. As far as I know, the author’s literary career ended with that one novel.

I return now to my digression to further refine the point.

Choosing a language does not pose a problem for the individual, for a particular writer; but when the subject in question is a literary institution, such as Basque literature, the need for anchor-reasons to choose the minority language becomes urgent. One must
realize everything that these anchors secure, so that the minority language will not be carried away by the current of the sun languages or planet languages: forty authors, fifty translators, one hundred language and literature professors, one hundred and fifty cultural associations, ten publishing houses—some of them sizable—fifteen critics, ten theater companies, five radio stations, one or two newspapers, three magazines, one television channel, twenty musicians, twenty visual artists, five movie directors, and five audiovisual production companies, as well as a stable market of 25,000 readers and an average sale of 1,500 book copies per title. The numbers I cite are bare minimums, thresholds; below them there can be no cultural or literary life in any individual language. By “life” I mean movement, breathing, color, the type of healthy color that results from working out at the gym, not from makeup.

To anchor a literary institution, to keep it alive, is a difficult task. It always has been, but now, because of new technologies and their economic consequences, it is more so than ever. Consider what has happened in countries such as Morocco or the Czech Republic. I once attended the Tanger (Tangier) Book Fair and, before that, Prague’s. There was barely any activity. Very few people were buying books; the atmosphere was sad. I thought to myself that in twenty or thirty years, when bilingualism takes hold throughout Europe, when the Czechs and Moroccans speak English like the Swedes and Dutch do, the literary institutions of those countries will become a thing of the past.

One might think that the considerations I raise resemble those of the joke that began by asking, “How many people work in Spain?” and ended with the punchline: “So you see, Manolo. You and I are the only people working in Spain. But you better get ready, because I’m getting tired.” Nevertheless, I believe that what is taking place in other cultural areas, specifically in music, bears out my point.

In Euskadi, the language dominating the airwaves is English. The lyrics of that unending stream of songs that floods us are almost always in English. I remember once, in Bordeaux, meeting a young person who had managed, I do not know how, to rig his radio to receive Basque music programs. “They’re terrific,” he told me. I figured he was an admirer of Basque culture. But then, as he continued to talk, I realized that, for him, Bilbao and Donostia-San Sebastian stations amounted to antennas relaying American and British radio signals. They allowed him to listen to the music to which in his country, because of laws protecting the French language and culture, he had limited or no access.

I expect that literature is subject to the same trends as music, despite the belief of those who, affirming its distinct position, point to the special relationship between literature and language. The notion, upon first inspection, appears sound, since the young man from Bordeaux might listen to songs in English all day but would hardly act in an equivalent way when he picks a detective novel to read. Simply put, he would read in the language he knows best, his own. And that, for now, is just what a young person in Prague, Madrid, or Berlin would do. But let us remember that there exist other cases. A typical young Swede, for example, is completely bilingual and reads in two languages:
that of his country and English. So does the young Dutchman. And in Morocco, even children can read in two languages: Arabic and French.

Let us consider again the question of Basque readership. In statistical terms, it consists of a block of twenty thousand adults, with a corresponding reserve of child and adolescent readers. The figure is impressive and taken on its own would be enough to rank the Basque literary institution above those of nations with similar characteristics, such as Wales or Frisia, or even countries such as Uruguay, Peru, Serbia, or the Czech Republic. But, even though the figure is a positive sign, as are other statistics—the number of publishing houses, the number of cultural associations and all the rest that I have mentioned—the Basque literary institution has a weakness: the very bilingualism of its readers. They are bilingual readers, furthermore, who in large numbers—ten of the twenty thousand, at the very least—use Castilian or French as their first language or as their cultural language.

Earlier, I stated that a bilingual writer can make use of an aerodynamic cork, the spaceship called *Translatio, Traductio*, or *Tradutrice*, to enter into orbit around a sun language. Surely, bilingual readers can make the same journey on, if you will, an armchair rocket ship, without even moving. They reach out a hand and, instantly, they are reading a book in one of the sun languages. This, I insist, is the great weakness of the Basque literary institution. If the readers, the foundation of the literary institution, leave, it is doomed.

Mark Twain wrote that any phrase, if repeated enough times, can become comic and provoke laughter from a conference audience. I agree, unless the repeated phrase is a question, in which case it becomes irritating. But I must accept this risk and return to my initial questions, viewing them now from a historical perspective. Why has Euskara been written and read, despite all the obstacles? Why has a literary institution and culture based on an asteroid language been kept alive? I respond now without branching off into further digression: because the anchor for which we are looking can be found lying not on a deserted shore, but on the most crowded beach. It is the same anchor that, for centuries, since the end of the eighteenth at the very least, has secured every literary institution in the world. It is the anchor of utility: public, political, ideological utility on the one hand, and strictly literary, intimate utility on the other.

As we all know, literature is politically useful because it is essential to the process of “building the national spirit,” as it was termed during Franco’s dictatorship. The nation, that human and cultural essence that legitimates the existence of a differentiated political unit, of an independent state, requires proof, signs that it truly exists; proof and signs of its greatness as well.

Isaiah Berlin explains this process in his description of the birth of the Romantic Movement. According to Berlin, in the eighteenth century Germany felt inferior to France, with its philosophers and literary figures, as well as to Italy and Spain, with their art and architecture. German intellectuals therefore began to place value upon what had been excluded in the prevailing understanding of culture—folktales and folk music, for
example, together with German urban architecture and the works of Martin Luther—in order to foment a true national spirit.8

The history of these ideas is well known, but I wish to underline the universal need to feel worthy, to not have to feel inferior to the citizens of a neighboring country. Remember the literary manuals used in schools and colleges. Although they may not speak explicitly about “building the national spirit,” the unadorned truth is that they tend to describe national histories. They include no foreign authors, and the local authors selected are those who best express the supposed national “spirit.” In twentieth-century Spain, these were authors and books that promoted a metaphysical concept of Castile.

Let us consider the intra-literary, in the ways in which literary works are described. Let us take the example of the *jarcha*. If the critic Michael Solomon is correct, certain scholars of Spanish literature separated this poetic form from the tree trunk from which it was an offshoot for the simple reason that the tree trunk—the *muwassaha*, a longer form of poetry—was Arabic.

The same applies to other countries and other cultural fields. In the United States—as documented in Frances S. Sauder’s book *The Cultural Cold War* (2000)—the CIA actively supported artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Alexander Calder.9 They were interested in proving that American painting, produced under capitalism, was more revolutionary and progressive than that of painters from the Communist bloc. This fact may not tell us anything about the quality of the painters’ work, but it does shed light on the relationship, sometimes hidden, between ideological wars and artistic production. Indeed, the relationship between the Communist movement and the diffusion of the writing of authors such as Pablo Neruda and Bertold Brecht was not so hidden.

I cite another example, also related to the United States, more specifically to the great national parks of the west. Let us visit the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, and head to the exhibit rooms displaying paintings of Yosemite. One of the titles reads: “The Cathedral.” Should we read this as a religious interpretation of the countryside, like the example of Zion Canyon in Mormon Utah, with its mountains named “The Temple” and “Altar of Sacrifice”? According to University of the Basque Country professor Kepa Altonaga, we should not. The explanation for the title lies in the Romantic tradition. What Isaiah Berlin wrote of eighteenth-century Germans could be applied to Americans of a century ago. As a new nation, the United States did not possess the art or literature of Europe, but, to make itself worthy—during the culmination of the so called “conquest of the west” and the discovery of the extraordinary spaces of that part of the world—it could fall back on “natural works of art.” Yosemite, the Grand Canyon . . . were they not as valuable as Notre Dame de Paris?


To summarize, literature and art serve as weapons in the fight waged by different nations to be themselves and to be “great”; they work at the service of identity. Or, to put it more precisely, they work at the service of a political ideology that is almost always concerned with questions of identity.

I return now to literature and the case of Basque literature. I do not wish to repeat what I have explained, only to state that Euskara too was quickly put into service. The fight for identity would center upon the language. So, too, would some of the most aggressive efforts of Spanish and French opponents, nationalists from the opposite side. Literature was caught in the middle of the fray. First, oral literature, if you will excuse the term. Then, the written word. Lizardi, Orixe, Aresti, all of us. The language worked well: it was a strange language, pre-Indo-European, the only language in the world in which verbs express gender. But it was not enough for it to be a rarity. Basque also had to be a language highly useful for expression and poetry. It awaited a great poet or prose writer. “When a Basque author wins the Nobel Prize, the Basque language will be saved.” At the time in which translators were taking on Virgil and Cervantes, the idea was often repeated.

I have observed that some authors downplay the political side of literature written in Basque, the implications that their work might have in the construction of a nation. I know this well, because I am, or have been in the past, one of those authors. In general, they profess not to see themselves as nationalists or separatists, and not to imagine a Basque nation or an independent Euskadi when writing; but these affirmations—and the terminology upon which they usually rely—lack precision. The anchor of Basque literature has long been the ideology of identity in its many forms, including what Jaume Fuster, quoting a Catalan friar who was a contemporary of Axular, described as “nationism.” “Nationism” is not unlike what George Orwell called “patriotism,” love of what is one’s own, and, above all, the defense of one’s own world against aggression.

Publishers, magazines, cultural associations—everything that comprises the Basque literary institution—arose thanks to the sector of society consisting of patriots, nationists, and nationalists. And the first readers—as well as the second and third—shared the same origin. I will add that the strength of the Basque literary institution, the fact that it is stronger than those of countries that in theory should rank above it—Serbia, Uruguay, the Czech Republic—can be explained in large part by the repression, not only of the ideology of independence, but of all of Basque culture, that followed the Spanish Civil War.

Ecce homo: I was one of those punished at school for speaking my family’s language. Fifteen years later, when I went to Bilbao and somebody told me reproachfully that I should be writing in Euskara, and not in Spanish—I had been among the winners of the “Francisco de Cossio” Prize handed out by the Valladolid newspaper *El Norte de Castilla*—I did not hesitate. I agreed that my interlocutor was correct. And those who thought like
me were, I would not call them a legion—there are not so many of us—but there were many. There was not one opponent to Franco in the Basque Country who did not support, at the very least rhetorically, the cause of Basque culture.

The same process took place in the field of visual art, especially with sculpture. The primary figures were Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida. The work of both sculptors was rooted, firstly, in German Romanticism and in popular culture—in the sense of the term that applies to the œuvre of Aranzadi or Barandiaran—and, secondly, in the political ideology of Basque nationalism. That is not always how history tells the story, not even in the case of Jorge Oteiza, but to do otherwise is to deny the evidence.

When I examine the recent past, I do not find any ideology more powerful or more disseminated than patriotism or nationism, and nationalism. Sometimes, it has been expressed on its own, as was the case with Jose Luis Alvarez Enparanza; at other times, it has been combined with Communism, as in Gabriel Aresti. At other times still, more concealed, the ideology has adopted a scientific or poetic guise, as occurred with the two theories I discussed earlier: the one that treated language as a world view and the one that, poetically, expressed the sufficiency of desire. But it has never been absent. In fact, it is never absent from any literary institution in the world. We could not be the exception.

Apart from all of these considerations, we must not forget that the ingredients used to forge an anchor for any literary institution include a second type of material, subtler than the political variety: what I described before as strictly literary or “intimate.” Political ideology can facilitate the existence of publishers, magazines, newspapers, cultural associations, and even writers, but in the end literature must reach the reader. And if it does not—if a book does not resonate with the reader, if it does not provoke laughter, or console, or transport through poetic space, or teach something, or stimulate thought, then everything else counts for nothing. This material may be subtler, but it is stronger than any other.

It has worked at the service of sun-language literatures and planet-language literatures, too. Perhaps politics and ideology provide these literatures their first impetus; perhaps this impetus is more powerful than it appears. That is the claim of some French intellectuals who affirm that the dominance of the English language is not “natural.” But it goes without saying that Antonio Machado, Paul Valery, Graham Greene, Cesare Pavese, Ernest Hemingway, and many other authors owe their fame to their readers, to their readers above all else.

A novel by the Irish writer Flann O’Brien tells the story of a mailman who delivered by bicycle. After many years the mailman became thirty percent bicycle, just as his bicycle became thirty percent mailman. Returning to my question and applying Flann O’Brien’s method, I ask myself: what proportion of the material comprising the Basque anchor is political, and what percentage is literary?
It has been forty years since the unfortunate time in which a great number of readers admitted that “militancy” motivated them to purchase books in Euskara, and almost as many since the first steps in the process of the standardization of the language, the unification of dialects that was necessary for any possibility of cultural development. Fewer years, but still many, have passed since Basque became an official language in the Basque Autonomous Community and in part of Navarre, as well as a language of common parlance in schools and in many university departments. Has a transformation taken place? Has the anchor switched over from being seventy percent political and thirty percent literary to the inverse proportions? Do Basque readers share the characteristics of those of Madrid, London, and Paris? That would be ideal.

My desire does not contain a value judgment in favor of one of the two materials, and I share none, or almost none, of the beliefs of those lletraferit who, to use the example of Jorge Luis Borges, uphold the autonomy of literature at a distance, in some seventh heaven that cannot be reached even by cork, our aerodynamic cork. In fact, Borges himself proves that such a space exists only in the minds of those who profess this aesthetic doctrine, for few writers have been as ideological as the author of “El hombre de la esquina rosada” (“The Man from the Pink Corner”).

I prefer an anchor more literary than political for the simple reason that I believe it to be more secure. Not only because the subtler material is in general terms, as I said earlier, stronger, but also because of the changes that have taken place in the Basque Country. Our situation is not what it once was, but rather much improved, and an ideological transformation has occurred. The politics of Basque identity no longer require literature, as they did when they had nothing else at their disposition. What good is literature for a political cause that can make use of an autonomous government, institutions, radio, and television channels? Perhaps literature retains something of the aura that surrounded it in the past, when Euskadi was in the process of forging its cultural destiny, but that splendor is rapidly dimming.

The key question then is the proportional composition of our anchor. If it is seventy-thirty, much more political than literary, that would bode poorly, for ours would be a phantom literary institution, propped up by government money, sheltering false writers, false critics, false professors, and all variety of posers, achieving nothing, except perhaps a product of “counter-alchemy”: the transformation of gold into common dust. If it is fifty-fifty, half political and half literary, our situation would be unstable, with a tendency to worsen, dragged down by the dead weight of the posers. If the proportion is thirty-seventy, thirty percent political and seventy percent literary, it would mean our literary institution could safely depend on its essential base of twenty thousand readers, and that its future is likely secure.

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My hypothesis is that ours is the fifty-fifty scenario, that the Basque literary institution is neither entirely phantasmal nor entirely real but an unstable constellation orbiting an asteroid language. If this is truly the case, then the question over the reasons to write in Basque rather than in any of the languages occupying a central orbit in the lingual solar system could be posed in the following terms: Which is better: to directly approach the orbit of one of the sun languages or to build a base on the asteroid and venture forth from there, venture forth to the world and across sidereal space? Is it worth remaining within one’s own literary institution?

Some time ago, I moderated a round table of Dutch authors held in Barcelona and asked the participants to speak about this subject. One of them had complained about the difficulties of being an author in Holland, and I wanted to know which they believed was more difficult, to publish in Dutch in Holland or in English in the United States. For an unknown author, where were conditions more favorable? Harry Mulish, one of the best-read authors within as well as outside of his country, answered for everyone: “It’s much easier to publish in Dutch in Holland!” he shouted.

I agree with Harry Mulish. A Basque author is better off staying within his literary institution, on his own asteroid. The shortest route around the world passes through there. It would be interesting to track the career paths of two writers of equal talent, one of them from, for example, Burgos, and the other from Donostia-San Sebastian, the first writing in Castilian, the second in Euskara. According to my hypothesis, the road ahead of the Basque author, a road that in the 1960s and 1970s was so hard—dangerous even—is much less bumpy since the founding of democracy than that of his neighbors to the south. I refer to the relative ease of publishing a first novel, and to the media attention the publication would draw. And to the government support the Basque author would receive from Vitoria-Gasteiz as well as from Madrid. Let us not forget: the Basque Writers’ Association receives a direct annual subsidy of approximately 600,000 euros or $940,000. There is no parallel outside of the Basque Country. Writers of other literary institutions have it far worse.

And what goes for writers goes also for critics, journalists, professors, and other members of the literary institution. “To be Basque means to work overtime,” I have said before, and repeat now. But let me correct myself: “To be Basque sometimes means working overtime. At other times it means having it made, working a soft job.”

We were looking for an anchor? Well, there it is. “Why do you do what you do?” our interlocutor asks. We can answer: “Among other reasons, because it is much better for us. As an economist might say, it is a matter of optimization, achieving the best possible results while expending minimal resources.” We could also answer in the following, more neutral fashion: “Writing in a minority language like Basque is more useful.”

I remember a teacher I had when I was young who used to tell us: “There are two types of things that people love: the ugly and the inexact.” I can say little about the first category. Of the second, I will say that I agree, and that love of inexactness gives rise to the false ideas and stereotypes that bog down comprehension of the literary act. We see
this occurring in reaction to our writing. The majority of our interlocutors lack basic knowledge of the state of Basque culture. Some think that the language is barely spoken and are surprised—deeply surprised—to learn that the household language of an author such as myself is in fact Euskara; others think that it is not official; still others believe that the best-selling author has not surpassed three hundred copies, two hundred of which are shipped directly to a sordid warehouse somewhere. “Why do you do what you do?” lovers of the inexact ask. And they speak of sacrifice, of rabid nationalism, and of worse.

But the truth is different. The Basque literary institution exists because it is in an enviable position. Basque authors exist, whatever their creed or values, because conditions favor their career. Thus, the anchor is so strong that, given enough time, and if its subtler elements grow to the desired seventy-thirty proportion, writing in Euskara will be like traveling by aerodynamic cork across sidereal space. And there will be no author happier than the Basque author.
Bibliography


I shall start my exposition speaking about the difficulty every Basque writer has in speaking about his or her feeling of identity. Of something that is apparently straightforward. The feeling of belonging to a territory, a language and a culture, can be experienced—at least at the symbolic level—as something variable, confusing, and susceptible to being constantly contested. I will then speak about my personal connection with the Basque language, Euskara, what it meant for me to learn it somewhat late in life and the circumstances that have surrounded my literary trajectory within the field of modern children’s literature in Basque. Finally, I wish to propose a personal reflection on literary bilingualism and, more specifically, on the exercise of self-translation as a praxis that I have long been practicing and on the strategies one must take into account, as well as on their future perspectives. I am of course describing all of this from my personal and eminently autobiographical point of view.

A Pin, a Map of Europe, and a Magnifying Glass

When I am asked where I am from, I always miss having a pin handy. A pin and a small map of Europe. If the person who asks is from the planet Earth, Europe will probably ring a bell; if he or she is from Europe, my small country will probably also ring a bell, but depending on where he or she comes from, that bell will sound like that of a cow
grazing in a faraway pasture or the echo of a piece of news in the newspaper, or perhaps it will sound like a somewhat bizarre surname such as Zenaurrezuzabezitía, which will be almost impossible to repeat. Whoever tries will desist in despair. Ah! A Basque surname! If the person is Spanish, my country will probably evoke not an echo but a blast, that of a car bomb that explodes anywhere, at any time. The pin will be useful to pinpoint a place on the map. The magnifying glass will also come in handy to observe how that territory is situated between two significant nations of the old Europe and which is divided, in turn, into seven, four, or three territories or provinces. Euskadi. Euskal Herria. Vasconia. The Basque Country. That would all depend on what map we are looking at. Another bizarre characteristic. In spite of the pin, the map of Europe, and the magnifying glass, that person will have to understand that I come from a people that both exists and does not exist at the same time. A people that, according to some, is a nation. A nation without a state, others will say. A country that, if it exists, exists only for some. But depending on who you are talking to, I would be defined as Spanish, Spanish Basque, French, French Basque, or, simply, Basque. I have identified myself before others qualifying myself in one or another of these forms, depending on where I am, the context or the situation.

But what nobody will ever deny is that they speak a very old language, the origins of which are lost in the hazes of prehistory, the mere defense of which makes people cringe, marginalizes you, and makes people underestimate you. Any Basque man or woman needs to have some notes handy the moment he or she steps out of the Basque territory. In those notes, Basques need to explain briefly and clearly the origin of their language, and depending on how the question is formulated, we may need to amplify the answer to make it more generic and explain where Basques come from, and then we need to leap forward in time to explain the so-called Basque question. I am not going to complain that I am being asked these things because it is often more dangerous when such questions are not asked or do not elicit interest; or when people think they know the answer and look away in disgust as if it was just another old joke.

Now that I have explained the difficulty of explaining where I am from, I now have to say where I come from, although now referring to the literary territory I belong to. I belong to literature in Basque, in Euskara, the Basque language, one of the official languages within the Spanish state at present.

Naming Euskara, the Basque language, is naming something strange, unknown, exotic and impenetrable. It is an opaque language for our neighboring Romance languages, which often increases the sensation of marginalization, of being in the periphery of the periphery, a consented and self-assumed loneliness. I will just qualify the language as a minority, marginalized, and unknown language. These are three terms that Basque writers have to suffer in their own flesh and bones.

Now that I have come to this point, I need to explain what made me learn, at such a late stage in my life, such a marginalized language, what personal motivations encour-
aged me, and what driving force kept me in a process in which there were quite a few moments of discontent.

**The Linguistic Wound**

I have always envied Basque writers who have written their work in their mother tongue, their familiar language in which they were born and were brought up; those who can always recur to their language to explain why they made it their literary language. It would all be so much simpler if I said that my mother tongue had been Euskara. That way, I would have no need of these preambles that I now feel forced to lay out. Whoever drinks from those irrefutable sources has many a matter solved and has ready-made answers. But that is not my case.

I have published some thirty books in children and young people’s literature. But I learned Basque, almost self-taught, from the age of twenty-three on. And recently, I have just published my first autobiographic-style novel, in Spanish, *La fiesta en la habitación de al lado* (The Party in the Next Room, 2007). Most of those children’s books I have then translated into Spanish, which is the language I have spoken since I was a child, and in spite of that, I have resorted to a translator to see my latest novel in Basque. Almost twenty-five years after my first published book hit the stands, I still see the need to try to explain biographically this somewhat peculiar situation. And to do so in the most objective way possible, that is to say, fleeing from what could have been, but was not; and from what should have been, but has not been.

I had to learn Basque on my own but that does not mean that my parents did not know or use the language, or that I did not listen to it since I was a child—it only means they did not transmit it to me. They preferred that I be a Spanish-speaker, as simple as that. All of that within a context of losers, in the post-Spanish Civil War period, and a brutal repression of the Basque language as an efficient form of political repression in the Francoist dictatorship. Therefore, I have not considered myself completely *euskaldunberri* (a Basque speaker that has learned Basque rather than receiving it as a maternal language) either, like other well-known Basque writers whose family language was clearly Spanish or French. Basque social linguistics offer a much wider range of possibilities than that which is often mentioned, and more so if reference is made to the historical and political moment, to Franco’s dictatorship, that characterizes my generation.

I like to imagine that the first words I heard when I was born were in Basque. It could not have been otherwise, since, traditionally, in the social and linguistic environment in which I grew up, kids and dogs were always spoken to in Basque. As my mother fell ill when she gave birth to me, it was my grandmother who cradled me tirelessly and she had no option but to speak to me in Basque. I never heard my mother and her speak in Spanish, so Basque was the language I was cradled and consoled in.

On the other hand, from the moment I was able to reason, I remember myself speaking Spanish and, I should say, it was a Spanish full of lexicon in Basque. For years I have had to think twice before saying “spoon” in Spanish, as all my life, at home, we
have always said pass me the *burruntzali*; or throw that away in the *txerrijana* (trash), or I feel sick from *bihoztorra* (stomach acidity) or *betekada* (eating too much). The second dish we always termed *jakiya* (food). Not to mention expressions that I have used up to very recently, being absolutely convinced I was speaking the language of Cervantes: How are you? That conventional question I have always answered, as many others, “*bien, habrá que decir*” (“well, one should say”), a literal translation of *ondo esan beharko* in Basque, an incomprehensible expression for a Spanish-speaker that does not live in the Basque Country.

A friend of mine who is a writer from Mundaka (Bizkaia) always used to defend the opinion according to which whoever wishes to learn Basque syntax just has to go to Mundaka or Gernika and listen to the Spanish that is spoken there. On the lexical or syntax level, Basque has always been incrusted into our Spanish, but that did not compensate a cruelly-felt reality from my childhood: in my family environment a language was spoken that I did not know, or at least I could not use. From the time I was very small, I remember expressing interest, wanting to learn it, wanting to grasp the reality that was intrinsically related to my family environment, with the roots of a people suffocated and oppressed by a war that was not spoken about but that was deeply felt within the family.

My grandparents came from a rural environment. Like many others they came down from the *caserío* (farmstead) to the industrial village. In Basque there is a semantic opposition *baserria/kalea* (farmstead/street) that might be compared to the generic countryside/town opposition. My grandparents went down to the street, to the urban environment that was not necessarily a town; it was just like any village. Their children maintained *Euskara* as the family language, but only among themselves. Once in contact with “the street,” they would speak Spanish, in a Spanish environment, in Spanish schools. To be sure, they would laugh at the way my grandmother spoke Spanish, and with my maternal grandfather perhaps not even that, as he practically never managed to master Spanish. As he was a somewhat taciturn character, it was not too difficult for him to conceal that fact.

Therefore, my parents met in Spanish, even though they both spoke Basque.

Therefore, once the war had been lost, dreams had also been lost, and our language along with them. The first child was spoken to in *Euskara* (he had much more contact than I did with my grandparents and my aunts), the second child, according to my mother, died when he was three without knowing any Spanish, and the third child, me, was spoken to in Basquized Spanish, but Spanish. The reason my mother gives for this is that she thought I was a somewhat clumsy child in terms of speaking and also that a Spanish-speaking neighbor, whom she considered cultivated, recommended the convenience of speaking to me only in Spanish.

I learned all my prayers, the numbers, the basic arithmetical exercises in Spanish, and I also learned to read and write in Spanish. Apart from all the children’s games, songs, and books that accompany one along during childhood. My tuition was not only
in Spanish, but I would add that it was a very Madrid-style Spanish. The nuns made us sing songs from or about Madrid, such as “Por la calle de Alcalá,” “Chamberí,” and chotis songs, together with Andalusian-style songs or those by Concha Piquer. Such were all our musical references.

I was also unaware of the fact that classmates of mine at the nuns’ school spoke Euskara, so, without going into too much detail about how dark these years were for the Basque language, I would have to admit that my school baggage, my knowledge, readings, and cultural references were in Spanish. Spanish was the language of teaching, the language of the state. And that is where I derive an ambiguous relationship with this language: on one hand, it was the language of the exams, the policemen, and Francoist speeches, which I hated. Yet on the other, it was the raw material of literature that we learned to venerate and enjoy: the language of Cervantes, if I may use this phrase, but also the language of Unamuno, Baroja, Blas de Otero, and Celaya. They were also all Basques. And I do not name these authors by coincidence, because they constituted for me authentic milestones in my literary experience, each one in his own sweet way and moment.

In my diaries I always find a reference to the good resolution to learn Euskara, that secret, marginalized language, just as we have all always taken sides in favor of the small David in his struggle against Goliath. Or perhaps it was because I was never able to speak with my grandfather. I would sit together with him, we would play cards, but I do not remember having been able to maintain a conversation with him. I now dare term that feeling as one of lacking something, a feeling of frustration with respect to a language that one loves but one does not know how to love, a “linguistic wound,” an intimate suffering that is not exempted from a certain feeling of guilt. That is why learning Euskara, that affectionate language, was the main outstanding debt I carried over from my childhood and youth.

When I was nineteen years old, I moved to Paris where I lived for four years and studied philosophy in the warm post-1968 winds. The French language occupied a relevant space in my life, introducing me into a culture and literature that I still feel indebted to today. I returned in 1973 and I made a decision that was to be crucial in my life: to recover that language which I had never had, Euskara, something which was not at all easy in the final years of Francoism. I started to work in an ikastola (schools in which teaching is carried out exclusively in Basque), the only way, in my circumstances, to learn Euskara by immersion. This kept me in the world of primary education for eleven years and made it possible for me first to write, and then to publish, my first book of children’s stories: *Amets Uhinak* (Dream Waves, 1982). That first book was a collection of narrations and stories that I had written throughout my years as andereño (schoolteacher) in order to cover the lack of literary books and texts my pupils had when I started to work in primary education. I had always wanted to be a writer but I had never thought I was going to write children’s literature, the field of literature that I discovered and which was later to channel my literary world.
This is how I summarize the long and winding road that took me to becoming a writer in Euskara, the language of the heart, an *euskal idazle*. However, Spanish and French have been, and still are, my other two languages, probably my languages of reasoning.

Although I have always wanted to be a writer, in my case the choice of literary language may well be considered the result of the historical circumstances of resistance by the Basque Country against Franco’s dictatorship, which included the recovery of language. That is to say, my trajectory as a writer in Euskara, like that of many in my generation, is linked to the avatars of the language, to its social and political status, to a certain idea—that everybody interpreted in their own way—of cultural and political commitment.

Once the dictator had died, the number of pupils in those *ikastolas* rose vertiginously. In 1979, the Basque Statute of Autonomy was approved and three years later, the decree on bilingualism was promulgated, according to which the teaching of Euskara was regulated for all schools. From 1980 on, there was a considerable growth in the production of children’s literature and literature for young people, new publishing houses were set up, the market was consolidated and the need to tend to the needs of children and young people going to school in Euskara consolidated a corpus of authors of children’s literature and literature for young people that had been inconceivable until then. The 1980s witnessed a boom in this type of literature and its incorporation into modernity. Obviously, what I have said up to now is but a variant of the rebirth of literature in general in Euskara during these same years:

> It is then when, under the aegis of the new political situation, we enjoyed the objective conditions of a production, mediation and reception of literary texts in Euskara as we now know them. The Law for the Normalization of the Use of Euskara (1982), the support of Basque institutions to publish works in that language, the appearance and development of new publishing houses, the existence of a market and a pool of literate readers, among other reasons, is the inevitable context in which the quantitative and qualitative change in literary production in the Basque Country took place. The data on the matter cannot be more revealing: if during the 1876–1975 period an average of 31.5 books were published a year, during the 1976–1994 period we jumped to an average of 659.2 books/year. Of the total of 1,205 new titles that were published in 1998, 31 percent were translations and, more concretely, children’s literature and literature for young people amounted to 26 percent of the total production.¹

After writing those first stories so that they could be used in class by pupils in need of children’s literature in Euskara (as noted above), I published *Txan Fantasma* (1984), a book that was to mark a small milestone in children’s literature in Euskara and in my own

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literary trajectory. It is considered as a referent in modern children’s literature, because it manifests clearly the new currents of critical realism that were so important at the time of publication. This narration, which deals with the problem of loneliness and lack of endearment in the main character, turned out to be quite original and somewhat of a novelty outside a purely Basque environment. I translated it into Spanish and months later it was published in both Spanish and Catalan by the La Galera publishing house in Barcelona, a children’s literature publishing house that was a pioneer in the recovery of the Catalan language.

This is how my literary projection then splits and starts on a new course that implies my own translating of my works in Basque and Spanish. Paradoxically, I found myself in the situation of having to translate into Spanish, my mother tongue, a work that I had written myself in Euskara, my acquired and adopted language. Another twenty books, also with my own translations, followed this first translation.

I wish to dedicate the next section to this praxis of self-translation that I have had for so many years and on the relationship I maintain with the two languages.

**Living in Two Languages**

If I have insisted in this exposition on the autobiographic aspect of my genesis as a writer in Basque, this is because I consider it is a key element to being able to understand some of my achievements and many of my limitations.

Since I published *Txan Fantasma* in Spanish (my own translation), I have been moving from one language to the other without interruption. Currently, practically everything I write is published, alternatively or simultaneously, in Euskara and in Spanish and I feel I am the author of the book in both Euskara and Spanish. I know that, within me, several voices live together, and at least one of them speaks Basque and another Spanish; sometimes, French as well. These voices are mine and they all speak their own language proficiently and spontaneously. Perhaps they do not all say the same things, but I make an effort, so that when I translate myself, they say equivalent things and, above all, I try to make those words produce a similar effect on the reader. I think this is the most important aspect.

Apparently, my case, like those of many others, might be considered as that of a bilingual writer. Yet as Christian Legarde observes, certain writings bear the marks and even the stigmas of a context of production and reception that should be considered not so much as bilingual but as diglossic. I believe that this could be my case too, since Euskara is now going through a diglossic situation, in other words, we have been educated and trained in the conjunction of two languages, but in a clearly unbalanced

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situation in terms of their prestige, in their written and academic uses, and even in their alleged capacity for literature.

We, the self-translators, would be those who wish to combine linguistic, cultural, and often political commitment with the marginalized language and accede, at the same time, to the wider body of readers and the advantages that arise from writing in the majority or vehicular language. And more so if we consider the majority language as our mother tongue, as in my case.

It is usually said that self-translators do not work starting from the most disseminated language toward the vernacular one, but starting from the minority language and translating their original works into the vehicular one. I would point out that, in my case at least, the praxis is more complex, since in reality, whoever pretends to express themselves literarily in two languages will be embarking on a peculiar relationship with both, which can be very enriching. I think it is very interesting to observe and analyze the transfer processes of a work from one linguistic code to another, or, in other words, how we, the authors, manage to confront our own texts when exchanging the role of creator for the role of translator-recreator. To mention but one example: when I wrote Krokodriloa ohe azpian (A Crocodile under the Bed, 2002), a story in which I parodied the leaflet of an antidepressant drug, cocodrifil, I found I had to write it first in Spanish, as I did not have any textual referent in Basque—medicines and their leaflets are not bilingual. Once I had written it in Spanish, it was easier to translate into Basque.

In any case, we, the self-translators, are privileged translators in that, as we are the authors of the text, we know everything that is said and anything that is an underlying element, and we have the intellectual rights to modify or rewrite it, with a degree of freedom that the poor translators would love to have, since they are always burdened with the fear of betraying the author of the texts they have in their hands. Yet that task of self-translation is also arduous and often boring, and all self-translators dream about being able to delegate the work to someone else. Sometimes, I have placed the translation into Spanish of some of my stories in Basque in competent hands, and it did not work. When I read the text, I was not able to recognize myself. It is difficult for me to explain why. I suppose it is a delicate problem when you do not find in the texts translated by others the tone, the interior voice, that signature that makes you consider the text as truly and completely your own. Yet despite that, for my latest novel, La fiesta en la habitación de al lado, which had originally been written in Spanish, I delegated its translation into Basque to a translator who did a splendid job in equipping it with the voice and rhythm I wanted. I do not think it is any coincidence that it is an autobiographical narration that evokes my youth in which I had still not learned Basque, and which I felt I could only write in Spanish, the language which lived inside me at that time. It is as if before being enounced with words, the literary text had, within us, a voice, a tone, something difficult to pinpoint and even more difficult to demonstrate that, however, is what shows us how we have to write, how we would like the atmosphere to be, or what the emotion behind what we are writing should be like. Up to now, and when it is a question of children’s
literature and literature for young people, that voice within me has spoken in Euskara. When I speak to an adult audience and when it is an autobiography, that voice usually speaks in Spanish and in French.

In general terms, I can say that my experience as a self-translator has always been to write the work in Basque first and later to rewrite it in Spanish. At the beginning I used to do this, faithfully respecting the original text, in a manner that I now consider somewhat rigid. Later on, I gained more freedom, until arriving at a point now where, as I publish my books almost simultaneously in the two languages, I often return to the original to correct it, to enrich it, or to introduce nuances. In reality, this exercise of self-translation or rewriting has increased within me an awareness of authorship.

However, the diglossia that exists between our languages converts the self-translator that writes in Euskara into a writer who must remember at all times and places that the original book has been published in the marginalized language. Partly, I believe this is due to the fact that translations into other languages take the Spanish version as the starting language, which implies increasing the diglossia even more. The clearest example for me was when I was awarded the Spanish National Prize for Children’s Literature and Literature for Young People in 2003, by the Spanish Ministry of Culture, for Krokodriloa ohe azpian (Un cocodrilo bajo la cama, in Spanish). In a certain way, as I was the self-translator of my own work into Spanish, they considered I was simultaneously included in two literary systems, which, in the eyes of many, also turned me into a Spanish authoress. Most of the translations of my works into foreign languages (such as German, Greek, Arabic, Korean, and so on) have used Spanish as the starting language, although there are also translations into other languages that have started from the Basque version (those into Catalan, Galician, French, and English). I have always insisted that, in the translations, mention is made of which was the starting language, as well as of the original Basque title. Sometimes I manage to get it done, but sometimes I don’t.

To conclude, if I mentioned before my passages between the two languages as something I perceive as enriching and creative, I would not like to finish off without mentioning the relationship that I have established between Basque and Spanish by making reference to the metaphor of the two dwellings. My attitude, when I translate myself, is similar to that of a person who has two residences: both are his or her property, both are necessary, he or she comes and goes between both of them, and in both of them, there is shelter and pleasure. Because perhaps translating and/or self-translating is somewhat like voluntarily and gladly opening the door of one of the houses to whatever comes from the other. I believe this is one of many forms that can be adopted by an inspiring dialogue between the two languages.
Bibliography


CHAPTER FIVE

Five Reasons for Writing in the Language of the Neighborhood

MIREN AGUR MEABE

Truth is a seductive fruit: once you have tried it you can never forget its flavour or desire anything else.

Teresa Moure

Preface: On the Search for the Place

Writing in a language as a result of one’s own decision is something that deserves consideration in a world in which economic and political factors foster the creation of a consensus that excludes the small, the “strange,” or the insignificant. These three adjectives are suitable for both certain languages and some insects.

Writing in a language like Basque can seem an absurd stance to the pragmatists; opportunist, to the suspicious; backward, to the liberals. These attitudes almost always reveal a certain “odor” of cultural scorn, based on an essential lack: pride in the language and respect for one’s neighbor, pride and respect based on the principles of equality and solidarity, and not on assimilation.

It is not easy to count or evaluate the transcendence of all the acts, details, and irrelevant phrases that—like flares launched at random—guide each creator until he/she reaches the right place, his/her place.

Translated by Trinor (David Griffith).
Considering that I am given to theorizing, here I will describe, under the appearance of a semi-fictional biography that mixes reality, fantasy, and some reflections (my own and those of others), the personal journey that has led me to the choice of writing in Basque as a vital attitude.

I hope the reader will pardon my boldness in telling a story that is not very rigorous and full of ornament, and I trust that you will be patient with my limited imagination.


M was born in a small town on the Bizkaia coast about thirty miles from Bilbao, one of the Basque towns most affected during Franco’s dictatorship after the Spanish Civil War.

Her mother ran a small textile shop, a long, dark place in which radio messages gently landed on the sober cuttings like signs of the incipient prosperity of the era, in the early 1970s. Her father, a ship’s engineer, spent long periods at sea, but the familiar house was home to grandparents, aunts, single grandmothers, godfathers, and others.

The entire mother’s side of the family came from a small village. They spoke Spanish with difficulty and only when absolutely necessary, and hoped that the little ones would learn to make their way in life with the help of the language of social prestige.

M’s first teachers were nuns who wore blue headdresses and taught her to pray, greet people with courtesy, behave immaculately, learn some housework tasks, read with good intonation, and develop good handwriting.

Her nanny, a young girl from Galicia, and her family, who ran a humble bar-restaurant, were the other reason for M to enter naturally into a language that she soon picked up and felt comfortable in, even though many months were to pass before she realized that when she called her nanny’s father *papá*, imitating her, she was calling him *aita*, father, without appreciating the meaning of the term at all.

She remembers walking between the tables of the immigrant workers and being surprised at not understanding their language, which sounded heavy to her, probably more due to the mood of the hungry men than to the way in which they spoke.

Here we should mention two interesting points about the role of language as an element of union. Jose Mª Sánchez Carrión (known as “Txepetx”) also reflects on the effect of primitivism or backwardness that “strange” languages produce in unaccustomed ears. Indeed, he highlights the inward-looking nature of language, establishing links among people within the same linguistic community and barriers to those on the outside, incapable of speaking the language.¹

The other point, made by the writer Joseba Sarrionandia, highlights the fact that, apart from being a medium of communication, language sometimes acts as a shelter. He gives

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examples of situations in which language becomes a shield against the meddling face that wanders around wretchedly: the Irish sailor and his wife who speak Gaelic while they clean the nets, just when two students from Dublin pass by; or young Africans who, being from different tribes, use French as their lingua franca when they meet in the big cities, but who keep quiet or use their own language even though they might not understand each other, when a white person approaches.\textsuperscript{2}

Let us get back to the girl now.

She remembers lying in bed next to her godmother, a gentle but sickly woman who was forced to rest. She was spellbound by the lilaceous odor of the breviary and the lives of martyrs and saints. There was always a bilingual dictionary in the house, an old Basque grammar, with affectionate references to Resurrección M\textsuperscript{a} Azkue—who was from the town—and other Basquophiles; it was a souvenir that someone brought from Iparralde (the Northern Basque Country), and it had an ikurriña (Basque flag) painted on the cover, although the book had been placed in a corner of the room just in case, half-hidden behind the curtains.

One evening when she came home from school M found her mother worried, emptying a drawer to burn its contents. Maybe some funeral reminder, a letter, or book in Basque? Those were years of repression in which people were imprisoned for almost any reason, and the family knew of those distant days when some of the townsfolk had been punished by shaving their heads for having spoken in Basque.

The girl also recalled her first reading in public, with a loudspeaker, at the church altar on the day of her first communion. She was six-and-a-half, and from then on she became the official reader, so she had to put up with admiration from some and jests from others who, thanks to her popularity, called her “\textit{Lehenengo irakurgaia}/Primera lectura” (first reading) or “\textit{Herri-otoitza}/Oración de los fieles” (prayers of the faithful).

She remembers being in her mother’s shop, speaking to tourists who came to buy embroidered tablecloths, or to villagers who bought nankeen aprons. She also recalls her first notebook as a present, a diary with deep-red covers and gilded edges. “What is this for?” she asked, amazed, when she saw the small key. The answer she received was certainly not trivial as far as she was concerned: “So you can write things that are important to you and that only you will know.” This explanation revealed to her that there was a way of writing about one’s own life with freedom, guaranteed by privacy.

Later on, the girl, now nine or ten years old, remembers being dressed in folkloric attire, singing carols in the streets that referred to shepherds, honey, snow, and stars, that were much nicer than the ones sung in Basque.

What was it that made Christmas seem different in different languages? There was a reality that she visualized depending on the language. But where was the difference? In the written ignorance of Basque. The words of the songs were learned from typed sheets on which the splashes of more cultured vocabulary and particular spelling were at a

\textsuperscript{2} Joseba Sarrionandia, \textit{Ni ez naiz hemengoa} (Villava-Atarrabia: Pamiela, 1999).
disadvantage in relation to the magical words that Spanish had already sown in her young mind. It was not the same thing to read, sing, or write in a language in a smug and self-satisfied way in contrast to doing it in a familiar language that is beautiful but weak, stripped of meaning for reasons of a lack of food and good humor by the age they were living through, or surviving in.

An old lady in the neighborhood shouted at the children every time she heard them speak in Spanish. Her squat figure, her white bun, and her booming voice put the fear of God in them: “Euskeraz egizue, ume madarikatuok!” (Speak in Basque, damned kids). She was angry that the children should be so permeable to the language of the “enemy.” M thought her reprimand was excessive and confusing, because her verbal fluency was a reason for pride at school. However, something made her realize that her liking of Spanish involved a kind of reprehensible treason or misdemeanor.

The girl liked to sit on the step in the doorway next to her mother’s shop. Across the way there was a cast iron fountain painted green. On the gilded bronze spout the inscription “1888” appeared in black letters, together with the outline of a whale and her calf fleeing from harpooners, an element taken from the city’s coat of arms.

She could not say when she first related that image of the defenseless and threatened animal with the language of her home. From then on she saw the Basque language as an animal swimming between the waves, tired and frightened by a threat: that of extinction, which makes the mother protect her child desperately.

Part Two: On the Language Carousel

Young M made up stories and poems to imitate the models she saw at school, the only ones she knew, and she wrote them with grace and meaning. She did not start the beautiful diary for fear of spoiling such a present with twisted and unimportant lines, but she started to write “her things” on loose pieces of paper or ordinary exercise books.

The years went by. The political regime changed and people started to breathe. The girl and her language grew together, and the status of the language went from “prohibited” to “co-official.”

After the initial outburst of joy came ambiguous sentiments. The language was loved and scorned, enjoyed and mistreated, respected and ignored. Boring laws, foolish remarks, lethargy, and indifference existed alongside dedication, quality, commitment, and a natural air—contrasts common in a small, varied, complex, and stateless territory.

Some people shouted their mouths off, like a good, pretty, and cheap pin, while others did it like an elegant brooch inherited from a grandmother.

Some people mistook the language for a cow, and ran after it with the bucket of profitability, to see how much they could squeeze from the teat.

It was a case of marrying off the language, and she, in love, said “yes” to the contracts, signed with rings of gold and fountain pens, adorned with all sorts of prizes and advertised with vote-seeking maneuvers.
There were also amateurs who wanted to wrap the language in gift paper, especially at Christmas and on birthdays, in the form of a child’s book.

Others wanted to put the language in an opaque bag and throw it in the garbage together with other wastes called identity, culture, or tradition.

And then there were the experts in dressing it up to exhibit it in a museum urn like a fossil of a thousand mysteries, or on a stand in a national and/or international fair as a kind of exotic species with a Basque label on it.

There were also those who shook it to wake it up from the comfort of passivity and make it run after the dream of just omnipresence in the media, in schools, in universities, in the world of work, and so on.

And those who weaned it with subsidies, hoping to see it grow into a big girl one day who might live her life without paternalism.

Or the purist who wanted to preserve it from any deviation, coining it with a grammatical sanctuary chant.

Then there were those who came with another language and were surprised to see that this one existed as well, and they might even enjoy hearing their children recite the names of numbers, colors, animals—bat, bi, txalo, etorri, gorria, txakurra; or maybe they would never do this, because in their school there was no bilingual education or single-language model in Basque.

This last phenomenon is quite recent, but very much a burning issue: the influence of immigrants in the language fabric. Pedro Albite highlights this very point, calling for a policy of normalizing use of unified or standard Basque to facilitate immigrants’ learning of the language, while at the same time recognizing and respecting the new languages, cultures, and ethnonational identities these people bring to the Basque Country.  

So, we understand that coexistence and survival of the language go hand-in-hand. An open, trusting hand, not a strict, unfriendly one that does not open for fear that its only coin, amassed with such effort, will be stolen.

Amelia Barquin also provides a good description about the major role that schools can play in the search for a new balance in the face of the multilingual biodiversity of Basque-Spanish-Romanian-Arabic-Chinese-Portuguese, and so on. This equilibrium should be based on a key attitude: reciprocity, not competition. For Barquin, such reciprocity—demonstrating a respect for everyone’s rights—can only aid the good will toward Basque necessary if the language is to advance.

We have another possibility . . . instead of competing with immigrants, we can join forces to defend everyone’s rights—including cultural rights—: both of local people and of immigrants. Only if we start from this positive, strategic and supportive attitude will we be able to create good feelings toward the Basque language.

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We need these good feelings if we want Basque to progress; for it to last, Basque should not only be spoken by those who were born here: it should also be the language of people who have come here from other places.4

Let us return to the language itself.

The language was a big fairground carousel, turning. And the customers chose what they were going to ride on: on the flagship language, the cow language, the contract language, the corpse language, the gift language, the exhibition language, the sports language, the baby language, the lottery language, the academy language . . . or whatever other kind, according to the customer’s desire.

Through this image of movement I am trying to say that in recent years there has been a “splendor and consoling” phase of the language in Euskadi if we look back at the barren past, although this phase is deceptive if we look forward to a fertile future in terms of the real normalization of the language.

It is true that it is now possible to use our native language in certain areas of daily, business, and cultural life. It has even received a major boost in sectors such as education. The basic support has been the language policy of the Basque Government, in the form of major investments, the conscious militancy of some Basque-speakers and the natural custom of others to express themselves in their traditional local language. Like any faith, the commitment to normalization was fed by hope for the future: that the language could be an element that would bring different parts of society together. However, mid-term success has been superficial, as there is great immaturity in the responsible use of the language by each individual. The language is not managing to really take root. What is learned is not used. It is not well learned. One cannot learn to use. Despite the efforts made, how many of the seven hundred thousand Basque-speakers are real potential readers? Perhaps fifty thousand? Koldo Izagirre argues that “the triumph of liberalism may well end up harming Basque, because modern liberal thought places no special emphasis on a sentimental attachment to a minority language.”5

As there is no internal cohesion in the population, ideological differences are above the interests that should lead us to make Euskara a common tool. In general, it is known that the commercial interests of the economic elites tend to impose themselves on cultural development interests, relegating or eliminating aspirations such as the normalization of the language, sovereignty, and self-determination.

So far, language and nationalism have constituted a formal couple, sustained (like any other) by mutual attraction, but also by deficiencies, infidelities, interests, and dependence. At present, and on the basis of recent election results, I am convinced that the divorce of this couple—language and nationalism—is not good for my country. I prefer an adulterous and adulterated language to one that has died because it has been abandoned or the couple has fallen out of love.

5. See Koldo Izagirre, Incursiones en territorio enemigo (Villava-Atarrabia: Pamiela, 1997).
Let us go back to the girl, who had become an inquisitive and studious young lady. M understood that the language was a polychrome icon to which each individual prayed according to his/her devotion. She decided to go outside, walk around, and look for a reason that would cast light on her doubt: she knew that her vocation was to write. She had many more rhetorical notions, linguistic resources, and reference points in Spanish. Now it was time to look at the two languages stored in her mind and heart, measure herself against them, and decide which of the two she would put her faith in.

Part Three: The Young Girl Leaves Her Home: Moss at the Crossroads

M took a bus to the city. She wasn’t carrying much luggage; some clothes, an exercise book, and her glasses. There were no other passengers that day, maybe because some journeys should be made alone. As chance would have it, the bus broke down halfway. M had to get off the bus and wait while the driver went to look for help.

She was at a crossroads. She sat on a stone and yawned, looking up at the sky. Suddenly she heard a faint voice.

“It’s me; here, next to you.”

M did not see anything special around here, just a little patch of moss at the bottom of the stone, in shadow. The root of a lesson can often grow in the most insignificant places.

“Bend down and listen.”

The moss told her its story (in reality, an old and modified Basque legend).

“At the start of Time, all the beings in the world, animate and inanimate, could speak. All except me, moss. In spring, the rain wanted to show me, but it did not succeed. The sun did the same in summer, but also failed. The wind tried in autumn, without success. And in winter, the snow worked in vain. All of them, animals and plants, tried to teach me to speak. In the end they gave up, exhausted after their efforts. By then, however, they all spoke their own language and kept quiet forever after.”

Well, the moss was not, nor had it ever been, dumb. What had happened? Was its voice so faint that no one could hear it? Or did nobody understand its language, code, or expression? It had not wanted to trick anyone, and even less so frustrate them until they were exhausted.

“As you can see, I am not dumb. But they brought it on themselves.”

Not hearing a voice does not mean that it does not exist. The moss quietly spreads in silence, supports stones, earth, and tree trunks, embraces what is closest to it, becomes yellow in the dry months and turns green when the rains come. It is difficult to see, hidden among more bright and colorful species.

M drew a parallel between the moss and her feelings about her two languages. The moss was her Basque and the rest, determined to teach her, were Spanish. The latter lost volume and tone for her.
Night fell, and M went to sleep on the stone at the roadside, excited by her recent discovery. She gradually slipped down and ended up asleep on the ground, with her ear on the moss, but in a terrible posture for her neck.

At dawn a traveler passed by driving a colorful van. He saw M shivering with fever, laid her out in the back of the van and dampened her forehead with water. M opened her eyes after a while:

“Non nago?” (“Where am I?” in Basque), she asked, in a language that the traveler had never heard.

It was a good question, not at all superfluous to express her disorientation, particularly bearing in mind that she was at a crossroads in both real and metaphorical terms. She fainted again, as she had a terrible headache.

While she recovered, however, she wrote a book of stories in bizkaiera (Bizkaian Basque), two collections of poems, several children’s stories, and three novels for youngsters, as well as a number of articles and texts. She even translated some of them into Spanish, something she had learned to do from a very early age and throughout her life, there in her neighborhood. She liked comparing one language to the other, the formal exercise of finding equivalents and suggestions, so much so that she was becoming addicted to the process of creation-translation-revision.

This reminds me of a parody by Iban Zaldua of an obsessive writer who, looking for the perfection of the original and its translation, becomes trapped by a ridiculous vice that cannot be controlled.6

In the meantime, the traveler, an older and already wise man, realized that it was time to resort to ICTs, information and communication technologies. He ran to the first internet café he could find and started to search, keying the term “non nago?” in Google. He then discovered that the words belonged to the language that was spoken in the land of the Basques. Unfortunately, there was no automatic translation system. How could he communicate with the sick young girl? Didn’t she know any other languages?

He waited for her to wake up, and they spoke. Without any difficulty.

The traveler spoke several languages, well, as was right for a rebel who was aware of the global village, who found through experience that not all bridges always have to pass through the same language.

They had a pleasant exchange of phrases, in half-Spanish, half-English, half-Italian, half-German, half-Portuguese, half-Galician, half-Catalan, half-Korean, half-Macedonian, half-Slovenian, and even half-Braille. . . an amusing flirting of ideas that they decided to celebrate with an improvised dinner based on:

First course: Scrambled uses, disuses, and abuses of languages
Second course: Threads of vital foam with an aroma of contextual mist
Dessert: Underlined infinite tree

M smiled between mouthfuls, as her appetite had been awoken by then, and she really loved eating.

**Part Four: Dialogue on the Tapestry**

(Note: For this stop along the way, we suggest that the reader locate the scene in a past time and place. For example, in a workshop where happy spinners weave in the light of the fireplace. Or maybe in a present space and time, in an industrial unit in which women make cheap clothing on sewing machines, unhurriedly but steadily.)

Let us go back to the van.

The traveler took M to the city in his van. They said goodbye with a blue kiss, the stamp of a dateless friendship.

M arrived at the market and walked past the stalls.

“I am looking for work,” she said to a fruit-stall owner.

“Ask over there,” she replied, indicating a country workshop or industrial estate (whatever the listener prefers).

M went across and looked out of the window. A group of women sitting in a circle laughed and chatted while they worked with spindles and wheels. She knocked on the door and they let her in. They put thread in her hands right away. She stayed silent while she listened to what her new colleagues were saying; they were talking about a tapestry.

At this point we might recall Roland Barthes’ observation that the word “text” comes from the Latin participle *texo*, which meant *fabric*: a text is a fabric of meanings that are joined up and linked.

The first woman said:

“*Writing can become a ‘raison d’être.’* Having been such and such a thing or having lived in one way or another justifies a whole series of poems. By reading and re-reading our lives we write to ourselves, with more or less sense of tragedy. We spread our biography across what we do, what we have experienced and what is pending, including that which we have lived in our imaginations.”

The second said:

“We are *voices marked by different experiences*, and our voices make us different. *We live in our writing*, through our ego, poetic doubles, myths, or disguises.”

How wise were those chattering spinners! They did not say anything silly. M saw that she had found a treasure in that house, a medicine, a horizon.

The third woman added:

“*Writing is also specifying.* Writing from one’s own life about the things of life: choose subjects, flow with the language, and create one’s own style. Speaking about oneself, about writing, about people, a village, love, about a love, or several, about time, death, a particular death, on the function of the poetic word . . .”

The fourth spinner added a finer point:

“*Let us not forget critical conscience about one’s own role in utopia, or the impossibility of total communication . . .”*
The fifth, who was given to making comparisons, added:

“Indeed, all these themes are some of the threads of the human conditions that link up and combine, giving form to a tapestry placed next to a window, the metaphorical window on the world that connects the exterior to the interior.”

M deduced that, bit by bit, the rock, the path, the tree, the ship, the bird, the house were drawn . . . until a landscape was completed that could cover the duration of one’s own existence. At the same time, it could be that the small individual tapestry could be a snippet of the great tapestry of literature, of the great conception of the world in which supposedly every poet collaborates.

She also understood that form was very important in that tapestry. The form that is precision, position, relief, measure, color, and image, and that it is necessary to go through form to become the word.

The power of the word seemed immense to M. She stayed in that place a long time, working in the hope of getting the catchy poem-anecdote right, the instructive poem-parable, the virtuoso poem-experiment, or the revolutionary poem-good news, in hope that the text could be a vehicle for catharsis, analysis, and communion with others. Her fingers worked hard to guide and finish off the threads of her little big tapestry with elegance.

Part Five: The Return of the Young Girl and How She Planted a Tree, thus Ending the Story and Hoping for Better Continuity

Despite all this, M missed the aromas of her home, her kitchen. She knew all too well that “going back to the kitchen” seemed a backward step, not the best way to take one’s place in the world. It was not an admirable example of “reterritorialization,” after having trod on terra incognita. However, she liked to write in the kitchen while the macaroni were cooking, or while she looked at the geranium that did not bloom, with its hard trunk that seemed to be a hand waiting for something. In the kitchen what lasted were the pots, the recipes, and the salt of oral transmission that had made so many women accomplices.

It is not that she disdained the advice of a certain Virginia on the idea of single room, nor that she did not catch the bittersweet meaning of nomadism, the melancholic charm of wandering toward no place in particular. Basically, she wanted to live in her house, however small it might be.

She never aspired to a mansion where she could house a thousand readers of her works, or a large chest full of checks, which would be easier to achieve if she wrote in Spanish, the language that could potentially attract other languages by chance.

Better to be a firefly in the neighborhood, dancing among her fellow kind, than a comet in the infinite universe of letters. If, one day, the firefly could fly a bit further, and a balloon, light aircraft, or something similar asked her to take a trip through the sky, well, all the better.
She remembered aunt Habiba, the engaging character of Fatema Mernissi, who said that anyone could grow wings. It was merely a matter of concentration. They did not have to be visible, like those of birds; invisible ones were equally good, and the sooner one started to concentrate on flying, the better . . .

“It is simply a matter of staying alert and catching the crackly silk of winged dreams,” she told me. However, she said there were two prerequisites for getting wings. “The first is to feel surrounded, and the second is to believe that you can break the circle.”

So, she said goodbye to her fellow spinners, thanking them for everything they had learned together, and started off for home. As usual, she started running and tripped over something, and fell to the ground. She woke up later, alone in the bus that had not even started the engine to leave her childhood neighborhood. M felt her ears blocked, and often overlapping words in her head, asking if they could say something.

Overcome with emotion, she got off the bus with her suitcase intact and climbed the stairs to her house. She sat down and wrote a poem, one of those that write themselves without understanding the intuitions that guide them at the time:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The geography of my silence is marked out} \\
to the north by the fridge, dishwasher and oven; \\
the larder and the front door to the East; \\
the junk room to the West; \\
and the wall with the calendar of Basque landscapes to the South. \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I grow in the center, a transparent tree in a tile.} \\
\text{An abyss extends under the tile,} \\
a destructure where the orphaned signs of the language hibernate. \\
They make up a skein that evokes the caprice of a painter. \\
If the wind rocks my head, \\
a root springs up and climbs, hungry, to my lap, \\
for me to suckle it. \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Silence of kitchens in the morning.} \\
\text{The geography of fertility.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

She was in her kitchen. Why had she chosen a tree as the symbol of the lyrical subject?

Because the tree is verticality between two spaces: it digs its roots into the dark soil—into the biographical memory and unassailable realities of the world—and grows in search of clarity, which is not the same as divine illumination, rather a certain light of utopia.

7. Fatema Mernissi, Sueños en el umbral (Barcelona: Muchnick Editores, 2002), 208.
It is a transparent tree—understandable, with a clear message—that looks in all directions, and can be seen from all directions.

A tree in the tile—still, part of a known place, for better or for worse—safe from the drifting of anonymous places.

A tree infinitely reborn in its branches and leaves—like a language in its infinite messages—and that underlines space with its form.

A tree that breastfeeds the word, a tree with a woman’s voice.

A woman’s voice? What was that? A new voice that would speak of sex with explicit physiological references, of feminine intimacy, of domestic affairs but, above all, a voice to describe the world from a different perspective, to mention what had not been mentioned and to give another meaning to what had been said before, to offer forms that do not correspond to prevailing conventions, that surpass identity stereotypes to recreate a literary space that transgresses.

To paraphrase Teresa Moure, who likes to use the delightful word “dissidence,” an established or conventional language reproduces a petty bourgeois moral code, telling us what and how to think about society, art, and literature. To avoid falling into line, then, we must dare to renew the language. We must work on old structures to usher in a new world. 8

Almost without leaving her neighborhood, M had returned convinced that she had to act from her own language, however small, strange, insignificant, picturesque, beautiful, weak, or curious it may be . . . a language that would accept all the adjectives used to describe insects, she knew that already. It didn’t matter: her perseverance in the language would be the way forward in the face of any doubts.

Epilogue: A Summary of the Five Reasons Found in the Phases of the Journey or the Search

For me, writing in Basque is an act of reaffirmation of several dimensions.

1. It is an act of love, because my heart combines feelings of family, of homeland, and language.

2. It is an act of commitment to my society and my time, to revive the breath of the oldest language in Europe, to help it to survive as a universal cultural asset in coexistence with other languages, and to contribute to their emancipation.

3. It is an act of autonomy, to slow down its dissolution in the amalgam of globality.

4. It is an aesthetic act, to use words at the service of the human being, to practice the faculty of thought and feeling, and to transmit these thoughts and feelings in writing.

5. It is an act of renovation and modernity that chooses to turn stereotypes about women around.

8. See Teresa Moure, La palabra de las hijas de Eva (Barcelona: Lumen, 2007).
Bibliography


Every decision is liberating, even if it leads to disaster. Otherwise, why do so many people walk upright and with open eyes into their misfortune?

Elias Canetti

Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before.

Mae West

A writer is always making decisions; as Vita Sackville-West used to say, even the very moment of when to start writing a novel becomes a vital and crucial choice for the writer. But I believe that those who, like myself, write in a victimized, subjugated, diglossic, quaint, in marked decline, in marked recovery, very ancient (delete where not applicable) language, as is the case with Basque, and from a tiny, colonized, with the greatest level of self-government in Europe, overdeveloped, and schizophrenic (delete, more energetically, if possible, where not applicable) country like the Basque Country, then we writers are faced with the obligation of making more decisions than most other writers. Even those

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preoccupations that we share with other writers from elsewhere seem to have their own peculiarities when faced from our small place within the World Republic of Letters.

One

Naturally, the first choice to be made is related to language: a Basque writer has to choose either Basque or Spanish (either Basque or French). Not even hypothetically will this choice ever worry a writer of any of the “great world” literatures, be it Spanish, French, English, Russian, or German, writing from the center, and being monolingual. Nowadays almost every Basque who speaks the Basque language is bilingual (not always very fluently) and has become a reader in one of the two languages spoken in the countries where the Basque Country is. It is only recently that we find writers who have started writing in Basque without having previously done so in Spanish or French, thanks to the ever increasing education in Basque and to a larger production of literary works, as well as translations in the Basque language. However, any writer over thirty-five will recount, when remembering his/her first attempts, that s/he (I) started writing in Spanish or French, even though later, and for different reasons, we chose to do so in Basque.

But even a young, and not-so-young, writer who has been writing in Basque from the very beginning will always be haunted, if only remotely, by the possibility of “moving over into” the other language. S/he speaks this other language fluently and has (and probably still does) read more extensively in it. A language with a larger amount of potential readers within a more established and solid literary system, which will rid him/her of the perennial and rather annoying question: Why do you write in such an insignificant language as Basque? French or Spanish writers will never be plagued by this question. In fact, very few writers use only Basque; most writers, though chiefly working in Basque, have also published a few short stories or poems, one or two essays and even whole books in Spanish or French. And last but not least, there is the widespread practice of self-translation which is a clear sign for many (mainly, and not by any chance, translators) of the state of underdevelopment of our language, in spite of the increase in recent years of translators from Basque into other languages, mostly into Spanish. Earlier, the trend was to train translators into Basque, rather than from Basque. Yet nowadays, the number of writers who start writing in Basque and end up doing so in Spanish is larger than those who, still very rare exceptions, have done it conversely.

This dilemma is a very sensitive issue permeating the thin tissue of Basque literary society as shown by a recent controversy following the publication of the first work in Spanish of two well known figures in Basque culture, the bertolari (improvising oral poet) Xabier Silveira’s first novel A las ocho en el Bule and Mariasun Landa’s first foray into adult literature, La fiesta en la habitación de al lado (2007). The controversy, as usual, soon degenerated into a political debate (of course, it could not have been otherwise!). Jokin Muñoz, a writer branded “a Spanish reactionary” (españolista), commented ironically on the sudden attachment of more than a few markedly pro-independent radical Basque writers to the Spanish language; and the hitherto unprecedented claim was made that the
Spanish language is “ours as well” by well-known intellectuals such as Sonia González or Mikel Soto, active members of the leftist *abertzale* movement. There was even a cutting rejoinder by Lander Garro, saying that: “I will not stand up for those who write in Spanish (the oppressor’s language), but let me tell you, by the way, that I prefer those who write in Spanish against the Spaniards, than those who write in Basque against the Basque people (or, in other words, in Basque in favor of the Spaniards).”\(^1\) Oh my! How could I have been so naïve! I had always thought that nothing written in Basque could be against Euskal Herria! (Land of the people who speak Basque).

The most sensible comment I have heard on the issue was made by Jokin Muñoz when writing that: “More than once I have been asked why, having been born in Castejón [a village in Navarre where Basque is not spoken], I write in Basque. For these occasions I have two ready, not particularly original, answers: A. Because I feel like it. B. Because I write better in Basque than in Spanish.”\(^2\) And this is, I believe, the freedom we Basque writers enjoy nowadays, unattainable not so long ago: the freedom to choose the language in which to write. We do not need to hide behind any historical mission or in guilty feelings; we are no longer obliged to write in Basque to save the language or in Spanish because imposed by law; we don’t even need to justify our answer when asked why we write in Basque or in Spanish, and can simply retort: “And why not?”

We can even afford not to choose. My mother tongue is Spanish, my adopted language Basque, which I learned at school. Some people compare them with the mother and the girlfriend, and I, as a true Basque (heterosexual), long for my girlfriend, but I find the oedipal separation from my mother very hard. In fact, I believe, paradoxically enough, that writing in Basque has helped me to write better in Spanish, to get rid of its heaviest rhetoric, to drop the burden that Spanish literature has accumulated since the Baroque period. It has helped me, as George Orwell said, “to write less picturesquely and more exactly.”\(^3\)

In short: Why choose? At this point, I stand for the obsessive neurotic who is unable to make a choice. However, as psychoanalysis suggests, not choosing is already a way of choosing, notably that of choosing to be ill. But in the end, is not literature itself an illness?

Two

Another important issue that any Basque writer will have to decide upon is whether his/her attitude regarding their literature, and language, and, in general, the surrounding world will be varnished with existential anxiety or not. Needless to say, existential

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anxiety seems to be the most popular attitude among Basque writers: if writers are everywhere compared with a lamenting animal, the Basque writer is the most developed link of this evolutionary chain. The Basque writer is always complaining about everything: about the small number of books being sold, about how little is being read, and especially how little in the Basque language (for they cannot even contemplate the possibility that their books might be badly written); about the unreliable readership, about the little help received from the Basque government, as well as its lack of interest in culture, about the cultural colonization on the verge of making this, our so ancient language, disappear. Our culture (if we can just but talk about one) is almost disappearing and our language is, surely, one of those other four thousand languages in the world on the brink of vanishing in the next two or three generations. Bernardo Atxaga was right when classifying Basque citizens according to their stance on the Basque language: there are the sympathizers (who do not speak and never use it but are tolerant toward it); un-sympathizers (those who reject it); and pathetic speakers (those who know and habitually use it and cannot help but be pessimistic about the future of the Basque language). We Basque writers are generally very pathetic. As an example let’s listen to Karlos Linazasoro:

Few would dare to write a novel of a certain quality, or an elaborate book of short stories. It is a long time since drama and the essay started to die, and naturally nobody cares . . . The market is cruel and our people are, unfortunately, not ready for great literature. Therefore, it is easier for all of us to write, publish, and read dead easy literary works (childish some would say). Let’s put it clearly, it is a very sad and harmful option, but—let’s not forget— it keeps the framework in place. Our literature then lives in a fictitious situation maintained by columns of books we do not need. That would be all right if it were the threshold of something greater and more challenging. However that is not the case and our literature is on the road to becoming something secondary.4

Or to Pako Aristi’s words: “We do not support our culture in our everyday life, we do not invest money, and we do not have a critical environment to sustain our Basque universe. And, I believe, there seems to be no hope in the near future. We do not have a national culture but a national sham, and at this precise moment, the Basque language is secondary in our comfortable well-being.”5

I must admit that they sound right but I wonder if that attitude will help to improve the state of our literature, especially when talking about the process of creation and our efforts to diffuse this creation, or if that attitude will not filter through our work and make it become moldy, just as penicillin spreads from one orange to another throughout the physical geography of a fruit bowl left to its own fate. Would that existential agony not be to blame for the inability to write works attracting a wider readership? Would it not be this agonic attitude which distances us further from our public? I think it best to imagine, when writing, reading, analyzing, or commenting, that our literature is like any other, as

literary as any other with twenty-five or forty million speakers. Writing in Basque should no longer be an act directed toward modernization or salvation of the Basque language as Gabriel Aresti, Txillardegi, Ramon Saizarbitoria, and the other forerunners of contemporary Basque literature thought. I don’t know if it was so essential, but, nowadays, fortunately, it is not indispensable. No matter what we may do, the Basque language will stay or disappear, but what is certain is that in the meantime there will be good or bad Basque literature. That former responsibility is not ours anymore and that is an improvement for our work, if only we could get rid of our apocalyptic feeling. Forgetting about it for a while might do us a lot of good.

This does not mean that we should become optimistic, act as passive critics, or become vehicles of propaganda for anything written in Basque. On the contrary, I strongly disagree with this view of avoiding any criticism on the grounds of the supposed minority quality and eternal childhood of cultural production in the Basque language. Basque literature, and even more so Basque culture, should be free of any apocalyptic approach and become a space for open criticism and debate, for dialectic games, even for cultural irony. Some believe that it is impossible to have a Basque literary system, or a Basque literary canon (if only to build it up and then demolish it), and think of criticism as vampirism feeding on an almost bloodless corpse. They may be right. Yet I would like to argue in favor of a Basque literature free from any apocalyptic feeling, focusing on the process of creation itself rather than on the surrounding context, more open to the world rather than being so inward-looking, more critical and less self-indulgent, less protectionist. The attitude of cancer-ridden patients may help to quicken or delay the illness, or might even cure it. In this line of thought I agree with some of the points in Kike Amonarriz’s “decalogue,” 10 Ideas in Half a Minute on Cultural Consumption in Basque, mostly when he insists on the need to reject certain capital sins such as victimization, chronic pessimism, and the absence of criticism.6

So, working as if we were normal guys without becoming obsessed with our lack of normality may help us to be normal, but without taking normal to be “the equivalent of being approved.” In the end, are we not makers of fiction? Facing yet another fiction cannot be so difficult.

Three

A Basque writer will have to decide as well whether s/he wants to be a nationalist or a non-nationalist (abertzale would be a more suitable term) writer. Obviously, this is a weird option to be taken a posteriori because one would expect this decision to come first: that is to say, one may be nationalist or non-nationalist and then a writer. Well, things are not so easy in our literary realm. To begin with, there is the well-founded suspicion that most of our (potential) readership, just because they write and speak in Basque, is to a certain

extent nationalist, hence a writer’s acceptance and popularity will depend (though not exclusively) on his/her stance regarding this issue. I (sorry for quoting myself!) satirized this in my Strategic Plan for Becoming a Successful Basque Writer:

A Basque writer longing to be successful should be discreetly abertzale. Be careful! This does not mean that s/he may not be a radical nationalist; s/he can be, but discreetly—it is not wise to appear as a radical abertzale. A Basque writer will never lack opportunities to sign manifestos and varied collective articles. What a Basque writer cannot ever be is a constitutionalist (whether the one implied be the French or the Spanish constitution). It would certainly be easier to become a “Basque writer” by being abertzale, whether writing in French or Spanish, than to write in Basque and not be a nationalist.7

Nowadays, I would add to this that if writing in Spanish or in French, although one may want to be considered a Basque writer, it is convenient to appear to be a nationalist, and the more radical, the better.

There is no doubt that the nationalist movement turned the Basque language into one of the main axes of contemporary Basque identity; especially (there is no point in denying it) through the new nationalism that emerged at the end of the 1950s in which ETA was born. Race and religion, which had been the pillars of the first nationalist movement, were pushed into the background. Without that driving force around the language that led to the unification (or standardization) of Basque, it would be difficult to understand the Basque movement with its media, its education system, its social networks, and its literature. However, as Saizarbitoria claims in his essay Aberriaren alde (eta kontra) (For (and Against) the Motherland, 1999), this process may have reached its high point and is perhaps now becoming a drawback rather than a force in progress: using Atxaga’s terminology, if more sympathizers are needed to join the pathetic group, speaking, reading, and writing in Basque, and more un-sympathizers to join the ranks of the sympathizers, it would be necessary to loosen the knot tying nationalism and the Basque language together (in addition, it would also be advisable to check the rejection of the Basque language on the part of Spanish nationalism, as can be seen, for example, in the official administration of Navarre, or among Spanish nationalists in the Basque Country, as well as in many other Spanish institutions).

Despite there having been some changes in recent years, Basque nationalism is still reflected in Basque literature. On the one hand, it is quite understandable, considering the historical circumstance that Basque writers have been nationalists at one point or other; conversely, there have also been cases of writers such as Jon Juaristi, Mikel Azurmendi, Eduardo Gil Bera, Matías Múgica, and Luis Daniel Ispizua, who when moving away from Basque nationalism also abandoned the use of the Basque language as a literary medium. Besides, some argue that writers who write in Basque but have given up

nationalism are not received favorably or else relegated to the background in the recent history of Basque literature. As Ivan Igartua argues,

In spite of the pioneering quality of Mario Onaindia’s literary work, it is heavily marked by one fact: it has been written by a non-nationalist writer; even worse, it is the work of a non-nationalist writer (and politician) who knew only too well the nationalist world, and this sin is not easily forgiven in Euskal Herria . . . Rafael Trapiello when commenting on the work of Rafael Sánchez Mazas and some others said that they had won the Civil War but lost their place in literary history. Putting Mario Onaindia in his place within the Basque literary canon, even at this late stage, would be a way of doing him justice. No great change seems to await the present or near future of the Basque Country, but the history of Basque literature cannot be left solely in the hands of the winners.8

Luis Haramburu-Altuna is a similar case in point. However, it seems to me that there is more to it than the purely political. Literary and aesthetic reasons also lie behind this discrimination.

In fact, something similar occurs on the more radical side: Txillardegi’s or Joxe Austin Arrieta’s loss of popularity show that being too abertzale does not guarantee success in our literature (but, once again, I suspect that the real motives behind their decline are not very different from those which committed the works of Onaindia and Haramburu to oblivion). The querulous laments of those writers who, feeling excluded from the Establishment, signed the manifesto ‘Utikan Euskadi Sariak!’ (Euskadi Prizes out!) seem to support this view. However, Joseba Sarrionandia (an ETA member still on the run) enjoys continuous public and critical success, and Xabier Montoia, the Euskadi Prize winner in 2007, in spite of being a rather embarrassing personality for the establishment, enjoys great prestige.

Even if nationalism has been an important issue since the 1950s for writers in the Basque language, this is changing gradually. In other words, contrary to what happens in the natural world, biodiversity in Basque literature is increasing. Accordingly, a Basque writer can “choose” with more freedom than in earlier decades whether s/he wants to be nationalist, which kind of nationalism to side with and, naturally, what degree of commitment s/he is ready to submit to. Some years ago, for example, any attempt to classify Basque writers on the grounds of their commitment to nationalism would have been unthinkable. However, Juan Luis Zabala, cultural journalist of Berria—the only daily newspaper published entirely in Basque and distributed throughout the whole of the Basque Country—and himself a writer, published a list of contemporary Basque writers separating them along the lines of non-nationalists (Jokin Muñoz, Patziku Perurena, Itxaro Borda, and myself . . .) and nationalists (Bernardo Atxaga, Mariasun Landa, Ramon Saizarbitoria, Anjel Lertxundi, Arantxa Urretabizkaia, Aingeru Epaltza, Pello Lizarralde, Kirmen Uribe, Unai Elorriaga, Jon Arretxe, Juan Kruz Igerabide, Patxi Zubizarreta, Karlos

Linazasoro, Rikardo Arregi, Julen Gabiria, Juanjo Olasagarre . . .). In his own words, this was a “rather demagogic” attempt. And a failed one, I would add, because some ascriptions are rather dubious, and some more clarification would have been advisable. Yet, Zabala’s attempt is in itself an example of a more relaxed attitude. I must say that my own nationalism has a changeable shape and it depends on my daily mood.

The nationalist question will never disappear completely unless the Basque Country achieves a hypothetical independence and if that happens many of the dilemmas considered here will make no sense. Anjel Lertxundi, after touring some Spanish towns to launch his novel *Ihes betea*, translated into Spanish as *Línea de fuga* (Line of Escape), wrote:

> To the journalist who asks him if he is a nationalist: “unfortunately, I am.” The journalist winks because he has noticed an obvious contradiction with *unfortunately* followed by an assertion. So an explanation is demanded. The other, tired of always being asked the same questions: “all ideologies, forced to the extreme, contain an evil and destructive seed. We have had numerous examples of this throughout the twentieth century. We all know that, and yes, nationalism also has this evil and destructive seed, I am not blind. However, if the banners of hegemonic nationalism think that their shadows are the only lawful ones, I, who humbly dream of a fair world capable of going beyond a nation that rises among other nations, do not know how to escape from this contradiction. Thus, I live with the risk of an evil and destructive seed, but does not blindness prevent you from seeing the evil and destructive seed within your own sovereign nationalism?”

Surrounded by two booming and intrusive languages and by two powerful nationalisms such as the French and the Spanish variants, although neither presuming to be nationalist, and with so little understanding for the minority languages within their territories, it is difficult if you want to live in Basque but not be nationalist, even if only a little. In short: even though we may choose to be non-nationalist writers, and that is easier now (I decide on it every morning depending on my mood), we Basque writers, because of the language issue, cannot but be somewhat nationalist. Unfortunately.

**Four**

Basque writers must almost compulsorily decide whether to write about “the Basque conflict” (or, as I and my friends like to call it, “The Thing”) or not. Paradoxically, depending on who addresses the issue, two apparently contradictory views prevail: Basque literature always revolves around The Thing (which is rather boring); or else, not enough space is given to this issue and nobody tackles it seriously. In a way, The Thing is to Basque literature, what the Spanish Civil War is to Spanish literature.

Oier Guillan, when commenting on Juanjo Olasagarre’s novel *Ezinezko maletak* (2004), summarizes very well the first view:

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What is the book about? [a friend asked me]. The first pages did not allow me to offer him consistent information: a group of friends, people looking back in time, the 80s atmosphere, a concert by Hertzainak, the way of life, politics . . . My friend shrugged and interrupted my explanation, snapping, “Oh my, another book speaking about the same issue?” while taking the newspaper to continue reading. I was stunned. Maybe that is what it is, perhaps there are too many stories which are framed within those limits, but is it not understandable? For, when it comes down to it, is it not a reflection of what we went through or what we have experienced?

Others do not think that very much is written about The Thing. Thus, Jokin Muñoz claims that “light literature, pure entertaining literature, so common in other European countries, would be a luxury among us,” and then, more precisely,

With that I wanted to point out that we should know how to use the so-called Basque conflict, the Basque problem, to offer something different within the frame of European literature. I believe that the interest of foreign readers in our culture is marked by the Basque conflict. I don’t know up to what point Basque literature can remain isolated from other literatures. What I know is that it is precisely that which may capture foreign attention. I have the highest respect for entertaining literature . . . and Basque literature must offer all kinds of books, but, if we have to offer something of our own, I believe we have something to say about unwinding the thread of the Basque problem.

I agree basically with Muñoz and I think that in the last twenty years Basque literature (above all, Basque literature written in Basque) has produced a rich variety of fiction about The Thing with works such as Gizona bere bakardadean (The Lone Man, 1993), Zeru horiek (The Lone Woman, 1995) and Soinujolearen semea (The Accordionist’s Son, 2003) by Bernardo Atxaga, the seminal 100 metro (1976) and Hamaika pauso (1995) by Ramón Saizarbitoria; Zorion perfektua (2002) by Anjel Lertxundi, Lagun izotzua (2001) by Joseba Sarrionandia, Ezinezko maletak (2004) by Juanjo Olasagarrre, Denboraren izerdia (2003) by Xabier Montoia, some short stories from Euri kontuak (1999) by Jose Luis Otamendi, as well as the short stories from Lasto sua (2005) by Aingeru Epaltza and Handik gutxira gaur (2004) and Haragia (2007) by Eider Rodriguez, or Bizia lo (2003) and Antzararen bidea (2007) by Jokin Muñoz, and these are but a few.

Yet, for some this is not enough. Thus, Mikel Iriondo argues that some more committed contributions should be expected within the art of letters, although this does not seem to be the case. In fact, Iriondo says:

What is still significant . . . is the lack of realism in literature written in Basque similar, by the way, to a TV series called Goenkale very popular with Basque audiences that has run for many years. Goenkale deals with a variety of everyday problems usual in any human society: sexual harassment, homosexuality, feminist demands, delinquency, and so on and so forth.

so forth, but here there is no place for politics, just in case the boring, everlasting conflict happens to appear and scriptwriters (some of them well-known and reputed writers) may not know how to handle the issue.\textsuperscript{12}

Criticism of this kind has clashed with its counterpart as a result of the recent and increasing appearance of The Thing in many literary works. Actually, what this criticism indicates is that its authors’ political stances fail to show up in recent literary publications. As Iriondo himself says, what he understands by “committed” literature is that aimed at making clear its position against terrorism. Sometimes we tend to forget that literature is not and should never be philosophy or a political manifesto, and that more than enforcing answers, its aim should be to induce questions in the reader. And I believe that Basque literature is playing an important function in relation to The Thing, greater than many would think; its influence may be more transcendental than that afforded to journalism and sociology, for example. Pío Baroja claimed that the history of some people could be better studied and known by reading their novels rather than by reading historical scholarship. This may be true of the recent history of the Basque Country; perhaps reading some short stories or some novels can help us to understand it better.

Another point is whether The Thing should be our sign of identity in the global literary market. It is true that the Basque conflict is what has made us known everywhere in the world. However, the few international Basque writers (Bernardo Atxaga, Unai Elorriaga, Kirmen Uribe, and Mariasun Landa) do not mention The Thing with the exception of Atxaga (who does not even mention it in his most famous work \textit{Ohabakoak}), while the identity question is not at all important in the works of Elorriaga and Landa. Perhaps nobody really cares about The Thing but us.

Of course, I must say, I cannot escape from it, although it is not my only literary interest. When I was young and started writing, I knew for sure that literature was something different, it was a world in which there was no place for political assassinations, police torture, or the injustices we heard about almost every day throughout the gloomy 1980s: I didn’t feel like talking about it, so perhaps that was the reason I chose science fiction. I was very young then and wrote in Spanish, which is the language of my beginnings as a literary author. However, with the passing of time and when The Thing became more and more of a nightmare I felt the necessity to write about it, and it was my first attempt in Basque. My first drafts on The Thing in Spanish were a failure, so I turned to Basque which helped to sort out some obstacles and eventually I was able to finish a couple of stories. Well, maybe that was sheer chance, who knows, but what I am sure of is that changing languages helped me, at a given moment, to write about something I could not avoid anymore, something that I can now deal with easily in both languages: Basque and Spanish.

\textsuperscript{12} Mikel Iriondo, “Arte y violencia en el País Vasco,” \textit{biTARTE} 30 (2003), 22.
Five

On the other hand, now that we’re talking about the language, it must be said that for the Basque writer even if s/he has decided to write in Basque, the process is not over yet. For when the moment to conquer The World Republic of Letters comes, the author must decide whether to make a stopover in Spanish or take a direct flight to another language, leaving Spanish aside. Obviously I am talking about the Basque writer from the Iberian Peninsula. The French Basque writer would have to opt for French or Basque, but this, for the time being, is a very remote problem given the power of French Jacobinism in any cultural field. It should be remembered that, of late, Basque, Catalan, and Galician, even if in name only, have been ranked as “Spanish languages,” hence some of the activities involving them organized by the Instituto Cervantes; conversely, for the French cultural establishment Basque, or Breton, with their literatures are but mere *patois*, unworthy of being placed at the same level as French: I cannot imagine the Alliance Française organizing, as the Instituto Cervantes has done, conferences on Corsican or Basque literature in Vienna or in Albuquerque.

The option of bypassing Spanish is probably the one that most pleases the true-born Basques, especially those who profess a marked nationalism. In the end, bypassing Spanish is one way of cutting off the “colonial” bond and a way of showing a cultural and political autonomy. As Pascale Casanova argues when discussing the Catalan case:

Success in winning recognition for the region’s linguistic and cultural autonomy has made it possible to establish independent networks for the production, marketing, and distribution of its literature . . . For a quarter-century or more writers such as Sergi Pámies, Pere Gimferrer, Jesus Moncada, and Quim Monzó have been able to write and publish in the Catalan language and, what is more, they can now hope to be translated directly into the great literary languages without having to pass through the intermediate stage of Castilian. The appearance of a corps of specialized translators has opened literary production to an international audience and gradually given the Catalan language existence not only in international literary space but in international political space as well.13

I think we are heading in the same direction, though a few years behind. There are now more translators from Basque into other languages. There are fewer than in Catalan, but of course, Basque has fewer speakers. Kirmen Uribe’s latest poetic work was published in English earlier than in Spanish, and *An Anthology of Basque Short Stories* (2004), edited by Mari Jose Olaziregi, confirms the tendency. While writing this I have heard that Juanjo Olasagarre’s novel *Ezineko maletak* have appeared both in Spanish and in Italian at the same time.

More efforts are being made, no doubt, but not to set the bells ringing. It is true that more Basque writers are translated into other languages, but as Koldo Izagirre says “it is

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good to remember that Greenwich is not the only meridian.”

Yet, we cannot forget that for better or for worse English is the only language that allows any literature to be known worldwide: it is the passport to The World Republic (that is to say market) of Letters. The Yugoslavian writer Dubravka Ugrešić claims that,

The American cultural industry has secured the global market, and all buyers are welcome, from the Papuans to the Portuguese. Local producers stay at home, placing their goods on local markets or trying to penetrate the American and West European. A Polish writer will not exert himself to he published in India; if such a thing does happen, it is just a happy but irrelevant accident. An Indian writer, despite his justified postcolonial bitterness, does not much care whether he is published in some Bulgaria or another. To be published in the Anglo-American market, though—from which the transmission of cultural goods spreads farther afield—means holding in your hand a ticket to the global market lottery.

Let’s not forget that the public administration, and the Basque government in particular, fail to give enough support for literary publishing and translation. For example, the highest award for literature, the Euskadi Prize, includes a bonus for translation if the winning author manages to find a publishing house, which is absurd. That bonus should have been invested by a government agency in translating the work and locating a publishing house because that is the task of the authorities, not of the writer. In this particular field, our government is still backward when compared with other small central European countries with a far lower GDP per capita than ours. Our authorities seem to be more preoccupied with industrial machinery than with literature and culture. Perhaps, to make matters worse, they are right: it may be better to invest in industry and machinery than to buy a lottery ticket for the uncertain global literary market. And, above all, as critic Iñaki Aldekoa has said, “Our literature must first be known in our country, if anywhere. In the end, Basque literature has been written for Basques to read. The basis for a living and healthy literature is strongly linked with language and culture. To be known abroad comes later.” And maybe he’s right.

Humbly, I must admit that I have taken the shameful road of colonial submission: I’ve entered the Spanish market. I’ve tried my works in that ring with the very faint hope that, if they come through without being badly bruised, they may be invited (if lucky) to fight in another international ring. I think this is the most natural route (though I don’t know what the exact meaning of “natural” is in this case), because of geographic and cultural proximity. Secondly, Spanish, as I said above, is also my language. And finally, I agree with some authors’ views (I am thinking about Lourdes Oñederra) claiming that generally we write for our neighbors, for our nearest fellow countrymen and women,


15. Dubravka Ugrešić, Thank You for Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 188.

and more than half of them could not read my works in Basque, no matter how much they longed to: to write in Spanish and translating myself are ways to reach those audiences to whom, usually, we are almost invisible.

Besides, as Pascale Casanova notes,

But even if Catalan has become an increasingly legitimate option, Castilian has remained in some ways a more attractive alternative. As I have already had occasion to emphasize, Catalan novelists working in Castilian, whose works by definition are available to a broader audience, and who spread a euphemistic version of Catalanian cultural nationalism aimed at the general public—in the form of detective novels by authors such as Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, or of realistic novels evoking the history of Barcelona by Eduardo Mendoza, Juan Marsé, and others—have achieved much greater recognition in the great literary centers.¹⁷

Contrary to what happens in Catalonia, the Basque writers who enjoy international recognition such as Bernardo Atxaga, Unai Elorriaga, and Mariasun Landa, write in Basque and have first been translated into Spanish before being translated into other languages, the first two thanks partly to winning the Spanish National Prize for literature, while Mariasun Landa gained recognition after a long and intense career in the field of youth and children’s literature.

However, I would not like to claim to have been deceived. I am not optimistic about the international diffusion of our literary works. Besides those few mentioned above there is no more space for the quaint in the international market; I feel that Ugrešić’s “happy though irrelevant accidents” will be the average fate of many of the translations of Basque works, no matter what the policy of the Basque government may be. There are 700,000 speakers of Basque, more or less. We all know, according to SF writer Theodore Sturgeon’s law (“Ninety percent of everything is crap,” as he answered to someone who argued that ninety percent of science fiction was trash), that the percentage of literary geniuses in any linguistic area is more or less the same with the exception of the center of the system that, as is well known, produces many more “geniuses” (and not by chance, I would add).

I wonder how many more significant Basque writers we can offer to the world besides those few mentioned above. Or others still making their way.

Six

The Basque writer has to make yet another decision, whether to rely or not on their own literary tradition (that written in Basque, obviously) when creating their work. Let’s put it bluntly. Our written literary tradition is rather poor, not to say totally impoverished, or at least it was until the 1960s. The history of Basque literature resembles that of the characters in Rafael Reig’s hilarious novel-essay Manual de literatura para caníbales

(Literary Handbook for Cannibals, 2006). In this novel the members of the Belinchón family are always one dominant literary trend behind (thus, when Romanticism was at its peak, the Belinchón at that moment was a true classicist, yet with the arrival of Realism, the next Belinchón was an ardent romantic and so on and so forth). To tell the truth, Basque literature has, in fact, been not one but two or three stages behind the dominant trend of Western literature; for example, the poets of the 1920s, Emeterio Arrese and his contemporaries, were deeply attached to Bécquer and Campoamor’s Romanticism, while Federico Belinchón, his fictional counterpart and contemporary of Lorca and other avant-garde poets, longed to be a modernist poet.

Meanwhile, and to make matters worse, our writers have been, like their readers, very few and most have left a musty clerical work that would not even deserve a footnote in the most dubious university literary handbook. Our “classic” literature, beyond being a field of research for literary critics or literary theorists, is nothing more than an excuse for philologists to work with the history of the Basque language.

Basque literature started to come up to date with Gabriel Aresti in the 1960s, but the resultant literature after that date does not seem to have evolved properly and fails to bring to life a real Tradition; it is too young, most of the writers are still alive and we cannot trust them to reach a friendly agreement about the position of each in a literary canon-to-be.

Unfortunately, writers who cut themselves off from their literary tradition commit an act of impiety in a country so prone to philology as is the Basque Country (philology is to the Basques what philosophy is to the Germans: as the illustrator Asisko Urmeneta says, all Basque people have a philologist deep down inside them from whom it is almost impossible to escape). In fact the only use made of our classics is as stylistic, rhetorical, and prosodic guides. But even this function is becoming less necessary because of the accumulated literary corpus since the 1960s and the increasing and better translations of the world classics into Basque, which makes it unnecessary to turn to Axular or Juan Bautista Agirre to know the most suitable order of the syntactic elements or the most convenient position of the verb within the phrase.

That is why uncommon confessions such as that of Ramon Saizarbitoria in *Bost idazle* (Five Basque Writers, 2002) seem to me very healthy:

> Our tradition is boring and tiresome and, you would also admit, not precisely the best literary model. In other words, . . . almost all extant texts have been published without any precise literary aim. That is why I say that I am not very interested . . . I read a few things to keep discipline but in the same way that I used to read Marxism, I tried to read Althusser because he was very often mentioned in our dinners. I tried, I do not recall up to what point, but I understood nothing.\(^{18}\)

The weakness of our literary tradition has shaped, however, what I take to be a remarkable network of literary persons and apocryphal texts that live among present-day Basque literary works. As our own tradition does not satisfy us (how could it be otherwise!), writers have, imitating Borges (sometimes unconsciously), made one up. Camilo Lizardi, a character in Bernardo Atxaga’s *Obabakoak*, reappears “recycled” in Pedro Alberdi’s *Orhoit gutxat* (2003); Saint Francis Xavier by Jon Alonso in *Katebegi galdua* (1995); Pedro Mari Arrieta in *Sasiak ere begiatu baditik* (1986) and Joanes Mailu in *Mailuaren odola* (2006), both from the pen of Aingeru Epaltza; Joanes Etxegoien in Joan Mari Irigoien’s *Lur bat haratago* (2000); Gaston Berrizar in Ur Apalategi’s *Gure Gauzak SA* (2004); the meta-literary hypothesis of a possible second volume, as a sequel to Axular’s *Gero* (1643), which appears from time to time in short stories or novels, and so on, are evidence of our longing for a fictitious corpus of forerunners that “book by book” is becoming more interesting than the original one. Perhaps the most outstanding attempt to date was the short story “Euskal literaturaren unibertsaltasuna frogatzen duen apokrifoa” (Apocryphal Text Which Shows the Universality of Basque Literature) by Joseba Gabilondo. Thanks to this text we discover that most of Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies had in fact been written by a sixteenth-century Basque, Martín Benítez de Cearreta, and apparently Shakespeare, a mere plagiarist, only rewrote them.19

In short, I think we should vindicate this newly invented tradition as much as the original one. To begin with it is very funny and entertaining, and the invented authors and works are closer to the literary evolution of their own times than the ones written by the clerics who mark the history of Basque literature. And last but not least, any writer knows that the best books are those which never get to be written.

The alternative, then, to tradition, be it real or invented, is (as I’ve already said above) contemporary Basque literature: That is my “tradition,” and that is the one I would like to defend with all its light and shade—with its good, not so good, and bad books. The Basque writer has to decide whether to read his/her contemporaries or not. I write in Basque because I have been a reader of Basque first. But if I had only read the canon-assigned books imposed while at school, I wouldn’t have continued reading in Basque. I am really sorry to say this but Txomin Agirre’s *costumbrista* novel *Garoa* (1912) could not compete with what I was being offered in my Spanish literature courses: Clarín, Galdós, and Baroja. Reading Bernardo Atxaga, Inazio Mujika, Karlos Linazasoro, Juan Garzia, Xabier Montoia, Arantxa Iturbe, and Joseba Sarrionandia drove me to read literature in Basque, and they still do nowadays. Sometimes I read interviews with Basque writers, especially those published in international media, and what surprises me most is how few Basque writers they mention. As Adam Zagajewski points out when talking about his literary tastes when young in Poland, “We were not very interested in Polish writers;

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we were somewhat snobbish (in small countries it is quite common that people do not appreciate writers in their mother tongue).”20

This should not be confused with chauvinism. If I am interested in our contemporary literature with its light and shade it is because I believe that it is to be connected with present Western literary trends, and it forms part, though nobody knows it (and there is no need to know it) of that current which takes universal literature (whatever that may be) to a void, perhaps. In fact, the worship of our (poor) tradition goes frequently hand-in-hand with one of the worst vices a Basque writer may indulge in, “Adamism”: that is, to add an extra value to any work because it is, supposedly, the first time (a detective novel whose main character is a retired lady, a long journey across two continents on a scooter, or whatever) it has been written in Basque; it is true, though, that with such a tradition as ours it is not difficult to be the first in something.

This pretentiousness made some sense when our literature only produced missals and books of sermons destined for people who had little contact with other languages and literatures. But nowadays with a bilingual population, with an increasing number of translations of the classics and of late even of contemporary authors (Philip Roth’s and Paul Auster’s latest books have been published in Basque and Spanish at the same time), and with contemporary authors fitting in within the latest trends, there is no space for Adamism. We can only hope (and it is not a bad goal to aspire to) to be but one more literature, to contribute with our little dose of rewriting within the immense and huge ocean of stories that have been told many a time. As the poet Angel Erro remarks,

Everything has been said, since antiquity.

That everything has been said has already been said.

Everything has been said, then, there is no alternative.

Everything has been said, but not by me.21

Seven

The Basque writer has yet to choose whether s/he wants to be an ironic writer. Well, this is not so easy, though. In such a distressing world as ours, irony does not enjoy a good press (even among writers), or else it is considered destructive; not so long ago Juan Luis Zabala seemed to agree with this when he claimed in his literary periodical Inon izatekotan: “I’ll say it without a hint of irony: I am sickened by those who when talking about literature praise irony as the supreme and unavoidable virtue. Don’t they know that whenever this word is pronounced and written it suffers from great pains?”22


Jokin Muñoz recalled this view when taking part in the aforementioned polemic on the language of Basque literature, and his words were not understood: “The people on the ‘left abertzale’ . . . do not understand the ironic game, or do not want to. Instead of accepting the game and writing following the same rules, they just make a political reading. I see there is a great difficulty in understanding irony. Irony is a fundamental weapon in the hands of a writer, irony, or wit in this case.”

I am afraid that this cannot only be blamed on the “left abertzale”; it goes further. Irony is a witty form of literature free from dogmatism, for it implies doubt and questioning. No other reason lay behind the obscure obsession of the librarian, Jorge de Burgos (ironic transposition of Jorge Luis Borges), when in Umberto Ecos’s novel The Name of the Rose, he desperately wanted to keep hidden the only volume dedicated to comedy in Aristotles’s Poetics. When discovered the librarian explained himself thus:

But if one day somebody, brandishing the words of the Philosopher and therefore speaking as a philosopher, were to raise the weapon of laughter to the condition of subtle weapon, if the rhetoric of conviction were replaced by the rhetoric of mockery, if the topics of the patient construction of the images of redemption were to be replaced by the topics of the impatient dismantling and upsetting of every holy and venerable image . . . then we would have no weapons to combat the blasphemy.

It is not strange, then, that in a country going through a national liberation process, culturally besieged, in a continuous state of emergency such as the one in which we live (that is, some Basque people live in), other plots have found their way into the realm of literature. On the one hand, the tragic plot, that is, the tragedy (or the epic) of the continual defeat—Borroka galduetatik gatoz (“We come from lost battles”), as put by the writer Urtzi Urrutikoetxea; a defeat that, naturally, one day will turn into victory. And, on the other, the naïf plot, the kindly (pleasant) “look,” or naïve, as has been remarked by the poet and critic Beñat Sarasola: “I believe that there is a principal current within Basque literature characterized by a sort of kindly look that walks along the path of Atxaga’s Obabakoak. We can find it, as well, among those who have been awarded the Igartza Prize. I am not particularly fond of that tone, I think it is too naïve . . . In this respect, it seems to me it is a conformist literature.”

As Lichtemberg pointed out the only problem that the truly good books have is that they become the origin of many other truly bad and mediocre ones. This seems to be, I believe, a way of tackling literature with a certain bent toward “escapism,” as seen in the works of Unai Elorriaga; but this, sometimes, even up with a sort of nostalgic, almost

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topical, view of a more or less imagined “traditional” and almost bucolic world that has become part of some columns and poems by Kirmen Uribe (or, moreover if possible, of his recent novel Bilbao-New York-Bilbao). Both the “defeatist” and the “naïf” currents are all too obvious: they do not mislead the reader and lack ulterior motives. Of course, they do not appear in a pure form, and are subject to different gradations and combinations, but I believe them to be the two most outstanding trends within contemporary Basque literature.

It is true that irony is not an easy tool to handle: you never know if the reader will grasp it or not, and, as Jon Alonso has pointed out very well, what makes a work witty does not depend so much on the intention of the author (who can fail spectacularly) as on the reception of the reader. Irony is, as I understand it, a critical and subtle form of literary wit that appeals (although not always successfully) to the complicity of the reader, but which at the same time, and as opposed to sarcasm, keeps a relation of complicity (and even of tenderness) with the object of its criticism.

Irony, however, is not autonomous and has its limitations; it always depends on a previous moment as Adam Zagajewski has noted: “Ironic opens very deep breaches in walls, but if there were no walls, it would have to bore through the void. If we look for the absolute or some sort of transcendence, irony will not do.” Perhaps, irony is but a modest literary tool. In this line, we must admit that either the dramatic or the “naïve look” are more effective, noble and comforting trends than the ironic.

Besides, irony entails laughing at ourselves, as Karlos Linazasoro explains:

It requires a lot of practice . . . if you want to use it correctly; in the use of irony there is the mixing of wit and intelligence, composure . . . , literature, the capacity to suggest, ambiguity, doubt, the ability to surprise (or catch unaware) the reader. Irony, however, does not work unless we try it first on ourselves. Laughing at ourselves is called self-irony, and is very useful and effective.

And maybe we Basque people, and mostly those who live in Basque, are not very keen on laughing at ourselves, taking into consideration our circumstances. This might be changing though.

I recall a lecture given by the anthropologist Joseba Zulaika in the Udako Euskal Unibertsitatea (Summer Basque University) in Iruñea-Pamplona some years ago. I remember being deeply impressed. Zulaika talked about history (about the history of the Basque Country) and the ways in which history can be narrated, and I think that his argument could be very well used when discussing literature, which (let’s not forget) is (among other things) a way of narrating history: history in lower case letters.

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To talk about parody and irony is to be conscious of the rivalry among different narrative plots. How do we choose the most appropriate narrative plot for each historical period? That choice depends on the historian’s sensitivity. It is in the latter, though, where a remarkable difference lies: the dogmatic writer believes his/her own chosen plot to be the true one; conversely, the most interesting writers are conscious of other alternative narrative axes which may offer as well some truth. The Basque Country’s violence can be narrated very differently. It can be argued that it is heroic transcendence, or just criminal activity . . . Tragedy, melodrama, farce . . . sometimes it is not easy to know which plot we are using.

This plural narrative awakens irony and parody. We cannot mistake parody for satire or mockery; parody springs up between two texts . . . To find or reproduce images of parody does not imply contempt. Quite the reverse: we parody what we are fond of, or something challenging and annoying, or, maybe, something that has grown too troublesome inside ourselves.31

That lecture opened my eyes to the resourcefulness of parody, though I don’t regard it as the supreme and only virtue. The advantage of parody, as Zulaika suggests, is its ability to fit in different plots and expose their relativity. In fact, to be ironic entails using irony while knowing that no absolute can be achieved with it.

Sometimes, though, it is unavoidable. The eternal reappearance of The Thing, with its killings, threats, illegalization, pains, and fear takes us to the beginnings of Marx’s The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: The first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”32 I am afraid that tragedy, the innocent look, and (naturally) the epic often will not do to tell us what is happening.

Often there is no need of an elaborate literary approach for irony to surface. Let me tell you a true story that happened to me as a case in point: Some years ago, I arranged a meeting with a poet just released after a twenty-one year imprisonment because of his ETA membership; we had met briefly earlier when I visited his prison as a university teacher. We met, but we didn’t know how to start for we both were aware of our differing views on politics. But soon, a young man came to us: in those days our town was celebrating a video-creation festival, and the young man (apparently an organizer) invited us to participate in a scene they were filming at that moment. We could not say no for he insisted peremptorily. Then he explained what was expected from me (and other people, for they filmed the scene a number of times with different volunteers): I should play, for a little while, the role of a “terrorist” who was fleeing from “the police” and while running eventually turn and, at the director’s indication, fall as if gunned down by an imaginary policeman; at the other end of the square there was a mattress where I was expected to fall, fatally wounded by the “bullets.” I couldn’t believe my ears; nor could the recently

released poet, who witnessed the whole event incredulously. But it was too late to refuse. They gave me a large straw hat and pushed me to the place to start. I showed no acting ability for I had to repeat the scene five times before dying convincingly in front of the camera. Even today I find it difficult to believe that it really happened, but I recall every detail of it and, some days later, the poet wrote about it in his column for the literary supplement of the newspaper Gara. He narrated it with irony: Could it have been otherwise, as things were?

Perhaps, as I said above, irony may be a modest and a second-rate literary device, but I believe that we live in a world surrounded by very lofty walls, and irony is still one of the tools at hand that we can use to bore through, if only a little.

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Finally, a Basque writer has to decide whether to accept invitations to conferences such as this one, and, if attending, whether to draw attention to his/her native exoticism, or to introduce himself/herself as a writer with a “universal” spirit. The World Republic of Letters allocates a very narrow space for Basque writers—only three or four, at the most, are exportable figures (and I may be exaggerating). The fact that it is a language with very few speakers, strange and mysterious, with no links with its contemporaries; a language that lives, or maybe is dying, in a developed Western European country (not in a remote tropical forest or on a frozen plain near the North Pole), well, you see, all this compels the organization of an international conference (or round tables, or a series of lectures) to debate it, but mostly the interest is in the language as such: its origin, its syntax, its morphology or any other philological aspect, or even its oral literature, but few events are arranged for the discussion of its written literature.

So, if we are invited to such a conference we can choose the native line and talk about how old and how few speakers our language has, and recount how whatever word or expression would be translated into our language, and weave all these threads poetically, of course, with a particular story of our childhood or youth. The logic of exoticism has its own logic and we, writers in Basque, cannot easily escape from it: our language has its own marked difference, and to possess such a marked difference has a value of its own no matter how little, temporary, and postcolonial it may be, in the current international literary market.

But, personally, I do not seem to fit this picture. My family speaks Spanish and I grew up in an environment where no Basque was spoken (even today it is not spoken); I learned it at school, and hardly recall any cute story related to the Basque language, or at least an interesting one. On the other hand, I believe that no language is older than any other, not even Basque, and I suspect that being great or small is not a virtue in itself, and on top of that I find I lack poetic flavor. I must meekly confess that, in literature, I’d rather be cork than anchor: it’s lighter, it fits better with my urban and mixed origin, and it makes me forget a little bit the burden that may become the anchor of our existen-
tial anxiety (as I argued before); I think is better for my work (but maybe not for other Basque writers', I must admit).

I do not trust any mysticism around the issue of language. Language is an instrument, and what really interests me is what I can do with that language or those languages. As I’ve said a number of times, both Spanish and Basque are my literary languages.

Besides, today we can read Maupassant and Poe in Basque, and authors such as Julio Cortazar, Anton Chekhov, and Tobias Wolff have influenced me more than Oihenart or Detxepare. Let me add that I have received the best of universal literature through contemporary Basque authors. Basque literature does not now need to be a mere instrument of defending Basque culture, or a weapon to fight for national liberation. We might say that Basque literature has joined the flow of universal literature during the last forty or fifty years, whatever that may be.

However, I don’t know whether I can come here and introduce myself as a “universal writer.” Firstly because I am not sure if is there is such a thing—a “universal writer”—because as Enrique Vila-Matas once observed: “There is a universal literature, but I suspect that this concept only embraces Western literatures: what Goethe called Weltliteratur or universal literature. So, maybe there is none. Besides, literature does not need adjectives. On the other hand, Universal is redundant. So, in the end I do not know.”

I agree with Vila-Matas’ misgivings. But, if I am here, it is (I suppose) because I write short stories (above all) in a precise language, in a very specific environment and circumstances and I address a particular audience: when I write I do not do so with the intention of reaching an international, unfamiliar reader with the aim of discussing more or less abstract feelings or realities. If there are any universal writers, we may find them here in the United States, right at the heart of the economic power, as in the nineteenth century they were found in France or in Great Britain. In the same way it is at the heart of the economic power, the very center of the system, where the makers of best-sellers are mostly found.

The problem is insoluble. Even if I wanted to, I could not introduce myself as a universal writer, and, even if I could do it, I would not want to do so as a native, exotic, or quaint writer.

All that remains is to shut up and finish this, once and for all.

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Bibliography


Part II:

RE-CREATION (ACADEMICS)
The Elephant in the Sitting Room

“On the Roundabout,” the opening tale in the collection of short stories *Matters of Life & Death* (2007) by the Irish writer Bernard MacLaverty, revolves around a family man who, risking his own life, saves an injured man from a savage sectarian attack. This fast-moving, succinct narrative, set at the height of the Northern Irish “troubles” in the late 1970s, dramatizes the complex interaction between victim, aggressor, and witness. The savior’s selfless act is not even acknowledged by the authorities, whose refusal—taking into account the highly unusual political climate of the time—of an offer to bear witness to the events leaves him deeply frustrated. Around two months later, however, he reads an account by the survivor published in the form of a thank-you letter in the local newspaper, the *Belfast Telegraph*. The victim thus turns into the witness, giving a face to the anonymous witness-savior, and the fact that he chooses to tell the tale transforms an anonymous act of solidarity in the streets of Belfast into a public gesture, a written record of an unexpected human encounter. The last thought of the protagonist, “Wasn’t that
good of him? To tell the story,"¹ renders the actual telling of the story a therapeutic event point in time in the narrative, as if the gift of the word has been exchanged for the gift of life.

Bernard MacLaverty had already famously compared the Northern Irish “troubles” with the experience of having an elephant in the sitting room. The “troubles” were the ever-present problem that society had collectively learned to tiptoe around. The legendary British filmmaker Alan Clarke named his documentary on the Northern Irish conflict Elephant (1989) after MacLaverty’s simile.² This minimalist piece, devoid of dialogue and any of the conventional trappings of the documentary genre such as voice-over, is an arresting visual essay on the dynamics of violence; its effectiveness lies in its formal starkness. Consisting of eighteen episodes, each a reconstruction of a witness account of a sectarian murder, the camera follows—literally tracks down—assassins about to kill their victim. The film works by overload: each murder adds to the heavy feeling and claustrophobic air generated by the “troubles”; words are not needed to account for the horror we are witnessing. It is a macabre, strangely lyrical dance of death, and viewing it, the reading of the survival of ETA in post-Franco Spain by the Spanish poet Leopoldo María Panero comes to mind:

“La fiesta revolucionaria no sería nada sin el crimen, lo mismo que nadie iría a la Guerra si no fuese ésta una promesa de matar. El terrorismo no es así una enfermedad infantil del comunismo, sino su más secreto deseo. Política y pulsión de muerte.”³

The Irish “troubles,” the Basque “problem”: both can be seen as all-encompassing signifiers that hang around the necks of the artists creating in these sociopolitical contexts, leaving them like albatrosses. And now the Irish conflict has been resolved, we feel a greater strain, our very own elephant in the sitting room feels even more anachronistic in the European context—and far heavier. As a counterpoint to this political pressure cooker, in his final intervention in the documentary by Julio Medem, La pelota vasca (Basque Ball, 2003), Bernardo Atxaga makes the claim that in a post-conflict society Basques would all feel so relieved that they would levitate. It would be a moment of lightness; ceasing to feel the weight of competing historical accounts would be liberating. It would be the moment when we could stop thinking about the problem, or stop worrying that we are not thinking enough about the problem. Finally it could be a society at ease with itself.⁴

One of the ways in which Medem’s documentary conveys the shift from the heavy burden on our shoulders to a utopian post-conflict lightness, is through music. The artist responsible for the soundtrack is Mikel Laboa (1934–2008), the best-known singer-

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⁴. “Levemente, para no escandalizar, pero levitará por el peso que nos habremos quitado de encima. Ahora tenemos mucho peso sobre los hombros.” In Julio Medem, La pelota vasca. La piel contra la piedra (Madrid: Santillana, 2003), 912.
songwriter of the 1960s era in the Basque context. He was a member of the new song
movement—one of the founders of the seminal musical collective “Ez dok amairu”—that
flourished during the 1960s and 1970s as part of the movement of cultural resistance
against Francoism in the creative arts. Medem’s film opens with the song “Txoria-Txori”
(Bird), the 1969 protest song by Laboa—as emblematic a protest song in the Basque con-
text as “L’estaca” (The Branch, 1968), by singer-songwriter Luis Llach, is in the Catalan
one. During the Franco dictatorship, a context of censorship of both production and
reception, everything acquired a symbolic meaning. In Laboa’s song, the bird’s desire
and need for freedom is the desire for Basque freedom. However, this anti-Francoist sym-
bol of the bird—just as in Medem’s use of the documentary Ama Lur (1968)—is read in a
new context: that of Basque terrorism during the post-Franco era and the state’s war on
terror. Thus, the aerial shots and the bird are re-read aesthetically and politically by Julio
Medem in his film. His is not a return to the 1960s, which is one of the many misreadings of
Basque Ball. It is not yearning for the past narratives of resistance against repression,
nor for a more heroic past. In the film, the aerial shots and the bird become symbols of
de-territorialization and of taking flight. Medem himself describes the project and the
documentary as “a bird flying,” and in the closing sequences of his film the camera takes
flight, itself becoming a bird flying away from territorial constraints, free from the weight
of the Basque problem.

Understanding history is crucial at moments of amnesia, particularly at a juncture
such as that when the documentary was made, when all expressions of Basque national-
ism were being analyzed from a single standpoint in the Spanish mainstream media.
Medem’s documentary offers various readings of Basque history and identity, and despite
the high percentage of its participants dissecting the Basque issue who are politicians,
journalists, or academics, this does not mean that on balance political and academic
analysis is given greater weight. Indeed, the structure of Medem’s documentary is circu-
lar, with the Basque writer Bernardo Atxaga as the participant who opens and closes the
film. Atxaga carries the weight of being the best-known Basque writer to defend Basque
language and culture—and is, as such, the representative or voice of a community. By
choosing a creative voice as the opening and closing contributor, Medem makes his key
point: the artist is the voice of the community. In the Mallarmelian model, the poet’s
role is to purify the words of the tribe and, as such, Atxaga chooses a very simple and
strong metaphor for a post-conflict society: that of the Greek polis. Atxaga chooses to
speak not only for the Basque-speaking community but also for those not included in this
group; his critical intervention is a defense of cultural diversity carried out in the Span-
ish language. Atxaga chooses as a societal model a plural democratic city that includes
all citizens, and by saying “Euskal Hiria” (in Basque, “Basque City”) instead of “Euskal
Herria” (in Basque, “Basque Country”), he offers an alternative to the cultural and politi-
cal projects of the 1960s. This is not a return to nationalism as some have suggested but

a palimpsest, writing on previous texts, in order to reclaim a collective voice (at a point when there is a right-wing government, and even the historical importance of Gernika is in danger of being forgotten). The final song in the documentary is “Gure hitzak” (Our Words)\(^6\) which is itself a palimpsest, with Mikel Laboa performing a musical interpretation of a poem by Bernardo Atxaga—in turn inspired by another poem written by the Arab poet Abdelfattah Kilito, in which the idea is expressed that culture is all about repetition, repetition through performance and culture. As Atxaga mentions in his novel \textit{Obabakoak} (1989), every story has already been told (in the Borgesian sense; and if it has not been told, it was not any good in the first place), but every generation forgets them and they have to be retold. It is this retelling and remembering that constitutes a community, and that is the role of the writer in Atxaga’s view: “We iterate our words over and over again / so they are not lost / like the footprints / left in the snow / by the slender legs / of birds.”\(^7\) The need for collective narratives constitutes an imagined community, and in \textit{Basque Ball} Medem uses the 1960s as visual and aural palimpsest, as a warning against the perils of not understanding history.

Through showing the lightness of the bird flying away, the film constitutes a counterpoint to the elephant in the sitting room; and opposed to the weight imposed by atavistic conflict, Atxaga offers the lightness of a post-conflict era. In the end, the paternal home of the 1960s is a plural community, and the generation of Atxaga and Medem have not returned to the house of the father since an essentialist perspective of identity is part of the Basque problem. Atxaga’s proposal of the polis as the ideal for Basque society, with its own independent neighborhoods, also reflects the reading of the historian Juan Pablo Fusi, who defends the idea that a plurality of identities has always co-existed in Basque history rather than the single exclusive identity favored by Basque and Spanish nationalisms.\(^8\) This is a yet more open and evolving situation in the new Spain, where issues of demographic composition are ever present and the palimpsest written against the Arabic text becomes a symbol of the multicultural past and future of Spain, not only “a nation of nations,” but a country with a growing community of immigrants that has become the new European border with Africa. Visually, in the documentary, the ending of authoritarianism is expressed via fluidity—formally expressed by the camera movement—and de-territorialization; it is the moment of taking flight, of casting off the weight of history. This is a utopian vision in which the co-existence of plural identities is fostered—breaking away from a univocal relationship between territory, history, and identity—and the design and artificiality of the modern state is torn apart. Ernest Gellner compares the design of the modern state to a painting by Modigliani, with clear-cut patterns and borders.\(^9\) Medem’s film visually points up the obsolescence of such exclusive

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\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.


notions of identity and territoriality, with borders becoming irrelevant via the camera’s movement in flight, freely moving over the landscape. This is a timely political point, coming at a moment when Spain is coming to be seen as the fortress of Europe.

Xabier Montoia, in his 2006 novel *Euskal hiria sutan* (The Basque City on Fire), sets a more conflictive version of the Basque urban reality against the utopian dream created by Atxaga.11 Montoia’s novel is just like Atxaga’s *Obabakoak* in that it is a novel constituted by short stories. Formally, therefore, it mirrors the most influential contemporary narrative in Basque. Thematically, however, it challenges the figure of the Basque city as dreamland, thus representing a new layer on the palimpsest: namely, one set against the romantic vision of Atxaga. Even though Atxaga presents the Basque City as a challenge to previous neo-romantic essentialist formulations of Basque identity, his proposal is now challenged within Basque literature as idealized and, in that sense, also romantic. It is patent now that the ways in which different models of the Basque City engage with each other require further research and contemplation.

On March 24, 2006 ETA announced a permanent cease-fire, opening up once again the path for a peaceful negotiated solution to the Basque problem. As a reaction to the new peace process, Atxaga published a piece entitled “La canción” (The Song) in the Spanish national daily *El País*.12 Although unnamed in his article, the song of the title is Mikel Laboa’s “Txoria Txorri,” which with its bird metaphor described the Basque experience during Francoism. As Atxaga notes, during dictatorships, simple metaphors acquire great power. In this historical context, the bird is connected with violence, the violence generated in the 1960s by the will to be free.

However, in Atxaga’s view although this song will live on, it will not now lead to violence. This reinscription of the bird symbol from violent to peaceful was already in place in Medem’s documentary. In his aural palimpsest, Mikel Laboa’s 1960s pared-down guitar version of “The Bird” as protest song becomes a symphonic cinematic version in which the bird serves as a symbol for leaving social fracture and division behind. The essay Medem wrote as a response to the hostile reception his film received in conservative circles is entitled “A Bird Flying Within a Gorge (A Trajectory”).13 The bird of which he speaks is no longer the jailed bird of before, but rather one that tries to fly in the space between polarized factions, to adopt the so-called equidistant position—a difficult balancing act in Basque society; as one of his interviewees, the writer Ramón Saizarbitoria

10. See the interview with musician Txetxo Bengoetxea, who speaks most extensively about immigration transforming Basque society and, as a result, fixed notions of borders in Medem, *La pelota vasca*, 891–99.


says, anyone who tries to understand both sides of the argument is accused of “cowardly equidistance” by the two parties. The bird thus becomes a symbol for a balancing act undertaken by the director in his quest to understand polarized positions.

The critic Paul Julian Smith proposes to read Medem’s earlier film *Tierra* (*Earth*) “as an allegory of a Basque nationalism brought down to earth,” reflecting the general objective expressed by Jon Juaristi in his essay on postnationalism: “The role of historiography is to bring down [descender] the nation from the heaven of myths and submerge it in temporality.” In Spanish postnationalist thinking, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on “fabrications” and “falsity” in a similar sense to that of Benedict Anderson’s critique of Gellner. Anderson’s corollary to this is that, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”

Opposing a dualistic true/false vision, the central formal aspects of Medem’s *Basque Ball*, such as the camera movement and the musical score, serve to signify the way in which communities are imagined. As regards the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, of power and the social field, Medem’s documentary is a case-study of the notion of affect (as understood by Deleuze and Guattari) that offers an alternative model to the interlocking, symmetrical interaction between polarized positions in the Basque context:

Against dialectical reasoning and various structuralist dualisms, Deleuze discovers a “narrow gorge like a border or frontier” where a multiplicity can be divulged. Casting, then, both “power” and “desire” in relation to affect, Deleuze makes a concise but illuminating equation between these terms, claiming that the “first difference would thus be that, for me, power is an affection of desire.”

The series of examples we have discussed allude to the feeling of weightiness and claustrophobia linked to the figure of the elephant in the sitting room and the idealistic attempts to break away from an ongoing conflict. Yet the figure of the elephant is also connected with the notion of the emperor’s new clothes in the film *Elephant* (2003) by the North American director Gus Van Sant. His is a different interpretation based on the notion of a conspiracy of silence, but nevertheless, he named his film (inspired by the Columbine High School massacre) after Alan Clarke’s highly influential documentary. Van Sant focuses on adolescence as a key period of personal formation alongside the experiencing of a traumatic event. We see a very similar theme and formal strategies in the novel *Zorion perfektua* (2002), translated as *Perfect Happiness* (2007), by the Basque writer Anjel

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Lertxundi. In this case, a young adolescent girl witnesses a terrorist assassination and her life is thereafter marked by this traumatic event. Trauma arrests time, and this is reflected in the approach to narrative time in the novel as she returns periodically and painfully to her witnessing of the murder:

I had never before seen the man who now lay on the ground, but as far as I was concerned, we were inextricably linked because I had seen him die: I was the only witness to the last spark of life in his eyes. To the cross-eyed policeman I was only a kid, but it was into my eyes and no one else’s that the man had looked for the last time. My eyes, not the gunshot, were his last human experience. And that was why I was there: I was collecting the last moments of this man’s life to keep in my memory.

The novel is a reflection on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, and the encounter with the victim can be read in the Levinasian sense as an encounter with the Other. Intertwined with the memories of the assassination are the sixteen-year-old’s rehearsals of classical music—specifically, her attempts to master Schumann’s *Bonheur parfait*. The novel *Zorion perfektua* plays with the contrast between the beauty, control, and perfect timing involved in performing a classical piece, and the temporal and emotional rupture brought about by experiencing violence firsthand. A similar contrast is explored in Van Sant’s *Elephant* when, just before the two killers go on their rampage in the episode entitled “The Calm Before the Storm” one of them, Alex, is seen rehearsing Beethoven’s *Für Elise* while the other, Eric, plays video games: virtual killing just before embarking on the real killing spree. This is the time when art and life come together—the sublime. In contrast, Lertxundi, via the use of classical music, explores ideals of beauty in his novel: “Do you remember what Schumann said to Clara Wieck about the pieces from *Scènes d’enfants*? . . . these little pieces are sweet: tender like life; full of hope like the future.” Lertxundi’s novel is also a well-timed piece: sweet and tender, but lacking in hope because the control that the protagonist has to exercise in performing her classical music is absent from her own life because her mind keeps returning to the murder; in other words, the teenager in the novel is imprisoned by her memories. Her experience reminds us of Irene, the protagonist of Atxaga’s novella *Zeru horiek* (*The Lone Woman*, 1995), who is also held by memories of prison, expressed within the novel in a poem by Joseba Sarrionandia. Cathy Caruth, following Freud, highlights the impact of trauma on time in her theoretical model on trauma:

Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. In some cases, as Freud points out, these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be

20. Ibid., 21.
21. Ibid., 137–38.
initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside of their wish or control.\textsuperscript{22}

Lertxundi had already explored the theme of violence in the novel \textit{Hamaseigarrenean aidanez} (On the Sixteenth, They Say, 1983), in which collective guilt and conspiracy of silence are examined by focusing on the foretold death of a local gambler, and the role of his fellow villagers who chose to remain passive bystanders. Both of Lertxundi’s narratives focus on the role of the witness. However, while \textit{Hamaseigarrenean aidanez} concerns itself with collective responsibility, \textit{Perfect Happiness} reflects on the impact of violence on the individual psyche. I am not going to offer a comprehensive list, but it is clear that there is now a very substantial body of work generated by the subject matter of violence in contemporary Basque literature, initiated by Ramon Saizarbitoria’s seminal \textit{Ehun metro} (A Hundred Meters, 1976). This corpus is as weighty as that written about the Spanish Civil War in Spanish literature. Yet as I am going to argue, fixating simply on quantity of production misses the crux of the matter.

\textbf{Writing Violence}

Obsessively, relentlessly we discuss the role of the writer in Basque literature: views range from the belief that terrorism is discussed far too much in writing and public interventions to the reverse, that the topic should not be addressed and writers should avoid engaging with the subject matter at all costs. Neither view fully accounts for the complexities of the writer’s engagement with reality. Do we speak too much or too little about the Basque “problem”? The question of violence as literary topic posed in such a way is utterly irrelevant since the very premise underlying the question is wrong. I argue that the formulation of the debate is intrinsically flawed, based on Slavoj Žižek’s reading of the post-9/11 rhetoric. He refers to the following anecdote as a starting point for his discussion of a political scenario in which there is no alternative of an alternative, as in fact the inscription is included in the encoded message:

In an old joke from the defunct German Democratic Republic, a German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: “Let’s establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it’s true; if it’s written in red ink, it’s false.” After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink: “Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair—the only thing you can’t get is red ink.”\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Cathy Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1–2.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Slavoj Žižek, \textit{Welcome to the Dessert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates} (London: Verso, 2002), 1.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
That the absence referred to is part of the code is what, in the Basque scenario, accounts for the fact that even when Basque writers choose not to write about violence, their lack of engagement with the topic is an issue in itself. One short story that includes this idea of inscription is “Bibliografía” (Bibliography), part of the collection Gezurrak, gezurrak, gezurrak (Lies, Lies, Lies, 2000) by Iban Zaldua, also included in the book An Anthology of Basque Short Stories (2004). The title of Zaldua’s collection challenges the view Basques have of themselves as being truthful at all times: Lies, Lies, Lies is a compendium of the everyday lies we tell each other, and more significantly the stories we tell ourselves. In “Bibliography,” the stolen library book that happens to be in the hands of the prison guard, and which is recognized by the prisoner as his because of its characteristics, is thus inscribed, by this already encoded reference to violence with the symbolic exchange between the “enemies” involved in the conflict. In short, the Basque conflict is embedded into the stolen library book.

Not only does Zaldua’s short story offer this compelling depiction of a society in conflict, but it also fully conveys the power of the written word as a human leveler. We need to hear and read stories because of our humanity, which is the invisible thread linking the guard and the radical activist. The intense relationship the prisoner has experienced reading the old book mirrors our engagement as readers with the short narrative as events unfold. In Mari Jose Olaziregi’s words in the introduction to the anthology, “Because of their intensity, Zaldua’s short stories will never leave the reader cold; for Zaldua the short story is, as J. Cheever says, what we tell ourselves in the unequivocal moment of death.”

The shift in recent Basque literature has been precisely a move away from narrating terrorism—a subgenre resembling that of the Spanish Civil War in Spanish literature—toward very bold attempts by younger writers to write the dynamics of violence, as already attempted in earlier examples such as Anjel Lertxundi’s Hamaseigarrenean aidanez. The question writers are asking themselves has changed recently from how to write the failure of the generation that believed in the cause—primarily a memorialistic project (with the prime example being Saizarbitoria’s Hamaika pausu)—to how violence pervades every aspect of Basque society. In this regard, the exhibition staged in 2004 by the Artium Museum in Vitoria-Gasteiz on the relationship between art and violence is most relevant, choosing the Greek mythic figure of Laocoonte as its symbol since: “Laocoonte, el más lucido y humano, es devorado por una violencia que él no ha iniciado pero que lo ha empujado a romper sus lealtades y compromisos personales, la violencia corrompe y degrada a quienes la ponen en marcha y, al final, incluso a los que conviven con ella, transformando su carácter, aunque la rechacen.”

The character of Laocoonte, the father who is impotent to save his two sons and whom is also finally devoured by violence, is reflected in Jokin Muñoz’s short story “Isiluneak”/ “Moments of Silence” (in Bizia lo/Life Sleep, 2003). Here he explores the impact on the family narrative of a radicalized son as his parents become entrapped by events. Their inability to communicate with each other as a couple (communication being the very basis of intimacy), coupled with their denial to acknowledge the active role of their son, engulfs them as a family. As they watch television coverage of a terrorist attack, each cocoons in isolation: “Baina kieto daude biak, nor bere aldean. Ez dute entzungo. Ez dute entzun nahi” / “But both are still, each on their own side of the bed. They will not listen. They do not want to listen.”

González Durana, the director of the Artium Museum at the time of the exhibition, describes Laocoonte devorado as the moment when artists in the Basque context were given the opportunity to speak on the topic of violence: “De hecho, lo sorprendente es que, aquí y hasta hoy, no se haya dado la palabra a los artistas sobre esta cuestión.” In Basque literature this moment preceded that of the visual arts: that is, writers such as Iban Zaldua and Jokin Muñoz, writing in Basque for a Basque readership, had already posed these questions.

Writing as Violence

Mariasun Landa refers to the difficult engagement with language at crucial points in the Basque context as a “linguistic wound.” One clear example of this difficult engagement is the Francoist period, and perhaps the most extreme example of the seeping wound is the case of the French Basque writer Jon Mirande (1925–72). The marginal nature of his writing makes it a paradigmatic example of the divided self—a self divided between two cultural contexts. Mirande was born in Paris to a Basque family. From childhood, his was a wounded experience as he was not taught Basque by his parents, who were native speakers and hardly proficient in French; he only learned Basque as an adult when he was already twenty, an achievement aided by his amazing gift for languages, which enabled him to learn several others, including Celtic tongues.

He remained a highly unusual figure in the Basque arts of the time, but his life and final suicide dramatize the impossible choices to be made by the writer when negotiating different cultural footings. He remained an eccentric figure, an outsider, a brilliant linguist and formal stylist who conformed to neither the euskaldun-fededun model (the assumption that all good Basques are good Catholics) nor the modernizing forces in the Basque arts of the period. In fact, he broke from the traditional nationalist ideology in the most radical ways. His Nietzschean perspective on life, his extreme right-wing political views, and a penchant for taboo literary topics differentiate his work from the writing of his contemporaries.

being published in Basque at the time. Jon Mirande’s novel *Haur besotakoa* (The Goddaughter, 1970) was written in 1959 but was not published until 1970. This narrative contains incest and pedophilia as its subject matter, making it impossible to publish the work at the time of writing. This pushed him to consider publishing it in other languages, but for political reasons he would never have chosen any of the languages that he considered to be oppressing their minority counterparts.\(^{29}\) The protagonist of *Haur besotakoa* commits suicide, and this act is mirrored in Mirande’s life by his own suicide. His choice of language and his literary views create a rift in his self, an impossible situation since he is writing for a potential Basque readership who do not relate to his literary world. While receiving treatment for depression, in answer to the question posed by his psychiatrist as to what was the most important thing in his life, he responded that it was the activity of writing. The doctor advised him to write, that writing was his cure, but he replied that he could not, and that as a result life was not worth living.\(^{30}\)

In a different cultural context and field of study, Alberto Moreiras discusses José María Arguedas’s suicide as the very moment at which the negotiation between two very different worlds fails, the point at which Arguedas becomes fully aware of his inability to negotiate being between two different languages (Quechua and Spanish) and the worlds of literature and anthropology: “Arguedas’s death is a fissure in the textual sense that paradoxically organizes the text’s plenitude of sense: meaning, in this novel, results from meaning’s absolute implosion. As an event of writing placed between the novel’s failure and failure’s other side, a rift, a gap, a bullet hole of total disjunction opens itself: as soon as meaning emerges, it needs to be erased anew.”\(^{31}\)

We have a similar failure in Jon Mirande’s novel, and this is not simply an attempt on my part to be provocative by comparing two radically different writers with opposing ideologies. Their challenge as writers is not what they achieve, but rather their failure in attempting to achieve it. Paradoxically, the most successful writing in Basque does not attempt to bridge the gap, to “cure the linguistic wound,” but instead incorporates this aporia—the impossibility of writing—into the writing itself: in other words, the fissure or the rift is incorporated into the written word. The writer Ramon Saizarbitoria’s view is that these intrinsic difficulties in writing in a minority language should be part of the literary stock of the Basque writer. His own novel *Hamaika pausu* (Countless Steps, 1995) exemplifies the fact that the linguistic situation has an existential dimension. The aporia—the difficulties, and at times the impossibility, of writing in the Basque language,

\(^{29}\) The novel was finally published with the help of the poet Gabriel Aresti.


dramatized in the novel by Daniel Zabalegi during the last night before his execution—can lead to the best writing in Basque, and Saizarbitoria’s novel is a paradigmatic example: “It is a narrative about failing to account for the past: memory is referred to as a Gaudí design; if broken, you can attempt to reconstruct it, but you will never be certain that you have all the pieces. The text also stages the difficulties of writing in Basque, and Saizarbitoria’s view is that the topic should be part of the repertoire of the Basque writer.”

The Palimpsest in Contemporary Basque Literature: Performing Conflict

Returning to the documentary La pelota vasca, it should be possible to shed light not only on the dynamics of violence in the political arena but also in that of the arts by turning to Joseba Zulaika’s Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament (1988), an ethnographic study of violence in the author’s home town, Itziar, in Gipuzkoa. Zulaika is one of a number of Basques who have returned to study their own society as anthropologists. His study offers an anthropological explanation for the seriousness of the game of Basque ball, or, for that matter, any sport in the Basque context. The Basque language has two words for the English equivalent to play: jolas and joko. The first has a ludic dimension, as in the case of a child’s game; the second, however, associated with sport and gambling, is a serious business. In his study, Zulaika also sees the dynamics of joko pervading Basque political dynamics: “Joko is a bipolar competitive game that produces a winner and a loser and is almost exclusively the men’s affair. Gaming, betting, playing, singing verses, and working can all easily become joko. A pelota game, a race, and playing the card game mus are examples of joko. In another sense, joko is people gambling or betting on the performance of a staged joko or event.”

This either/or dynamic performed in the joko is mirrored in Basque violence, and accounts for the choice of the sport of pelota as a structuring principle to Julio Medem’s documentary. With a similar aim, Anjel Lertxundi’s novel Hamaseigarrerenean aidanez centers on a gambling event in which the life of a man is at stake: again joko, and not jolas, is at play here, the dynamics of violence in the Basque context. We can extrapolate this dynamic to the cultural arena: a case in point would be writers being forced to justify linguistic choices, and at times being pushed to make impossible choices in the “all or nothing” game. This pressure is not only internal but also external; going back to Saizarbitoria’s “cowardly equidistance,” there is no room for ambiguity.

At times it seems as if the global is celebrated as a way of avoiding our own domestic elephant, a way out of the “problem.” In their analysis of cyberculture in the Basque context, Andoni Alonso and Iñaki Arzoz outline the development of a hyperidentity, an emerging non-confictive technological identity. In their reading, Bernardo Atxaga’s Obabakoak is classified as a hypertext, a concept they explain in the terms of A. Rodríguez

de las Heras, a Spanish pioneer in this technology: “If a text is understood as a flat piece of paper, hypertext is an origami figure made with it.” In the current situation, Basque literature is closer to the palimpsest, a text written against the grain of previous ones with different layers of memory traces. When Atxaga refers to Euskal Hiria (Basque City) as the utopian space, his image is superimposed upon not only Euskal Herria (Basque Country), the community, but also the poet Gabriel Aresti’s Euskal Harria (Basque Stone). The new image resonates against this image of the stone, of resistance against the Francoist regime. However, it is not as simple as this, as demonstrated, for example, by the breaking away of the Pott literary group from the previous generation through their defense of the autonomy of literature.

We see the same idea of break and continuity in Atxaga’s Zeru horiek (The Lone Woman, 1995). This novel contains a passage from Jorge Oteiza’s essay on aesthetics, Quosque tandem…! (1963), in which he recalls the childhood feelings of security he experienced while lying down inside a hole on the beach looking out at the open skies above. The contradictory ideas of being inside an enclosed space (a zulo, in Basque) and belonging, by looking elsewhere, form the basis of creativity here. In Oteiza’s account, the child is inside the hole looking out at the open skies above, so there is a sense of protection without a feeling of claustrophobia. This excerpt from Oteiza is located within a narrative that follows the journey of a released prisoner back home from enclosure to open space. In the above-mentioned literary palimpsests, it might be that we move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and vice-versa, following the Freudian model of the uncanny: “Thus heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich.” In Atxaga’s latest novel, Soinujolearen semea (The Accordionist’s Son, 2003), the notion of the uncanny is articulated through the symbol of the zulo, which represents the Freudian shift in which the unheimlich becomes part of the heimlich: the zulo had been a place of shelter for over a century, but with the advent of the armed struggle during the Francoist dictatorship it turned into a dangerous space where kidnapped people were hidden; from a place of sanctuary to a place of torture:

“What are you up to, Uncle? Shifting furniture?” I asked when I joined him. The wardrobe had been moved. After a moment’s hesitation, he said: “I do it every summer. I always like to have a look at the old hiding-place, just to see how it’s doing.” The word he used for “hiding-place” was gordelekua.

The hiding-place was very narrow. If I leaned to one side, I immediately touched the wall with my shoulder. “It’s like a tomb!” I said. Juan laughed, “Well, if you’re not careful, I’ll leave you in there.” “How could they get out if the wardrobe was on top of the trapdoor?” “They couldn’t, unless they had good friends outside.”

34. Andoni Alonso and Iñaki Arzoz, Basque Cyberculture (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2003), 12.

if those friends let them down?” Juan gave a sardonic laugh: “They’d be stuck down there forever!”

The same symbol signifies both protection and menace; the new meaning does not erase the previous one but instead encompasses it, which is the challenge Basque writers have to face when writing violence. Precisely due to the slippage from familiar to unknown territory when performing violence, the figure of the palimpsest—with all its layers, alterations, and erasures—is vital to any understanding of contemporary Basque literature. Moreover, in Javier González de Durana’s depiction of the role of the artist, the most significant aspect is the questions posed rather than the answers given: “No es cuestión de que los artistas ofrezcan respuestas que nadie tiene o de que encuentren un sentido a lo que carece de ello, sino de que, como dijo Theodor Adorno, se consiga cambiar las preguntas.” Contemporary Basque literature performs this tension, the shift from familiar to treacherous territory, and we should not expect Basque writers to resolve or erase the tension between these states. This balancing act is not “cowardly equidistance” but simply the duty of the writer.

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Bibliography


CHAPTER EIGHT

The Astigmatic Vision and the Perception of Minority Literatures

L. Elena Delgado

We generally give to our ideas about the unknown the color of our notions about what we do know . . . We build our beliefs and hopes out of these small misunderstandings with reality and live off husks of bread we call cakes, the way poor children play at being happy.

Fernando Pessoa: The Book of Disquiet

The truth, it must be admitted, is not easy to recognize, once it has been accepted.


Moving Subjects (A Type of Introduction)

Allow me start this paper with an anecdote: months ago, when I received an email invitation to participate in a conference sponsored by the Center for Basque Studies in Reno entitled “Writers In Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene,” my

I thank my colleague Rob Rushing for inspiring the title of this paper and also its very premise. His own characteristically original exploration of the “astigmatic vision” is related to a critical evaluation of popular culture in relation to the work of Erich Auerbach. My thanks also to the organizers of the conference “Writers In Between Languages: Minority Writers in the Global Scene,” particularly Mari Jose Olaziregi, for creating such an atmosphere of dialogue and cordiality, Laku bat basamortuaren erdian.
immediate reaction was to think that there had been a mistake. Surely the organizers had entered my email by accident (I thought) because I am not a speaker of Basque, or any other minority language. The very next day I got a letter, which explained in detail the purpose of the conference and included several topics for discussion. It was only then that I realized that some of the topics were in fact issues that I did consider in my own work, and therefore maybe the invitation had not been a mistake after all. Indeed, I started to question why my first reaction was to assume that I did not belong in such a meeting. For even though I do not have a biological connection to any minority language, I do have a professional and even personal one: I work in a Spanish department where Euskara and Catalan are taught (one of the very few in the United States), and I routinely teach in translation works by Basque, Catalan, and Galician writers. Moreover, for many years now I have written about the construction of a normative “Spanishness” whose cohesion seems to be primarily based more on what it has excluded than what it has included. Nevertheless, I think that both my instinctive reaction and my subsequent reconsideration of it reflect precisely my position in this exchange of ideas, my standpoint, in the sense of the term as used in sociology and political science. Because I think that such a standpoint is not just relevant to my professional views, but in fact has been a determining factor in shaping them, I will allude to it briefly.

I am a native speaker of Spanish and professor of Spanish literature, trained in philological analysis first (in Spain) and literary theory and cultural criticism second (in the United States). I think it is pertinent to indicate that I was born in Venezuela, the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants; I was therefore, initially, a speaker of a Spanish-American variety of Spanish and from an early age I learned not just that words matter, but that accents and registers matter a lot as well. Indeed, words and accents locate you, assign you to places and categories, to some of which you have a deep attachment and to others from which you might feel distant. To speak with a South American accent in Madrid in the late 1960s was just uncommon, and, in the context of a particularly normative society, “strange” (in a bad way). So my sister and I pretty soon acquired the intonation and expressions that would allow us to “pass” as “Spanish” natives, thus stopping the constant questioning, “where are you from?” But the questions did not stop, for they extended to the whole family. When my father used the second person plural pronoun, ustedes instead of vosotros and when he tried in vain to diminish the seseo that characterizes the Spanish spoken in the Canary Islands (and the vast majority of the Spanish-speaking world for that matter), the reaction was inevitable: “Usted no es español, verdad?” (You, sir, are not Spanish, are you?). Which in fact was a rather accurate view of things as they were then for the Canaries: even the daily weather reports on Spanish TV showed the islands (conquered by Castile in the fourteenth century, bartered and sold between Portugal and Castile until the fifteenth century, and part of Spain since the sixteenth century) as separated from the rest of Spain and relegated to a convenient corner. Years later, when my stepfather spoke Castilian in Madrid, his Catalan accent was always remarked upon, and when he spoke Catalan in Catalonia, his interlocutors had
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difficulty placing an intonation whose origin they could not identify (it was, in fact, the product of his long exile in Argentina). And there were many other stories that the different accents and registers that surrounded me told, stories of class and status, for instance. When I moved to Zaragoza for a year, I realized that the madrileño accent (Madrid accent) I had acquired in school was identified as pretentious and middle-class; yet to me, that accent was the one that characterized the speech of my definitely working-class, formally uneducated grandparents. Later, when I moved back to Madrid, it became obvious that the Aragonese intonation I had acquired was perceived as provincial, and therefore the process of adapting to a new “norm” started all over again. Thus, before I even knew that critical theory existed, I realized that cultural identity is very much linked to performance and recognition.

I recognized early on that not having a fixed location impacts many aspects of life, beyond semantic choices and phonology. When I was eighteen years old, I had to “renounce” my citizenship of birth (Venezuelan) and petition to acquire another (Spanish) so that I could work legally in a country that I already considered mine. It was only after extensive documentation, an interview with the police, and an oath of loyalty to a Spanish monarch and the country’s constitution that I could become not a citizen, but a subject (súbdita). I learned then that some nationalities are more exclusive than others: years later, already living in the US, this fact became even clearer. Along the way, I appreciated that it is complicated and often exhausting to be two or three things at the same time. Postcolonial criticism might extol liminality and places in between, but legal norms have very little room for anything that it is not clearly locatable and classifiable.

I have now lived in the United States longer than any other place, where I spend my days speaking mostly in English, a language that I know very well but one in which even my slight accent always locates me as being “not really from here.” Indeed, the legal term for my status here is “resident alien”; I am, thus, some sort of E.T. being, with permission to stay on my new planet. In any case, it is remarkable that even after so many years, when I am very tired, English words seem to elude me. Although, to be perfectly honest, when I am very tired, all words in any language seem to elude me. It is also true that more often than not, I now speak a type of “Spanglish” with several varieties of Spanish and English in it, and that my speech, like that of so many long-term immigrants, is characterized by constant code-switching, something that twenty years ago I would have found unthinkable (and to be quite honest, undesirable).

So, what did I learn in all this? For one thing, that I had no short answer to the question “where are you from?” Indeed, the question itself became irritating, as it seemed to require an answer that could reduce to a single declarative sentence a reality that needed to be expressed through subordinates and adversative connectors. For another thing, I also learned that my own trajectory was certainly not uncommon, and that there were lots of other moving subjects who felt that their own location was also “in between,” to borrow Homi Bhabha’s well-known expression. At the same time, all the literal and symbolic “moving” made me comprehend very well the attachment that one can have to
a place called “home,” however broadly or metaphorically it may be defined. Displacement and diasporic positions can be very productive and enriching, but also alienating. The ability to move in between spaces, to change languages and/or registers, can in fact mean several things: privilege (the knowledge of several codes, used to one’s advantage), but also need (for survival, for acceptance), sometimes both things at once. The often-remarkable artistic consequences of those who do manage to transcend borders and boundaries should not blind us to the fact that many more cannot survive the journey, let alone find the way to sublimate it into artistic creation.

Perhaps above all, my own complicated trajectory, having to move to and from different places, taught me that one is perceived differently in different contexts, and that different contexts make one look at things differently. In other words, I recognized from rather early on the interconnectedness of language and standpoint, the link between the language(s) that we speak and the limits of what we can see and are willing to recognize. Finally, I learned that the ties that bind us to certain languages and places are simply not just “rational,” but have an affective component that exercises a tremendous gravitational pull: we cannot always explain why certain things, places, words, or sounds move us, but we certainly can feel that they do. Pretending that this is not the case leads to the assumption that some feelings or national belonging are rational and productive, while others are excessive and unreasonable: a distinction that seems to assume the existence of a neutral position exempt from “particularism” and articulated void of any affect. As I hope the rest of this paper will show, I do not believe this is possible.

The “Global Scene”

In my opinion, a discussion of the role of “minority” writers in the global scene should consider, first of all, what the “global scene” actually represents. As Walter Mignolo has shown, the globalization of culture is nothing new, since culture is the material aspect in which the history of capitalism and of global designs (Christianity, the civilizing mission, modernization, and progress) evolved. The fact that technology allows culture and financial markets to move faster, does not imply that such movement is reciprocal and equally steady on both sides:

The force with which Inca and Aymara’s cultures entered and modified Castilian’s was less significant than the reverse. That is, Castilian knowledge and attitudes toward life did not change as much as knowledge and attitude toward life among Aymara and Inca people. The same today: Bolivia’s music players and restaurants in the US or Europe are less relevant . . . than European television and popular music in Bolivia.¹

Moreover, as John Hutchinson reminds us, nation-states have always operated in alliance or in contest with transnational institutions of empires, the great religions, revolutionary

internationals, and capitalism. Moreover, even in the era of transnational markets, national loyalties have not diminished and nation-states are strengthening some of its functions “including the regulation of education, the family and sexuality.” Border thinking might be praised in academic circles, but political thinking is still inseparable from the need to preserve and/or expand the actual borders of the territorially bounded nation. For many citizens/subjects of certain nations (Iran, Cuba, Syria, Libya, Peru, and Colombia, just to name a few) their ability to experience firsthand what the “global scene” looks like is limited to the countries that actually will grant them a visa; and that possibility only exists after proof of economic solvency and a detailed and often humiliating questionnaire that tries to establish that they are, in fact, an exception to the rule that implies that most of their fellow citizens are dangerous and untrustworthy. Students from certain countries are not allowed into the US anymore, which presents tremendous problems for some disciplines (mathematics and engineering, for instance). In all US universities, federal requirements limit the amount of hours that foreign students are allowed to work, which puts enormous financial pressure on them; the very concrete intellectual (not to mention human) consequences of these differences are incalculable. Before rushing to lament the evils of American foreign and immigration policies, we should stop to consider that the European Union does not fare much better in this regard. Indeed, in some instances, the restrictions on citizens of certain nations to enter the EU space are even greater. And we should also not forget that many citizens also endure severe restrictions on their ability to move about within their own nations, or are forced to live in a permanent displacement, without any protection from any national or supranational body.

Thus the notion of a “global scene” or a transnational citizenship, in academia or in any other context, must be handled with extreme caution. While we keep writing our papers challenging the relevance of the nation-state, and celebrating our transnational hybridity, in practical terms it is still nation-states that define for us what our relative location is in relation to the global. Therefore, it is better to hold on to our European or American passports, visas, and work permits, and more honest to accept that nobody exists outside of nationalism, banal or otherwise. It should also be understandable, then, that as Kathryn Crameri points out, “The muddy waters of ‘transnational hybridity’ might be of no comfort to minority nationalists who are trying to gain for themselves the unquestioned legitimacy of the nation-state and/or the security of a particularized national identity.”

Aside from the very real impediments to our ability to determine what the global scene might or might not be, we also need to consider the institutional contexts that frame the limits of our knowledge and the uses to which it should be put. Those of us

3. Ibid., 91.
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working in the humanities (area studies and/or comparative literature) in the US are often reminded of the fact that area studies were established during the Cold War to preserve the United States’ political power, and that comparative literature is the result of European intellectuals fleeing totalitarian regimes. Beyond the specificities of the North American academic world, however, there is also the larger issue of the link between the subject of “humanism” and the imperial subject, between humanist “universal” knowledge and the knowledge of specific imperial languages. The very concept of humanitas, as is well known, was initially limited to those who spoke Latin and used language correctly; similarly, the word “Barbarian” comes from a Greek anecdote: those who could not speak Greek just uttered strange sounds, “bar-bar,” that did not amount to a real language. To this day, there is a definite (if often unacknowledged) link between languages and literacies, on the one hand, and knowledge and civilization on the other. Moreover, the dominance of a few languages as languages of culture, scholarship, and theoretical research is no weaker today than in the period between 1850 and 1945, when 95 percent of scholars came from, and wrote about, only five countries: France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and the United States. Therefore, any consideration of “minority literatures” in the context of “global” or world literature will have to include a reflection on their connection “to the national literatures whose production continued unabated even after Goethe announced their obsolescence [in 1827],” or the relations between dominant European countries and the rest of the world. An important part of this consideration, however, will be the question of not just “what” we study but “how” we do it: In what language will our research questions be asked? What will be the theories used to construct the theoretical framework for our arguments? What modes of transmission are accessible to a given writer/literary culture? How do cultural products change from one location to another? What role do translation and edition play in the way certain cultural identities are constructed for “universal” consumption?

The question of translation is a particularly crucial one for “minority” literatures, since “readability” and “translatability” cannot be determined in isolation from social and cultural capital, and it is precisely social and cultural capital that determines why some literary traditions are deemed to be accessible in translation, while others “seem to demand an almost ethnographic knowledge of all their original codes.” Moreover, the presupposition of universal accessibility and reception is, as Idelber Avelar has pointed out, one of the pillars on which the fallacy of universalist humanism is built: “Monolingualism

in Quechua is not an option available to the intellectual from the Peruvian hills, much as monolingualism in Maya is not a possibility to the Guatamalan or Southern Mexican intellectual. It is not an option to Hungarians or Brazilians who wish to argue their conceptions of universality in any international forum."11 I would add that Basque, Galician, or Catalan monolingualism is also not an option, let alone a possibility for speakers of Urdu, Kurdish, Wolof, or Swahili.12 For many writers the question (quite literally) is “to be translated or not to be,” to borrow a title from a recent report on the state of literary translation in the world published by the Ramon Llull Institute.13 Thus, when discussing “the global scene” from the perspective of the humanities as practiced in dominant nations and cultures, we cannot overlook the need for a meta-critical reflection on our own location and material circumstances, and how they affect our perceptions of the universal and the particular.14

A (re)consideration of the very obvious hierarchies that organize the World Republic of Letters might lead to what Walter Mignolo calls the “decolonization of knowledge and scholarship”: a connection of diverse critical discourse archives and critical traditions that do not move through a “center,” which predetermines the conditions of possibility for the exchanges between the “majority” and the “minority.” What is needed, then, is not more benevolent multiculturalism, but new interpretative paradigms, a model perhaps based on what Mignolo calls the anti-Argentinean railroad model. When the British installed the railroad in Argentina in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was part of the course of a growing British Empire. But the structure of the railroad was very telling: the railroad connected several nodes from northwest to southwest, and from the north and south of Argentina to Buenos Aires. Every single node was connected to Buenos Aires, which in turn was connected by boat to London. But none of the nodes were connected among themselves. Those familiar with the Spanish railroad system will also recognize the model that established the nation’s capital as both a literal and symbolic “kilómetro cero” (kilometer zero). For Mignolo, the geopolitics of knowledge has a similar structure. People from Latin America, North and South Africa, post-partition India, and China, all connect with Europe first and if there is inter-connection among the nodes, it is through


12. The very fact that the papers that make up this volume will all be translated into English, and that during the conference the languages spoken were mostly Spanish and English, proves the point. Moreover, many of the papers do address the issue of having two or more linguistic and cultural identities, and the advantages but also constraints that situation entails.

13. Ester Allen, ed. “To be Translated or Not to Be,” in IRI Report on the International Situation of Literary Translation (Barcelona: Institut Ramon Llull, 2007). I thank Elizabeth Lowe, director of the Center for Translation Studies at the University of Illinois, for the reference. I also thank John O’Brien, the editor of the Dalkey Press (now also at the University of Illinois), the leading independent publisher specializing in literary translations, for a very interesting conversation on the topic of translation of minority literatures, as well as for his efforts in bringing international fiction (including Catalan works) to the American public. This, in spite of the depressing statistics that point out that only 3 percent of the books published in the US are translations, whereas in Italy, for example, the figure is 27 percent.

Europe or, now, the US. In the context of Spanish culture, as some of the papers included in this volume mention, the connections between the different languages and cultures that co-existed in Spain were (and still are) established through Spanish and administratively, through Madrid. Thus those of us who work on the institutional production of knowledge must challenge a structure that historically has prevented the nodes from connecting among themselves, with all its political and intellectual consequences (not the least of which would be dismantling the still prevalent consideration of state nationalism as a metaphorical “kilómetro cero” as well).

Now, how can the study of minority literatures be positioned so that we can have access to “the rules of representation and permissible narratives which make up the substance of a culture, as well as becoming responsible and accountable to the writing/translating of the presupposed original?” The answer to this question requires two different sets of tools: analytical (individual) practices and also institutional (collective) interventions.

**Cultural Sights**

Let us move on now from general considerations to the specific; in my case, the specific is my location within an academic discipline called “Spanish” or “Peninsular” studies. It is a discipline that has suffered (“suffered” being the operative word) considerable transformations in recent years, in an attempt to become more culturally relevant in an academic context not very receptive to the explorations of stylistic traits or textual sources and influences that have characterized Spanish philological study. Even less relevant seemed the interminable debates over “the Spanish (identity) problem” and the reasons for the nation’s secondary status in the world. Hence, as Helena Buffery, Stuart Davis, and Kirsty Hooper explain in their recent book, *Reading Iberia*, the discipline was reconfigured into wider “geographical, cultural or thematic groupings within the University, such as International Studies, European Studies, Comparative Literature or Cultural Studies.” Part of that reconfiguration includes also the inclusion in the curriculum of the “Other” Iberian languages (other than Spanish and Portuguese): Catalan, Basque, and Galician. However, in many cases, that inclusive movement does not necessarily signal a reassessment of the object of study (“Spanish culture” or “Spanish literary history”). Indeed, such texts are often studied as a “supplement” to truly essential knowledge: it is opportune to have them around, as they certainly bring with them considerable social and cultural capital, but they remain structurally in the periphery, dependent on what has always been “the core” of Spanish departments and, for that

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16. Helena Buffery, Stuart Davis, and Kirsty Hooper, “Introduction: Reading Iberia,” *Reading Iberia*, eds. Buffery, Davis, and Hooper, 10. Such reconfiguration is also not unproblematic, as in many cases it is linked to budget cuts that will eventually eliminate “minor” literature courses taught in their original languages, to leave only “general education” courses taught in English.
matter, the core of “Spanishness” itself. In this context, even well-meaning attempts to teach “minority literatures” will only produce (as Gladys Cruz et al. have defined it) a version of the Culture Tour, that old Western concept dating back to the seventeenth century, whereby the educated young man (it was an exclusively male project at first) was expected to round off his education with a visit to the major sites of continental Europe, particularly those associated with Greece and Rome. This brief period of exposure to carefully chosen “local” cultures and sites, only served to reinforce deeply ingrained ideas about the universality and historical continuity of a supposedly homogenous Western European culture.

To this day, it is surprising to realize how often both the premise and structure of many courses that deal with minority literatures/languages constitute the academic version of the “Culture Tour”: offering a glimpse into an otherness whose uniqueness is always already both predetermined and safely contained. Thus courses on “Hispanic women writers,” for instance, group together writers from several areas of Spain (some of whom write in Spanish, others in Catalan, Galician, or Basque; some of whom do not even consider themselves Spanish), writers from Argentina, Chile, Mexico, or Puerto Rico, and US Latinas (most of whom write only in English), without giving an explanation as to what they have in common, other than being women writers and a denomination (Hispanic) that was put into circulation by the United States Census. Yet, at the same time, the very act of grouping them together points to a certain particularism that they supposedly share, a common thread: something culturally specific that would transcend the language in which they write, their national origin, ethnicity, personal location, and ideology. The same could be said for the many varieties of “ethnic minority writers” courses that exist. I am of course not questioning the value of inclusive courses that consider a variety of literary traditions, languages, and contexts. However, the very parameters used to justify these inclusions need to be considered carefully (or discarded, as the case may be), so as not to end up reaffirming very essentialist and simplistic views of cultural “alterity.” Moreover, and as Doris Sommer warns us, there is a clear danger in “the ravages of facile intimacies,” the arrogant appropriation and cannibalistic consumption of minority literatures. Dominant group members, who also happen to be skilled and diligent readers, expect that they should be able to resolve any difficulty presented by any text, assuming that unequal relationships will be neutralized on the page. When reading texts by “cultural others,” mainstream readers expect to gain access to other worlds, not to be made aware of their own limitations. But the fact is, these limitations are precisely the heart of the matter, and should be used to frame a discussion where the literary is firmly located in the bedrock of history; a discussion that also includes a consideration

17. Crameri, “Reading Iberias,” 211.
18. Doris Sommer, Proceed with Caution when Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), xiii.
of the work’s cultural context (including the material conditions of textual production) as well as the locus of enunciation of the reader/critic. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, as readers we might have to admit to an occasional “incompetence” that acknowledges “the socially circumscribed limits of interpretation, the distances and refusals that some texts have been broadcasting to our deaf ears.”

What’s in It for “Us”?  

So, the question might be posed: why should a (Spanish) professor of Spanish literature, have to concern herself with Basque, Catalan, or Galician literatures? After all, these literatures have their own specialists, who naturally might not be well predisposed toward interlopers from the very dominant culture, which for so long has denied texts written in Catalan, Basque, or Galician their place in the state-sanctioned national cultural canon. Here I can only speak of my own perspective, and, again, from my own location. Reading minority literatures (in any language) is for me definitely not about adding new names to the same canon (Rodoreda, Atxaga, Oñederra, Monzó, Rivas). It is, rather, part of an effort to promote a serious questioning of what Paul Gilroy terms “the fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture,” and the assumption that the nation was to provide the framework for contextualized and culturally specific literary study. One of my goals is therefore a deconstruction of the “us” that national histories (and of course we can never forget that literary histories are always national histories) so pointedly invoke. Such a deconstructive move leads to important questions of cultural identity, including the outsider/insider dichotomy in all its complexity. Ultimately, I agree with Sommer that “the question, finally, is not what ‘insiders’ can know as opposed to ‘outsiders’; it is how those positions are being constructed as incommensurate or conflictive.”

The writer Max Aub said that there were three types of men: those who tell their history, those who do not, and those who do not have a history. In my opinion, an important part of what we do as professors of literatures (majority and minority) is to interrogate what has been deemed worthy to represent as national in different historical moments. If national literature has traditionally been defined as “the body of canonized texts into which a nation’s sense of imagined history is believed to be inscribed in images that evoke historical continuity and social unity,” a crucial part of literary and cultural analysis should include the exploration of the images and the style in which a specific national (literary) community has been imagined. In order to do so, we not only need

20. Ibid., 9.


to analyze what is present, but more importantly, what is absent or even what is present, but at the same time persistently denied. In other words, the goal would not be to just focus on how Spanish literature has created its “Others,” but the deconstruction of the very notion of “Spanish literature” itself. Toward that end what is needed, then, is a new hermeneutic logic that is at once specific and historical; a logic that restores the text to its own distinctive time and context. A serious historicizing effort is needed to dismantle the persistent use of a narrative that substitutes the effect for the cause: the effects of an enforced political centralization, and cultural homogeneization (including official Castilian monolingualism from the eighteenth century on), that resulted in the construction of “Spanishness” prevalent today. Indeed, I would say that one of the drawbacks of otherwise excellent work done in cultural studies is that it limits its analysis to contemporary periods, thus perpetuating the myth that the Spanish Civil War and Francoism are the only cause of the tensions between the competing national narratives at play today. This presentism, which also dominates Spanish political life, is perhaps the most effective tool in occluding the historical trajectory of Catalan, Galician, or Basque cultures. A historical perspective would show that being a “writer in between languages” in the Iberian peninsula was not at all uncommon. We could mention just some examples. The initial literary languages of the Iberian Peninsula were *mozárabe* (as seen in the *jarchas*) and Galician-Portuguese. Castilian writers systematically wrote in Galician in a practice that dates back to Alfonso VII and was in full force with Alfonso the Wise. Even in the fifteenth century, Gómez Manrique produced poems in Galician, and shortly after, Catalans would also write in Provençal. Literary constructions of Spanishness usually completely ignored Portugal and with it, Castilian-Portuguese bilingualism, which lasted until the beginning of the fifteenth century. After that, the Portuguese started using Spanish as a literary language for two centuries, and even opposition to Castile was often written in Castilian. Jorge de Montemayor, canonized as a Spanish author, was an example of a Portuguese writer who chose to write mostly in Castilian. The Aldana brothers, who were Italian, are also studied as Castilian authors since they wrote mostly (but not exclusively) in Spanish. The political and ideological reasons for these choices should be part of the dialogue about these authors’ production.

When studying “the birth of the narrative” (itself a questionable term) we must consider not just Don Juan Manuel (1337), but also Ramon Llull’s *Blanquerna* (circa 1283). Many of what we consider “masterpieces of world literature,” such as the *Decameron*, were translated into Catalan first, and Castilian second: in Catalan they had a wide readership. The greatest theorist of neoclassic aesthetics, Ignacio de Luzán, was educated in Italian, and started using Spanish as a literary language only after switching political alliances to the new Bourbon dynasty. The list could go on, for even after the decrees that signal the beginning of official monolingualism in the eighteenth century, and the sustained efforts

to enforce political and cultural unification in the nineteenth, the linguistic and cultural reality of the Iberian Peninsula continued to be complex and multi-lingual.

Another excellent example of a genre that has been constructed as an example of “Spanishness” but actually thrives in very different cultural and linguistic contexts is that of ballads (romances), arguably one of the two genres most tied to the Spanish/Castilian worldview and identity (the other one would be the picaresque). It has however been proven that the “romance” not only changes location and transforms into corridos (including today’s Mexican narco-corridos), but that the genre itself also exists in other Peninsular languages. One little known example would be the “Romance de Aída” (Aída’s Romance) in Bable. A much better known one would be the Catalan anthem “Els segadors” (The Reapers), a ballad that originated in the seventeenth century (the present version dates from the nineteenth century). Indeed, the oldest known ballad was written in Catalan in the fifteenth century by a Catalan student living in Italy. We could use this data in the context of a narrative that is used to perpetuate the logic of the (superior) original and the (inferior) copy, the illusion of the original source and/or the notion of the organic national culture whose uniqueness can be decoded through their literary works. Or, we can use it to make a conceptual break “with the primacy of origins,” and focus instead on the countless sequence of transformations that specific cultural traditions can originate, as well as issues such as cultural crossings, multi-lingual transpositions, and inter-cultural interactions.

The Astigmatic Eye and the Parallax Gap

In her impressive study of “The World Republic of Letters,” Pascale Casanova questions a study of literatures based on current national borders. According to her, the focus on “national literatures” leads to a form of astigmatism, a partial and distorted view that erases from view the multi-faceted power relations that impact a given work, both historically and structurally. While I agree with Casanova’s basic premise, I would like to question her choice of metaphor. It seems to me that by using the simile of astigmatism, she is also implying that, if using the correct lenses, a non-distorted, clearly focused view of things will be produced. Now, let us think for a moment what astigmatism actually is: due to a refractive “error” motivated by a difference in degree of refraction in different meridians, the astigmatic eye literally has different focal points in different planes. That certainly can be inconvenient in practical terms, when we need to focus our sight on one specific object. Indeed, the negative consequences of astigmatism are transposed to the


26. I am grateful to my colleague José M. Martínez Torrejón for the many conversations on this topic and for providing some of the examples of linguistic “in betweenness” that are listed here. His vast knowledge of three Peninsular languages and cultural traditions (Spanish, Catalan, and Portuguese) is rare, but exemplary. For a more detailed study of Portuguese-Castilian bilingualism and cultural relations, see José M. Martínez Torrejón and Fco. Bethencourt, eds. “La littérature portugaise en langue castillane,” special issue, Arquivos 44 (2002), particularly the prologue.
metaphorical use of the term, which according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary implies “distorted understanding” and “incapacity for discrimination.” The negative implications of the “astigmatic eye” are also proof of what Lennard Davis sustains as characteristic of Western civilizations: “How deeply tied to the normalized body are the assumptions we make about art, language, literature and culture in general.”\textsuperscript{27} On the other hand, is it not the potential for achieving a “multiple vision” of reality that characterizes art? Photography and film certainly do that, and in these contexts the term “astigmatic lens” refers to a lens that offers a distorted, multiple, and contradictory focus.\textsuperscript{28} But many of the most enduring and fascinating literary texts also possess the same ability. And shouldn’t in fact literary criticism attempt to do just that: to allow for the contradictory and even the distorted to come into view? Isn’t the stubborn effort to maintain a single centered focus the greatest limitation of literary histories and “world histories” in general? Shouldn’t we accept the fact that the only possible ethical criticism is one that takes into consideration the “distortions of the perceiving consciousness”?\textsuperscript{29} 

Slavoj Žižek uses the concept of parallax, originally a term used in astronomy and geometry, to articulate his position that reality can never been perceived in its totality; not because part of it might elude us, but rather because it always contains a blind spot that signals our inclusion in it.\textsuperscript{30} In other words, the subject’s gaze is always included in the perceived object. The “parallax gap” is the space that separates two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible (and the visual parallax often points to a political parallax, a social antagonism that allows for no common ground). In my opinion, the only possible way of studying literatures belonging to different linguistic, cultural, and political contexts is to start with the premise that such a gap might indeed exist and accept it with all its consequences (including political ones).

By questioning the “centric” vantage point still dominant in literary and artistic analysis, and relinquishing the illusion of the objective observer, we also accept that we can only make sense of the world through specific cultural contexts. The dismantling of the scaffolding of normality and universalism that sustains national and “world” literary histories requires the reader not just to “see” things, but to learn to “look,” understanding looking as a practice that involves a choice, and a willingness to (re)interpret what we think we know. On the other hand, a careful and historicized analysis of texts produced in very different cultural contexts might just lead to the existence of their noticeable affinities and commonalities: we should also not fall into the trap of considering some cultures relevant only because of their “difference.”

\textsuperscript{27} Lennard J. Davis, \textit{Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body} (London: Verso, 1995), 158.

\textsuperscript{28} Robert Rushing, “Auerbach and Popular Culture: Snapshots from the Evolution of Western Astigmatism,” unpublished paper, 6.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 4.

According to Roberto Schwarz, certain literary traditions can only become national “by elimination.” I would say that all nationalities are built on that premise, but the subtractions are heavier in some cases. In the particular case of Spain, there is no denying that the dominant idea of Spanish culture is based on a series of violent amputations. Indeed what “Spain” should not be—the heterodox deviations that had to be erased from the collective memory of the nation—have been more often than not what has given Spanish nationalism its main structural cohesion. And while we cannot turn back the clock of history, we certainly can acknowledge its consequences, including an honest answer to the question “cui bono?”: who has benefited from the status quo, from that particular understanding of normalcy and Spanishness. As we look history in the face, we will inevitably encounter the words and the reasons pushed aside and suppressed for too long. Then the question will be what to do with them. We can simply ignore the reality that there are four official (literary) languages within the Spanish state that often correspond to non-state national allegiances. We can also just “reclaim” what had been expelled from the national space and push it back in, within a de-historicized normalcy that denies the violence and the very memory of that expulsion. We can continue to just take comfort in the analysis of the beautiful words that so many have written, breathing what Stuart Hall calls the “clean air of meaning and textuality,” but denying them their cultural specificity, and with it, the “something nasty” that often lays right below them, including the constitutive and political nature of representation itself.31 Facing the nastiness of history does not mean doing away with the “pleasure of the text,” but it certainly might mean redefining what can be construed as pleasurable, including the fact that some dominant readers might not be able to read (let alone enjoy) minority texts without considerable effort and tension. That in and of itself is a parallax gap that needs to be acknowledged and understood. Such understanding will require, in my view, not just a rational effort, but also an affective displacement. As the great Salvador Espriu reminds us in one of his most famous poems (XLVI) included in his book La pell de brau (The Bull’s Skin)—addressing his comments to Sepharad (the Jewish denomination of Spain)—in order for the bridges of dialogue to remain secure, one must not just understand and value the diverse words of others, but also, one must love their words and reasons: “mira de comprendre i estimar les raons i les parles diverses dels teus fills.” The online English-language version of this poem by the Association of Catalan Writers warns of the dangers inherent to translations: namely, the English sentence “Make the bridges of dialogue firm and try to understand and esteem your children’s different minds and tongues,”32 takes the advice on offer into the realm of reason, erasing the affective component explicit in the Catalan verb “estimar” (to love, and only secondarily, to esteem). Nevertheless, such


an affective identification is a crucial element in that understanding Espriu is asking for. “Affective” does not need to imply “irrational,” nor does it have to be the result of a shared biology, ethnicity, or even the same history. Indeed, I would argue that the strongest affective ties are the result of choice, intent, and it is also often a voluntary dislocation (understood as the displacement from our inherited de facto positions).

Those of us who spend our days reading, teaching, and researching literature, sometimes written in our own language, sometimes in translation, should never forget that we do indeed have a choice to determine to what use we put the skills that we have acquired. We can use words to police the borders of what Joan Ramon Resina terms, in his essay included in the present volume, “the normative ethos of the national community,” a role in which literary/philological studies have been unquestionably complicit. For that surveillance task, we do indeed need to maintain a centric vantage point, one that presupposes the existence of a disincarnated, absolute, and neutral eye. Or, as Michael Holquist suggests, we can learn from the way philological study was conceived of initially by humanists such as Wolf and Humboldt: as a cognitive and ethical task that required constant performance and whose main goal was the opposition to absolute truths. To engage in such a task, we do not need to wait for the special corrective lenses that will bring things into focus, organizing our field of vision into a discernible hierarchy. On the contrary, all we will need, perhaps, is the willingness to accept that some texts, and some realities, refuse familiarity and simultaneous translation, and therefore our perception of them might always be somewhat blurry. Ironically, it is with this humble acknowledgment that we might begin to engage with what has hitherto remained out of (our) sight.

Bibliography


Travel literature, in spite of its current popularity and the growing attention it now enjoys among cultural critics and historians, remains a genre paradoxically estranged from its most fitting environment. Here is the paradox. On the one hand, as Jaš Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés have noted, “the literature of travel not only exemplifies the multiple facets of modern identity, but it is also one of the principal cultural mechanisms, even a key cause, for the development of modern identity since the Renaissance.”¹ On the other hand, literary histories—whose limits and purposes are ultimately determined by a sense of national identity, as encoded or portrayed in textual artifacts—pay due attention to travel books almost exclusively when mapping the Middle Ages, a time when there was hardly any clear conscience of a national identity, national borders were rather permeable, and notions of genre and even “literature” were not established yet with the kind of rigor they acquired later. Travel literature became increasingly important “from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century,” when it “reached the height of its influence on Western culture . . . with its largest ever share of the book market.”² That phase, however, makes little headway in conventional literary histories, particularly in Spain, and then mostly with travelogues pertaining to the colonization of America. Such a form of disengagement between literary history and travel literature seems ever more blunt and perplexing when the periods in question are the onset of Modernity—which I will place, with Foucault, in the


aftermath of the French Revolution, precisely when literary histories became what they are today—and the subsequent avatars of Modernity that characterized the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

With regard to the interface between travelogues and national identity, two typically modern phenomena appear particularly relevant. On the one hand, we see the inception of modern forms of understanding nation and nationalism, which started around 1780 in Hobsbawm’s account, and became especially controversial between 1830 and 1875, culminating right after World War I with the hegemony of what he called “principle of nationality.”3 On the other hand, a new phase begins of prestige and extensive influence for travel literature, which predated and stimulated the arrival of mass tourism around 1850 and was then, in turn, deeply affected by it. In the pages that follow I would like to propose a brief exercise in a new literary history: a partial record of the complex interaction between those two phenomena—nationalism and modern travel writing—in Spain’s national territories. In the process, my exercise should contribute to the challenging and dismantling of two interrelated dichotomies that generally constrain national literary histories: the dichotomy of the national versus the foreign, and the dichotomy of national unity versus national fragmentation or even national dissolution.

The nineteenth century brought about dramatic changes in the history of travel, in the means of transportation (railroads, steam ships) as much as in the means of publication (newspapers, illustrated magazines), and in the general configuration of traveler and journey (tourism, travel agencies, modern comforts); and yet, it did not yield either exceptional or abundant travel books by Spanish writers, at least during its early stages. It could be argued that from the late eighteenth century on more and more canonical writers—poets, novelists, essayists, and playwrights, from Leandro Fernández de Moratín to Pedro Antonio de Alarcón—recounted their travels in the homeland and abroad in noteworthy books. 4 The overall production of travel books in Spain, however, can hardly match the extraordinary quality and quantity of foreign travelogues. Numerous foreign travelers—many of them also novelists, poets, and playwrights, some of them quite renowned—toured the Iberian Peninsula in the nineteenth century and produced travel literature that is both extensive and intense, passionate and repetitive, and in a few cases remarkably decisive for the creation and dissemination of the most resilient

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4. It is also true that Spanish literary histories, which often acknowledge the writer’s travels in characteristic biographical sketches, may or may not acknowledge the books those travels produced, without any perceptible system behind the decision. Juan Hurtado and Angel González Palencia are a case in point: they refer to Moratín’s travels in Europe but do not register his Viaje a Italia among his works; unpredictably, though, they start their account of Alarcón’s works with his “Crónicas de viajes,” and point out that La Alpujarra—which I will mention later—“es uno de los mejores libros de Alarcón.” Juan Hurtado and Angel González Palencia, Historia de la literatura española, vol. 2 (Madrid: Saeta, 1940), 948.
profile of Spain’s national identity. Most of the foreign travelers followed as invariable an itinerary as Medieval pilgrims: they started in different Occidental cities and moved straight south through the Pyrenees, with a stop, at best, in Madrid and Toledo, or else in Barcelona and Valencia, but always with an eye on the ultimate destination: the great Andalusian towns and, primarily, Granada, a secular shrine that rewarded them with access to the Oriental paradise of La Alhambra. Around 1870, a widely read and exuberant Italian traveler, Edmundo de Amicis, conveyed the enthralment this way: “That magical word, which in every portion of the world awakens in every soul a tumult of grand recollections and a feeling of secret desire; that gives the last impulse toward Spain to anyone who has conceived the idea of traveling and not yet arrived at the determination of starting; which makes the hearts of poets and painters beat and the eyes of women glisten—the Alhambra!”

At that point in time, Spain’s romantic aura and its extraordinary success among certain types of travelers was due, in great part, to the convergence of Modern Europe’s misgivings about Modernity and a durable notion of Spain as a country that, forever anchored in an age-old, mostly Oriental past, successfully resisted Modernity. Quite early in the nineteenth century, “the progress of Romanticism reveals a disenchantment with the process of Western civilization and its most magnificent outward expressions.” Richard Ford was arguably the best writer of travel guides for nineteenth-century Spain. He considered Spain “the most romantic and peculiar country in Europe” and pointed out in 1845 one effect of such disenchantment: “[The foreign traveler] crosses the Pyrenees, too weary of the bore, commonplace, and uniformity of ultra civilization, in order to see something new and un-European; he hopes to find again in Spain, as in the moon of Ariosto, all that has been lost and forgotten elsewhere.” New and un-European were now the unshakable dangers and discomforts that nearly every traveler in Medieval and

5. In any case, the importance of travel literature and the sheer amount of travelogues that concerned the Iberian Peninsula were already such that, before the century was over, a French scholar, Raymond Foulché-Delbosc, found it necessary to compile an extensive Bibliographie des voyages en Espagne et en Portugal [1896]. “Según la bibliografía de Foulché-Delbosc, 599 viajes de los que han quedado relatos se realizan en España en este siglo y de ellos 318 se refieren a Andalucía, correspondiendo un tercio a franceses, un cuarto a ingleses, un quinto a alemanes y la sexta parte a americanos, acusándose en todos ellos un notable retroceso a partir de 1850.” Antonio López Ontiveros, “El paisaje de Andalucía a través de los viajeros románticos: Creación y pervivencia del mito andaluz desde una perspectiva geográfica,” in Josefina Gómez Mendoza et al., Viajeros y paisajes (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988), 32. No less than 45 of those writers were women. The decline of traditional travelogues that started around 1850 was linked to the growth of “tourism” and the numerous “tourist guides” that ensued; that is, there were not fewer travelers nor fewer travel books, only many of these were now the sort of generic script that simply guided the typical tourist’s journey, leaving little or no room for any personal memoir.


10. Ibid., pt. 3, 1103.
pre-Modern Spain recorded irascibly in their travelogues and that—along with the Carlist wars in the 1830s and 1870s—kept organized tourism away from Spain until much later in the century. Even in the 1880s and 1890s, Thomas Cook brought his British tourist groups mostly by sea to Andalucía’s ports, and from there to the more easily accessible and better equipped Andalucian towns. Certain modern travelers, though—Théophile Gautier most famously, among Ford’s contemporaries—considered the severe exertion and unpredictability of land travel in an archaic environment a unique, distinctive pleasure of the Spanish journey: “Ce qui constitue le plaisir du voyageur, c’est l’obstacle, la fatigue, le péril même . . . Un des grands malheurs de la vie moderne, c’est le manque d’imprévu, l’absence d’aventures . . . Un voyage en Espagne est encore une entreprise périlleuse et Romanesque.”

The narrow, treacherous mountain passes of Despeñaperros, door to the Andalucian paradise, became thus the ultimate arena of such a harsh but exhilarating experience. Near the turn of the nineteenth century, when modern comforts were wiping out the romanticized shortcomings of the Spanish tour, two travelers—the Spanish painter Dario de Regoyos and the Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren—who made famous the title España negra (1899), still refused to let go of the vanishing fantasy: “Buscábamos una diligencia a todo trance con mulas viciadas, dispuestas a rodar por los precipicios, a romper los arreos y a matar al mayoral . . . Buscábamos algo nuevo y distinto de lo que ambicionan los ingleses que en sus viajes no buscan más que el confort.”

The transition from disreputable infrastructure and disappointed travelers to the newly acquired prestige of Spain’s backwardness among exalted romantic foreigners can be documented as early as 1788, in Alexander Jardine’s Letters from Spain by an English Officer (the first 400 pages in volume 2 of his Letters from Barbary, France, Spain, etc.). To be sure, most travelers of that period, like the exemplary Joseph Townsend in A Journey Through Spain in the Years 1786 and 1787 (1791) or the dubious Alexandre Laborde, in the outsized (59 cm or 23 in. tall) and luxurious four volumes of his Voyage Pittoresque e historique de l’Espagne (1806–1820), are not yet tied to the southern routes; they tend to explore different regions of the Iberian Peninsula with the kind of multiple interests that characterized the Enlightenment. The progressive Townsend, for example, toured the entire country, from Asturias to Málaga, and from Cartagena to Barcelona. He was especially interested in mineralogy, but paid due attention to botany, mechanics, industry, salaries, prices and finances, coins, weights and measures, and general aspects of the administration. After close examination, he concluded: “In every country a traveller can pass through, he will find some mechanical contrivances, some modes of expediting work . . . and I am inclined to think, that no country, if thoroughly examined, would furnish more than

Spain.” Jardine’s Spain is no longer an object of merely enlightened appreciation or rigorous inventories but rather a major repository of the sublime and melancholy views that will lure nineteenth-century writers and illustrators: “We now proceed on our difficult but delightful journey, often along the shore, by narrow paths, on dreadful precipices, with the additional horror of having those places pointed out to us, where men and mules, etc. have fallen down, and have been dashed to pieces before they reached the distant ocean beneath.” His native Britain’s wealth and prosperity have no match, but Spain has a unique merit, due in great part to its unremitting decadence and deterioration, “for, I think, the very mention of Spain awakens in the mind, especially of young people, ideas of something romantic and uncommon.” With a reference to Andalucía as “the most interesting part of a journey through Spain,” Jardine rounds up the basic markers of the country’s national identity as it would be understood for the next hundred years, with few exceptions, both within and without its borders. In 1806, Laborde himself, whose travelogue, with its systematic routes and geometric illustrations, shows still more affinity with the letter and the spirit of L’Encyclopédie than with the longings of the romantic soul, offers nonetheless a hint of newer attitudes in his own observations about Andalucía and, more concretely, La Alhambra: “L’aspect de son ensemble a quelque chose de très imposant, et fait naître cette émotion dont on ne peut se défendre pour tous les monuments qui portent le caractère de la force, de la grandeur et de la durée.”

In that new vein, the forthright and unemotional illustrations of Laborde’s account soon gave way to the dramatic, affecting views by David Roberts, who illustrated Thomas Roscoe’s guides since 1836, and by Gustave Doré, who contributed 309 wood engravings to Baron de Davillier’s since 1874. Both were celebrated as much for their artistic skills as for their boundless sense of the “sublime.” The romantic movement that brought about such a radical change in the visual perception of the country shaped at the same time a number of new, distinct travelogues of great influence. First and foremost among them, Washington Irvin’s Alhambra (1832) guided the destination as well as the emotions of countless nineteenth-century travelers in Spain. Irvin’s book offers an artful interplay of history and legend, descriptions of ancient splendors and contempo-

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16. Ibid., 2.

17. Ibid., 125.


19. One of Doré’s most striking woodcuts represents precisely the terrifying scene alluded to by Jardine and Verhaeren: a stagecoach and its mules falling down a deep, horrific precipice in a narrow mountain pass, under a stormy sky.
rary ethnographic observations, but can be best characterized by his awareness of the insurmountable discrepancy between the fabulous world of La Alhambra and the dull everyday life in modern countries. His last chapter, “The Author’s Farewell to Granada,” starts with this characteristic lament: “My serene and happy reign in the Alhambra was suddenly brought to a close by letters which reached me, while indulging in oriental luxury in the cool hall of the baths, summoning me away from my Moslem Elysium, to mingle once more in the bustle and business of the dusty world. How was I to encounter its toils and turmoils after such a life of repose and reverie! How was I to endure its commonplace, after the poetry of the Alhambra!”²²⁰ Irvin’s definitive orientalization of the Spanish condition resonates in the prose of so many travel writers who followed in his footsteps: Gautier, Dumas, Quinet, Ford, Andersen, Amicis, and so on.²¹ Moreover, for the next hundred years, the Southern “oriental standard”²²² that they all deployed in their books would determine Spain’s exchange value in the travelers market at large. In 1840, Gautier did not feel Spain’s magic spell until he reached Despeñaperros: “On ne saurait rien imaginer de plus pittoresque et de plus grandiose que cette porte de l’Andalousie.”²²³ Later, he found in La Alhambra the sublime object of his “passion” (despite hordes of proto-tourists) and managed to remain in the palace “quatre jours et quatre nuits qui sont les instants les plus délicieux de ma vie sans aucun doute.”²²⁴ In 1843, Quinet “avez traversé impatiemment le grand désert d’Espagne,” anxious to reach the “Alhambra,” “comme si ce nom magique, entr’ouvrant des trésors enfouis, allait payer, en un moment, des années d’attente.”²²⁵ In 1846, Alexandre Dumas, whose Impressions de Voyage. De Paris a Cadix inspired eminent travelers like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, was immediately captivated by the entire country, but agreed that it was only in “cette Grenade tant promise” where “chère Espagne nous apparaissait enfin dans toute sa splendeur.”²²⁶ In 1862, Hans Christian Andersen declared no interest in Spain’s northern cities (too much like France’s), started to feel the riveting appeal of the Orient

²¹. Prosper Mérimée is often included in this list, but his Lettres d’Espagne (1830–1833), originally commissioned by the Revue de Paris and L’Artiste, are—much like Ganivet’s Cartas finlandesas (1898)—brief monographical articles more than travel accounts. The best of them, about the public execution of a criminal, cannot compete with Borrow’s equivalent, in chap. 12 of his The Bible in Spain (1842). The others tend to simply repeat commonplaces about bullfights, bandits, the Prado museum, etc.
²⁴. Ibid., 218.
only in Elche’s palm gardens, and was finally overcome by “happiness” inside the walls of Alhambra’s “paradise.”

It was, in part, against this restrictive perception of the country, imposed with overwhelming consistency and success by foreign travelogues, that a new traveling mode soon called “excursion” or “excursión” was born in the 1840s among refined local travelers with patent nationalist proclivities. The “excursion” was a relatively short although often challenging trip that took the traveler through a small region, typically the writer’s own. Often this was just an isolated, somewhat remote corner of a province, whose archaic charms—which awoke both the enthusiasm and the melancholy of the writer—were little known to anyone but odd erudites and local folks. Throughout the eighteenth century, several Spanish ilustrados, moved by yet another type of reaction against foreign views of the country, had traveled through most of those regions, only with a somewhat different point of view. Foremost among the typical travelogues produced by such patriotic ilustrados, Antonio Ponz’s eighteen-volume Viaje de España (1776), which Menéndez y Pelayo considered a turning point in the history of Spanish culture, starts with a characteristic claim: the author wrote it to invalidate Norberto Caimo’s “cruel sátira contra la nación” in his Lettere d’un Vago italiano ad un suo amico (1759–67). Ultimately, however, Ponz’s book is a distinctive reflection on Spain’s “despoblación y decadencia” and on the need to bring the country back to “su opulencia Antigua.”

He paid particular attention to Spanish art and architecture, which he aspired to catalog with “todos los pelos y señales.” He thus registered every sculpture and every painting in every temple, large or small, renowned or unknown, as long as it might be considered “cosa particular perteneciente a las bellas artes.” Ponz was a purist who admired mostly neoclassical symmetries, disdained the prolix ornamentation of gothic cathedrals and Arab palaces, and had little or no feeling for the gloom of ruins. Accordingly, he records his visit to Tembleque without a word about its formidable Medieval square, describes coldly Seville’s Alcazar and shows no interest in the Alhambra. As far as he is concerned, church steeples and belfries—which later became emotional pointers for the typical excurs—

28. Editors and critics generally count twenty volumes instead of eighteen when they consider Viaje de España and Viaje fuera de España a single work. Ponz’s trip abroad took place in 1783 and the resulting book—with as much detail about the visual arts but a great deal more enthusiasm about the quality of life north of the Pyrenees—was published in two volumes in 1785.
30. Ibid., 30–32.
31. Ibid., 84.
32. Ibid., 420.
sionista—had required labor and materials that would have been much better spent on the bridges that the country needed badly.\textsuperscript{33}

Those enlightened, unifying critical registers that were so common among practical-minded Spanish \textit{ilustrados} were typically replaced during the nineteenth century by the type of \textit{sentimental journey} that eventually received the name of “excursion” and produced an acutely and irreversibly fragmentary notion of the nation. Two forms of action and/or reaction appear to have given the “excursion” its initial momentum. On the one hand, the heavy-handed Orientalism mentioned above, predicated mostly by foreign travelogues as the one distinctive feature of Spain’s national identity, awoke the local nationalist pride of just about every other region in the country where Oriental marvels and traditions were less formidable or conspicuously absent.\textsuperscript{34} On the other, the Spanish victory in the war against Napoleon (1808–13), marks for some recent historians the beginning of modern Castilian nationalism. It is significant, however, that the nationalist awareness associated with the so-called War of Independence seems to have brought about not only a fervent love for the common \textit{patria} but also, and perhaps even more intensely, a cult of the neatly circumscribed area of origin or \textit{patria chica}, the primeval territory of a now sanctified but irretrievable childhood: distinctive valleys, revered mountains, small idiosyncratic towns, all typically off the tourist-trodden path but deeply familiar to the native writer who sets out to prove them marvelously “picturesque”—perhaps the most common adjective in nineteenth-century Spanish travel literature—and honored with unique historical relevance. Enrique Gil y Carrasco’s \textit{Bosquejo de un viaje a una provincia del interior} (1843) is one of the clearly foundational excursion books. Gil y Carrasco starts with a distinctive lament: foreign travelers “se empeñan en no ver en los españoles sino árabes” and completely overlook León, a small territory in the North-East, far from the routes to the South but “adornado de todas las bellezas y accidentes graves, terribles y risueños.”\textsuperscript{35} In direct contrast and conflict with the constrained predicates of foreign travelogues, the sublime and the familiar, the historical and the intimate, the exotic and the endotic now come harmoniously together in Gil y Carrasco’s melancholy but alluring prose to build a complete microcosm distinguished by the cherished, detailed first-hand knowledge generally associated with the experiences of growing up:

Cerca de las fuentes del Oza, en el seno más apartado de aquellas asperezas, en un precipicio colgado sobre el río y debajo de un fuerte o castillo romano destinado a proteger las líneas de canales que ya vimos en el artículo anterior, encontró por fin San Fructuoso un paraje acomodado a su intento y allí fundó el monasterio de San Pedro de Montes . . .

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{34} As late as 1895, the well-traveled Condesa de Pardo Bazán would insist: “Todas las provincias de España (no lo olviden los que hagan rumbo hacia acá) ostentan su sello peculiar y propio, y el sello meridional, o, por mejor decir, el andaluz, no es probablemente el que expresa nuestra esencia íntima.” Emilia Pardo Bazán, \textit{Viajes por España} (Madrid: Bercimuel, 2006), 159.

Nearly thirty years later, when Thomas Cook’s first great explosion of organized tourism was well underway, Amós de Escalante, a prolix if not extraordinary writer of excursion books, put it this way in his *Costas y montañas*: on the one hand, “en este sentimiento de la patria no caben tibieza, moderación ni templanza; es superior a toda superstición, más intenso y permanente que todo egoismo: ingénita y primera religión del hombre, domina fe, supersticiones y creencias”;37 on the other, “el *tourismo* [sic] no ha extendido hasta estos parajes [Santander’s mountains, valleys and shores] su aparato teatral y su lucrativa farsa.”38 During this early phase, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón was perhaps the master who—in Castilian—brought the genre to fruition and beyond, particularly in *La Alpujarra* (1860). His premise was still that, unlike nearby Granada, La Alpujarra would be “horizonte inexplorado, tierra misteriosa,” worthy of “la privación, los obstáculos, la novedad y el peligro” that surely awaited the excursionista.39 The mapping and description of country—by the likes of Ponz, Madoz, Ford and others—has made considerable progress, though, and the remote corner so coveted by the local excursionista was no longer virgin territory: he narrates—with, again, a tinge of melancholy—a comfortable, well-charted, and fully informed journey, with “Diccionarios geográficos, Enciclopedias, Guías y toda clase de itinerarios pintorescos” always at hand.40

At the same time, paradoxically enough, the dissociation of the foreign and the national becomes weaker as the excursion mode generates a discernible difference between the trip around one’s province or town—say, Marineda, for Pardo Bazán41—and the trip elsewhere in one’s own country—say, Toledo or Santillana del Mar. In the account of the former, it is its condition of “home,” with its familiarity, its intimacy, that is underlined first and foremost, in sharp contrast with the common destinations

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36. Ibid., 317. Gil y Carrasco’s *Bosquejo* coincides, significantly, with Pascual Madoz’s formidable *Diccionario geográfico-estadístico-histórico de España*, 16 vols. (Madrid: Est. tip. de P. Madoz y L. Sagasti, 1845–50): the first isolates the region and, as a consequence, fragments the nation; the second unifies the nation as the organized sum of all its regions. Madoz, with a different kind of verbal economy, endorses nonetheless Gil y Carrasco’s views of the monk’s territory: “el sitio no podía estar mejor elegido, porque es agreste y espantoso en demasía” (vol. 7, 269).


38. Ibid., 435.


40. Ibid., 1535.

41. Emilia Pardo Bazán is one of the few women excursionists whose travel writings—generally conceived as short, separate pieces—can be read in volumes currently in print. The reader of nineteenth-century illustrated magazines—*La Ilustración española y americana, La Ilustración de Madrid, La Ilustración artística*, and especially *La Ilustración de la mujer*—could find occasional travel pieces, mostly about foreign journeys, by other women writers, such as Sofía Casanova, Clotilde Cerdá, and Carolina Coronado.
of cosmopolitan travelers: “Cuando regreso del activo París o del disipado Madrid, me place esta infusión en la tranquilidad del viejo pueblo nativo.” In the report of the latter, the character of the place as “national museum” or national repository of antiquities takes center stage, along with references to lodgings, guides, and routes, in manners strikingly similar to those of foreign travelogues.

The greatest success in the history of the excursion mode, however, was achieved in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, at a time of intense growth in nationalist awareness, when variations of this kind of passionately nationalistic excursionismo were practiced in Catalonia with unequalled zeal. Abundant and distinguished evidence of excursionismo’s literary and scientific products can be found mostly in Album Pintoresch y Monumental de Catalunya, the Bulletí and the Anuari de la Associació d’Excursions Catalana, Memories de la Associació Catalanista d’Excursions Científicas, and similar, often long-lived serials. Just about every Catalan intellectual of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—from Rusiñol to Domenech i Montaner—was a devoted excursionista who faithfully reported the scientific findings and intimate emotions of his or her excursions, but Jacint Verdaguer’s brief Excursions (1887) remains the paragon of the genre in Catalan and possibly in any of the Peninsular languages. Verdaguer may remind the reader, by affinities and contrasts, of another committed ilustrado, Francisco de Zamora, whom the central government named Barcelona’s chief of police (“alcalde del crimen”) one hundred years earlier.

Out of a sense of enlightened duty, Zamora traveled all over the province with a clerk who transcribed, somewhat clumsily and with no adornment, his on-the-spot oral comments. The resulting Diario de los viajes hechos en Cataluña (1785) is probably the most

42. Pardo Bazán, Viajes por España, 101.

43. Ibid., 197. In this regard, the contrast between her travelogues De mi tierra and Por la España pintoresca or Por la Europa católica is very telling, particularly in statements like this: “Tomar el tren . . . y dejando la frescura y el plácido ambiente gallego, meterse en la abrasada Castilla, en sus caducas ciudades monumentales, hidalgas y solitarias . . . eso es lo que a nadie se le ocurre, y por lo mismo tiene, aparte de otros encantos que especificaré, el indiscutible encanto de la novedad y la rareza” (329).

44. Catalan excursionisme—whose inaugural moment is generally associated with the foundation of the Centre Excursionista de Catalunya in 1876—mixed some of the positivist tenets of the period (and of eighteenth-century Spanish ilustrados) with the romantic impulses of early excursionistas. On the one hand, it pursued a scientific objective that was meant to compensate for the Castilian bias of university education in Catalonia. The first bylaw of the Centre declared that the mission of the association was “d’investigar tot quant meresca la preferent atenció sota els concepts científic, literari i artistic en nostra benvolguda terra,” Centre Excursionista de Catalunya, 120 anys d’història: 1876–1996 (Barcelona: Centre Excursionista de Catalunya, 1996), 26. The concepts of excursion and fieldwork became at times interchangeable. In fact, many more Catalan excursionistas considered themselves amateur anthropologists, philologists, archeologists, botanists, geographers, speleologists, etc., than littérateurs or artists. On the other hand, excursionisme were expected to deploy “un encàrrec aclaparador: posar les bases per a l’edificació d’un pais ideal” (ibid., 18). Catalan mountains soon became the favorite destination of the excursionistes “pel misteri de les coves, per la bellesa humana dels paratges, pel color i la vida dels pobles i pels vestigies monumentals i les tradicions i legends populars” (ibid., 39). Verdaguer’s Canigó may very well be the most eminent literary byproduct of Catalan excursionisme: “El poema del Canigo, a més d’esser bell y grandios poema, és també un fidel guia geogràfic que l’excursionista pot seguir sense recel,” Carles Bosch de la Trinxeria, Records d’un excursionista, prol. Jordi Castellanos (1887; Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1978), 309.

comprehensive document of its kind produced by Spanish _ilustrados._ Zamora’s likes and dislikes were dictated by his unflappable persuasion that progress could be accomplished only through industrialization, hygiene, order, diligence, and the principle of “the work well done.” One example:

Este pueblo [Copons], según su situación y el terreno infeliz que alcanza, sería como ha sido siempre de los más infelices de Cataluña, pero por medio de la industria y aplicación de sus vecinos no hay en la provincia otro en que se vea lo que aquí. Todas las casas son nuevas, hechas de piedra y de buena argamasa de muy pocos años a esta parte ... Las mujeres van vestidas con más aseo y de ropas más finas que en el resto de esta Segarra.46

Verdaguer, like Zamora, takes good note of the bearings of villages and rivers, and admires, like him, large panoramas from places high above, but “Mosen Cinto,” national poet, captures the nuances of his native landscape with an intimacy, a delicacy, and an unappeasable melancholy that were mostly alien to the “Alcalde del crimen” and his cold obsession with order and industry. This is Verdaguer on the ruins of Pallars castle: “Un jazmín florido que encontré escondido entre las ruinas (le envié un esqueje a nuestro gran poeta Aguiló) fue una gota de bálsamo para mi corazón triste y dolorido, recordándome que no todo ha muerto allí ... No en todas las ruinas encontraré esa flor de jazmín.”47

While Zamora’s somewhat standard approach to travel would have been equally productive in any other province of the country (indeed, in any other place, national or foreign), Verdaguer’s ways of reading the native land could hardly have been obtained in another territory, however geographically or historically similar, for—like Gil y Carrasco’s or Amós de Escalante’s—they are predetermined by an exclusive, atavistic bond between traveler and land.48 Accordingly, it was a firm expectation of a happier future that drove the _ilustrados_’s perception and representation of losses and gains throughout the national territory, while the excursion mode appears to be driven primarily by a sort of contradictory affect. The predictable enthusiasm about one’s own territory, its riches and its beauties, is almost invariably mixed with a characteristic melancholy: like his or her own childhood, something very proper is always irreparably lost to the writer in his or her small aboriginal land. Most Catalan excursionistas—indeed most excursionistas in any region, replicating paradoxically the initial impulse of foreign romantic travelers in Spain—went from the city to the countryside in search of a disappearing home “format dins el medi natural i no contaminat per la civilització.”49 More often than not, however, such “home”

47. Jacint Verdaguer, _Excursions y Viatges_ [1887], in _Obres Completes_ (Barcelona: Biblioteca Selecta, 1946), 1086.
48. In fact, Verdaguer’s sparse notes on a European trip invite comparison with a _Grand Tour_ travelogue by yet another _ilustrado_, Viera y Clavijo, a remarkable priest born in the Canary Islands, who enjoyed every possible attraction in eighteenth-century Paris in his capacity as tutor of an aristocratic Spanish youth. Preferential attention to his pious obligations and an aching, persistent yearning for the native land radically differentiate the Catalan poet’s European experience from the cosmopolitan cleric’s.
49. Jordi Castellanos, prol. to Bosch de la Trinxera, _Records d’un excursionista_, 9.
and its environment are a thing of the past, and only traces of it—tenuous traces in the process of being erased—reward the agonizing search of the excursionista.

A great deal of Spanish travel literature of the twentieth century\(^{50}\) carries on the strong tradition of nineteenth-century excursionismo, often in variations that distort and complicate to an extreme both the premises and the ultimate purposes of the genre as well as its fragmentary portrait of the nation. Around the turn of the century, the style of provincial, emotional bliss exemplified by Gil y Carrasco’s and Verdaguer’s literary excursions, started to merge with the pedagogical and even critical bent that characterized the less local and more expansive excursions promoted by the Institución Libre de Enseñanza. When the teacher travels with the students, melancholy is at times displaced by new mixtures of love and positivism, love and metaphysics, love and bourgeois economics. Unamuno defined the resulting mode as follows: “Estas excursiones no son sólo un consuelo, un descanso y una enseñanza; son además, y acaso sobre todo, uno de los mejores medios de cobrar apego y amor a la patria.”\(^{51}\) Unamuno, like most travel writers of his generation, was the type of voyageur essayiste who curbed the amount of news and data about the journey—“Yo cada día odio más la información y me interesa menos la noticia”\(^{52}\)—in order to concentrate on transcendental reflections that some locales (that he would adopt with the fervor of a native) facilitated more than others. In this new way of fragmenting the nation, Medina del Campo, for example, turned out to be “lugar el más santo para meditar en lo que pasa y en lo que queda, en la España temporal y en la España eterna,” while Las Palmas “poco, muy poco tiene de interés para los que vamos buscando emociones que nos aren por dentro del espíritu.”\(^{53}\) Yet these reflections often produce—reproduce—terse generalizations like “el paisaje en Galicia es femenino” or “Portugal es un pueblo de suicidas.”\(^{54}\) Moreover, Unamuno’s brand of transcendental, idealizing nationalism distorted at times his views in almost grotesque ways. One example: the unbearable reality of Las Hurdes is for him but a source of impertinent ruminations about the honorable patriotism of the hurdanos who—Unamuno claims—chose freely to stick to their miserable life conditions instead of abandoning the homeland.\(^{55}\)

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50. This travel literature remains, at best, on the fringes of the national literary canon, in spite of the fact that the great majority of Spain’s canonical authors count one or more travelogues among their works. The Cronología de la literatura española, IV, siglo XX (primera parte) (Madrid: Cátedra, 1991), compiled with rather strict criteria by Darío Villanueva and Margarita Santos Zas, records the production of 275 authors, and files 118 of their books under the heading “Género: VIAJES” (Ciro Bayo and Josep Pla are conspicuously absent from that catalog). The same heading of the previous volume, comprising the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries together, lists only 51 books.


52. Ibid., 351.

53. Ibid., 366, 315.

54. Ibid., 308, 244.

55. Ibid., 410. Unamuno would be duly corrected both by Luis Buñuel’s documentary on Las Hurdes (1932) and, later, under Buñuel’s influence, by Antonio Ferrés and Armando López Salinas’ Caminando por Las Hurdes (1960), one of the most characteristic excursion books produced under the hegemony of the so-called social realism: “Los viajeros, con el corazón dolido, se preguntan en qué mundo han caído, en qué sitio oscuro y olvidado,” Antonio Ferrés and Armando López Salinas, Caminando por las Hurdes, photography by Luis Buñuel and Oriol Maspons (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1960), 47. Three years
This reflective manner appears somewhat attenuated in Azorín’s and Ortega’s travel writings. On the three hundredth anniversary of the first edition of *Don Quijote* (1905), the newspaper ABC sent Azorín to la Mancha to retrace the knight’s steps. His reports mix historical data, precise descriptions of the place, and erudite notes about a decayed territory, but conclude with reflections that are characteristic of the grander, more optimistic views of a generation that still believed in the power of the mother land to breed the superior agents of its Golden Age: “son los poblados libres, anchurosos, espaciados, de la vieja gente castellana . . . ¿No es este el medio en que han nacido y se han desarrollado las grandes voluntades, fuertes, poderosas, tremendas, pero solitarias, anárquicas, de aventureros, navegantes, conquistadores?”56 Ortega’s various travel notes published between 1916 and 1934 in *El Espectador*, do combine lyrical descriptions and narrative fragments with the type of critical reflection that so abounds in his essays:

> Castilla es ancha y plana, como el pecho de un varón; otras tierras, en cambio, están hechas con valles angostos y redondos collados, como el pecho de una mujer. El mundo es de muchas maneras. En Castilla se ve mejor que en ninguna parte; pero . . . ¡ese come tan mal! Y esto sería lo de menos si en Castilla se pensara bien. Pero no se piensa bien y, sobre todo, no se siente bien.”57

There are at least two major exceptions to this turn-of-the-century pattern. The first is Ciro Bayo, who contributed more and arguably better pages to travel literature in the excursion mode than any other member of the Generation of 98. A *voyageur romantique* in the manner of Lawrence Sterne and George Borrow, but confined to small areas of the national territory and generally free from transcendental reflections, Bayo’s travelogues record atypically the bliss of humble, open-minded travel without purposeful itineraries or nationalistic agendas. They abound in incisive stories about happy adventures, amorous escapades, and assorted jobs (olive and grape harvester, swimming instructor, mediator between bandits and policemen); long conversations both unassuming and elevated, all interlaced with erudite quotations (Pliny, Virgil, Cervantes, and so forth), and vaguely melancholy historical recollections. In Seville, for example, “pagué mi pesetilla, como un señor, por ver el Alcázar, y me senté en las gradas de la Lonja, esperando lo que ya pasó para no volver: los pregones de mercaderías, plata labrada y esclavos de las Indias, que en aquel lugar se vendían a grito herido en pública almoneda.”58 The second exception, at the opposite end of the excursion spectrum, is José Gutiérrez Solana. In

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1920, the painter-turned-writer published a striking travelogue with almost the same title and similar intentions as Regoyo’s and Verhaeren’s book, La España negra. In 1998, in a new edition of the book that restored the passages removed by Franco’s censors, Andrés Trapiello heralded it as “uno de los libros más singulares, expresivos y hermosos de toda nuestra literatura.” Solana—more than any of the notoriously crude writers of his generation, like the Baroja brothers or the Valle-Inclán of the esperpentos—exhibits a sharp eye for barbarous, revolting national mores, an irate disposition toward women and the clergy, and a distinctive preference for the enumeration of atrocities, all in a deadpan prose that often disregards the conventional rules of Spanish grammar. Curiously enough, however, Solana’s representation of such misery never fails to transmit a sort of perverse pleasure that cancels any critical proclivities on the part of the traveler. For example, this closure to the detailed description of a sinful community of monks in an old convent in Medina del Campo, just across the street from the local brothel, invites comparison with Unamuno’s report of metaphysical pleasures in the same locale: “Anochecido, los cagones del pueblo, que salen de las casas de lenocinio, se ponen en fila, y bajándose las bragas, con las posaderas al aire, hacen del cuerpo bajo las rejas del convento; los frailes, que a esa hora suelen estar borrachos, se asoman por las ventanas y vomitan en las espaldas de los cagones y vuelcan sus pestilent bacines.”

None of the more canonical members of the following “1927” generation contributed in any significant way to the growing corpus of travel literature in any of its variations, with the exception of García Lorca. Impresiones y paisajes (1918), his first book and a generational watershed, chronicles a Castilian excursion organized by the Institución Libre de Enseñanza. García Lorca, restoring somewhat the older pattern of foreign travelogues, takes the opportunity to place in condescending opposition his sensibility of wealthy European bourgeois and the provincial casticismo of his less privileged elders; his modern musical culture and their outdated erudition; the Andalusian sensuality of his native Granada (displayed in gardens and palaces) and Castile’s proverbial asceticism, so dear to his professor’s generation but so intolerable in García Lorca’s eyes, at least as he perceived it in the disturbingly perverse atmosphere of Burgos’s monasteries.

After García Lorca, the great legacy of Castilian excursionismo remained somewhat dormant until Camilo José Cela, who wrote no less than eleven travel books, resurrected it in the most celebrated Spanish excursion travelogue of all time, Viaje a la Alcarria (1948). Cela’s success remains deeply distressing. In postwar Spain, ravaged by poverty and open wounds, Cela indulges time and again in obstinately flippant comments like this:

60. Gutiérrez Solana, La España negra, 110.
61. Federico García Lorca, Impresiones y paisajes (Granada: por el autor, 1918).
Según le explican al viajero, antiguamente, cuando para entretener a las gentes sencillas, que lo que piden es un poco de sangre, aún no se habían inventado las corridas de toros, se usaba la mesetilla del cerro de la Horca para ajusticiar a los condenados a muerte. El viajero piensa que el sitio no está mal elegido; sin duda alguna el cerro de la horca tiene una hermosa perspectiva. El viajero piensa también que es lástima que en el cerro de la Horca no se levante la fiera silueta del rollo; hubiera hecho muy hermoso.  

José María Ridao summarizes the shortcomings of Cela’s callous prose: “Engrandece la estatura del autor mediante la despiadada jibarización de cuanto observa”; in “la caricatura grosera y despiadada [que] hace de la miseria” the reader can recognize a certain tradition of Spanish *majismo* and “la reacción castiza contra los ilustrados y su proyecto.”

Moreover, in spite of the proven diversity of the regions that Cela traverses in his numerous books, the common denominator of his lyrical *tremendismo* tends to unify them all into yet another monochrome *España negra*, thus canceling one of the great achievements of the excursion mode: the differentiating, multiple view of the nation. And yet, traces of Cela’s approach—which are, in turn, but pale, cleansed traces of Bayo’s prodigious travel prose and Solana’s crude, perversely pleasurable observations—are quite recognizable in most of the excursion literature that followed, particularly Ferrés and López Salinas’s *Caminando por las Hurdes*, but also Juan Goytisolo’s *Campos de Níjar* (1960) and *La Chanca* (1962), “dominios de hambre y raquitismo, tracoma y lepra.” Goytisolo is a traveler from Spain’s newly appointed Northern paradise who descends against the grain to the now wretched South: “Cataluña es el paraíso soñado por todos los hombres y mujeres de Almería, una especie de legendario y remoto Eldorado.”

He then adheres to the details of Southern misery, avoiding, just barely, Cela’s affectations: “un crío corretea desnudo por el muladar, con el vientre hinchado y el cráneo negro de moscas.”

One or two generations later, in a more prosperous postwar Spain, romantic, melancholy *excursionismo* returned with some of its original intensity and feisty style, particularly within the province of León, afresh with memories of Gil y Carrasco’s indigenous zeal. The first native of the younger generations to return to the land of his childhood was Jesús Torbado, who wrote *Tierra mal bautizada. Un viaje por Tierra de Campos* in 1966. At a time when coastal tourism began to bloom in Spain and the government trumpeted its “Plan de Tierra de Campos,” the inland excursionist rushes to explain that, on the one hand, “yo no soy un turista, ¿sabe usted? Soy más bien un caminante. Vengo sin coche y sin vademecum”; and, on the other, “uno se ha puesto en camino . . . para comprobar todo lo que se ha dicho y algunos detalles que han procurado omitirse.”

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criticism, enthusiasm and despair tinge in equal parts his purported “documento serio”: “No es ningún vergel y, sin embargo, me parece que estoy en la frontera del paraíso terrenal, alejándome de él para entrar en este paisaje monótono, astral, vacío y magnífico.” 68 Juan Pedro Aparicio and José María Merino embark on a twofold mission in Los caminos del Esla (1980). First they search for the true source of one of the rivers that give León its ancestral, independent geographic identity—“¡Que se enteren en Madrid!”; 69 second, they follow the river’s banks to its mouth recovering the traces of a historical and social identity that the rest of the nation appears to ignore: “Hasta en lo más evidente suele descubrirse hacia lo leonés una ignorancia que, muchas veces, parece expresa.” 70 In El río del olvido (1990), Julio Llamazares returns to yet another one of León’s characteristic rivers, “el río [Porma] en torno al cual pasé todos los veranos de mi infancia,” in the typically loving, yet failed, melancholy search of the romantic excursionistas: “El viajero reconoce cada curva y cada cuesta, pero a pesar de ello no consigue evitar la sensación de volver ahora a La Mata como si fuera un forastero . . . Quizá porque, en el fondo, en el país de la infancia, todos somos extranjeros.” 71

In the meantime, Catalan excursionisme, which continued to thrive throughout the twentieth century, reached a singular, idiosyncratic pinnacle in the 1940s at the hands of Josep Pla. Essayiste and romancier, journaliste and philosophe, Josep Pla, arguably the greatest travel writer of twentieth-century Spain, favored two kinds of destinations: minuscule rural areas of his own province and the great cities of the occidental world where he was stationed as newspaper correspondent. In either case, he finds no reason for Ford’s or Gautier’s long-lived complaint about “la vulgaridad y la rutina del mundo civilizado”; 72 both were “civilized” destinations, fascinating territories that the traveler observed in pleasurable detail and described in a prose equally distant from Cela’s smug caricatures

68. Ibid., 142, 32–33.
70. Ibid., 152.
71. Julio Llamazares, El río del olvido (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990), 7, 69. All along, foreign travelers in twentieth-century Spain—from Havelock Ellis, John Dos Passos, V. S. Pritchett, and Mario Praz to Norman Lewis, Richard Write, Cees Nootoomb, and Miranda France—were as distinguished as their nineteenth-century predecessors, but produced a wider variety of travelogues; in fact, they were often guided by a will to differ from their predecessors’ itineraries and style, as if inspired instead by Spain’s excursionistas. “Spain is the discovery of a few poets and painters and flamboyant tourists . . . I am struggling to detach myself from this yoke,” wrote Nikos Kazantzakis, who did not quite succeed. See Spain, trans. Amy Mims (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 92. Consequently, many of these travelers declared themselves disappointed with the Alhambra, recognized in Spain a rich diversity that nineteenth-century Orientalism had masked, and gradually (at a quicker pace after the Civil War) turned their eyes to the country’s evolving present instead of its purportedly unchanging past.
and from Unamuno’s willful transcendentalism: “No siento el excursionismo heroico ni la literatura de gran espectáculo.”  

Pla was not a typical Catalan excursionista; he neither belonged to an associació excursionista no shared excursionisme’s penchant for academic field work or athletic exertions; moreover, he derided typical excursionistas. He was, however, the most accomplished heir of the excursion mode when it came to the essential features of the genre at large. His excursions proper resulted in two major books: Viaje en autobús (1942) and Viaje a pie (1949), both through the Ampurdán, in northern Catalonia, his patria chica; both in search of a country life that the hegemony of the great metropolitan areas had started to erode irretrievably. Viaje en autobús claims no particular purpose—“Viajar sin tener un objeto concreto es una auténtica maravilla”—except, perhaps, for a literary aspiration: “la desnudez estilística, la simplificación maxima de la manera literaria.”  

Viaje a pie is more of an essayistic exercise in the sociology, psychology, and economics of peasant life in postwar Ampurdán. He declares his purpose in the guise of advice to the youth, a frequent topos in the writings of Catalan excursionistas:  

Su viaje debería tener un objeto: informarse, enterarse de lo que es el país, de cómo vive en él la gente, empaparse de la manera de ser básica, inalienable, insoluble, del material humano. Sería—lo digo de antemano—un poco difícil de resistir y no sólo por las incomodidades que se irían encontrando, que eso no sería nada, sino por la cantidad y la calidad de la información que al paso iría saliendo—que sería brava, desapacible, complicada, a veces de una profundidad insondable.

Pla’s own reports—in both excursions—are significantly less compliant and detached; they tend to blend nationalism and criticism in equal measures. On the one hand, the villages he visits are certainly repositories of “nuestra manera de ser más auténtica y real.”  

On the other, though, his understanding of such “manera de ser” is deeply permeated by uncertainty: nothing but “contradiction” characterizes the “payés,” “es muy difícil saber de antemano qué es lo que hace mover a los payeses, y qué les hace no moverse.” In either travelogue, nothing grand, overwhelming, or extraordinary is ever chronicled. Pla’s excursions—mostly slow walks and long conversations—trace the minutest steps in the evolving lives of the natives and their dwellings, and register every little nuance that appears to signal the current, transitory state of the national condition: “Las cosas

73. Josep Pla, Cartas de Lejos, trans. Josep Daurella (1928; Barcelona: Destino, 1997), 19. By “excursionismo heroico” Pla is probably referring to a vaguely fascist, athletic type of Alpinism (or montañismo) which many understood to be a degenerate form of excursionisme, particularly after the Spanish Civil War, when some of the old excursionist associations were officially approved only as sports associations (see Centre Excursionista de Catalunya, Centre Excursionista de Catalunya, 141).
74. Josep Pla, Viaje en autobús (Barcelona: Destino, 1942), 8, 9.
75. Josep Pla, Viaje a pie (Barcelona: Destino, 1949), 8.
76. Ibid., 13.
77. Ibid., 198.
se transforman ante nuestra vista—a veces sin que nos demos cuenta—incesantemente.”

Noting that evolution, the excursionist “más habituado a la ironía que a la intolerancia” tends to oscillate between a distinctive brand of humor and an attenuated version of the genre’s characteristic melancholy. The traveler observes, for example, the presence of new bathrooms in the peasants’ homes and recognizes that it is a source of equivocal scenes, “muy típicas para explicar su manera de ser . . . si se quiere comprender un poco el fondo de Cataluña.” One of those scenes occurs in “un excelente cuarto de baño” where the tub has been given to broody hens: “Pensé que una bañera es probablemente un lugar muy adecuado para que una incubación de huevos se lleve a término de una manera feliz, completa y apropiada.”

At a different point, he can also lament: “Yo sospecho que la juventud de hoy pasará por la vida sin darse cuenta de las pequeñas, amables, si quereis insignificantes, pero únicas cosas que la vida contiene. Y esto es triste”; or “Uno va detrás de las sombras de los hombres que ha querido y admirado y generalmente no se encuentra nada.” Enclosing it all is the native landscape, which Pla records with a delicate, nimble hand, akin to Verdaguer’s: “Detrás de los cristales empañados se ve el valle metido en aguas, y sobre las laderas de los montes pasan lentamente los jirones de niebla azulada y fina.”

The original versions of *Viaje en autobús* and *Viaje a pie* expose the reader to yet one more factor that makes these travelogues especially relevant in a history of the interplay between travel books and national identities: both were written, exceptionally, in Castilian, for they were both published at a time when the central government prohibited the publication of books in Catalan. Of course, this kind of prohibition, which attempts to impose unity and preempt fragmentation, is of great consequence for any kind of writing, any kind of publication; for obvious reasons, it is particularly disruptive in the case of excursion books, especially if those books are written by a traveler who not only considers language and land (and language and excursion) utterly inseparable, but also declares not to recognize himself in any national language other than Catalan. The result of the prohibition is here a Castilian prose that, however fluent, could not prevent those

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79. Ibid., 145.
81. Ibid., 119, 156.
82. Ibid., 194.
83. Xavier Pla informs me that fragments of both books were written in Catalan and published in different magazines before the Spanish Civil War. It was common practice for Pla to weave old short pieces, or fragments of them, into new longer texts. In this case, the resulting maze of old and new, Catalan and Castilian, has not been untangled yet; moreover, the entanglement continued after their first edition. Of course, once the prohibition disappeared, the texts could have undergone a process of restitution; that is, Pla could have translated them back into the original. It would have been a sort of ultimate poetic justice whereby a translation would be more original than the original, leaving the concept of “the original” significantly disrupted in the process. The actual life of the two texts is, however, more complicated than that. Garolera speaks of adaptations or recastings more than mere translations: “El pagés y el seu mon . . . refon, en catalá, el *Viaje a pie*”; in turn, *Viatge a la Catalunya vella* (1965) is an adaptation of several previous books, among them *Viaje a pie* and *Viaje en autobús*. See Garolera, *L’escritura itinerant*, 132.
texts—so sharply focused on the minutest nuances of a minute region—from appearing significantly out of focus: the reader is constantly reminded that the traveler’s encounters and conversations could not possible have taken place in any language but Catalan, and that the more frequent objects of his attention—all those plants, foods, animals, things, natural accidents, and so on—have Catalan names that reappear throughout the Castilian pages as red flags of an unmistakable and disturbing displacement.
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A Minor Literature?

One might recall the scene in Pedro Almodóvar’s 1995 film, *La flor de mi secreto*, where a distraught writer of romance fiction battles with her publisher over the unconventional content of her last novel. At Editorial Fascinación, a business-minded editor threatens a dumbfounded Amanda Gris and brings to her attention that she is in breach of contract because of her reckless mishandling of artistic license. The rules of the romantic code are quite simple: “amor y lujo en escenarios cosmopolitas, sexo sugerente y sólo sugerido, deportes de invierno, sol radiante, urbanizaciones, subsecretarios, ministros, yuppies. Nada de política. Ausencia de conciencia social. Hijos ilegítimos . . . Eso sí, final feliz” (romance and luxury in cosmopolitan settings, enticing sex but never explicit, winter sports, exuberant sunny days, gated communities, under-secretaries, cabinet members, yuppies. No politics. No social awareness. Illegitimate children . . . and of course, a happy ending).¹ Leo, the woman writer behind the penname of Amanda Gris, has made the mistake of confusing truth in *life* with truth in *fiction*, and in her quest for mimesis, for accuracy in feeling and form, she crosses the barrier of the believable and downgrades the fictional code of romance. If this were only a question of thematic content as her editor’s words imply, Leo could adapt her story to the semiotic protocols written into her

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¹. Pedro Almodóvar, *La flor de mi secreto* (Madrid: Plaza y Janés, 1995), 75. All translations are my own. The page numbers in the translations correspond to the original.
contract quite easily. Instead, the error takes place on a grander scale and provokes the collapse of her universe: Leo mistakenly believed she could conflate the epistemological pulse behind “the minor,” what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari insightfully posed as a “foreignness” in literature that de- and re-territorializes the experiences contained in art, with the actual poetics of lowbrow fiction and its market driven code of honor. Leo knows that high literature and melodrama dissent in their semiotic codes, in the grammar they embody, but she is not quite so sure the two do not share a deeper and more subtle framework, one related to the power of fiction to cure, heal, and mediate, a process that entails making both writer and reader “a stranger within [one’s] own language.”

I would like to frame the “foreignness” that I find in certain Basque cultural productions along this line of thinking. My interest in the artistic works that are conceived within this unique geopolitical context, in their different mediums and languages, is driven by what I deem as a new “minor” cultural framework gradually taking hold of public discourse, a lucid reawakening of critical thinking that keeps in check the “Major” aspirations that all nationalist imaginings of culture hold. A pedagogy of national homogeneity still taints most public funding and inspires the staging of a good part, but certainly not all, of the Basque Government’s cultural planning. For example, the Basque Government’s 2003 Plan for Culture brought together artists, writers, and thinkers with the goal of bringing up to date the guidelines that public school education should follow in the Basque Country. The intellectuals who worked on the plan strongly emphasized the contradictory ideological stances that crisscross Basque society, the linguistic diversity of the area, and made a plea that the Basque Government promote a model of culture conceived as negotiation and not as commerce or spectacle. This is the kind of “minority” status that interests me, one that does not conform so much to conventional formulations of identity based on size, linguistic specificity, and ethnic uniqueness in hardcore geopolitical terms but rather to how “Basqueness” might be theorized not as a thing (an ontology) but rather as an “estrangement,” that is, as the outcome of a process (an epistemology) leading to profounder understanding of the complexities of our world. If we adopted this model, foreignness would be a goal to achieve, a specific means of producing knowledge (an adverb) and not be restricted to its more common meaning as a politics of othering (the home of nouns and adjectives).

Deleuze and Guattari’s political dictum of “hating all languages of masters” embodies a universal call for promoting the counter-hegemonic impulses of the arts. In their canonical essay, “What is a Minor Literature?” (1975), this estrangement or “poetics of

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4. This is an issue addressed by Luis Fernández Cifuentes and Brad Epps in their introduction to *Spain Beyond Spain* (2005) in reference to the link between nationalist projects of cultural identity and literary history (13).

the paradoxical,” to use Bernardo Atxaga’s formulation,⁶ becomes the site for an immigrant imagination. In other words, this is a place of fertile cultural displacement that both philosophers articulate when they define the literary as a process by which one becomes “a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language.”⁷ While this state of mind or migrant impulse could potentially be universalized as the epistemological road map of all literature, I do not wish to make any type of essentialist claims either in terms of the kind of critical knowledge literature produces or, in the opposite camp, of establishing just how strong a grip literature and its institutionalization might or might not have in legitimizing structures of power and feeling within a given society. Instead, my goal is to think about the ripple effects and echoes particular types of literary thinking (like the migrant imaginary evoked above) have (or can be called to have) over societies during discrete instances of the political sequestering of their critical discourses. I am interested in the kind of literary epistemology that in the words of Claudio Magris, “defiende la excepción y el desecho contra la norma y las reglas; recuerda que la totalidad del mundo se ha resquebrajado y que ninguna restauración puede fingir la reconstrucción de una imagen armoniosa y unitaria de la realidad, que sería falsa” (defends the exceptional and the marginal against the norm and its rules; remembers that the entire world has been shattered and that no restoration can simulate the reconstruction of a harmonious and unified image of reality, inextricably false).⁸ This is a particularly relevant inquiry for understanding the complexities underlying language, identity, and cultural production in the Basque case given how nationalist ideologies of different colors, what I have termed elsewhere as the “regimes of the Idea,”⁹ have focused more on identity as an ontological given and not as a multifaceted and unstable process that must constantly be re-semanticized if identity can have any type of ontological legitimacy and accuracy.

Our multicultural and widely interconnected historical moment operates under the assumption that the identitarian paradigm that most comfortably fits the bill in today’s world is a malleable and hybrid one. Sociocultural identity is no longer restricted to the traditional borders of the nation-state given how nations are learning to imagine their cultures in less homogeneous ways thanks to the changes stemming from global capitalism and the socio-political shift in ideas and attitudes it enhances. Today we live in a world where no political party that aspires to win an election can make discriminatory policies toward women, racialized minorities, the handicapped, the GLBT community, or the poor the center of their political platform—although current mayoral elections in Rome and the rise of xenophobia in most EU countries might make this affirmation

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debateable. Most nation-states comfortably adapt to the newly emerging hybrid identity of the national subject if, of course, the demand for representational fairness does not alter the underlying forces that stubbornly structure our world: the chronic differences between the North and the South, the stronghold that particular nations and regions of the world have on wealth and military power, enhanced, needless to say, by the critically anesthetized mindsets of many European and US citizens, immobilized by the fear that results after the systematic erosion of the welfare-state in their respective countries.

The world has undoubtedly shrunk in size and time and is increasingly measured in smaller units, but it is also true that this new relative proximity does not contribute all that it might to the deepening of democracy in our societies. Instead of structural change, of redistributing the centers of power, we witness how orthodoxy, the filter that delegitimates any and all forms of dissidence, has learned how to refashion itself and better camouflage its priorities. The same kind of power can be exerted today behind less conventional dress codes, by people of color, or pronounced in minority languages. Power is no longer obsessed with its form (its packaging) because it knows that its source—its content—is much more stable and less susceptible to fundamental change. Nominalism is no longer the law of the land, or more precisely, it has taken on a new twist: interestingly, in a globalized world, the Universal takes center stage, although now fully aware that it can only fully legitimize itself if it masquerades as a Particular or “novelty” in the menu options of Power.

Globalization has caused an important paradigmatic shift in how “small” cultures are studied and addressed. Small in size and population but not in significance for current discussions on democracy and terrorism, the Basque Country is proof that the postnationalist turn that tends to govern how we think about ourselves in an ever more interconnected world actually clashes with how we experience our lives on the smaller scale of the everyday. The local matters—there is no other site for life—and it matters even more so when our social anchoring is deemed nebulous and randomly subject to intangible economic and political forces, no longer kept in check (or experienced as such) by civil dissent and potent collective organization. In the Basque context, this contradiction and clash of spheres also feeds into much of the public discourse on the role of governments and citizens within these structures. I have argued elsewhere how the nationalist model that inspires today’s Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV, Basque Nationalist Party) and its rendering of social and cultural space in the Basque Autonomous Community is one of “designer nationalism.”

By this term I mean an intelligent use of the tourist imaginary, its commodification of identity, and the circuits of global market capitalism to secure a political and economic visibility of “a people.” Bilbao’s enormously successful post-industrial

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11. As Joseba Zulaika has pointed out, in his Crónica de una seducción (Madrid: Nerea, 1997), the Basque Government’s shrewd staging of identitarian politics was a key factor in securing the global consumer and legitimizing its cost locally.
revitalization project was planned and staged in ideological terms through the logic of the underrepresented “minority” within the global erasure of difference. This project was never an attempt to temper global capitalism, to put it on a leash and secure a place for alternate economic or political experiments. Instead, we witness how a driven nationalist force embraces the new economic opportunities and, in many symbolic instances, mimics the hard-core nationalist pedagogies of Spanish cultural nationalism in its striving to secure a piece of the new geopolitical pie for the emergent Basque Nation. This retooling of conservative identitarian politics would be just another example of the local playing global if the Basque context did not face the moral urgency of needing to understand the anachronistic legacy and persistence of ETA political violence. Much like the absent discussion of an alternative model of cultural politics articulated from the public sphere and from state cultural institutions, not enough energy has been spent on making the critique of the culture of violence, the rejection of a culture of victimization, a symbol of social cohesion. There seems to be room in Euskadi to make the “stuff” of the literary a more prominent piece of the social fabric, for in Claudio Magris’ thinking, if “la historia cuenta los hechos, la sociología describe los procesos, la estadística proporciona los números . . . no es sino la literatura la que nos hace palpar todo ello allí donde toman cuerpo y sangre en la existencia de los hombres” (history narrates the facts, sociology describes the processes, statistics provides us the numbers . . . it will be literature that makes us fathom reality there where it becomes flesh and blood for humankind).

Over the past ten years, the majority of studies of the Basque Country seeking to engage theoretical work on globalization (Virilio; Canclini; Jameson; Baudrillard; Harvey) have been undertaken by anthropologists, political scientists, historians, and sociologists who have analyzed the culture of violence (Zulaika; Aranzadi; Elorza; Juaristi) governing that context. While much of this research has in some way drawn on a notion of the “textual” borrowed from literary studies in their study of culture, ideology, identity, or space, little credit is given to how literature itself might also be a first-hand contribu-


13. An important exception to this affirmation would be the work that takes places at Arteleku, the Basque Country’s prime site for independent, cutting-edge thinking in the arts, located in Donostia-San Sebastián and publicly funded by the Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa. This is the Basque Country’s flagship institution for discussion in the public sphere. There is no room here to give an adequate portrayal of this unique cultural and arts center, but a small sampling of the kinds of the debates it has fostered and list of speakers it has hosted might offer readers a sense of the counter-hegemonic fever that impulses this center. Arteleku considers itself a “centro vanguardista de pensamiento y de arte,” a cultural “factory” that houses art exhibits, provides creative workspaces for local artists dedicated to the graphic arts, printing, multimedia, and film, hosts debates on a wide array of topics ranging from Copyleft, the Web and artistic creation, global feminism, urban planning and politics, historical memory, etc. It also publishes an interdisciplinary journal Zehar, and is a fine arts library and experimental think tank of sorts. Internationally acclaimed intellectuals have lectured and debated at Arteleku, figures like Giulia Colaizzi, Sami Nair, Ignacio Ramonet, Francisco Jarauta, Jacques Rancière, Toni Negri, Bernardo Atxaga, John Berger, Giovanni Arrighi, Belén Gopegi, Víctor Erice, etc.

tor to that conversation and a prime actor in a cultural politics that wishes to dismantle parochial nationalism.

We live in times that do not pay enough attention either to the humanities or to the aesthetic realm, a time of renewed crisis, as Joan Ramón Resina would astutely have it. And while some might mistake this turn to the literary as a nostalgic longing for an “old order,” for an impossible ideology-neutral reading of the arts, for an essentialist high-brow call to public office of the avant-garde, nothing could be farther from my objective. In an attempt to repoliticize and better understand the broader sociological underpinning of culture and of our profession, some practitioners of cultural studies felt the need to push the literary into a quiet corner and bring other kinds of texts to the forefront and mainstream of scholarly inquiry. While the broadening of the type of texts we teach and study is a goal that I share, I do not want to run the risk of essentializing either the artistic or political merits of any creative work by narrow-mindedly basing these judgments on their genre and not on how these texts generate knowledge or facilitate discussion in the public sphere. It is for this reason that I find an increasingly more sympathetic stance toward “returning” to the literary and its interconnections with other forms of artistic production, if now for different disciplinary and politically more interesting reasons. Elaine Showalter has asked this question when she points out that in the fruitless antagonism between theory and literature one seems to have forgotten that literature might just be the best place “to go for help about morality, love, evil, death, suffering, and truth, among other things.” The Greeks understood the place of the arts much better. They envisioned in much clearer terms how the fate of the protagonists in the tragedies had an explicit translation on the level of public pedagogy: the magic of theater, its moving spectators to become someone else for a brief period of time, was considered not only as fertile psychological alchemy but also as a political training of citizens, for what can be more conducive to a rich and productive public sphere than “entering the consciousness of another.” Former US Poet Laureate (2001–03) Billy Collins put it quite eloquently when he stipulated that the study of poetry

requires that we loosen some of our fixed notions in order to accommodate another point of view—which is a model of the kind of intellectual openness and conceptual sympathy that a liberal education seeks to encourage. To follow the connections in a metaphor is to make a mental leap, to exercise an imaginative agility, even to open a new synapse as two disparate things are linked.

19. Ibid.
Hence, poetry, or the literary in general, is “a way of thinking, an angle of approach,” a means to make the world intelligible and to slow it down so that greater care can be placed on experiencing life, if only briefly, through the eyes of others. Much like the case of a good photograph—the kind that conjures up what Barthes theorized as the “punctum,” or “sting” that “pricks me” and pierces through multiple levels of distraction, forgetfulness, and blindness—the arts create logical registers where the questions of the child-theorist make sense: namely, the simple yet profound questions of the sort Adrienne Rich poses as “Why . . . ? What if? We will be told these are childish, naïve, ‘pre-postmodern’ questions. They are the imagination’s questions.” In her *Arts of the Possible* (2001), Rich outlines how a productive imagination is in “direct conflict with traditional ways of being,” and argues that this incompatibility is precisely where the political dimension of the arts resides—and I would like to venture, where the healing process for societies profoundly damaged by violence begins.

Art, like the political, stems primarily from a gnoseological impulse, from taking a stab at “a way of knowing / why it must come.” More than being about beauty, the arts dovetail quite naturally with the suprapersonal—or have a political location in Rich’s terms—when, like critical discourse, they become “a vital instrument in combating unreality and lies . . . the systems that abuse and waste the majority of peoples’ lives.” It is important to point out, though, that the political nature of the arts, or in this case, of the literary, does not reside in how politics and aesthetics might share particular themes. The political location that I would like to trace owes its effectiveness to each medium’s specificity and to the craft of the artist. In the case of literature, this would entail a writer’s unique struggle with language to name the unknown, with the writer’s attempt to give form through metaphor to the unintelligible, with being truthful to the complexity of reality, with learning how to suspend a “netted bridge over a gorge.” This is an epistemological project that becomes political when the answer to the question, “What do we know when we know your story?” resides in discovering just how much of the story of the You is entangled in the story of the I. Within the context of current Basque socio-political reality, these are especially poignant questions.

20. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 21.
24. Ibid., 116.
25. Ibid., 162.
26. Ibid., 118.
27. Ibid., 155.
Organized Forgetting

The Basque conflict is unfortunately Western Europe’s last site of internal political violence, a situation stemming from the outcome of World War II and the special socio-historical circumstances that governed the later years of the Franco regime in Spain (1939–75). The end of the dictatorship was a contradictory ethical period of Spanish history. Many of those pushing for democracy looked the other way when political violence was deemed a legitimate avenue of action given the longevity and brutality of the dictatorship. This triggered a complex renegotiation of national identity for Spaniards and Basques alike during the country’s subsequent transition to democracy after Franco’s death in 1975. At the time, most progressives both in and out of the Basque Country joined in the Basque nationalist sentiment, equating Spanish national identity (the adjective) with the legacy of the dictatorship. In the Basque context, regionalism, whether nationalist or not, promised to correct the democratic deficit for which a strong Spanish state was held responsible. ETA terrorism, which began in 1959, sadly persists to this day with a death toll of nearly a thousand lives which includes ETA’s most recent assassination of a former city council member of the Socialist Party, Isaías Carrasco, on March 7, 2008 in Arrasate-Mondragón, Gipuzkoa, after a relatively long ceasefire and failed conversations between members of the terrorist group and the representatives of the Socialist government to end the violence and agree to a political solution more in line with the nationalist parameters ETA espouses for the Basque Country.28

In our global context, no matter how “imagined” or how “performative” the national project becomes, it nevertheless has the power to provide us with a sense of what Basque writer Bernardo Atxaga termed “gravitational” security (Atxaga 1996);29 in other words, a place to anchor our daily experiences and generate a closer locus for reality in socio-political, cultural, and affective terms. This might partially explain the power of the strong emotional appeal nationalist ideologies have over us, of their being a means to counterbalance the virtual and ineffable quality of our global world, but this essay wishes to think about the local, about that place where your story and mine share streets, images, sounds, smells, dreams, and memory (personal, historical, and political) outside of a nationalist location. Literature (the “minor” literature that interests me) teaches us how to break out of the nationalist stronghold of social experience, out of its dichotomous, exclusionary thinking when defining membership in the community. It helps us identify nationalism’s savvy repackaging of misogynist, racial, ethnic, and linguistic markers,

28. ETA’s last ceasefire was announced on March 22, 2006 and formally lasted until June 5, 2007, although the Barajas Airport car bombing and killing of two Ecuadorian immigrants on December 30, 2006 foreshadowed a dramatic ending to the peace negotiations.

and it does so with a quick strike of the pen. The current socio-political context that imbues the Basque Country with high international visibility, massive urban planning, and somewhat dwindling nationalist attachments (an assertion based on recent parliamentary election results)\(^{30}\) insinuates that the time is ripe for a profound public discussion of what constitutes the “Basqueness” of that cultural-identitarian marker. One place to look for inspiration is the history of literary creation itself (not of literature, regrettably until only recently) given how a focus on the creative process evinces just how reified and useless a notion of the national becomes when addressing how the arts “think.” To do otherwise would be to distort, for example, the immensely rich and complex definition of what Basque culture actually is: a site overflowing in tradition, not of the kind Bernardo Atxaga deems “antiguo y obsolete,”\(^ {31}\) but rather one that globalization and capitalist consumer culture interestingly (and not so unexpectedly) facilitate:

Todo el pasado literario, ya el de Arabia, ya el de China, ya el de Europa, está a nuestra disposición; en las tiendas, en las bibliotecas, en todas partes. Cualquier escritor puede así crearse su propia tradición. Puede leer Las mil y una noches un día, y al siguiente puede leer Moby Dick o La Metamorfosis de Kafka . . . y esas obras, el espíritu que ellas transmiten, pasarán inmediatamente a su vida y a su trabajo de escritor. No hay, hoy en día, nada que sea estrictamente particular. El mundo está en todas partes, y Euskal Herria, ya no es solamente Euskal Herria, sino—como habría dicho Celso Emilio Ferreiro—el lugar donde el mundo toma el nombre de Euskal Herria.

The world’s entire literary tradition, the Arab tradition, the Chinese tradition, the European tradition is at our fingertips: in bookstores, in libraries, widely available. Writers can create their own corpus. One day they can read The Arabian Nights, the next day Moby Dick or Kafka’s Metamorphosis . . . and those books, the spirit they convey, will immediately become part of the writer’s life and therefore of his or her creative world. Today nothing is unique, strictly speaking. The world is everywhere, and Euskal Herria, is no longer only Euskal Herria, but rather—as Celso Emilio Ferreiro would say—the place where the world is called Euskal Herria.\(^ {32}\)

Critic Mario Santana considers this process of importation one of the most important remedies against the romantic marking of the autochthonous as the only legitimate piece of the “national.” In his precise terms:

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30. Political loyalties seem to be shifting in the Basque Country. The March 2008 general election results showed that the PNV lost over 100,000 votes compared to the 2004 general elections, hence losing one seat in the Spanish Parliament (from 7 to 6 deputies). On the other hand, the Partido Socialista de Euskadi (Basque Socialist Party, PSE) gained nearly 100,000 votes translating into 2 new deputies in the Spanish Parliament (from 7 to 9). The relentless disputes between the members of the Partido Popular (Popular Party, PP) and every other political party against negotiations with ETA did not serve them well in the Basque Country. Here the PP saw a drop of about 28,000 votes and a loss of one deputy (from 4 to 3) from the Basque Country to the Spanish Parliament. Source: El País, “Elecciones Generales, 9 de marzo de 2008,” at http://www.elpais.com/especial/elecciones-generales/ (last accessed July 14, 2009).


32. Ibid., 376–77.
The literary repertoire of a community . . . is also composed of works and authors that acquire citizenship thanks to a process of nationalization or naturalization. If national literature is understood as a system of communication that is effective within a particular social geography (whether that of the state or the nation or that of any other collective that may be the focus of study) and not simply as a list of works, it must account for the appropriation of supposedly foreign works and values that is constantly effected in the receptive practice of its citizens. This necessary shift from the talk of cataloguing the literature of a nation to that of analyzing the existent repertoire of literature in a community requires the abdication of any exclusive rights to the ownership of works and authors.  

This, of course, does not imply that writers and readers do not have a special relationship with the language(s) that drive the plot of their primary or basic affect or that there does not exist a unique dialectic between what is conventionally termed the mother tongue and the “degree zero of writing” and reading. But if we were to assume a polyglotism of sorts (literal or cultural) as the driving force of literary creation this could easily become the cornerstone of a less rigid cultural identity that in turn could help shape a more fluid, “minor” nation. Could this be a suggestion for how to open a space of civil encounter, of civil imagination where “another consciousness and another sensibility” are possible? Does this allow us to make ours the identitarian critique of the sort Edward Said so eloquently posed in the context of the Palestinian struggle, when he made inquiries like, “Do we exist? . . . When did we become one?” and when he wished to understand the relationship between “these big questions” and “our intimate relationships with each other and with others”? Perhaps literature can shine some light on these crucial ethical questions in the Basque context and help shape a new public sphere grounded on a pedagogy of peace for future generations. I am thinking of a pedagogy inspired in civil memory, in what Antigone, the celebrated sister of antiquity, debated when she taught us how to live with the dead.

Today’s Basque Country wrestles with an inexplicable social and moral debt, one that lehendakari Juan José Ibarretxe expressed in the following terms to an auditorium of over one thousand family members of ETA victims in April 2007:

La paz y la convivencia sólo pueden construirse sobre los cimientos de la verdad y de la justicia. No estuvimos a la altura de las circunstancias como sociedad frente a las penurias

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35. Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, 17.
37. The Basque political spectrum did not achieve full representation at this event celebrated in Bilbao’s Palacio Euskalduna. No representatives of the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) or of the communist-nationalist EHAK (Euskal Herrialdeetako Alderdi Komunista—Communist Party of the Basque Homelands) were present.
Peace and coexistence can only be built upon the foundation of truth and justice. As a society, we did not live up to the challenge facing hundreds of families in this country, their hardships and their suffering, day in and day out. Nevertheless, we believe that there is still time to ask for their forgiveness.38

Words that were appreciated by most, came too late for others, and that certainly need to be translated into laws like the 2008 Ley de Reconocimiento y Protección de las Víctimas del Terrorismo (Law of Recognition and Protection of Victims of Terrorism) approved in the Basque Parliament after several years of painful political confrontations. The last several years have been particularly difficult times for anyone who mistakenly trusted that the end of ETA violence was on the horizon; an especially grave moment for Basque society in particular given how democracy was being sequestered, once again, by bullets and not being put to the test by ideas. ETA took center stage in all things political, yet again—how could it not?—and political discourse was inevitably tainted with this protagonism instead of making room for better questions, instead of addressing the issues affecting the quality of life of those who live, work, and dream in the Basque Country in a more concrete and substantive manner: health care, the environment, the quality of schools and universities, housing costs, the special needs of the young and of the elderly, the new challenges of immigration, growth in research, sustainable development, racism and xenophobia, violence against women, and so forth. All of these matters got sidetracked in public discourse and the all too familiar and dysfunctional civil context of bodyguards, illegalized political groups, lack of political freedoms, the stalemated situation of ETA prisoners and their families, linguistic zealotry, and a deep sense of fear were once more the logs of a toxic and slow-burning fire.

Now, literature and the practice of literary study might seem like weak opponents to this type of cultural malaise but let’s look a little closer. Much disciplinary discussion has developed around the reformulation of comparative literature over the past fifteen years in light of multiculturalism and globalization, some of it quite useful for rethinking civil identity in general, and the tenets of Basque nationalism in particular. From the Bernheimer Report of 1993 to the most recent collective discussion on the topic in the US academy, Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization (2006), much energy has been spent on insisting that comparative literature is not a discipline concerned with a canon of texts but is instead a mode of reading.39 As in the case of the epistemology of the “minor,” comparative literature is conceived today as an anti-nationalist adverb in two ways: as a practice that disassociates literature from the nation and the notion of

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national language and secondly, as a means of reading other “texts” (urban, filmic, politi-
cal, and so on) in a literary fashion. In Saussy’s formulation, the discipline has experi-
enced a shift from “the comparison of literatures” to ‘comparisons with literature’ and also
claimed a larger dialogic space because “Comparative Literature is best known, not as
the reading of literature, but as reading literally (with intensive textual scrutiny, defiance,
and metatheoretical awareness) whatever there may be to read.”40 Linda Hutcheon uses
the humble metaphor of the “electrical converter” to best describe what comparative lit-
erature does best, “make energy (in its case, intellectual energy, usable in different places
and in different contexts.”41 This, of course, presupposes a de-reified discipline, one that
feels comfortable with and settles for a weak hypothesis about the identity of the object
it is describing, something that, unfortunately, “does not come naturally to describers.”42
Accepting a diffuse object of inquiry, meandering between and across disciplinary bor-
ders seems to be counterintuitive to the protocol of disciplinary uniqueness, yet, if we
were to examine more profoundly the actual way we learn, would not these weak ties
between texts, national languages, reading, and other modes of cultural production be
nothing more than a more accurate description of that learning process: “not so much
through coverage as through contact”?43 And to push this observation into the terrain
of postnational civic identity, would it not be legitimate to ask that if “all literature has
always been comparative, i.e., watered by many streams,”44 then would it not also be
incumbent to bring these “insights and skills to the cultural redefining of Europe”?45
This is the site where I believe literature—its creation and its study à la comparative lit-
erature and its echoes in newer decentralized models of Hispanism—has much to add to
the public sphere of our time, and specifically, to the situation that confronts the Basque
context today on both the political and cultural fronts. Could the notions of cultural
hybridity—what Primo Levi termed “the usefulness of not being pure”46—the logic of
metaphor that conjures unexpected connections between the apparently unrelated, the
use of the Particular to reach the Universal, not be strategies that the public sphere could
make its own? Could these not be the tools of a new cultural/political counter “minority”
in its struggle to make the democratic values of solidarity, otherness, and reconciliation
more central to its identity?

From discussions ranging from the place of the Basque language in education,
research, and popular culture, to the reconfiguration of political sovereignty for the

40. Ibid., 22, 23 (emphasis added in first of these two citations).
43. Ibid., 35.
44. Ibid., 6.
Basque Autonomous Community under current Spanish and European law there needs to be, in my opinion, a “weakening” of the nationalist cultural planning that overcompensates for the inevitable and sometimes ruthless interconnectedness of our world. A nationalist sociocultural paradigm has become the dominant sociological mindset of the Basque Country, a mindset that has done little to make today’s Basque society less frayed, more compassionate, and willing to make its “others” not so “unimaginably foreign or uninhabitable.” The skills of the politician, political scientist, sociologist, anthropologist are certainly summoned to fulfill this postnationalist de-programming objective but so are those of the artists who pose a special sensitivity to “humanity’s disorders,” men and women who produce works of art whose greatness is determined by the degree of strangeness they introduce to our cultural milieu, a strangeness so strong that it “either cannot be assimilated or so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange.” Writers like Basque poet Julia Ottxoa who reminds us in her short stories, poems, and visual art that “No será desde luego / hundiendo el tenedor / en el corazón de las golondrinas / cómo nos alimentaremos de libertad” (“Of course, / stabbing a fork / in a swallow’s heart / will not feed us freedom”) or Bernardo Atxaga, who relentlessly works to elevate the imaginary of all things Basque to their rightful multicultural, multilingual, and transnational interfaces, are just two examples of an entire cohort of Basque artists whose work is deeply embedded with moral habits that are hypersensitive to their moment in history, artists who tend bridges between the two chasms that bind human life: fanaticism and absolute skepticism. This is the lens through which Basque cultural discourse can become “minor” and “great.”

Some years ago, Bernardo Atxaga published an important autobiographical essay on a “secret country” where state-sponsored forgetting was the law of the land, his magnificent “De Euzkadi a Euskadi” (1997). In that poetic essay, Atxaga describes a very different political context than the one Basques face today, or maybe not so disparate on moral terms if one looks a little deeper. In that text, Atxaga narrates the adolescent’s discovery of a new secret country, one that his young fellow classmate would be willing to sacrifice his life for: “Nik bizia emango nikek Euzkadiren alde.” Es decir: ‘yo daría la vida por Euzkadi’ (“‘Nik bizia emango nikek Euzkadiren alde.’ In other words, ‘I’d give my life for Euzkadi’”). The times, of course, are the Francoist postwar years and the country that Atxaga discovers is Euzkadi. At the age of thirteen, he unearthed a secret country, a place that gives him

a unique cultural identity, anchored in a “strange” language, in a history of repression of a people, and in the also secret and veiled memories of a civil war that the adolescent only now begins to unravel and link to the origins of the Basque nation. This new country is experienced as Unity, as an inconspicuous collective entity, recently dug out from under the ruins of an unknown past, radically different and “wounded,” given the state of affairs brought about by Francoism and its brutally repressive ethos and determination to annul all things Basque. Atxaga conveys with exquisite sensitivity the emotional state of mind of the adolescent who one day wakes up alone if only to fall sleep that same night nestled in the arms of a community of national feeling. Without ever losing sight of the social chimera he faced, Atxaga clearly explains how simple it was for the adolescent to be seduced by the masculinist heroic narratives of Belief, of sacrifice in the name of the Idea, of the Community: atavistic and illusory constructions that nevertheless provided the boy with a roadmap of how to reclaim a moment in history for himself and for a Country within the unreality of the postwar years. In his words:

El país oculto que vislumbrábamos en tal o cual manifestación, y que tan una pieza nos parecía, era más bien un país idealizado, de fantasía; un territorio que debía muchísimo a la imaginación y a la necesidad de creer en algo. Por una parte, la palabra Euzkadi sólo rimaba bien con las ideas de los vascos que habían luchado como gudaris en la guerra o habían estado a favor de su causa, es decir, con la ideología del Partido Nacionalista Vasco, y nada tenía que ver, en cambio, con los vascos de ideología falangista o requeté, también numerosos, o con los que durante la guerra combatieron en las filas socialistas o izquierdistas; por otra parte, la guerra la habían perdido todos los ciudadanos que lucharon por la República, y no sólo los vascos que defendieron Bilbao o fueron bombardeados en Guernika. En resumidas cuentas, Euzkadi no era un territorio ni una gente—como sí lo era el País Vasco, Euskal Herria—, sino el nombre que una determinada opción política, la más vasquista, daba a su utopía.

The secret country that could be perceived every now and then, here or there, and that seemed so completely unified, was, of course, an idealized country, a fantasy; it was a territory that owed itself to the imagination and to the need to believe in something. On the one hand, the word Euzkadi only rhymed well with the ideology of certain Basques, those who had fought as gudaris [Basque nationalist soldiers] in the Civil War or had been on that side of the conflict, in other words, in tune with the ideology of the Basque Nationalist Party, and these were quite different from the Basques of Falangist or requeté [Carlist] ideology, numerous as well, or with those who fought on the side of the socialists or other leftist groups during the war; on the other hand, everyone who had fought on the side of the Republic had lost the war, not only the Basques that defended Bilbao or who were attacked in Guernika. In short, Euzkadi was not a territory nor a people—like the Basque Country, Euskal Herria was—it was the name given by a particular political option, the most Basquophile, to its utopia.  

53. Ibid., 54.

54. Ibid., 56.
Forty years later, this secret country has different borders, although they obey the same processes of historical erasure and counterfeiting that the Basque nation faced after the Civil War. The two historical moments are closer in time than one might think at first, interconnected as they are by the disease of social mean-spiritedness that currently pervades democracy in Spain. On the one hand, for example, members of the opposition party (PP) fight long and hard to make the already difficult processes of reconciliation with the Francoist aftermath of persecution, incarceration, and execution of family members even more burdensome and painful by voting against Spain’s first (albeit imperfect) Law of Historical Memory in an attempt to crush necessary public debate on reconciliation and retribution for war victims and their families.55 Similarly, in the Basque Country, one could argue that the process of historical erasure embodied in the nationalist rewriting of Basque history owes much to the same spirit of falsification and mean-spiritedness that governed the earlier context. To illustrate this point one could look at how Basque nationalists have ignored the industrial past of the city of Bilbao, its shipyards, its manufacturing and steel mills, rendering obsolete its struggle against nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalism: class warfare, environmental disasters, sprawling urban growth, an entangled and complex modernity. Inspired maybe by the Francoist erasure of all things Republican, do the Basque nationalists think that the industrial legacy of the city and neighboring towns along the Nervión River can simply be diffused? The region, like many others, has a long history of social, cultural, economic, and political outcasts and victims but the time has finally come, as the debate on the Law of Historical Memory foreshadowed, for making the experiences of the victim a foundational cornerstone of a more generous society: one that is at ease with its historical memory, with its messy and dirty past, and uses this knowledge with compassion, therefore transforming the victims of political, cultural, and social excesses from specters to the inspiration and locus for social change. If poet Adrienne Rich is correct when claiming that “mean-spiritedness as a generalized social symptom suggests an inexplicable national mood, a bad attitude, a souring of social conscience and compassion,”56 what role can the arts play in this much-needed atonement, in this renewed project of democracy?

55. Spain’s first Ley por la que se reconocen y amplían derechos y se establecen medidas en favor de quienes padecieron persecución o violencia durante la Guerra Civil y la Dictadura (Law that acknowledges, furthers the rights, and establishes measures to compensate those who were either persecuted or harmed during the Civil War and the dictatorship) or better known as La Ley de Memoria Histórica (Law of Historical Memory) was approved by the Spanish Parliament on October 31, 2007 after a year of long and contentious debate primarily between the Socialist governing party and both the political forces on its Right (the Partido Popular), who deemed the law unnecessary and detrimental to democracy, and with forces to its Left (Izquierda Unida-The United Left), who wanted a stronger and more explicitly critical law against the Franco regime and better retribution for its victims. The law recognizes as victims the fallen of both the Republican and Francoist factions of the Spanish Civil War and those incarcerated and assassinated during the Franco dictatorship. It allocates public funding for the search and exhumation of bodies from mass graves, and among other measures, stipulates the removal of all Francoist symbols and statues from public view. See the full text at: http://www.mpr.es/NR/rdonlyres/D03898BE-21B8-4CB8-BBDI-D1450E6FD7AD/85567/boememoria.pdf (last accessed July 14, 2009).

Let’s recall comparative literature’s insight on adopting a fluid object of study, on shifting from comparing literatures (that is, national cultures) to thinking about cultural production (in its many formats) in a broad textual way and translate this porosity and leakiness to the nationalist sphere. If one of the finer conclusions of this shift celebrates finding inspiration outside of the autochthonous, this might help the postnationalist find leads beyond the traditional geopolitical borders, what the arts seem to do “naturally.” If the theoretician of postnationalist civil identity were to probe the literary field for a new imaginary to help modulate Basque society, authors like Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Juan Goytisolo, W. G. Sebald, Doris Lessing, and Philip Roth might suddenly be a part of a renewed Basque cultural tradition. The minority status of these writers is not based on a simplistic numeric straightjacketing like the kind the Basque government holds over cultural production in the Basque language, reducing its progress and success to statistical measurements. This minority status invoked on political grounds (size) is, of course, the contradictory wish to be dominant through means that are (or aspire to be) countercultural. The minority status model I would like to see the postnationalist adopt—a model of strangeness from within—is exemplified in the writing of authors like those mentioned previously, a strangeness that conforms to the way their texts feverishly dismember each and every monolithic account of identity through an acute struggle with metaphor and language. Naming is not only the task of the nationalist; the borders of reality are also very much the stuff of the literary. But even if the nationalist and the minority writer are both creators of sorts, their incompatible epistemologies keep them irreconcilably apart. If the nationalist’s politics of naming stems from the pedagogy of uniqueness and specificity that drives all nationalist frameworks, the minority (anti-hegemonic) author’s quest is, on the contrary, for universal rootedness in estrangement. In a perceptive interview with Philip Roth, Czech writer Ivan Klíma explains how “uniqueness” does not point back to any Particular. Instead, when they “reflect [on their] most personal experiences deeply and truthfully” they touch the suprapersonal and wider polity, for “literature doesn’t have to scratch around for political realities or even worry about systems that come and go; it can transcend them and still answer questions that the system evokes in people.”57

So, if the literary occupies itself with the traces of the political in us, what better way to find those traces than through articulating identity as a kind of “strangeness” within one’s language or community, as a local foreigner?

Returning to the Basque case, literature can have a major role to play in articulating the tone of reconciliation, in bringing the different social and political interlocutors closer, in making the murders less in vain. If the literary can serve as a factory of knowledge, if metaphor and storytelling can generate instruments and processes that bring us closer to truth, then no one should be shocked if a profound analysis of political violence in the Basque context comes from the literary. By this I do not mean to imply that, for example, the world of ETA and of its victims should become the topic of more literary texts or

57. Ivan Klíma, “Conversation in Prague with Ivan Klíma,” in Roth, Shop Talk, 67.
works of art in general—an issue for artists to wrestle with in their work. Instead, what I hope this essay has begun to sketch is that political answers can be found in the ways literature wrestles with the messiness of life, with the trauma of memory, with learning how to live with the dead. Basque society’s social peace and moral stature depend on it.

So let me conclude by making my own Milan Kundera’s assertion that organized forgetting can only be combatted by a society that is ready to set aside the tyrannical impulses of the youth culture that permeates and infiltrates our daily lives. Our culture’s indifference to the past and mistrust of thought—well explained in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting—turns the nation of citizens we strive for into a nation of juveniles, lacking in memory, and insensitive to the place history should have in the social fabric. Let us instead heal the severing of the victim from his/her sustained connections with community, family, and life and compensate this being “torn out of history” this unimaginable life story, with a well-equipped, compassionate community of listeners who have been retrained and re-sensitized to become a nation of memory, irony, and of strangers from themselves. Only then can the arts heal our wounds and prepare us to fight against the totalitarianism of forgetfulness with a pedagogy of peace. We have been given an unforgiving mandate, for let us not forget, in words of poet Julia Otxoa, that “En medio de todo esto, / los niños siguen arrojando / sus caídos dientes a la luna, / suplicando nuevos alfabetos de hueso / para nombrar la vida” (In the middle of all this, / children still toss / their baby teeth to the moon, / begging for new bone alphabets / to name life). It will be our charge to point them in a kinder direction.

59. Roth, Shop Talk, 4.
60. Otxoa, La nieve en los manzanos, 15.
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In his essay “Unity and Diversity: The Region,” the poet T. S. Eliot denounced the localist conception of culture. There are a lot of reasons for the preservation of local cultures. Every culture is a peculiar way of thinking, feeling, and behaving, and, according to Eliot, for its maintenance, there is no safeguard more reliable than a language. But we have to admit that if an excess of unity may have as a result a dangerous “tyranny,” an excess of division could mean “decadence or calamity.” Localists are only concerned with the interests of their own region. They argue by using sentimental reasons; they become purely defensive, with local loyalties. They defend the local as an absolute value. For these reasons, Eliot introduced the notion of satellite culture in order to denounce all those societies that, for geographical, economic, political, or other causes, have a permanent relation to a stronger one:

The unmistakable satellite culture is one which preserves its language, but which is so closely associated with, and dependent upon, another, that not only certain classes of the population, but all of them have to be bi-lingual. It differs from the culture of the independent small nation in this respect, that in the latter it is usually only necessary for some
classes to know another language; and in the independent small nation, those who need to know one foreign language are likely to need two or three: so that the pull toward one foreign culture will be balanced by the attraction of at least one other.  

A true satellite culture is one that has a permanent relation to a stronger one. Eliot realized that the essential structure of the minority culture is the linguistic interposition. Welsh, Scots, and Irish, for example, need the English language to speak to the world. Eliot aims to draw more attention to cultural diversity. He rejects the idea that cultures are compartmentalized and static. Finally, he underscores the importance, in today’s world, of the veritable “ecology of languages and cultures.” By this, he means there should be a constellation of cultures sharing a common core, as in Britain or Western Europe, but with enough diversity to provide stimulation for each other: “For a national culture, if it is to flourish, should be a constellation of cultures, the constituents of which, benefiting each other, benefit the whole.”

Taking into account these previous considerations, might we ask: What, in fact, is Catalan culture today? Fortunately, even though Catalonia is not a recognized state, Catalan culture is not a satellite culture. That is, it does not rely on other great cultures. Nor is it the culture of an independent state in Southern Europe, and that is precisely one of the things which sets it apart. Though demographically, economically, and politically it is a small, minority culture, Catalan culture has always had great ambitions and has stood out in multiple ways. One of its ambitions has been to maintain its own autonomous and separate voice despite intense Spanish and French influence. Catalan literature has never renounced the opportunity to make a direct impact upon the world at large. Ramon Llull was the first philosopher to write in a Romance language, because he lived at a crossroads of cultures, religions and languages. Ausiàs March is one of the medieval poets who shaped modern identity and that is because he lived in a world where cultural interaction and exchanges of experiences were constantly taking place throughout the entire Mediterranean area, the very same context that produced important cartographers such as Abraham Cresques, and a writer whose novel reflects Italian influences like Joanot Martorell, author of *Tirant lo Blanc*. The poetry written by Josep Carner—perhaps the greatest Catalan poet of the twentieth century—would not have been what it is were it not for the time he spent as a consul in Genova and Beirut, his translation of Dickens’ works, or his years spent in exile in Brussels. One must view Catalan culture in the broadest sense in order to appreciate internationally recognized names such as Gaudí, Jujol, Miró, Dalí, Casals, and Tàpies.

Catalonia is not a region and Catalan culture is not a regional culture addressing only local, tangible questions. For over eight centuries Catalan culture has been expressed through the Catalan language. It is the language of novels, poetry, essays, scholarly works, scientific research, the arts, and traditional customs. Today Catalan is the language of

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2. Ibid., 76.
3. Ibid., 77.
learning from primary school through the university level and is the official language of Catalonia, Valencia (known there as the Valencian language), the Balearic Islands, and Andorra. But what sets the Catalan language and culture apart in Europe is not the times it has been banned or repressed by different political regimes both in Spain and in France since the eighteenth century—and particularly between 1939 and 1975 under the Franco dictatorship—but rather its stubborn determination to carry on over time and to stand out despite extremely adverse political circumstances.

Today, fortunately, Catalan culture enjoys a situation of political normality, great creativity, and freedom of expression. In its moments of greatest vitality Catalan has always been a language of the people, modern and cutting-edge, and synonymous with innovation and openness to the world. Catalan culture is by no means rooted in an extinct, rural or pre-modern world and Catalan speakers do not need the forced intervention of a majority language in order to access contemporary culture. But that being the case, the issue is not only whether Catalan or any other language is spoken or not, but also whether the language serves as a vehicle for discourse, creativity, thought, and, above all, dialogue with the rest of the world’s cultures.

Josep Pla and the Adhesion to Catalan Language

In 1979, in the prologue to one of the final volumes of his complete works that the Destino publishing house had begun publishing in 1966, Josep Pla expressed yet again an idea that he had repeated explicitly elsewhere, above all in his later writings:

Els meus escrits m’han permès d’enfrontar-me amb les coses que m’agraden: descriure un paisatge, l’enigma del mar, espiar la insensatesa de la vida dels homes i de les dones, trobar un adjectiu al vol d’un ocell, a les corbes d’una noia jove, què dir davant la petulància d’una flor. El resultat de tot això no sé quin és . . . Aquests quaranta volums, als quals fatalment arribarem, són la meva modesta aportació a dues coses que estimo: la meva llengua i el país on he nascut. Negar l’evidència d’un fet tan obvi no seria admès ni pels meus apreciats detractors.4

The explicit reflection on language and country was, effectively, for Josep Pla, a constant of his writing and one of his unequivocal interests. That said, denying this evidence marked, for many years, a part of the debate that, from the time of his youth, Pla sustained within intellectual, cultural, and journalistic circles in Catalonia from the 1920s onward. There is, however, in Josep Pla’s work, an undeniable expression of Catalanism. A Catalanism that does not at all translate, not even during the writer’s youth, to any expression of patriotism; rather, it is principally founded in an unyielding adhesion: the “incondicional i militant adhesió a l’idioma,” of which Joan Fuster speaks,5 a voluntary

5. Joan Fuster, “Notes per a una introducció a l’estudi de Josep Pla,” in Josep Pla, El quadern gris (Barcelona: Destino, 1966), 16.
adhesion that overcomes Pla’s ideological thought and that unmistakably marks his entire political and intellectual evolution.

Josep Pla’s writing, which is structured around a vertebral axis that encompasses the constant and continued presence of a “self” that writes, is the gaze of a man, then, that through the adhesion to a language and to certain landscapes feels capable of interpreting the world and of reorganizing it through his writing, creating forms of identity that are the result of an observation of the land, of the countryside, and of its inhabitants. Pla’s work may also be read in the following manner, in the same way that he defines the poetry of the Roussillonese author Josep Sebastià Pons: “com una perllongació intellectual del paisatge físic o intellectual que suscita, com una perllongació, sense solució de continuitat, insensible, perfecta.”6

The people and the landscape fuse together, then, in a totality, without elements of interposition, in a human geography in which the language, the maternal language, is understood primarily as a capacity to make things present, of “donar” (giving) the most immediate reality, as if language possessed the power to reveal the world. Because, in spite of everything, for Josep Pla the world is satisfactory just as it is, and because of that it is unnecessary to use words to construct from it others, whether fictitious or symbolic. The narrator of El quadern gris (The Gray Notebook) affirms a similar sentiment in a November 3, 1918 entry: “Si jo pogués imitar, crear un altre món, imaginaria aquest món mateix.”

There is, certainly, a desire to possess the world, to reconstruct it, to produce it and liberate it through literature. Because of this, the local gaze, localism understood as one aspect of quotidian existence, of the most immediate reality (resulting from the denial of any kind of transcendental abstraction or of any sort of concept such as “eternity,” “unity,” “infinity,” or “universe”), becomes, beyond a simple way of seeing, of viewing and of thinking about the world, a literary demand, an exercise of style, a “mètode de treball.” Pla is neither a local writer nor a defender of particularities or singularities, affirming this in the preface of El meu poble (My People): “L’existència de l’Empordanet és una mera comoditat —és una exigència d’un mètode de treball. Tots som iguals: els veïns de més ençà i els de més enllà.”8 Critic Josep M. Castellet previously denounced all those who tried to reduce Pla to the category of a simple local writer: “No es pot afirmar—com s’ha fet, gratuïtament—que la mirada planiana sigui de volada curta pel que respecta a les qüestions catalanes. Com no és cert que el seu ‘localisme’ reduceixi el seu abast d’escriptor . . . L’obra de Pla tradueix una determinada concepció del món, d’una gran coherència, en la qual sempre es parteix de la realitat, concreta, per arribar, més tard, a les ‘idees generals.’”9

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9. Josep Maria Castellet, Josep Pla o la raó narrativa (Barcelona, Destino, 1977), 68.
It is obvious that Josep Pla’s literature was nourished by the soil of Palafrugell and from its nearby countryside in order to arrive at a high degree of universality. It concerns a vision of the world that is voluntarily limited to the individual and local scale because, in all actuality, it is the only scale that man may comprehend and assimilate. A vision of the world that, consequently, determines an acceptance of the most simple, most quotidian and even the most banal things: “La petitesa de visió és una bona escola, una escola de modèstia i d’estoicisme, exactament l’escola de la vida.”

A School of Vision

Faithful to his disavowal of any external manifestation of literary hubris, of intellectual pedantry, or of cultural transcendence, Josep Pla voluntarily opts for localism, of the reclamation of local character as a school of vision and of perception of the world. It is a vision that serves Pla best for combining his personal and literary ambitions: “Per a comprendre bé les cases, s’han d’empetitir una mica, situar-les en el seu marc exacte.”

Localism, in Pla’s work, is the consequence of a deliberate selection, of a voluntary choice that concerns his unique vision of life and of literature, which remains faithful to a manner of conceiving a reality that Pla inherits essentially from his reading (basically from Montaigne’s and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French moralists’ conception of the world, but also from Goethe), of authors in which restraint and narrowness of vision become crucial concepts for understanding the world.

Above all, Pla would find in the work of a great writer the necessary argument for legitimizing his or her literary project, and one such great writer is Michel de Montaigne, one of the writers toward whom Pla felt most indebted, both with respect to Montaigne’s work and his philosophical thought. Both Pla and Montaigne would attempt to find within themselves the universality of the human condition, rejecting any form of narcissism, rejecting the emphasis, detesting those writers that, like Rousseau, present themselves impudently through pure exhibitionism, those that conceive of literature as a pure exercise in ostentation, of glorification of the self. The element that transmits a unity to the totality of Pla’s work is, then, essentially the problematic generated by the self’s surroundings, a constant spirit of searching for the meaning of one’s own life and conducting an intense reflection on the human personality. Coming to speak about one’s self without affectation, without emphasis, with naturalness, humility, and modesty would be one of the literary objectives of Josep Pla, one of the challenges that one must take on in approaching his literature. Both Pla and Montaigne conceive of literature as a kind of remedy, as an antidote against vanity and as a struggle against all forms of hypocrisy. The reiterative use of the pronoun “I” would be the result of ascetic work and of the renouncing of one’s own self that inevitably gives way to an unfolding, a separating of

the literary self from the biographic. The search for the self is only carried out with a feeling of discomfort and through a constant seeking of new formulas for expressing subjectivity.12

A Mediterranean writer, Josep Pla always openly defended the values of localism and of the limitations imposed by the forms of Mediterranean life: “Personalment, no em costa gens de limitar-me . . . I bé: en el Mediterrani tot és local: la metereologia, la cuina, els dialectes, la gent. Tot hi canvia constantment. Unes milles més al nord o més al sud i tot varia: la direcció dels vents, el sabor del peix, la dosificació dels alls a la cassola, el parlar, el gust, els sentiments. La matisació és fascinadora, sorprenent.”13 One of the surprises that Pla’s work perhaps gives to its new readers is precisely the text’s capacity to make present the reality of which it speaks, a reality that appears to us almost crude and voluptuous, dense and brutal, and that always gives way to a concrete and tangible space, to a geography and to a well-known countryside:

En literatura, sempre he estat partidari que els textos tinguin una precisió geogràfica, que es trobin emmarcats, explícitament, en un temps determinat, que si hi figuren persones que existiren o existeixen siguin anomenades fins, és clar, on sigui possible. Hi ha persones que afirman que la vaguetat, la imprecisió en aquest punt, el fet que no se sapigui mai si som a Polònia o a Matadepera, fa universal! És el pur cretinisme.14

It is precisely this localist conception that makes Josep Pla extend his identification with the landscape and countryside to the use of language, because language is nothing more than one of the identifying aspects of a people and their locale. It concerns a concept, hardly theorized perhaps, of a linguistic nation, of a cultural area, that Pla defined in July 1927 in the pages of the *Revista de Catalunya*, using, as always, reductionism and metonymic procedures, so proper to his unique manner of expression. Pla presented the following definition of “país”:

Cercle a dins del qual, si dieu a un home o a una dona:
—Bon dia; avui fa bon temps —us responen:
—Bon dia; sí sembla que fa bon temps . . . —i això és agradable.15

From the middle of the 1950s onward, perhaps due to the demonstrable influence that historian Jaume Vicens Vives and, later, Joan Fuster, exercised over him, Pla amplified and made concrete the notion of linguistic area to encompass the concept of countries of the Catalan language, or Catalan-speaking countries, where Rousillon plays a noticeable role. Pla compares the Rousillon that he had visited in the 1920s and 1930s with that of the 1940s and 1950s: observing that the degradation of the Catalan language there had

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12. I formulated a large and detailed critique of this question in my essay *Josep Pla, ficció autobiogràfica i veritat literària* (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1997).
paralleled provincialization and the loss of a Catalanist consciousness. In a fragment of the story “Contraban” we are able to find precisely one of these comparisons in an apparently insignificant detail stemming from the observation of quotidian life, after which follows a reflection:

Entre Catalunya i el Rosselló no hi ha cap frontera real, en vista de la qual cosa hom ha creat una frontera d’escenografia: l’urbanisme ha tractat de crear una població destinada a assenyalar acusadament una diferència. Com que no hi havia res que separés, hom ha hagut de fer cases i teulats diferents. Els teulats, sobretot, són francesos, vull dir de França endins. Una mica més amunt tornen a ésser catalans, les teules tornen a ésser com les nostres teules. Però a Cervera havien d’ésser diferents.

El que ha passat amb els teulats i amb l’urbanisme de Cervera ha passat a tot el Rosselló amb la llengua.16

However, as always, Pla may be misread if we stop with the simple anecdote; rather, his work offers us many interesting definitions of “el país”: “Jo formo part d’una determinada tribu. Aquesta tribu ocupa una determinada àrea geogràfica, té una manera absoluta personal de veure el món, parla una llengua determinada, pobra, poc treballada, mísera —constitueix el que ara es comença d’anomenar una àrea lingüística.”17

The pleasure of denomination, of simply providing a name for things, seems to have led Pla to imperceptibly divert his interest in the immediate reality, in the things-in-themselves, to another type of interest, the interest in words that serve to designate things. Meditations on reality, in Josep Pla, are often displaced by a meta-linguistic reflection, by a reflection on language. Each word possesses the power to reveal, in essence, its referent, thereby permitting inner exploration of the sign, inferring that names truly unfold within our consciousness in the same way as memories.

Bibliography


Post-Hispanism, or the Long Goodbye of National Philology

Joan Ramon Resina

Twilight Reflection

The reason why there is so much talk about memory these days is that people no longer recall the object of this memory. We find ourselves in a melancholy spiral: we retain our intentional relation toward an object even though we can hardly remember its original function, to say nothing of its features. Religion retains a shadowy memory of a world inhabited by gods; ecology, the memory of a nature found today only in tourist ads or on the labels of organic products; politics preserves in its unconscious the memory of participatory communities on a human scale; urbanism, the memory of the city; culture, of the dignification of customs. Philology, for its part, retains the memory of the link between society and the words that bring it into being. Joan Maragall’s *Elogi de la paraula* (In Praise of the Word, 1903) is a philological manifesto in the fullest sense of the term. The poet perceives the majesty of the sacred in the “living word,” which is language so close to nature that it is just at the point of blending into the landscape or perhaps just emerging from it. For Maragall, poetry relies on the experience of the sublime without losing its familiarity with ordinary speech; it is common speech rediscovered in its primordial context. As an epiphany of the Logos and not the stuff of liturgy, the living word resonates in the vernacular. This proximity to the pragmatic context demarcates the sphere of meaning and acts as a powerful sounding board for rich yet simple evocations. From so close, there is little or no conscious...
effort at interpretation, while on the other hand there is an enormous density of emotions. “A subtle movement of the air,” says Maragall, “places before you the immense variety of the world and arouses in you a strong sense of the infinite unknown.”¹

Every region of the planet and every language evokes and shapes a universal truth that can only be accessed by participating ontologically—lovingly, says Maragall—in the immediate surroundings. “Because every land endows the most substantial words of its people with subtle meaning that cannot be explained by any dictionary or taught by any grammar book.”² Philology is this loving relationship with the word, or more exactly, with meaning captured in status nascens, in the very moment when sound breathes a “soul” into things.³ For Maragall it is the exact opposite of scientific activity. Therefore, philology of the living word concerns itself neither with classical languages nor with religious or commercial koines, but rather with the whole range of human speech in all its phonetic richness and geographic variation. It calls forth the world in its essential diversity and brings a premonition of things in anticipation of their meaning. Being a poet’s theory, the living word of Maragall relates to what Gumbrecht has called the “production of presence.”⁴

Maragall has clearly adopted aspects of Herder’s philosophy of language. Those same aspects inspired the foundation of modern philology as an integral discipline of the modern university. From Herder modern philology takes the idea that the spirit of a people lives in its language, and that the features of all nations can be studied in their linguistic monuments, collected together as “literature.” The university did not always fulfill the emancipatory force of this idea, which today is assailed on many fronts. But even then, Herder, associating language with the source of popular sovereignty, raised hopes about the end of political subordination of one people to another. Maragall took to heart the principle that for each language there is a corresponding nationality, pushing this idea to the extreme of defining territorially in linguistic rather than political terms. “And what other arrangement of lands can one wish, if not the one drawn up by the spontaneous life of languages?”⁵ Maragall’s own Castilian rendering of this phrase drove the point home more explicitly: “What other boundaries are needed for the governing of nations than the very borders drawn on the earth by the varying sounds of human speech?”⁶ “Nation” in its original sense refers to the emergence of meaning from a place of origin. So too, for Maragall it does not refer to a provisional arrangement of human relations established by the will to power. Such deliberate action expropriates the natural rules of conduct and imposes by force a new interpretive code, which Maragall calls “learned languages.”

¹. Joan Maragall, Elogi de la paraula, in Obres Completes, Escrits en Prosa II (Barcelona: Gustau Gili, 1912), 4.
². Ibid., 11.
³. Ibid., 10.
⁵. Maragall, Elogi de la paraula, 12.
The *Elogi de la paraula* was written when anxiety over the loss of the empire spurred the colonization of the state’s periphery by transferring there the ghost of the Cuban insurrection and the associated repressive measures. On November 21, 1902, a Royal Decree had made Castilian the official language of the state, in a move distinctly intended to halt the revival of Catalan then underway. Maragall’s response, as we have seen, was to invoke the cosmic resonance of every language, the subtle meaning that “the earth” imparts to words and which the arbitrary exercise of power sweeps away.

It is important to underline the convivial nature of cultures and languages in Maragall’s thought. His harmonization of human geography with political geography is undoubtedly idealized. It presupposes not only a utopian overcoming of cultural Darwinism somewhat reminiscent of Kant’s perpetual peace, but also an overly neat and equally ahistorical definition of linguistic borders. However, Maragall’s insistence on poetic revelation as “production of presence” dispels any suspicion of a metaphysical approach to communication. For Maragall, poetry is not about reconstructing the semantic drift of words away from their lost origins; nor does he seek to recreate tradition through an endless tracking of signs. He calmly accepts that the source of poetry is inaccessible to reason and relishes its “transubstantiated” presence in the existence of beings and languages: “Because it is not through same-sounding words that men must become brothers, but rather we are brothers because of the one shared spirit that makes our words sound different in the mysterious variety of the earth.” One spirit, perhaps; but Maragall is not seduced by the siren’s song of universality. His attitude to language compares with Nietzsche’s attitude to history; and this similarity cannot be entirely incidental, given the fact that Maragall was the first to write about the German philosopher in Spain.

Nietzsche opposes *wirkliche Historie* to traditional history. The term means “real” or perhaps “effective” history, as Foucault translates it, drawing on the *etymon* of the word, which also produces *Wirkung* (effect). This history rejects an absolute perspective on the past. The romantic sense that the earth breaks up into a diversity of geographic regions, each molding the human spirit differently, finds its Nietzschean equivalent in the historicity and discontinuity of the body. Certainly, Maragall does not take his reading of Nietzsche as far as Foucault, for whom radical historicity demands the rejection of any attitude that leads to the “consoling play of recognitions.” For Maragall there is a moment of recognition, but it is affective rather than intellectual, and philological in the etymological sense of the term. In the realm of poetry, he says, “when someone speaks with love from the bottom of his soul, he is understood by all that listen in the magic

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7. On November 30, 1895, Angel Guimerà delivered the presidential address at Barcelona’s Ateneu in Catalan for the first time, with Maragall acting as secretary. The Spanish nationalist part of the audience reacted tumultuously. Attitudes against Catalan became gradually more abrasive as the language reemerged into public life.


of love.”

But although he clings to the consolation of understanding, he also concurs with Foucault that “knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.”

The scholastic, the learned, the analytical, in short any use of language driven by pragmatic urgencies or by power, forces the subject into a game that is different from the one Maragall sees inscribed in the somatic depth of the voice: “Understanding one another through superficial words learned at a distance from love amounts to understanding without truly understanding each other.”

While Nietzsche challenged a historic tradition that dissolved particularities in an evolutionary continuum and packed facts into laws that were supposed to be unchanging and knowable, Maragall pitted his essay, “In Praise of the Word,” against a philological tradition that suppressed the shimmer of language and erased human contingency.

Poetic language, which Maragall calls true language in the same sense that Nietzsche calls embodied history “real history,” puts on hold the habituating effect of speech in its pragmatic and socializing function, calling attention to the imbalance between the medium’s restrictions and meaning’s unfathomable scope. “A subtle movement of air puts before you the immense variety of the world and awakens in you an inkling of the unknown infinite.” For this reason, he says, “we should speak as though enchanted and awe-struck.” Seen in this light, speaking means suspending the automatism of language and becoming aware of the inspiration that invariably accompanies each act of speech. Speaking, even in the most banal circumstances, is not the conscious laying-out of a meaning contained in pre-articulated thought, but rather the ad hoc use of the rules that govern a particular language in a precise pragmatic context.

Real history, says Foucault, closes the distance that the metaphysical tradition puts between itself and the historical object. While traditional history favors great distances and heights, genuine history turns its gaze on the things closest at hand. Tradition is attracted to the noblest eras, the purest forms, golden ages, abstract ideas, and heroic individuals, which it contemplates from the perspective of frogs. By contrast, effective history takes into account what is most local and immediate: the body and its functions; and it is not afraid to look down at apparently minor things, to discover differences and diversity, respecting the inherent dimensions and intensity of things. Like Foucault’s version of effective history, Maragall’s poetic language is somatic, an emanation from the earth that rises through the body: “It seems as though the earth uses all its might to make man the highest expression of itself; and that man uses all the power of his being

10. Maragall, Elogi de la paraula, 10.
12. Maragall, Elogi de la paraula, 10.
13. Ibid., 4.
14. Ibid.
to produce the word.” For Maragall, as for Saussure, the linguistic sign is two-faced, but its visible face, the signifier, is not virtual and certainly not arbitrary; rather, it is somatic and rooted in the ontology of the speakers.

I have discussed Maragall’s brief poetic manifesto at some length because it contains at least two of the principles that govern the teaching of foreign languages and culture. I am thinking about the reduction of distances and the production of presence, two obviously related concepts. For a long time, one of the reasons for the study of foreign languages has been the reduction of distances between groups of people and the facilitation of communication among them. This reduction of distance was procured less by teaching a grammar of culture than through the creation of an empathetic context: favoring instruction by native (or “near-native”) speakers; encouraging extracurricular activities that mimic everyday life in the target language; or through controlled immersion during a year of study abroad. In literary studies, the reduction of distance is achieved by renouncing the history of texts and randomly recombining them to suit the agenda of language teaching, which nevertheless threatens to migrate to other departments, in response to the need for professional specialization. Put another way, the vocational uses of foreign languages encroach on the mother disciplines, which are once more called on to satisfy the professions’ selective need for vocabulary, or what Maragall calls “the words that float dead on the surface of things.”

These and other pragmatic approaches to the literary disciplines bring us quite far from Maragall’s awed speech. And surely we have made little progress in assessing the modulations of human speech caused by accidents of geography (as Maragall would have it) or history (as our postmodern prejudice prefers). But even though today most would reject Maragall’s metaphysical naturalism, few would openly renounce his romantic esteem of diversity. Free from our prejudice, Maragall offers three instances of poetic words in which the speaker underlines speech with a gesture that allows meaning to emerge in relation to the body. In each of these vignettes, language arises as a constituent of a cosmic manifestation at which both speaker and addressee are co-present. “Aquella canal . . . Lis estelas . . . Mira . . .” (“That ravine . . . The stars . . . Look . . .”), words heard at different times and places. Catalan, Provençal, Castilian words. Their diversity, an effect of their being true to place, of remaining local through and through, is what makes them valid examples of “the living word.” Shortening distances means ineluctably entering into polyglotism; lengthening them in the name of the universality of an ever smaller set of languages means returning to metaphysics and expropriating meaning.

It is still too early to know whether the crisis of the state that led Maragall to renovate poetic language—in a Rousseauian return to “sincerity”—finds a parallel in the much-heralded “end of the era of nations.” But it cannot be denied that the symptoms of

17. Ibid., 7.
18. Ibid., 9.
institutional crisis are already turning up in a wide range of fields, not least in literature. The causes of this crisis are diverse, so it would be presumptuous to blame it on anyone in particular. But some facts cannot be ignored. So much energy has gone into destroying the mimetic illusion, into questioning representation, into pointing out the artifice of all experience and the paltriness of all values, that we should not be surprised if the teaching of literature attracts fewer and fewer students or if those it still attracts come for the wrong reasons. But if the priests have lost their faith, what right do they have to demand enthusiasm from the catechumen? Maragall is unequivocal: “You found a word that could light up the world, but your little obsession over perfection and grandeur wrapped it in a confused swarm of words without life, which hid that divine light, burying it again in confusion and darkness.”

His admonition to poets easily applies to those who profess to teach the love of poetic language: “When will you stop listening to other music and speak only with the living words? Only then will you be listened to in the enchantment of the senses, and your mysterious words will create true life, and you will be phenomenal magicians.”

Maragall’s vision of language went hand-in-hand with the rise of philology. Although his theory of the poetic word was decidedly mystical and had little sympathy for a positivistic methodology, it shared philology’s celebration of the cultural riches of peoples and its desire to bridge the distances among them. Here, though, their ways parted. Maragall lived for the moment in which the word came alive in a sudden illumination, while philology cultivated the appreciation of the literary work through learned mediation. Both can be traced to Herder’s belief in the linguistic dignity of all peoples. But in the course of the nineteenth century, philology embraced Fichte’s radicalization of Herder’s idea of language. For Fichte, language was the stronghold of the national spirit, and the arena where that spirit demonstrated its vigor and intrinsic worth competing with others. In Spain this view was upheld by Ramón Menéndez Pidal, who brought to philology a suprahistorical perspective based on distance and on what Foucault has called “an apocalyptic objectivity.” This objectivity presupposes that consciousness maintains its identity over time. More metaphysical than historicist, such a model amounts to a secular version of the immortality of the soul. It inverts the relation between causes and effects, which are shifted to the origin, and also obscures the role of chance in creating a necessity that is nothing more than the vertical perspective of the historian or philologist.

Philology as a discipline evidently owes more to Pidal than to Maragall. It is interesting to note that the two men belonged to the same generation, though their longevity contrasted sharply, as did their life experiences. Maragall (1860–1911) grew up during the bourgeois revolution of 1868 and the federal republic of 1873, while Menéndez Pidal (1869–1968), who was born after the revolution and was too young to remember the republic, came of age in the politically regressive climate of the restoration. This simple

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19. Ibid., 7.
20. Ibid., 6.
contrast helps us to understand why the two men represent divergent reactions to the same crisis. It is easy to see that the role that fell to Menéndez Pidal in this crisis called for a rejection of Maragall’s liberal conception of the social role of literature. Maragall’s drama, and that of the entire modernista generation, was that a philology that enabled the free study of poetic truth and granted each person the possibility of experiencing “his own wonder,” could not prevail over a discipline charged with creating a social identity to match the requirements of centralized institutions. Furthermore, consideration of the earth’s linguistic cragginess and of the potential overlap between linguistic environments and political sovereignties fell outside the purview of a philology underwritten by the state, which since the eighteenth century had taken hold of the spaces available for the creation and transmission of culture, as José A. Valero has shown in a magnificent essay.22

After the failure of absolutism, the state was not interested in literature as an instrument for controlling subjectivity or as an apology for a paternalistic government, which would have been a late correlate of Neoaristotelian doctrine.23 Rather, it was attracted to literature’s ability to provide secular legitimation without sacrificing the halo of traditional sovereignty. The Middle Ages were especially interesting as a repository of remote but immanent causes whose myths nourished the modern state and furnished its axiological foundation. Menéndez Pidal states: “These ancient stories, however primitive, will always be of interest, above all because their heroes, leaders of peoples, carry inside them the mystery that surrounds the darkened origins of our civilization, of our way of being.”24 Philology in service to the state inverted the very terms of the positivism to which it subscribed, starting from the sacred and mysterious to contemplate the present as if it were eternal. An archaic outlook justifies “our way of being” by presenting it as a constant feature of history. “Our” way of being, which is unequivocally linked to what Menéndez Pidal calls “Castile’s original character,” owes much to the labors of philology: to its devoted tracking down of tradition but also to the normative ethos of the national community as identified by the philologist.

Here again, some dates shed light on the case. Menéndez Pidal intervened few times in public life, and almost always in moderation. So it stands out that in 1902 he weighed in in the polemic over making Castilian the official language of the state,25 and that he


24. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, La epopeya castellana a través de la literatura española (1945; Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1974), 244.

25. The royal Decree that made Castilian Spain’s official language was not an empty formulism. It explicitly forbid teaching in Catalan, Euskara, and Galician, even for religious education, and it threatened with the loss of teaching credentials any teacher that contravened this ban. The offender would “lose all the rights recognized by the law.” Real Decreto, Gaceta de Madrid, November 21, 1902, cited in Prudencio García Isasti, La España metafísica: Lectura crítica del pensamiento de Ramón Menéndez Pidal (1891–1936) (Bilbao: Real Academia de la Lengua Vasca/Euskaltzaindia, 2004), 326n34.
did so in a belligerent article entitled “Cataluña Bilingüe” (Bilingual Catalonia), in which he established the guidelines of his future philological activities. His induction speech for the Royal Academy of the Language (on October 1 of the same year, at age 33) was a declaration of loyalty to a centralized state and an opening volley against Catalonia’s pluralistic conception. This speech set the protocol for other distinguished academics, who at different times in the history of the institution have addressed the learned audience in similar terms. Committed to the imperial worldview, Menéndez Pidal rejects the notion that Catalonia can ever attain national status. Not only is it unthinkable to recognize Catalonia as a nation, but this political designation, he affirms, is too complex for the Catalan imaginary. The rise of Catalan nationalism is just so much noise, he says, made by “those who still have no understanding of the modern idea of the nation.” Next, the new-fangled academic makes a statement that merits highlighting: “On the other hand, I feel too small to be part of the nation’s highest literary Center, which, as the nation’s summit, represents the principle of unity and conservation of one of the most widely disseminated languages in the world, for the good of human progress.”

For its newest and youngest member, the Royal Academy was already the center of the literary institution of the state and the nation’s highest chamber. Literature, therefore, need not negotiate its influence in competition with other discourses. Removed from the civil sphere, where there are no centers, it draws authority from its position at the apex of “the nation,” where it watches providentially over the “national” language, on which universal progress is now staked.

Not satisfied with securing the spread of Castilian and its rise to officialdom under the auspices of the Royal Spanish Academy, Menéndez Pidal threw himself into the battle for world hegemony starting in the academic sphere. In 1927 increasing numbers of North American students registered for the summer course for foreigners at the Pidal-led Centro de Estudios Históricos. Menéndez Pidal was no doubt aware that until 1914 German had been the second most commonly spoken language in the United States, and that Spanish was benefiting from the animosity toward German that resulted from the war in Europe. Even so, during the inauguration of the course he portrayed Spanish as the underdog by affirming that its growth in US schools had given rise to protests among teachers of other languages. He did not attribute increased enrollment to the burgeoning relations between countries in the American hemisphere, but instead to a form of desemantization which, for lack of a better term, I have called, echoing Gumbrecht, production of presence. For Menéndez Pidal, though, this *presenting* is not about the “wonder” that all languages evoke by epiphanically encoding the subtlest aspects of a particular culture. Instead, it is about feeling “in the very atmosphere of Castile something of the spirit . . . that is brought to life in the language,” and which is therefore *embodied* in other places, much as Christianity

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28. Ibid., 50 (emphasis added).
emerged from the spirit of Galilee to spread over the length and breadth of the Roman Empire. For this reason, pilgrimage is made to Castile, to the source of a mystery “which is much greater than the mere practical knowledge of the language itself.”

Menéndez Pidal does rejoice in the pragmatic reasons buoying Castilian but subordinates them to a spiritual force. He does not so much ask for students as he demands initiates. And thus his followers have often taken faith for necessity, a confusion that can be traced to the fatalism of Pidal’s doctrine. Time and again the demographic weight of Castilian is held out as an unassailable argument for cultural hegemony. All the same, this illiberal stance is not based on the dictates of the linguistic marketplace. Rather, it expresses an enthusiasm that manifests itself in a mixture of triumphalism and dissatisfaction, spurring on an insatiable expansion. The numbers do not seem to matter. Menéndez Pidal spoke in Olympic terms of seventy million Spanish speakers; today, numbers as high as four hundred million are flaunted, but even that figure does not soothe the itch to proselytize and conquer. In reality, the marketplace is neither neutral nor objective. It brings into play ruthless competition, unscrupulous advertising, large subsidies, and shameless dumping of linguistic products and teaching personnel in areas considered strategically important.

Philology’s Long Goodbye

Philology as it was instituted in Spain by Menéndez Pidal and cultivated by his disciples, is immersed today in the crisis of the humanities. Even though the state confers an artificial longevity on its practices, the functionarial inertia of this kind of knowledge cannot hide the decline of a discipline that has lost its social function. One might still argue for the need to preserve certain textual techniques, but it is clear that, for different reasons, an entire branch of the university can no longer claim to be serving society. One reason is the law of diminishing returns. The majority of manuscripts of any value have already been edited, in some cases repeatedly; and while each new edition seeks to improve on the previous ones, economic as well as hermeneutic common sense impose limits on the ambition to restore a text to its original meaning. Thus, what is left of the founding spirit of Spanish philology is the transmission of a few supposedly national values that are mainly expressed in literature. The presence of values tied to the language feeds the belief in a Hispanic identity whose transmission and empowerment falls to Hispanism. In the extreme tautology of this plan, “scientific activity” becomes an interminable taxonomy of authors and works, made the objects of “research,” merely by the one simple criteria of being written in Castilian—and being, therefore, bearers of what Menéndez Pidal calls “the atavistic inspiration of the race.”

After decades of glee at the decline of germane disciplines while Spanish kept on a rising statistical curve, it is now possible to detect a divorce between language and the spirit to which Menéndez Pidal attributed the very success of the Hispanic expansion.

29. Ibid.
By a ruse of history, Hispanism has run into a potentially fatal crisis, as often happens, at the very moment of its triumph. The moment Castilian becomes an object of practical study almost everywhere, Hispanism loses its reason for being without having gained a firm standing as knowledge within the university. That Almodóvar should be the only global Spanish landmark to rival Cervantes in this area (with García Lorca a distant third) speaks volumes on the issue.

Spanish philologists and North American culturalists experience in very different ways the end of the hegemony of letters. The two groups certainly have different profiles. If the philologists are the institution most protected by its association with the state, the culturalists are the group most exposed to the ravages of competition in the global marketplace of knowledge. Their mutual accusations of incompetence recently filled the pages of the literary journal *Lateral* for several months. However, the tensions between them cannot hide the fact that both groups are subject to the same evolution of their field. Hispanism is living out the general crisis in the humanities through its traditional particularism. Having lost its original mission without even realizing it, it suffers a melancholy longing for a goal it never had: a modern Hispanic theory. At the same time, it rejects the currently existing theory as if it were a foreign body, or else becomes its acritical servant. In either case, Hispanism registers its own failure. Like the protagonist of *Talk to Her*, Hispanism maintains an apparently normal relationship with a body of work, setting the texts, massaging them, doting on them, and—*in extremis*—fertilizing them in order to resuscitate them. What is *abnormal* is that all this activity serving a comatose discipline is aimed at producing an illusion of presence for the spirit that once animated the tasks of Spanish philology.

The parallels with the comatose body, which can be transplanted, cross-dressed, and miraculously purified—qualities that fascinate Almodóvar’s fans—are not gratuitous, and neither is the fact that the director has assumed iconic stature in Hispanic studies. A body that can be recycled, reformulated, reprogrammed, and retransmitted points, of course, to the problem of the eternity of the material—that is, of the corpus—and its capacity to transition from dead weight to new life. It is also the problem as philology’s tradition, whose “transnational” sounding board (to use the catch phrase now in vogue) is the phonetic space of Castilian stretching seamlessly from Buenos Aires to Barcelona, and always passing through the old imperial center of Madrid.

*Ubi lingua ibi Hispania.* Since Nebrija, language and “management” has been the principle on which the essential universality of the Hispanic has been forged. By hewing the cultural law of the state to universal guidelines, Hispanism has naturalized the domination of a culturally complex ecosystem by one successful subculture. To understand its religious resonance, it is useful to invoke Weber’s idea of the disenchantment of the world yielding the depersonalization or bureaucratization of magical authority or charisma. For a long time the constellation of knowledges organized around philology provided a cultural front to the secularization of the state, but because culture displaced religion as the primary legitimating agency, religion lived on at the heart of culture’s functional or
functionarial raison d’être. In the case of Spain, this bureaucratized religion is expressed, not coincidentally, in a language that for a long time was referred to as “Christian,” and which drew from the religious struggles the passion for unconditional hegemony that Weber calls the search for absolute ends.

**Elephants Also Die**

Hispanism is in crisis, as is its academic matrix, national philology. If its appearance marked the collapse of the empire and the culmination of the long transition from the religious legitimation of the state to its cultural legitimation, Hispanism’s shift to a managerial discourse alerts us to another change of historic proportions.

In times of crisis, the possibilities of breaking with the principles that organize a discipline tend to multiply. At such times, the increasingly shaky consensus makes it easy to see that practices evolve historically. And it is in the perception of the contingency of practices that lie the roots of the crisis. Of course, it is always possible to change things so that the bottom line remains the same. What else is the “transatlantic” jargon that is currently in vogue but a recycled or merely rebaptized Hispanism? A true change in perspective implies a change of the phenomenon under study. In turn, the renewal of the object requires an updating of practical approaches and theoretical tools; in other words, a change in cognitive structures. Mere methodological revision is not an adequate response to a discipline’s crisis. It is also necessary to acknowledge the radical nature of the crisis and in our case, it is incumbent on us to face up to the possibility that Hispanism no longer has a future in the university.

The question “whither Hispanism?” cannot be answered in advance, but one thing is certain: the rhythm of the transformation cannot be the same everywhere, because institutional conditions and the systems of relevance vary enormously. While the motto in Spanish faculties seems to be “all quiet in the Alcázar,” within departments in the United States, inertia is synonymous with failure and leads quickly to institutional upheaval. In many of these departments, the old combination of practical teaching (language instruction) and reflexive teaching (of culture) has disappeared. In others, cultural instruction is unable to pull its own weight and is kept in tow by language instruction. This represents an inversion of the original relationship. Whereas language used to be studied as a way of gaining access to a literary culture of great historical and philological complexity, literature is now “studied” as a way to extend language learning. What this trend means for Hispanism’s aspirations to join the rank of world culture is not hard to forecast. And the solution to the quandary does not appear to lie in an intercontinental feedback system, whereby theory is injected into Spanish philology departments and positivism into North

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30. It is noteworthy that in the texts of Menéndez Pidal, unlike those of Menéndez Pelayo, there are no manifestations of adherence to a religious creed, nor, for that matter, of the linguistic tolerance evidenced by the historian of Spanish heterodoxy.
American cultural studies ones. For the near future, it is safe to bet that institutions will continue along divergent paths on either side of the Atlantic.

At present, the most pressing question highlighted by the crisis of Hispanism in the United States is the nagging ethical concern with the marginalization of cultures and social groups, which emerge not only with the multicultural rage but also in the renewed interest in the historical memory and the appeals for intellectual reparations to all kinds of victimized communities, including those that have been excluded by the discipline. In Spain, the urgency comes from society itself, which insists on putting forward the stubborn reality of the plurality of nations existing under one political umbrella. Spanish philology, to the extent that it hopes to be Spanish—in the sense of bonding together the cultures that, for better or worse, coexist within the state—cannot remain the monopoly of an oversized particularism. And it is doubtful whether it can continue to be only or mainly “philology.”

Forging a discipline that is sensitive to the plurality of cultures and languages in Spain and in the poorly-named Hispanic world will require familiarity with the complexity of the field and negotiating discrepancies, contrasting them with all available documents and scholarship without artificially reducing their scope in the name of a generality. This does not imply the appearance of specialists in all of the Iberian cultures and in all the indigenous cultures of Spanish-speaking America. It does imply an attitude of openness to these riches and a favorable approach to their empowerment, correcting past injustices. It also implies, of course, making this approach concrete in our own practices and not in rhetorical expressions of good will. To pave the way for this new discipline, whatever it is called, there is still an unfinished task: making a reasoned examination of those who feel socially authorized to wield a stamp of approval regarding what is Hispanic—in other words, of Hispanists themselves.

Beyond Hispanism, beyond the belief in the superior value of dominant languages, there is a virtual academic space where the memory of humanity is affirmed through respect for all languages. A space where no language’s status as “dominant” is disputed within its own social realm and all are recognized as bearers of knowledge no less necessary than that which is transmitted by languages with a more imperial calling. Today Maragall’s persuasion can be validated and universality recognized as equilibrium in diversity. This sense of universality, far from what Dalí called “the immense cannibalisms of history,”\(^{31}\) raises prudent hopes for the preservation of the planet. To ensure this goal, though, a critical mass of people must become aware that survival, beyond a certain point, is not the privilege of predators, and that in the order of meaning, as indeed in nature, the complexity of situations guarantees life, while monoculture leads inexorably to barrenness. One need not look far to find examples. The history of Spanish culture offers, in this regard, a lesson worth studying.

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Bibliography


On Visible and Invisible Languages: Bernardo Atxaga’s *Soínujolearen semea* in Translation

Mario Santana

Reading Iberian Literatures in the Spanish Language

For those of us who share the conviction that the study and teaching of the literature of Spain cannot be limited to the literary production in Spanish, the issue of how to negotiate a linguistically variegated corpus in the usually monolingual classroom is not an easy one to resolve. The relegation of philology to a secondary (or tertiary) position in literary programs, at least in the United States, has made it increasingly difficult to count on scholars and students able to read in different languages, even within the field of Romance languages and literatures—now mostly fragmented in compartmentalized units devoted to single languages. The reverence once due to the figure of the philologist trained in the comparative study of several Romance languages, formerly the axis of our discipline, has been displaced by our contemporary concern with theory and cultural studies. I do not intend to call for a nostalgic return to the past, but rather point to the fact that this change in the configuration of the field has come at a price. Even as we pay due attention to the plurality of cultures, we also have increasingly to rely on translations to gain access to literatures in other languages. This is in many cases unavoidable, and there is no question that translation plays a fundamental role in our life not only as scholars but also as citizens of a globalized world. But, as J. Hillis Miller has argued, the act of reading has certain ethical requirements, and “the reader must take responsibility
for it and for its consequences in the personal, social, and political worlds.”¹ Like Miller, I would like to think that the reader and scholar of translated texts is also bound by particular ethical demands—and that those demands are even higher on readers of minority literatures when translated into dominant, globalized languages.

As it is well known, the notion of “invisibility” in the context of translation studies has been advanced by Lawrence Venuti to discuss the tendency in Anglo-American culture to ignore the work of the translator by advocating the illusion of fluent transparency:

A translated text . . . is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original.”²

A fluent translation would thus give the impression that the reader is given direct access to the original work, and therefore the impression that nothing is missed (or gained) by reading the translation. The implications of the ideal of invisibility for the understanding of cultural otherness in a multilingual world divided by power relations are obvious: dominant majority languages are conspicuously present and proficiency in them is often regarded as an emblem of cosmopolitanism—they are highly visible and recognizable—while minority languages fade into the background (or, for some, the backlands) and “attachment” to them may even be seen as an obstacle to universal communication.

The unreflective use of translated literature in Anglo-American culture was later questioned by Venuti in *The Scandals of Translation* (1998). Like Venuti, I fear that, as we strive to be inclusive in teaching Iberian literatures in our Hispanic studies programs, an unreflective use of translated literature may foster the tendency “to elide the status of translated texts as translated, to treat them as texts originally written in the translating language” to the point where “the fact of translation continues to be repressed in the teaching of translated literature.”³ As a response to the repression of translation in the classroom, Venuti calls for a pedagogy of translated literature that would pay attention to the fact that “the language of instruction is not impartial in its representation of foreign texts.”⁴ A central strategy of this pedagogical project is the study of the “reminder”—the textual and linguistic features that are added to a translated text and frustrate any attempt to domesticate the work within the target language. The release and study of the reminder in translations, and particularly in those from minority languages, would thus aim to make visible what the dominant languages of globalization would rather

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⁴. Ibid., 92.
keep invisible under the pretense of universal transparency. In this essay, I would like to explore how the reading of Bernardo Atxaga’s *Soinujolearen semea* in translation—and as translation—could provide material for a pedagogy of Iberian literatures.

![Bernardo Atxaga: Soinujolearen semea](image)

**Figure 1.**

**The Fate of Literary Prizes**

In April 2004, Atxaga’s novel received the 2003 Critics Prize for Narrative in Basque, the first of a number of awards that would accompany the novel as it traveled through the literary scene. This prize, created in 1956 by the Spanish Association of Literary Critics, is one of the few Spanish literary prizes that is not directly sponsored by a publishing house and involves no monetary value, and has thus maintained a certain reputation as independent from purely mercantile interests. The prize recognizes works of poetry and fiction published in the previous year, and since 1977 prizes in those two genres have been announced by the Critics Association in April of each year. Moreover, the Italian translation by Paola Tomasinelli, *Il libro di mio fratello* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), received the Grinzane Cavour award and the Mondello Prize for best foreign-language book of fiction (in January and April 2008, respectively).

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5. The Critics Prize was announced on April 3, 2004, and it was closely followed by the Zilarrezko Euskadi (Silver Euskadi) Prize given by the Booksellers Association of Gipuzkoa during the Book Fair celebrated in Donostia-San Sebastián on April 23, 2004. Moreover, the Italian translation by Paola Tomasinelli, *Il libro di mio fratello* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007), received the Grinzane Cavour award and the Mondello Prize for best foreign-language book of fiction (in January and April 2008, respectively).
been awarded in the four official literary languages of the Spanish State (Basque, Catalan, Galician, and Spanish). While other prizes—like the National Prize—can be given to authors and works in any of those four languages, the Critics Prize is the only one that, every year, aims to recognize works in each of them. It thus provides an appropriate—albeit obviously limited—ground for evidence of the linguistic dynamics of the Spanish literary polysystem.

**Critics Prize in Narrative, 1977–2007**

(Translations into other languages in Spain)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL ↓ TL→</th>
<th>Aragonese</th>
<th>Asturian</th>
<th>Basque</th>
<th>Catalan</th>
<th>Galician</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basque (29)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catalan (30)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galician (31)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>Spanish (31)</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(SL = source language — TL = target language)

Since 1977 the Critics Prize has recognized 121 narrative works—29 in Basque, 30 in Catalan, 31 in Galician, and 31 in Spanish. One would think that a novel that has been identified by literary critics as worthy of the prize would represent a valuable candidate for translation into other languages within the country, but as the table above shows, these works have not circulated as widely as could be expected into other languages. Translations into Spanish are relatively common (63 percent of Catalan, 45 percent of Basque, and 57 percent of Galician works recognized with this prize have been translated into Spanish), but translations among the other languages are somewhat rare—and not a single Spanish-language book winner of the Critics Prize in these three decades has been translated. The lack of translation from Spanish points to the peculiarities of power relations between the languages of Spain. In the international book economy, “asymmetry in translation” is the rule: minority literary systems tend to be overflowed with translations from dominant languages, and vice versa, translation into dominant systems is usually of little significance. Thus, an important percentage of literary works available in Basque are translations—30.8 percent of the Basque literary production in 2003, according to Aiora Jaka Irizar.

But in the case of Spain, the prominent role of Spanish as lingua franca—and its coexistence with other languages in conditions of diglossia in parts of the territory—creates another form of asymmetry, one that not only makes the translation from Spanish

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7. Another important perspective that needs attention but that will not be discussed here is the significant role that translations into Basque play in the configuration of the Basque language literary system. For an overview of the history and practice of translation from and into Basque, see Aiora Jaka Irizar, “Translating Basque Literature,” *Transcript: European Internet Review of Books and Writing* 20, at http://www.transcript-review.org/section.cfm?id=274&lan=en (last accessed July 15, 2009).
unnecessary to guarantee access to a state-wide readership, but that also (and more importantly for what concerns us here) makes the translation into Spanish a direct competitor for the attention of readers in the source languages. The implications of such coexistence would require a descriptive analysis of the literary polysystem of Spain that I cannot attempt here, but I suspect that we would need to rethink Gideon Toury’s assertion that “there is no way a translation could share the same systemic space with its original; not even when the two are physically present side by side.”8 For Toury, bilingualism is more often than not a question of individuals (the bilingual writer or translator gets explicit attention in his book), rather than communities.9 Similarly, the idea itself of translation as the importation of texts postulated as “foreign” (common, as we have seen earlier in Venuti, in translation studies) is indebted, of course, to the understanding of national literatures as monolingual configurations. In the case of multilingual communities, and when languages coexist in conditions of diglossia, translations are more than ways of importing a text to or from a language—they can be instrumental in the displacement of the original text from its originally intended readership as they attract bilingual readers to the translated version.

While a limited number of the 121 narrative works to have won the Critics Prize in Spain since 1976 have made it into other languages, Atxaga’s *Soinujolearen semea* enjoys the distinction of being the only one that has been translated into *all* the other official languages of the state—from Basque into Catalan, Galician, and Spanish. This extraordinary circumstance undoubtedly accounts for the popularity of the novel and its iconic status as perhaps the most prominent materialization of an ideal, cross-linguistic literature in Spain. In what follows, I will attempt not a reading of the text itself, but rather an examination of the paratexts that have been produced as the novel has circulated in translation across Spain.10 (I should also make clear my own limitations as I engage in this exercise: I am neither a scholar of Basque literature, nor a reader in Basque.)

**Translating *Soinujolearen semea***

*Soinujolearen semea* was first published by Pamiela in November of 2003. Ten months later, in September 2004, the novel appeared simultaneously in Spanish as *El hijo del*
acordeonista, translated by Asun Garikano and Bernardo Atxaga (Alfaguara), and in the Catalan version by Joan Pau Hernández (El fill de l’acordionista, Edicions 62). In November, Edicións Xerais de Galicia published O fillo do acordeonista, the Galician translation by Ramón Nicolás Rodríguez. Outside Spain, the novel has been translated into at least eight other languages—Dutch in 2005; German, Russian, and Slovene in 2006; Danish, English, French, and Italian in 2007.

The Spanish version of the novel by Atxaga and Garikano contains several modifications with respect to the original Basque text. The obvious ones are:

- the inclusion of the poem “Muerte y vida de las palabras” as epigraph (HA, 7–8)
- the transposition of “Barne Eskaintza” (SS, 56)—“Dedicatoria interior” (HA, 66)—now placed after the section “Izenak” (“Nombres”)12
- the elimination from the Spanish version of the tale “Pirpo eta Txanberlain, hiltzaileak” (Pirpo and Txanberlain, murderers) (SS, 275–80)
- the new title for the section “Bigarren barne eskaintza. Tximeletak” (second internal dedication) (SS, 374–76), now known as “La baraja” (HA, 381–84)
- the abridged title for “Euskadi askatzearen aldeko mugimendua eta Toshiro” (The Movement for the freedom of the Basque Country and Toshiro) (SS, 397–407), now “Toshiro” (HA, 408–19)
- and, finally, a shortened list of acknowledgments, where the fourteen names listed in the Basque original are reduced to six in the Spanish (SS, 471; HA, 483).

Changes like these, one should note, are not uncommon in Atxaga’s work, as is the case with other writers who translate their own books. But they will be helpful here in tracking down the trajectory of the book as it gets translated into other languages.

Less obvious, of course, are the changes the translation introduces at the linguistic level, where the main challenge is to use the Spanish language but at the same time preserve the visibility of the Basque. In many cases, El hijo del acordeonista translates but does not replace the Basque. For example:

11. “Bernardo Atxaga . . . ha tardado casi siete meses en traducir al castellano Soinujolearen semea, a plena dedicación y con la ayuda de su mujer, Asun Garikano . . . Aunque no ha hecho muchos cambios del original euskera, tiene la sensación de que ha reescrito la novela,” Bernardo Atxaga, “Bernardo Atxaga cierra una etapa literaria con El hijo del acordeonista,” interview with Rosa Mora, El País, sec. “Cultura,” June 6, 2004. In “translating Basque Literature,” Aiora Jaka Irizar notes that self-translation is a widespread practice among Basque writers, and Atxaga is certainly no exception. In giving page references, I will use SS for the Basque original, and HA for the Spanish. I would like to thank Juan Pablo Gil Oslé for his assistance with the Basque text.

12. The transposition is also marked by typographic markings: in the Basque original, the dedication is placed among the names and set using the same font, while in the Spanish version it is marked by the larger form used for other major section headings.

13. Carme Riera, for instance, has described her self-translation of La meitat de l’ànima (Barcelona: Proa, 2004) to La mitad del alma (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2004) as an adaptation, and several transpositions and expansions can be identified in the Spanish version of the novel.

Although mariposa and manzana do translate mitxirrika and domentxa, the original words are maintained and justified by the reference to the “old forms” (a phrase absent in the original). A similar strategy is used when giving the title of a book in Basque found by David:

Liburuak. Irakurtzen nituenen arteko bat, osabaren gelan aurkitutakoa, ezinbestekoa egin zitzaidan. Lizardi izeneko euskal poetarena zen, eta titulua zuen Biotz-begietan. (SS, 96–97)

Los libros. Uno de ellos, que encontré en la habitación de mi tío, se volvió imprescindible para mí. Era de un poeta llamado Lizardi, y se titulaba Biotz-begietan —“En el corazón y en los ojos”—. (HA, 101)

In an interesting variation over this form of preservation, the translation is forced to modify the original vocabulary in order not to give away the plot:


“¿Qué haces, tío? ¿Vas a cambiar los muebles de sitio?,” le pregunté cuando lo tuve delante. El armario estaba movido. “Lo hago todos los veranos —dijo él después de un momento de vacilación—. Me gusta echarle un vistazo a este escondrijo, a ver cómo sigue.” La palabra que utilizó fue gordeleku, “sitio para esconderse.” (HA, 88)

The word the uncle uses here to refer to the hiding place in the original Basque is not, as the Spanish text claims, “gordeleku” (although that word is used in the same dialogue a few lines later), but rather “zulo”—a generic word in Basque that it is used also in Spanish but with very concrete connotations, since it has been repeatedly used in the Spanish press to designate the place where ETA would hide arms or hostages. Since what at this time in the narrative is just a secret from the past (that of the Spanish Civil War, when the hole was used to hide individuals at risk of extermination) will later turn out to be an important element in David’s life as a member of ETA, the choice of words in the translation seems aimed at not revealing in advance too much of the elements of the story to the reader.
It should also be noted that not all the indications of the strangeness of certain forms of Basque diction are introduced in the Spanish version, but are already part of the original:

Bazter batean, hotsak adierazi bezala, iturri bat zegoen, eta haren urarekin osatutako urmaelak —“putzuak,” Lubisen lexikoan— leporaino bereganatzen zuen Pantxo. (SS, 67)

Vi entonces que junto a una de las paredes había, efectivamente, una fuente, cuyas aguas iban a dar a un pozo —*putzu*, en el lenguaje de Lubis— que cubría a Pancho hasta el cuello. (*HA, 71*)

Here *putzu* is not an expression that is noted for the benefit of the Spanish-language reader (who might erroneously assume that “Lubis’s language” is just the language of Basque-speakers), but rather it is already present in the original text as an illustration of the different registers of the Basque language.

However, all the efforts made by the Spanish translation to avoid the illusion of fluency and transparency are complicated by the paratexts that present the book to the reader. *El hijo del acordeonista* retains the illustration by Jose Ordorika on the cover, but eliminates the frontispiece of the original edition, also by Ordorika (see Figure 2 and 3).
On Visible and Invisible Languages: Bernardo Atxaga’s Soinujolearen semea

The other paratexts accompanying the novel in Spanish offer some puzzling evidence as to the nature of the text. After informing the reader that the “Italian version” of Atxaga’s *Poemas & Hibridos* (1990) was awarded the Cesare Pavese Prize in 2003, and that his oeuvre has been translated into twenty-five languages, the text in the front lap of the book jacket notes that “la edición en euskera de El hijo del acordeonista ha recibido el Premio de la Crítica 2003 y el Premio Euskadi de Plata.” This mention of the “Basque edition” could be construed as ambiguous: is the edition in Basque a translation, equivalent to the Italian one? The matter is cleared on the title page, which clearly indicates that *El hijo del acordeonista* is a translation—“Traducción de Asun Garikano y Bernardo Atxaga”—and on the copyright page we see that the original title of the book is indeed *Soinujolearen semea*. But, perhaps confused by the ambiguous message of the paratext, when *El País* (the newspaper edited by PRISA, owner of the same publishing house behind Atxaga’s Spanish text) published a preview of books forthcoming in the fall of 2004, *El hijo del acordeonista* was included in the section devoted to new publications by writers “in Spanish.” The fact that the novel by Atxaga had already been published a year earlier, and thus was a novelty only for non-Basque-language readers, was not mentioned. These, I believe, are not mere lapses—the Basque edition continues to be ignored by the same newspaper: after the novel was awarded the Grinzane Cavour Prize in January 2008, news of the award reminded the reader that the novel “was published by Alfaguara in the fall of 2004.”

While the Spanish edition muddles the reality of the Basque original, the Catalan and Galician ones choose to ignore the existence of Atxaga’s Spanish adaptation. In *El fill de l’acordionista*, both the information on the inside flap of the jacket and the copyright page clearly note that *Soinujolearen semea* is the original that is being translated. So does the Galician translation, in which, on the copyright page, thanks are extended to the literary agency Ikeder and Ediciones Pamiela, publisher of the Basque original edition. The Catalan and Galician versions claim to be translations of the original Basque, but they are in fact based on the Spanish version: they feature the same changes mentioned above with regard to the Alfaguara edition—the opening poem, the transposition, retitling, or elimination of sections, and the revised acknowledgments. In these translations, Atxaga’s Spanish version is used as the source but nevertheless rendered invisible to the reader. The Catalan edition also eliminates the cover shared by the Basque and Spanish editions (which is reproduced in the Galician version), and replaces it with the frontispiece of the

15. Also included among the authors with new books in the fall of 2004 was Galician writer Manuel Rivas. Manrique does not give the title of the forthcoming book by Rivas, although he mentions that it will be published by Alfaguara. The book is presumably *En salvaje compañía*, which had originally appeared in Galician as *En salvaxe compaña* (Vigo: Edicións Xerais de Galicia, 1993) and then published by Alfaguara, in Rivas’s own Spanish translation, in 1994 (what eventually appeared in November 2004 was a revised edition).
original—thus, the link to the Basque is preserved, but the parallels to the Spanish are obliterated (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4.](image)

If I bring to light the peculiarities of the Catalan and Galician translations it is not to decry the practice of indirect translation. After all, to the extent that *El hijo del acorderonista* can be arguably regarded not as a translation of the original Basque, but rather as another version written by the same author in a different language, most of the concerns about the potential for errors and misinterpretations in mediated translations do not hold. But that does not mean that the use of the Spanish version as the intermediary source should be free from scrutiny.

Is there a tendency/obligation [—asks Toury—] to mark a translated work as having been mediated, or is this fact ignored/camouflaged/denied? If it is mentioned, is the identity of

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17. According to Clifford E. Landers, the major disadvantages of indirect translation are: “First and most important, any error or misinterpretation in the first-generation translation (T1) will inevitably be reproduced in T2 (the second generation) with no chance of correction through comparison with the SL. Thus T2 is automatically further removed from denotative fidelity than T1, even if T2 introduces no further errors into the translation.” Indirect translations, he argues, “are to be avoided if possible, and an ethical translator is duty-bound to inform readers . . . that the text at hand is not a first-generation translation.” See *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001), 131.
the mediating language supplied as well? . . . Second-hand translation is not some kind of a disease to be shunned, as has long been the dominant attitude. Such an approach only reflects a fallacious projection of a currently prevalent norm, ascribing uppermost value to the ultimate original, onto the plane of theoretical premises. By contrast, mediated translation should be taken as a syndromic basis for descriptive-explanatory studies—a configuration of interrelated symptoms which should be laid bare . . . No historically oriented study of a culture where indirect translation was practiced with any regularity can afford to ignore this phenomenon and fail to examine what it stands for.18

In the search for norms governing the behavior of Spain’s literary polysystem, and based on the treatment given to the translations of Atxaga’s novel, one would be inclined to conclude that each of its linguistically-defined components (the Spanish, the Catalan, and the Galician) feels compelled to affirm its autonomy and independence as the primary provider of literature. In the case of the Catalan and Galician translations, to recognize the use of the Spanish version could signal the acknowledgment of the existence of a dominant language as a mediating factor—even though I would argue that in this case the deciding mediation is not simply the Spanish text, but also the authorial self-translation. In other words, when translations or versions of a text by a minority-language author are available by the same author in another, more accessible language, that second version is regarded as a legitimate source for translations into other languages. But the fact is that, even if the use of Atxaga’s Spanish version could be perfectly legitimate, it has been hidden in the Catalan and Galician paratexts—as if to assert that those two languages share with Basque a common space where Spanish is nonexistent.

What to say, on the other hand, of the ambiguities of the Spanish paratext with respect to the nature of its version? It would appear here that Spanish literature (understood here as literature in Spanish) tends to be regarded as a totalizing system that is reluctant to give full recognition to its co-existence and interaction with other autonomous languages within the same territory. The monolingual aspirations of important sectors of Spain’s political body—and its implications for Spanish literary culture—have been articulated and analyzed by various critics, so I will not devote more space here to this fundamental issue.19 But they need to be constantly brought to the foreground if we want to counter the false, but widespread perception (in Spain and elsewhere) that language policies—seen as a form of affirmative action needed to provide support and

18. Toury, Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond, 130.

substance to languages that otherwise would not survive on their own—are just an instrument of peripheral or minority nationalisms.20

**Soinujolearen semea and *El hijo del acordeonista***

But let’s go back to the book. Several stories are narrated in Atxaga’s novel—stories of violence and love, friendship and exile, memory and loss—and I will not pretend to make justice to all of them. But for the purposes of this essay, I would like to suggest that *Soinujolearen semea* is the story of the writing, editing, and translating of a book, the transformation of a personal memoir intended for a restricted audience into a public narrative accessible to a globalized readership. From this perspective, the importance of translation becomes immediately evident: this is a text where both language and translation play a central role in the narrative plot.

The Basque text opens with a scene, set during the first day of school in Obaba in September 1957, that calls attention to the coexistence of linguistic codes:


> “¿Y tú? ¿Cómo te llamas?,” preguntó [la nueva maestra] al llegar junto a mí. “José—respondí—, pero todo el mundo me llama Joseba.” “Muy bien.” La maestra se dirigió a mi compañero de pupitre, el último que le quedaba por preguntar: “¿Y tú? ¿Qué nombre tienes?” El muchacho respondió imitando mi manera de hablar: “Yo soy David, pero todo el mundo me llama el hijo del acordeonista.” (HA, 9)

Immediately after this opening scene, the action flashes forward to September 1999 in California, where Joseba and Mary Ann, David’s widow, stand by David’s grave: “Gizon bat epitafioa zizelkatzen ari zen hiru hizkuntzatan, ingelesez, gaztelaniaz eta euskaraz” (SS, 10) (“frente a nosotros, un hombre esculpía en tres lenguas distintas, inglés, vasco y español, el epitafio que debía llevar la lápida” (HA 10)). The intermingling of languages is a consistent presence in the story, as is the concern for minority languages: David and Joseba discuss on more than one occasion the uneven relation between majority and minority languages, the condition of endangered languages, and the advantages and dangers of translation for “the old language” (SS, 18; HA, 19).

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20. “Cataluña, Euskadi, Galicia, la Comunidad Valenciana y Baleares tienen hace años leyes propias para proteger sus idiomas tradicionales y fomentar su uso . . . El concepto de ‘política lingüística’ es inaudito en el resto de España, donde sólo hay una lengua oficial,” claims Pablo Ximénez de Sandoval—apparently oblivious to the fact that the Constitutional proclamation of Spanish as the official language, the knowledge of which is required of all citizens of the state, or the promotion of the Spanish language through the activities of the Instituto Cervantes, are indeed elements of a language policy that has nevertheless become invisible by the spread of an unconscious nationalism. See “¿Está perseguido el castellano?” *El País*, April 21, 2008.
The two beginnings (1957 and 1999) point to two overlapping threads in the book. The first one narrates the story of David, Joseba, and their friends and families as they grow up in Obaba—an existence marked by the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War—become aware of the social transformations and the political tensions of the 1960s and 1970s, participate for five years in the armed resistance against the dictatorship as members of an ETA commando that is captured by the Spanish police in Zaragoza on August 19, 1976, and, after a period of fourteen months in prison that ends with an amnesty, return to rebuild their lives. David leaves Spain to live with his uncle in California, where he meets and marries Mary Ann, has two daughters, writes short stories and an autobiography in Basque, and eventually dies in September of 1999. Joseba, on the other hand, remains in the Basque Country and ends up becoming a writer. The second thread begins when Mary Ann, following her husband’s wish, gives Joseba a copy of David’s autobiography (one of three copies printed by friends) so he can take it back with him and deposit it in the Obaba library. Joseba complies, but he also decides to copy the text of the memoirs in order to rewrite and expand them into a book—the book that, after three years of work, is finally published as Soinujolearen semea. The book is in Basque, as David had initially intended his own memoirs for the inhabitants of Obaba and his daughters (to whom he had begun to teach the language), but the potential for a Spanish or English translation is foreshadowed by Mary Ann (an American professor and translator of Spanish literature who does not understand Basque) in her desire to learn more about David’s life.

Language is prominently featured in both threads. As the two friends expand the horizons of their childhood, they (and the reader) become aware of the dialectal varieties of Basque—the many names for butterfly that constitute a leitmotif of the novel. As the memoirs are transformed into a book, David’s concern for the fate of the “old language” comes to the fore. It is telling that the readings of the novel by Jon Kortazar and Mari Jose Olaziregi, which are based on the Basque original, tend to pay less attention to the question of language than to the other elements of the text (narrative strategies, intertextuality, memory and the recollection of the past, the utopian dimension of the novel’s geography).21

The fate of the Basque language is made more evident as a theme in the Spanish version of the novel, as the insertion at the beginning of “Muerte y vida de las palabras” (HA, 7–8) elevates the poem to the category of epigraph. I would argue that, of the various functions of the epigraph identified by Gerard Genette,22 the poem here seems to fulfill the two most canonical and powerful: to emphasize the meaning of the text and set

21. Kortazar does note the “special taste for language, a language that is heard as it is read, and that is described as heard, attending to differences in nuance between the Basque of the rural people and the Basque of the city, which is mixed with French, English, Spanish—in the exact definition of what was said,” Bernardo Atxaga, 69. Barbancho, who refers to the Spanish version, also points to the relevance of language as a concern within the plot, but devotes most of his attention to issues of intertextuality and memory. See “El paraíso insuficiente” and “Los memorígrafos de la ficción.”

the tenor (what Genette calls the “epigraph-effect”). By inverting the traditional order of things (death paves the way for life), a story that dwells on fatalities—the disappearance of friends, words, ideals, earthly paradises—aims to strike a positive, optimistic note. If initially some words fall down to the earth:

Así mueren las palabras antiguas:
como copos de nieve que tras dudar en el aire caen al suelo
sin un lamento.
Debería decir: callando.

This is how they die,
the old words:
like snowflakes which,
after hesitating in the air,
fall to the ground
without so much as a sigh.
Or should I say: without a word.

(vv. 1–7)

. . . eventually other, new words are created:

Pero mira a las niñas que chillan y juegan
You see, words don’t always emerge
en solitarias áreas industriales;
out of remote industrial estates;
no son necesariamente producto de las oficinas de propaganda.
sometimes they are born out of laughter
Surgen a veces entre risas,
and float like dandelion clocks in the air.
y parecen vilanos en el aire.
Mira cómo marchan hacia el cielo,
look how they rise into the sky,
cómo está nevando hacia arriba.

(vv. 36–37, 43–50)

The novel contemplates its own translation, but also warns against the potentially destructive effect that translations may have for minority languages. Considered from the traditional dichotomy between domesticating and foreignizing translations, the Spanish version of Soinjolearen semea could be said to prevent the reader from establishing a comfortable, monolingual relation with the text by constantly reminding us that there is another language, the old language, lurking behind the surface, and that the characters talk to each other in Basque. (This may seem like a ridiculously obvious observation, but one should keep in mind that the obvious multilingualism of the Spanish state is often rendered invisible in fiction—even in narratives written from and localized in areas where more than one language is used.) Thus, in Venuti’s terms, El hijo del acordeonista could properly be understood as a dissident work that resists assimilation into the majority language and forces the strangeness of the Basque original upon the reader of the translated

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23. I have modified Margaret Jull Costa’s translation into English, which reads, “looking how it’s snowing up there.”
text: “Foreignizing translation is a dissident cultural practice, maintaining a refusal of the dominant by developing affiliations with marginal linguistic and literary values at home, including foreign cultures that have been excluded because of their own resistance to dominant values.”

Our study of Spanish literature and culture needs to acknowledge and understand this resistance. The use of translations of Basque, Catalan, or Galician works in the classroom may be an instrument of a progressive pedagogy only in so far as it is willing to openly confront the ideology of monolingualism—the notion that everything can be reinscribed and eventually done exclusively in Spanish. At the same time, an understanding of the limitations of the translated text should not prevent us from exploring the enormous potential it has for committing us to an ethics of reading, preserving, and understanding differences.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Memory, Past, and Writing in the Global Scene: Bernardo Atxaga’s *El hijo del acordeonista* and Carme Riera’s *La mitad del alma*

**ALFREDO J. SOSA-VELASCO**

*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.*

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” 255.

*The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what [the past] was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring.*


The *Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy* has fourteen meanings for the word “memory.” “Memory” is defined as the psychic ability through which something of the past is retained and remembered; it is also the exposition of facts, data, or motives regarding a determined issue. “Memory” is also the study or written dissertation on a certain topic; the monument built to remember or glorify someone or something; the act of charity or anniversary instituted or founded by someone; the physical device, generally electronic, where data are saved in order to be recovered and used later; the book or writing account in which an author narrates his own life or events of it; the list of determined events that are written to illustrate history; or the book, notebook, or paper in which something is written to make it present. “Remembrance” is the memory that is made or the notice
given of something past or talked about; it is used to remember someone or something; it is the action of bringing something to memory. “Writing” is the art, action, and effect of representing ideas with letters or other signs; it is used to compose books, discourses; it is used to communicate something to someone through writing. It is not easy to talk about memory, and much less to talk about remembering if it is understood as memory itself or as the action to make something or someone present. Writing is not less complicated to understand when its intention is especially to represent, compose, or communicate something related to memory. It is not my intention in these lines, given limits of space, time, or my own interest, to clarify such terms or resolve their complexity, but I do want to propose a reflection on the relationship between memory, the past, and writing in the context of writers of Peninsular minority literatures in the global scene.

The establishment of a discipline of memory studies has taken many forms, currents, and valences and each one has posed different questions: What kind of memory are we talking about? How complete or authentic is memory? Who are those who remember and why do they do so? How and for whom is something remembered? These questions and many others try to understand how memory functions at social, cultural, and political action at the highest level. A new type of memory discourses emerged in the West after the 1970s as a consequence of the decolonization of countries and the rise of social movements that looked for alternative and revisionist histories. Memory discourses accelerated in the United States and Europe at the beginning of the 1980s as a result of the debates on the Holocaust and the attention paid to the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries of the events of the Third Reich. At the end of 1990s, we can talk about globalization of the Holocaust discourse, since it started to function as a metaphor for other histories and traumatic memories. The geographical extension of a culture of

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2. The recurrence of genocidal practices in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo has kept the Holocaust memory discourse alive, at the same time that different concerns regarding memory and forgetting have emerged in connection to political processes in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, South Africa, Nigeria, Japan, China, Korea, Australia, Argentina, and Chile. In “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory,” European Journal of Social Theory 5, no. 1 (2002), 87–106, Daniel Levy and Natan Szaider analyze the distinctive forms that collective memory takes in the age of globalization. They study the transition from national to cosmopolitan memory cultures. For them, cosmopolitanism refers to a process of “internal globalization” through which global concerns become part of the local experiences of an increasing number of people. Global media representations, among others, create new cosmopolitan memories, providing new epistemological vantage points and emerging moral-political interdependencies. Levy and Szaider trace the historical roots of this transformation and outline the theoretical foundations for the
memory is as ample as different political uses of memory are, including the mobilization of mythic pasts with the aim of supporting fundamentalist politics and incipient attempts to create public spheres of a real memory that accounts for politics of forgetting implanted by dictatorial regimes, whether through reconciliation or official amnesties or through repressive silence. Memory has become a cultural obsession of monumental proportions around the globe. As Barbie Zelizer suggests, memory is not only a construction of social, historical, and cultural circumstances, but also a reflection on the power of such a construction against its rivals. Collective memory, understood as a concept and as an activity, becomes the residue of past decades with contemporary resonances. Much of how we act in the present has to do with how we see our constructions and memories of past experiences. Although Maurice Halbwachs’ study On Collective Memory (1992) serves as a referent to the definition of collective memory—understood as a notion totally constructed, since individuals are part of groups that remember and recreate the past—today such a conceptualization seems to be simplistic and it has been questioned and refined. However, I am interested here in highlighting that each memory—individual or collective—emerges as such from the present that helps us to fabricate, order, and omit details of the past as we think we knew them or as we want them to be known. It represents a graph of the past that is used with present objectives, a view of the past that interlinks the present and future in which the past is a product of our collective memory and not the other way around.

Memory matters. It matters because every consciousness is measured through it. Individual or collective memory lies in the intersection of our current concerns. It is crucial to some of the fields of scholarly inquiry that have been most prominent in recent years: the study of nationalism, questions of ethnic identity and the politics of recognition, emergence of cosmopolitan memories through an examination of how the Holocaust has been remembered in Germany, Israel, and the United States in the course of the last fifty years. It is precisely the abstract nature of “good and evil” that symbolizes the Holocaust, which contributes to the extra-territorial quality of cosmopolitan memory. As such, memories of the Holocaust contribute to the creation of a common European cultural memory.


4. Barbie Zelizer, “Reading the Past Against the Grain: Shape of Memory Studies,” Critical Studies in Mass Communication 12, no. 2 (1995), 217. Zelizer points out that the move from an individualized to collective action in the study of memory has given to the act of remembering an all-new cast of characters, activities, and issues, substantially changing our understanding of how memory works. In order to study collective remembering, Zelizer notes the following premises: collective memory is processual; it is unpredictable; it is strongly connected to time and space; it is partial; it is usable; it is both particular and universal; and it is material.

5. See Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). In “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical discourse,” Representations 69 (Winter 2000), 127–50, Kerwin Lee Klein presents a reconsideration of the relationship between historical imagination and the new memorial consciousness, mapping the contours of the new structures of memory. Klein explores the multiple uses of the term, wondering how this term popularizes a historical concept that becomes an identifying feature of new historicisms, how a word associated with the sacred becomes part of a critique of metaphysics, and what the effects of a new linguistic practice are.

in which groups are given recognition not only for their past experience of exclusion and suffering. Moreover, there have been numerous studies of cultural memory as expressed in monuments, memorials and works of art, and school textbooks. This is why memory matters politically, since, as Jan-Werner Müller points out, it is personally reworked, officially refunded and often violently reinculcated, especially after wars and political crisis.

Memory discourses in Spain are linked to the end of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship in 1975, three years of political transition overseen by King Juan Carlos I from a dictatorial to a democratic regime (a constitutional monarchy), and the insertion of Spain within the European Economic Community first and the European Union and the global economy later. Many questions about Spain’s past—the Spanish Civil War and Francoism—and about its present and future require the readjustment of historical narratives and the production of representations. Some things are remembered; others are forgotten. Identity is established by what is remembered: remembrance and forgetting depend on each other. The transition from dictatorship to democracy after the death of Franco in 1975 was a model of decorum. There were no recriminations against the old regime, which was to be consigned to silence. In those years, silence pervaded the private realm more than the public, and there, in families and villages, it did a great deal of harm. History resided then in locked memories, half-told stories, unread archives. In some families the silence was complete; children, as they grew up in the bright new democracy, simply did not know what their parents had done in the war or the dictatorship.

My goal today is to reflect on the relationship between memory, past, and writing in two minority literatures—the Catalan and the Basque—in the context of the global scene. I am interested in analyzing how the themes of memory, past, and writing appear in Bernardo Atxaga’s El hijo del acordeonista (2003) and Carme Riera’s La mitad del alma (2004) in order to answer some questions that shape my current research project on history, memory, and cultural discourses in Spain: What is the relationship between

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9. During these years, despite a number of important television documentaries, the standard history of the Spanish Civil War, even for Spanish readers, remained Hugh Thomas’s The Spanish Civil War (1961) in translation. Other historians who write in English, such as Raymond Carr, have had an authoritative role in the writing of Spanish history. The problem for Spanish historians was that any survey of the war and the dictatorship would serve only to offer narrative to what was often chaotic, to offer shape and meaning to what varied considerably according to region and even village. Much remained mysterious and disputed.
memory, past, and writing? How do individual and collective memories interact? What is the relationship between memory and politics? How do nationalist movements participate in the construction of memory and past? Is there an ethics of memory? It is not my intention to fully answer each question. Rather, I will look for some answers that may help us understand the epistemological change regarding memory through the analysis of Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels, reconciling the fact that both works are part of two different literary traditions, but believing they can be compared, as they respond to a same preoccupation: that of the construction of national identities in the context of minority literatures in the global scene.

I have selected Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels for several reasons: Atxaga and Riera come from two different historical nationalities and both writers are part of the same generation (Atxaga was born in Gipuzkoa in 1951 and Riera was born in Mallorca in 1948); they write in minority languages and they published their works in Euskara and Catalan within a year of each other (Soinujolearen semea in 2003 and La meitat de l’ànima in 2004); they both received literary prizes for them (the Critics Prize and the Grinzane Cavour Prize for El hijo del acordeonista, and the Sant Jordi Prize for La mitad del alma), and they were translated into Castilian in 2004 by Alfaguara in the Colección Hispánica (Atxaga worked with Asun Garikano on the translation and Riera translated herself). Atxaga’s and Riera’s works were also translated into other languages such as English, German, Italian, Russian, and Slovene, among others. In this sense, I would like to point out that I work with translations from Euskara and Catalan into Castilian and, therefore, these translations should be seen as versions of the original works. Beyond these similarities, El hijo del acordeonista and La mitad del alma are novels that recover the past to convert it into literature. El hijo del acordeonista tells the story of David Imaz, an amateur writer, who leaves as a part of his legacy a manuscript that is edited and transformed by his friend Joseba, and this is the book that the reader has in his/her hands. La mitad del alma presents the story of C, a professional writer, who writes the book we read to look for a reader who might help her to clarify the questions regarding her mother’s life, Cecilia Balaguer or Celia Ballester. Both Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels transform the past into fiction. By the narrativization and recovering of the past, Atxaga and Riera seek to interpellate the reader who will question what s/he reads and who will have the last word about the reading of the novels. The past becomes a literary object and the work itself becomes the embodiment of such a past, linking it to memory and writing. As exercises in the search

10. Carme Riera has repeatedly said that La mitad del alma, like many of her other works translated into Castilian, is not a translation, but a version of it. As Walter Benjamin affirms, translation is above all a form; no matter how good it is, it can never mean anything for the original: “In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure, and it certainly does not reach it in its entirety. Yet, in a singularly expressive manner, at least it points the way to this region; the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages. The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter.” See “The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s Tableaux Parisiens,” in The Translation Studies Reader, ed. Lawrence Venuti, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75.
for identity and as receptacles of memory, *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* can be seen as “sites of memory,” as defined by Pierre Nora, that is, as sites where memory crystallizes, where individual memory survives by connecting it with the present through oral and written tradition. For Nora, “[lieux de mémoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally.”11 The reconstruction of personal narratives manifests the idea of memory when we consider the performative aspect of the texts. Beyond the fact that these two works were written to be read, *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* make the reader question what s/he reads: To what extent is *El hijo del acordeonista*, at an intratextual level, the book written by David to leave memory for his daughters and Obaba, or is it the book rewritten and expanded by Joseba based on his friend’s text that collects other characters’ experiences? Regarding Riera’s novel, to what extent is *La mitad del alma*, at an extratextual level, an autobiographic work by Riera, since the narrator-protagonist’s personal information coincides with that of the author and makes the reader think that Riera herself is looking for the man who handed in some papers questioning her identity? David’s and C’s memories appear as metaphors of the past that remain in constant evolution, opening a space to the dialectic between remembrance and forgetting and to the manipulations and appropriations of revived experiences that link them to the present, accommodating the facts that are part of them. The protagonists’ memories of both novels have their roots in the concrete, in the spaces, gestures, images, and objects that surround them. Both David’s stories and those of his Obaba friends, and C’s stories and those people who knew her mother, are themselves reconstructions of what is not present; reconstructions of what is suppressed, destroyed if it is not remembered, of what would be lost if it is not recovered by the protagonists’ accounts.

*El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma*, as “sites of memory,” are products of their contexts of cultural production, at a moment in which historiography rediscovers the secrets of the past, between a David who, after being part of ETA, goes into exile in the United States in the 1970s without ever going back to his hometown, and a C who does not know if she is the daughter of her supposed father, or of Albert Camus, and of a mother who might be a spy for both dictatorship and resistance. As “sites of memory,” *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* are born from a non-spontaneous memory, both works emerge with a purpose: to communicate and transmit at a moment in which official history tries to erase any reminiscence of the past; it is not so much about having been part of one faction or another—with Franco or against Francoism—but about who we are as products of such a circumstance. Beyond nostalgia, David’s and C’s memories are transformed through stories and History itself. Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels can be seen as symbolic objects of memory, as works that are part of archives, libraries, and cemeteries, where a memory consciousness that is formed survives, like the books written

by David to leave a legacy for his daughters and Obaba, and by C to clarify the history of her family. Like the matchboxes buried with the name of the butterflies in Euskara or the Basque shepherds’ engravings in Humboldt County, or as the story written by C or her mother’s letters, *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* allow us to see memory as an archive that is sustained in the materiality of the trace and of the visibility of the image. This is because, as Nora suggests, we feel obliged to collect memories, testimonies, documents, images, conversations, and any visible sign of what it has been to save any proof of who we are for the tribunal of History. Atxa’s and Riera’s novels show the production of identity in relation to the past. David writes his memoirs in Euskara to defend a minority language:

David se había resistido a que su vida primera y su vida segunda, la “americana”, se mezclaran . . . Al fin entre las posible alternativas—la de Virgilio, por ejemplo: ceder el impulso de difundir su escrito, pero a través de una lengua hermética para la mayoría, aunque no para la gente de Obaba ni para sus hijas, si éstas seguían su deseo y decidían aumentar su léxico e ir más allá de *mitxirrika* y de las otras palabras enterradas en el cementerio de Stoneham.

In a more general sense, C explains to Diana, an atypical Argentinian, who defends the need to forget, that without memory, she would not be alive: “Para mí es imprescindible. Sin memoria estamos muertos. La memoria es el alma de las personas y quizá por eso yo ando buscando la mitad de mi alma.” Memory gives David and C the need to remember and protect identity traits, since, as Nora suggests, “when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals, as if an inner voice were to tell each Corsican ‘You must be Corsican’ and each Breton ‘You must be Breton.’” As Nora affirms, besides an “archive-memory” and a “duty-memory,” a “distance-memory” is also needed, since our relationship with the past is something entirely different to what we would expect from memory, that is, not as much a retrospective continuity, but an illumination of discontinuity. For David and C, the past can be revived as an

12. Ibid., 13–14. For Nora, official history resides in a systematic, institutionalized, and self-referential “site of memory.” “Sites of memory” incorporate places such as cemeteries, museums, and archives; objects such as monuments, statues, documents, and, even, money; and events such as anniversaries, parades, and other celebrations whose function is to impose a uniformed, deliberate, and external “learned memory” that buries the lived memory.


16. While “archive-memory” refers to the fact that modern memory is archival (we keep everything in order to preserve every indicator of memory and produce archives) and “duty-memory” to the fact that the task of remembering makes everyone or his own historian (every established group, whether intellectual or not, has felt the need to go in search of its origins and identity), “distance-memory” refers to how our relation to the past is formed in a subtle play between its intractability
effort of rememoration; the present can be seen as something that becomes recycled, from a “before” to an “after.” Joseba approaches both his and his friend David’s past in September 1999. Joseba talks to David about their youth and discovers his friend used to bury matchboxes with words in Euskara in the cemetery and wrote a two-hundred page book for his daughters: “No había ningún documento. Sólo quedaban los rastros, las palabras que mi memoria había podido retener.”

C approaches the past when on April 23, 2001 she receives documents that question who she is. C writes her story to ask the man who handed in the documents about her mother’s whereabouts, when in Portbou, between December 30, 1959 and January 4, 1960, Cecilia Balaguer disappeared and died: “Por eso me dirijo, en primer lugar, a todas las personas que la tarde del 23 de abril del 2001, estaban en el stand de la librería de Cataluña, las personas que pudieron fijarse en el hombre que me esperaba, que nunca me había visto y desconocía de mí cualquier rasgo que no fuera, supongo, mi nombre y mis apellidos, mi profesión y mis antecedentes familiares.” Through the past, David and C look to define who they are. Memory reveals how far the past is left behind. David’s and C’s pasts are formed from being treated, represented.

_El hijo del acordeonista_ and _La mitad del alma_ present a “narrative of the past,” a selection of examples, that ranks certain events and connects written to oral tradition as represented by David’s father’s notebook, David’s writings, David’s and Joseba’s conversations, C’s mother’s letters, C’s interviews with those who knew her mom when she was alive, and C’s story converted into a book. Literary work appears as a product of the relationship between the written and the oral, between the “novelist” and the “storyteller,” as explained in Walter Benjamin’s terms in “The Storyteller.” For Benjamin, experience that is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. The figure of the storyteller achieves its full corporeality because he has something to tell: “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.” Benjamin points out that no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. Information lays claim to prompt verifiability, because it appears understandable in itself, while narration surrenders to it completely and explains itself to it without losing any time. Memory creates the chain of tradition that passes a happening on from generation to generation: “A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship.” Finally, Benjamin concludes that the storyteller’s gift is his ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able...
to tell his entire life: “The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story . . . The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.”

David and C act as narrators, as storytellers, who not only tell their stories to other characters within the diegesis of the novels, but also outside of it, to the readers of the novels, since they choose to write their stories in order to conserve them. In doing so, *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* suggest the possible perpetuation of individual past through the creation of a collective space, a site of memory, where memory is preserved and complemented with the oral act. David and C look to create a space in which transmission and communication link past and present. David accesses the past through his experiences, his participation in a clandestine fight, while C does so through the clues she has about her mother and the stories she is told about her. Both novels turn to writing to recover past. By writing David and C show how the interpretation of the past and the interconnection of individual lives conform to a collective experience. David and C involve the reader and the tension between writing (David’s manuscript, Joseba’s book, C’s book) and orality (conversations with other characters) prepares the reader to interpret and explore *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* as “sites of memory,” a move that suggests that memory is a product of both written and oral traditions. Heritage as a perpetuation (David’s inheritance to his daughters and the speakers of Euskara, among them, those people from Obaba), and as a result of who we are (where C is from, who her parents were) emerge as a repository of the secrets of the present.

*El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* are “sites of memory,” as defined by Nora, in the three senses of the word: material, symbolic, and functional. As material sites, Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels can be seen as testaments and objects that serve memory. They are born of the interaction between memory and history and the will to remember: David and C write in order not to forget; they write to transmit and communicate. David’s text, Joseba’s version, and C’s account are mixed and hybrid texts formed by other intertexts (notebooks, short stories, confessions, letters) that communicate the experience of death, that of its presence and absence. David starts writing to leave a memory before dying, while C does so to clarify the events surrounding her mother’s death. Their stories link the individual and the collective: each one’s story within collectivity. *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* look to fight forgetting symbolically, immortalize death, materialize the immaterial in order to capture the meaning of little signs such as the name of the butterflies in Euskara, the butterfly cards from the Basque Country, childhood memories, and items of clothing, among others. The novels transcend their meaning as cultural products to become “sites of memory” from which different meanings proliferate. *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* contest history, resist it, playing with the reader: How does the reader react to David who confronts the men responsible for other people’s death (his father among the executors), while he is also part of ETA?

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How does the reader react to C, whose dilemma is to know if her father might have been responsible for her mother’s death or if she played at the same time for the winners and the defeated? *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* are themselves objects that enter to form part of historical memory.

The writing of the protagonists’ stories inscribes *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* in and out of the text, between writers and readers, and in and out of history, between individuals and groups. The translations of Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels from Euskara and Catalan to Castilian and other languages create alternative linguistic spaces that complicate the exercise of memory. Acceptance or rejection of literary conventions (for example, we read David’s manuscript as if it were written in Euskara, Joseba’s book as the rewriting of David’s manuscript, and C’s book as if it were written in Catalan) shows how writing and orality act in the cultural construction of memory that implicates a consciousness of other memories, an imposition of the man of letters and action, of the identification of individual discourse with collective discourse, of the insertion of individual rationality in a raison d’être, since, as Nora suggests, all motifs, in the perspective of extensive memory, oblige us to think about them as “sites of memory.” Beyond great events, there are minuscule events that have a symbolic meaning and, in the moment of their occurrence, seem to anticipate the commemoration of such events. In this fashion, in *El hijo del acordeonista*, the construction of a monument to dead winners in opposition to the defeated, Miss Obaba’s list distributed by a donkey in Obaba and the propaganda spread out by Toshirō to the workers in the shipyards contest the events to which history creates new meanings that highlight their functional element. As testaments, *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* are alternative “sites of memory” to those triumphant and spectacular places imposed by national authority or by concrete interests. David’s and C’s stories have their own referents, which make them “sites of memories” that contest official history, offering a space where memory can reside.

In Joseba’s letter to Mary Ann, he explains what David’s motives were to write his book in Euskara, and he copies David’s words that were used as colophon to his friend’s work: “He pensado en mis hijas al redactar todas y cada una de estas páginas, y de esta presencia he sacado el ánimo necesario para terminar el libro. Creo que es lógico. No hay que olvidar que incluso Benjamin Franklin, que fue un padre bastante desafecto, incluye ‘la necesidad de dejar memoria para los hijos’ en su lista de razones válidas para escribir una autobiografía.”


23. Ibid., 57.
greater and scarier: the separation between life and death. David’s words show the importance of memory and its relation with the past and writing. On the other hand, C writes her book because, exhausting all other possibilities (searching in archives, registers, newspaper libraries, diffusion in the press, radio, and television, interviews with different people), there is no another solution than

utilizar este libro para llamar la atención sobre el caso de Cecilia Balaguer, que es también mi caso. Para conseguir saber cuánto hay de verdad en la historia que voy a contarle, para que usted me ayude a descubrirla, no tengo más opción que hacer público lo que hasta ahora siempre había considerado privado. Por más vergonzoso o humillante que me resulte no puedo dejar de hablar de la intimidad familiar, en la que se involucran personas de mi entorno a quienes quizá no les guste ver sus nombres en letras de molde.

C chooses writing because she has no other recourse but to turn to her public, since she depends on the contributions that the reader may offer her to complete her story and she does not want to miss anyone who might have information. El hijo del acordeonista and La mitad del alma fictionalize the experience of their protagonists through testimony. Atxaga’s and Riera’s characters are witnesses to their experience and to others’ experiences. The events described by David and C are present, at an intratextual level, to the readers of their works from the memories of two adults. David and C make the reader a witness of the events they tell, so that they become the immediate recipients of such events: David’s memories are organized from 1957 to 1976 in Obaba and from 1976 to 1999 in the United States, and C’s memories from 1949 to 2001, which emerged from reading her mother’s letters. The narratee of David’s and C’s stories, as well as El hijo del acordeonista’s and La mitad del alma’s reader, are present as someone who participates in the re-experience of the events; the reader becomes part of them. Atxaga’s and Riera’s readers take the place of the narratees of the texts written by David, Joseba, and C. The

24. Ibid., 65.
25. Riera, La mitad del alma, 15.
26. Ibid., 22.
27. Dori Laub’s work proposes some interesting reflections on the relationship of witnessing to truth in reference to the historical experience of the Holocaust. For Laub, the quest of testifying and of witnessing is linked to three different levels: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself. The imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling and, therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails. Laub proposes to see the Holocaust as a unique event that, during its historical occurrence, produced no witnesses: “There was no longer an other to which one could say ‘Thou’ in the hope of being heard, of being recognized as a subject, of being answered. The historical reality of the Holocaust became, thus, a reality which extinguished philosophically the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to. But when one cannot turn to a ‘you’ one cannot say ‘thou’ even to oneself. The Holocaust created in this way a world in which one could not bear witness to oneself. The Nazi system turned out therefore to be foolproof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no outside witnesses but also in the sense that it convinced its victims, the potential witnesses from the inside, that what was affirmed about their ‘otherness’ and their inhumanity was correct and that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves, and therefore, perhaps never took place,” “An Event Without a Witness: Truth Testimony and Survival,” in Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 82.
reader somehow becomes David’s, Joseba’s, and C’s interlocutor, since the texts raise ethical questions for her or him: How to interpret and get the meaning of *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma*? How to respond to the characters’ stories and C’s seduction game that situates the reader as a key figure in resolving the supposed mystery that permeates her life? By being witness to David’s stories, and his friends’ confessions, or C’s account, and her mother’s letters, *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* make the reader responsible for being present, for being a witness. David’s and C’s stories become testimonies that claim the position of the reader as witness, reconstituting the lack of interlocutor (to whom David wants to transmit and C to communicate) and presenting the possibility of recovering the truth of each character.

The writing of David’s and C’s accounts, as a practice of remembering, has an ethical function, since individual memory is situated in dialogue with collective memory. In her introduction to *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth explains that when the present was present, it could not be remembered; once it is past, its presence is only in recall. This is not the same presence that it had when it first occurred, since remembering involves the revival of a past that was never present. The present was never present, not because it did not happen, but because its happening exceeded the individual’s capacity for registration and understanding. If it has not been fully present, it cannot become past, it cannot even attain a presence in recall. Caruth suggests that traumatic experience “is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time”; traumatic experience is characterized by its latency. Caruth provides a model of trauma that makes us question our understanding of memory. For Caruth, trauma can only be represented or approached in figurative terms. Trauma represents a “fundamental dislocation,” which challenges our received notions of memory, experience and even the event itself: “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished.”

David will be marked by the remembrance of that man, an insurance salesman in Obaba, who gave him the cord—“*herramienta para recordar cosas*”—when Lubis and other friends were with him. From the United States, he writes:

Podría afirmar ahora, con esa rotundidad con la que se escribe a veces: ‘A partir de aquel día guardé siempre conmigo el cordón. Fue el primer objeto que metí en la maleta cuando decidí marcharme a Estados Unidos’ . . . Guardé el cordón en mi mesilla de noche, y allí permaneció durante años. Luego lo llevé de casa de mis padres a la de Iruain, para

29. Ibid., 8.
30. Ibid., 4–5.
enseñárselo a unos amigos de Lubis, y no volví a tenerlo presente, hasta que, ya en América, empecé a escribir mi libro y decidí aplicar aquel modo de recordar: ira de un tema a otro igual que los dedos del agente de seguros habían ido del trozo de carbón a la astilla abrasada o a las mariposas. ‘Guarda el cordón. Algún día te será útil’, me dijo aquel hombre. Su profecía iba a cumplirse.31

The composition of the cord in pieces of charcoal, burnt wood, and butterflies (the cards) serves to articulate the narrative of *El hijo del acordeonista*, since it orders the story by parts (Atxaga’s novel read by the reader), intermixing it with texts such as short stories written by David (“El primer americano de Obaba,” “Toshiro”) or the three confessions that form the united work of David and Joseba (which are also parts of *El hijo del acordeonista*). More than remembering the past, C tries to clarify it, explain it, filling the gaps of her mother’s story:

Así, camino de Portbou, con la intención de buscar unas coordenadas parecidas que me permitieran incidir en algunos puntos de similitud, empecé a escribir esta historia. Sin embargo, le confieso que por entonces me aferraba a la esperanza de no tener que contársela, de poder interrumpirla en cualquier momento, feliz de haber encontrado el motivo que convertiría estas páginas en inútiles. Tenía la intuición de que sería de Portbou, o de sus alrededores, la única persona que podría darme referencias de la mujer del abrigo azul y el sombrero escaso. Estaba segura que si me veía, si volvía a verme por la calle, en la playa, en el puerto, comiendo en España o en La Masía, caería en la tentación de acercármeme, como hizo en Barcelona hace casi dos años, y contestaría a mis preguntas sin hacerse de rogar.32

C’s story is written as a search for questions; without them, the book we read would not exist. In both cases, the experience of trauma, as a latent fact that compels the protagonists to write, is understood not as the forgetting of a reality that never can be totally known, but as something inherent to the experience itself. The historic power of trauma is that, as Caruth points out, the experience is for the first time experienced, lived, through forgetting, and its inherent latency of the event explains paradoxically the peculiar, temporal structure, the lateness, of historical experience: the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurred, but in connection to another time and space. Both David and C write as a result of the relationship between crisis and survival. *El hijo del acordeonista’s* and *La mitad del alma’s* protagonists try to explain a traumatic experience that is related to the impossibility of knowing what constituted it. David and C approach traumatic experience through writing.

Dominick LaCapra, in *History in Transit: Experience, Identity and Critical Theory* (2004), responds to Caruth’s work arguing that in her writing there is not enough distinction between “historical trauma” (specific, often human-made, historical occurrences and

would include events such as the Holocaust, slavery, apartheid, child sexual abuse, and rape) and “structural trauma” (transhistorical losses, such as entry into language, separation from the mother, or the inability to partake fully in a community). While historical trauma is susceptible to at least partial working-through, structural trauma cannot be directly changed or healed. In this sense, it is suggestive to think that working-through does not imply the possibility of attaining total integration of the self, including the retrospective feat of putting together seamlessly, through a harmonizing or fetishistic narrative, the experience of the past trauma, since any retrospective suturing would itself be phantasmatic or illusory. For LaCapra, working-through means to work on post-traumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency, in the present and the future. David’s and C’s narratives do not change the past by writing, but deal with post-traumatic symptoms in the present in order to open possible futures. David works through trauma, after talking to Mary Ann in regard to Joseba’s story about Toshiro that she is translating. In a sort of addenda, he writes:

He abierto en mi ordenador el documento donde está mi memorial, y he buscado a Toshiro. Pero no podía dar con él, parecía que lo había perdido. Al final he caído en la cuenta de que lo había guardado con el nombre de Toshiro, y he refrescado mi memoria leyendo lo que escribí sobre él. En contra de lo que había supuesto, me ha resultado grato volver a la época en que Joseba, Agustín y yo estábamos metidos de lleno en la lucha clandestina y nos hacíamos llamar Etxeberria, Triku y Ramuntxo. Será por lo que dicen los clásicos: pasa el tiempo, y lo que dio dolor produce placer. O por lo que dice Joseba: la verdad adquiere en la ficción una naturaleza más suave, es decir, más acceptable.

La sensación de que las líneas destinadas a Toshiro estaban un poco perdidas no ha desaparecido. Entre tantas páginas, parecían irrelevantes. He decidido que la historia de nuestro amigo del pasado merece un lugar más digno, y que la voy a colocar entre estas notas. Aquí estará mejor.

... Hemos cenado pronto. Pensaba acostarme en seguida, pero me he sentado delante del ordenador, como vengo haciendo a diario durante todo el mes de agosto, y me he animado a escribir. Ahora veré un vídeo con Mary Ann y las niñas. Y mañana a Visalia.33

Here ends David’s manuscript, since the next day he undergoes surgery and dies. After talking to Armonía González about her father and wondering if he was responsible for her mother’s death, C also works through trauma. C addresses the reader to reiterate what she is trying to investigate: if her mother was a double agent, why she was killed, who ordered her death, and who is her biological father, introducing a comment on the writing of her book and a series of suppositions about the events that involved Cecilia Balaguér’s disappearance and death:

33. Aixaga, El hijo del acordeonista, 400–1, 474.
Si todo lo que quisiera preguntarle al desconocido que me dio las cartas formase parte exclusiva de los ingredientes de la trama de una novela, a estas alturas ya habría atado todos los cabos, recogiendo los hilos esparcidos aquí y allá, para tejer la tela que me permitiese, sin engañar a los lectores, sin guardarme ninguna carta escondida, conducir la acción final congruente, quizá inesperado, pero del todo verosímil.

. . .

Cuanto usted ha leído fue escrito en Portbou, donde esperé en vano durante quince días el encuentro con la persona que me dio las cartas. Me instalé en un hotel abierto desde 1960, cuya dueña me decía, muy camusianamente, por cierto, ‘Así que usted vive de escribir lo primero que se le pasa por la cabeza’.

. . .

Puede que quien me remitió las cartas sintiera por Cecilia Balaguer un remoto afecto.

. . . Intuía que las cartas me llevarían a perpetuar su memoria prolongando su existencia con mis recuerdos. No sé si se suponía también que yo habría de pedir su ayuda para poder completar la historia de Cecilia Balaguer y la mía propia, ni hasta qué punto estas páginas sólo adquirirán sentido si cuentan con su colaboración. De ella depen. Se lo puedo, te lo puedo asegurar.34

David’s and C’s narratives recount events and evoke experience through literal silences (David does not tell Joseba he is writing a book), doubts, and suppositions (C raises some questions regarding the facts surrounding her mother’s mystery). By showing David and C as witnesses who “give testimony,” their narratives help to performatively initiate communication with their narratees and, consequently, with the readers. Beyond the possibility of representing memory, through recuperation of the past by writing, or through representation of traumatic experience, Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels seek to implicate the reader by using their protagonists as observant subjects, at different levels, depending on their relation to their past and their current actions. This transfer implication is important, because it allows acceptance or rejection of the protagonist by the reader.

Although Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (1991) has been contested for his proposed model of nationalism—modern nationalism grew first in the Americas and from there was adopted by Europe and eventually by tri-continental anti-imperialist movements in Asia, Africa, and South America—and for ignoring the uneven development of imperial capital, I am interested in highlighting the notion of collective cultural memory present in his study. In the 1991 edition, Anderson adds the chapter “Memory and forgetting.” Here he proposes that national communities come to think about themselves as “old” and clearly position memory as an important category.35 El hijo del acordeonista shows how a national narrative

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34. Riera, La mitad del alma, 206, 216, 218.

35. Anderson argues that in the “new land” of the Americas, large bodies of European settlers were able to think of themselves as simultaneously sharing a space with “old” Europe and creating a rupture in the conception of time/duration by declaring that they inhabited a revolutionary new chronology. Thus the formation of “new nationalisms” depended on a reconfiguration of collective memory about “old/original” European spaces as well as chronologies. But once this revolutionary moment has passed (exemplified by the American Revolution and its European counterpart, the French
is constituted. The poem that opens Atxaga’s novel, “Muerte y vida de las palabras,” shows the tension between past and present: the lyrical voice of the poem says that old words die as snowflakes that fall to the ground. S/he asks where the different ways of saying butterflies are now, of those children who are parents now. But new words are also born out of laughter and rise into the sky, as if they were snowing up there. So, Mary Ann translates David’s short stories about the first American in Obaba, Teresa, and Adrián, but David resists publishing them directly in English: “Le parecía una tradición hacia la vieja lengua.” David had shown his agreement to do so, but has always postponed his decision. Mary Ann asks Joseba not to judge her badly, not to look at her as the typical reactionary person who has a phobia about minorities, since for her it was a pleasure to listen to David and Juan speaking in Euskara: it was like listening to music. Joseba explains that, for David and for himself, the “old language” had been an important topic:

Muchas de las cartas que nos habíamos escrito desde su viaje a América contenían referencias a ella: ¿se cumpliría la predicción de Schuchardt? ¿Desaparecería nuestra lengua? ¿Éramos, él y yo y todos nuestros paisanos, el equivalente al último mohicano? ‘Escribir en español o en inglés se le haría duro a David—dije—. Somos muy poca gente. Menos de un millón de personas. Cuando uno solo de nosotros abandona la lengua, da la impresión de que contribuye a su extinción. En vuestro caso es distinto. Vosotros sois millones de personas. Nunca se dará el caso de que un inglés o un español diga: ‘Las palabras que estuvieron en la boca de mis padres me resultan extrañas’.

For David and Joseba, writing in Euskara not only means maintaining their community, but also avoiding the forgetting of language. It means recovering the words that were in their ancestors’ mouths and transmitting them to others; just like the matchboxes were buried and the butterfly cards were born to avoid forgetting, David’s writings are also born. It is not about translating from another language into Euskara, like translating the Walt Disney cards that would be “puentes al imperialismo y desnacionalizando a los niños vascos,” but about creating autochthonous products of the Basque Country in the vernacular language. David also tells how certain books became essential for him, for example, when at the age of fifteen in the summer of 1964 he saw his mother tongue

Revolution), the second generation of American and European nationalists worked toward emplotting their communities within a narrative of historical memory whereby their “nations” were continuously linked to the past generations, thus making sense of their current social configurations. This act of memorializing origins also demanded a forgetting of those episodes (usually traumatic) in the lives of the communities that disturbed this smooth, organic linkage of the past to the present. For Anderson, “nations” are called into being when communities with access to certain kinds of technologies and in certain kinds of relationship with other communities are able to produce a narrative of their pasts which depends on acts of both memorializing and forgetting. See Benedict Anderson, “Memory and Forgetting,” in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

37. Ibid., 20.
38. Ibid., 20–21.
in print: *Biotz-begietan* ("En el corazón y en los ojos") by the Basque poet Lizardi. About this book, David affirms:

*Biotz-begietan* era para mí un libro de lectura difícil, y me veía obligado a descifrar sus palabras—repito: ilas de mi lengua materna!—como si se trataran de las de Ovidio o las de Marcial: con paciencia, con obstinación, como quien frota con agua y vinagre las monedas que han estado mucho tiempo enterradas. La dificultad de la lectura de Lizardi tenía por ello, afortunadamente, la virtud de hacer que me olvidara de todo lo demás.39

Besides Lizardi’s work, uncle Juan gives David a *Dictionnaire Basque-Français*. Pierre Lhande S. J., telling him: ‘Te he traído esto. Te vendrá bien si quieres aprender a leer en nuestra lengua’ . . . ‘Te sería más práctico un diccionario del vasco al castellano, pero ya sabes los militares que mandan aquí no dan permiso.”40

On the other hand, C recreates Josefa’s expressions in Catalan, accompanied by the translation into Castilian in footnotes: “Una cosa que no és cosa i que tot el món es troba” (Una cosa que no es cosa y que todo el mundo se encuentra);41 “Ja ho veurás, estimada dolça, colflorieta meva, pastanagó, cebeta tendra, glop de vi dolç, tu no prendás mal, tu no” (Ya lo verás, queridita mía, coliflorcilla mía, zanahoria, cebollita tierna, sorbo de vino dulce, tú no te pondrás enferma, tú no);42 “Això és un invent per a homes sols’, insinuó la cocinera y todavía añadió: ‘Vol dir que n’hi ha alguns als temps que corren?’” (Eso es un invento para hombres solos, ¿Quieres usted decir que hay algunos en los tiempos que corren?).43 When C arrives in Mallorca to go to Fornalutx to look for the boxes sent from Barcelona and Paris that contain her mother’s objects, she realizes that “los olores del valle, una mezcla indefinible de flores de naranjo, hojas de limonero y tierra mojada” arouse strong feelings, and she says:

Puede que lo que hubiera ido a buscar no fueran sólo las huellas de mi madre sino, sin saberlo, las más propias, las de los meses pasados con la abuela en su casa, en su casa humilde de las afueras de Sóller en el barrio llamado de L’Horta, que compartía con su hija bordadora, mi tía Francisca. Aunque quizá ninguna llevara mi sangre, aunque de los baúles pudiera sacar la certeza de mi nombre, aunque nada tuviera que ver con ellas, me sentía atada a las dos por un vínculo indestructible. Más que a nada en el mundo, mi vida estaba arraigada en su amparo, ‘com en la nit les flames a la fosca,’ (como en la noche las llamas a la oscuridad).44

While David tries to preserve his mother tongue, C tries to track her mother’s past by going through the things in her chest. *El hijo del acordeonista* makes the reader reflect on
the importance of the mother tongue for David and for writing. *La mitad del alma* looks for the same thing when the reader understands that for C to know who her mother was is to know who she is. The writing of David’s and C’s accounts and the reading of *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* link past and present through language as vehicle of transmission and communication. Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels show what Étienne Balibar suggests when he says that every community is an imaginary construction founded on a particular use (and textualization) of collective memory. In order to be able to imagine a nation, a community has to create a memory of being for the people. *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* construct such a memory by using the notion of common language and the fictionalization of the past. When answering the question “What is a Jew?” Nicholas De Lange resists the notion that the Jewish religion unites Jewish people. Instead, for him, what unites Jews is “a strong sense of common origin, a shared past and a shared destiny.” Shared or collective memory has predominantly been associated with issues of space and territory; in Nora’s work, memory is connected to national identity and to a unique land and a shared language. Interestingly, Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels go beyond national frontiers. David’s and C’s stories are initially written from outside the Basque Country and the Catalan Countries, from the United States and France, respectively. The notion of “place” is extended from local to global, it is no longer understood as something eternal, interchangeable, and a denominator of territorialism, since it becomes, as Doreen Massey suggests, a dynamic concept, constituted by a series of changeable social relations, which “stretch beyond that ‘place’ itself.” As David and C see themselves as members of their corresponding communities, they recognize this fact when they are out of national borders. Beyond the description of conquests, popular movements, territorialization practices, David’s and C’s recognition is an effect of a specific ideological form, that of interpellation of the subjects (Althusser) in a process of fixation of affects in the representation of the self. Both David and C confront a politics of affects, shown by the relationship of the protagonists with their parents who do not only metaphorically represent the symbolic law, but also the Francoist regime during their childhood and youth. In order to achieve such a fixation of affects, communication must take place. David’s and C’s stories try to inscribe their identities in a sense of belonging in the two senses of the word: what each one is as an individual and what they are as a group. As individuals, *El hijo del acordeonista*’s and *La mitad del alma*’s readers are interpellated by the protagonists of the novels in the name of the collectivity they belong to. Atxaga’s and Riera’s novels express the idea of a national character (diversity of languages and cultures) and transcend individual and political relations. They constitute two ways to anchor two nations and to give meaning to their existence. By writing the


past, David and C connect with their narratees, with their readers, and establish communication with them.

David and C (as writers), and Atxaga and Riera (as writers and translators) become social actors who speak the language of their people. Balibar mentions that the process of translation has primarily become one of internal translation between different levels of speech.\(^{48}\) Social differences are expressed and relativized as diverse ways of speaking a national language which suppose a common code and a common norm. That is why family, as organ of an ideal nation, appears linked to people’s life, to each one’s reality, to identity. The theme of writing in *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* becomes a metaphor for a mother tongue, for the written or pronounced word, for linguistic practices, for the ideal of a common origin with projection into the past and with effect into the present and future. Through language, individuals are interpellated as subjects. If each personality is constructed by words, in which the law, genealogy, history, political options, professional qualifications, and psychology are formed, then the construction of linguistic identity in *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* is open. Nobody chooses his/her mother tongue or can change it, although it is always possible to appropriate many other languages and make them one’s own. David’s and C’s accounts are the result of the formation of a community in the present that produces the feeling that it has always existed and will exist for future generations. With the reading of *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma*, the reader is called to find himself, in communication with other individuals, with whom s/he can share interests and, even, the same future.

*El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma*, in the context of Spanish minority literatures in the global scene, allow us to see how places travel discursively, how they offer possibilities to think about identity and question conceptions about whom they “naturally” belong to.\(^{49}\) *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* are no less Basque or Catalan than those novels whose actions take place in the Basque Country or the Catalan Countries. Atxaga and Riera traverse geographical limits, showing us how a change of topographies allows us to think in new forms about our own identities and our connections with others. Contemporary discussions on identity make us reflect on how to think about the local in the context of the global, the periphery in relation to the center, the minority in the frame of the majority. Writing from the United States like David, from Obaba like Joseba, or from Portbou and Barcelona like C, we can see the search of Euskara and Catalan literatures as literatures that reinscribe the local within the global, the private within the public, the individual within the collective. In this situation, memory is not a process of looking back, of looking at the past, but of looking at the present in constant change. Atxaga and Riera situate their characters within a story, with several versions, a move that makes us examine their roots and traumas in other countries not

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always known to their protagonists. Adriana Cavarero, in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), points out that to be “narratable” is both a fundamental need for the subject and the condition for our recognition of the other’s uniqueness. Even before we know the other’s story, even before we tell our own, we perceive each other as having a story to tell.\(^{50}\) It is precisely because we are aware of our own uniqueness that we recognize the same quality in others. *El hijo del acordeonista* and *La mitad del alma* make us reflect on the connections between individual and collective memory and understand that we do not have anything better than testimony to access the past. We can say that we do not have anything better than the perception of the unique story each of us has to tell, like David and C—with its own burden of remembering and forgetting—to alert us not only to the past, but also to the current need for connection and communication with others.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Exile, Dissemination, and Homogenization: The Case of Equatorial Guinea as the Space of a Minority Literature

MICHAEL UGARTE

What happens to the cultural production and the languages of a nation when that nation becomes the victim of a siege, and as a result of that siege, the country’s intellectuals are expelled or leave of their own will? The problem is not a new one, and in the Hispanic world, including Equatorial Guinea, we have seen abundant cases in the twentieth century. Expulsions, whether they have been forced (exile) or self-inflicted (emigration), have deeply affected how the citizens of a nation think about themselves. Also, considering the slippery category in which the very notion of nation-state has fallen in the last few decades, it seems that exile and other types of political-economic migrations have exacerbated the slipperiness. Borderlines become objects of contention as does national consciousness. Migration gives rise to that sense of homelessness, disconnection, cultural alienation, and ambiguity, which are all too familiar in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And at the same time, a cosmopolitan spirit, urbanity, new cultural knowledge that allows for deeper understanding of the homeland all comprise the gains that accompany the losses of exile.

Dissemination is a related issue. In the land that has fallen to the domination of a different culture, obstacles are often created to the dissemination of that culture’s cultural production and language. In the cases of writers and artists from Equatorial Guinea, these obstacles are overwhelming (as they are in virtually all African cultures) due to the circumstances of the publishing industry in Spain, circumstances not exceptional in first-world societies in the age of globalization. Justo Bolekia is one of the few critics who has
addressed the crucial issue of dissemination as part of all the conditions that lead to major difficulties in creating visibility among Equatorial Guinean writers. He speaks of the need for a “reciprocity” in dissemination in the face of the continuing domination of colonizing culture over that of the colonized. But that reciprocity has not come about; in fact what we have seen is anything but a reciprocal exchange of ideas, images, or texts. The immediate effect of colonization and the subsequent state-sponsored terror that came with independence has been the “deterritorialization” of Guineans, that is, the creation of a status of eternal exiles among the entire nation. Yet the situation is not merely a sorry state of affairs, a lamentable circumstance arising from historical factors whose agency is difficult to ascertain, according to Bolekia. There are “aggressive” players in the processes of “deterritorialization.”

1.  See Justo Bolekia, “El español y la producción literaria de Guinea Ecuatorial,” Panorama de la literatura en Guinea Ecuatorial, Centro Virtual Cervantes, Anuario 2005, at http://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/anuario/anuario_05/bolekia/p05.htm (last accessed July 17, 2009). Thinking of the genocide in Rwanda of 1994, the causes as reported by the vast majority of news agencies—also some historians and intellectuals—were presented in terms of a pathetic tragedy with no discernable agents other than age-old ethnic hatreds. Most egregious in these reports was the lack of understanding and coverage of the French government’s complicity in the genocide, both in its history of colonialism as well as its postcolonial control of the economies and politics of a region made up of the former Zaire (Mobutu’s paradise), now one of the most miserable nations in the world (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Burundi, and Rwanda.

Bolekia, perhaps unwittingly, raises one of the most important questions regarding the post-colonial other. What are the responsibilities of the former colonizing societies vis-à-vis the subjects of colonization? The challenge that the face-to-face relationship with the other presents is directed to the entire global community as the postcolonial writer, in all her-his double consciousness, explores the consequences of colonialism. It seems, according to Bolekia, that the Spanish intelligentsia and the publishing industry have either not (yet) heard the challenge or they pretend not to hear it. This brings us to the age-old question about the relations between subjectivity and reality: if something happens with no record of it having happened—no text, no recorded testimony, no document referring to it—the very truth of the event is in question. The same applies to a writer or a text. Thus, since the major communications industries pay little attention to Afro-Spanish culture, it is either unimportant or does not exist.

A concrete manifestation of Spanish deaf ears is the reception of the work of Guinean philosopher, Eugenio Nkogo. Nkogo writes what might seem a small-minded and peevish preface to his work *Sobre las ruinas de la República de Ghana* written after he had lived in Ghana from 1978–80. The book is a penetrating analysis of the modern history of the country whose independence movement was led by none other than Kwame Nkrumah, and the disillusionment with that very movement in the post-independence period. Nkogo has the gall to complain that he did not find a financially solvent publisher for his book, and that as a consequence, he had to dip into his small savings to disseminate his study:

> Once again I have taken on the burden of my own work: for the fourth time I am going to publish this book, titled *On the Ruins of the Republic of Ghana*, using my own meager means . . . It has been six years since I wrote it and for three years I have been seeking a publisher . . . tired of reading and listening to the same response, which is usually an unequivocal ‘no’; . . . These efforts have been based on false hopes . . .
> How can an intellectual work on a creative project, if he must work for survival?
> How can an intellectual complete a rigorous reflection on the diverse forms of exchange of reality if one is saturated and fatigued by a prohibitive work schedule?
> ‘Blessed are those’ intellectuals who live in a society with ‘an objective spirit’ of intellectual promotion, ‘for it is they who shall inherit’ the world of creativity.³

These words sound shrill, and the taste they leave in any reader interested in the history of Ghana may be bitter. Yet for those of us living and working “in a society with ‘an objective spirit’ of intellectual promotion,” Nkogo’s preface elicits sympathy (perhaps even guilt), especially considering the author’s carefully detailed explanation in the pages that follow of the effects of colonialism on the development, or lack thereof, of a viable democracy in Ghana, as the promise of independence turned into “ruins.” Indeed

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³ Eugenio Nkogo *Sobre las ruinas de la República de Ghana* (Madrid: n.p., 1987), 9–10. Nkogo has published a number of philosophical works, mainly on existentialism. Two of these are: *El aspecto ético y social del existencialismo* (León: Ediciones Leonesas, 1982) and *El método filosófico en Jean Paul Sartre* (Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, 1983).
Eugenio Nkogo is our other, the one we turn to as we seek the “authentic African voice,” who, in turn, is the one who is not allowed into our club. Bitterness notwithstanding, the preface is perhaps the most faithful manifestation of everything Nkogo traces in his book. Similarly, one wonders if Bolekia’s more than understandable protestations are part of broader issues surrounding that always problematic relationship between the so-called Global North and Global South, particularly in terms of the movements to-and-fro on the part of formerly colonized subjects—indeed the main theme of this book.

On a related topic exploring the publishing practices in nineteenth-century Spain, Elisa Martí-López traces French influences on the Spanish novel. The Spanish novel in the mid-nineteenth century, argues Martí-López, was not only dependent on French forms of expression, but on a readership that disdained autochthonous cultural expression and celebrated the fashions coming from outside of Spain, especially from the nation that produced Victor Hugo. These were as much market forces as literary ones. In more theoretical terms, she states: “In the context of modern cultural production, it is not enough to inquire into the forms of writing; we also need to consider the conditions for the possibility of writing itself.”\(^4\) And of course these “conditions” have as much to do with what we think of as “taste” as with the promotion of “taste.” Spanish writers expressed their displeasure at this sorry state of affairs on more than one occasion. Publishers were indifferent to the “autochthonous novel,”\(^5\) as Spanish novelists were forced to turn to small and impoverished printing outlets to make their work accessible. The more lucrative endeavor of imitation or translation of French works led to a certain bitterness not unlike that of Eugenio Nkogo. It is not until the late nineteenth century that we see Spanish writers appeal to a national readership on their own terms.

Martí-López’s elucidation of the emergence of the Spanish realist novel in conjunction with the culture of dependence on France provides a precedent for the conditions of writing in Spain’s ex-colony. Admittedly, “the conditions for the possibility of writing” have changed dramatically since the nineteenth century. In an age in which the very medium of print itself is in danger of extinction (or at least diminution) with the advent of cyber-publishing, video, and the C(ompact) D(isk), one wonders if the neglect of Guinean writing lamented by both Bolekia and Nkogo is not due simply to the vicissitudes of a world moving toward new information technologies. Yet the Internet and all that goes with it is by no means the only difference worthy of discussion. Indeed, the conditions described by Martí-López are aggravated by both exile and post-colonialism.

I turn to another precedent from Spain as a manifestation of the difficulties of exile publishing. For the many Spanish exile intellectuals and writers who fled to Mexico after the Spanish Civil War, difficult access to publishers and readers, financial want, and neglect were major problems despite the fact that the Mexican government of the 1930s,

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5. Ibid., 38.
as scholars have pointed out, carried out an official policy of assistance to those *transsettados* (exiles speaking the same language) who had suffered the onslaught of fascism. We need only recall, as an example—in all its pathos—of a little-remembered work of Spanish exile, *La librería de Arana* (Arana’s Library, 1952) by Salvador Otaola, in which an exile novelist, poet, and would-be publisher, José Ramón Arana, becomes a protagonist. As he establishes his “walking bookstore” (*librería ambulante*), quixotically entrepreneurial, he wanders from dwelling to dwelling hawking the books of his fellow exiles living in Mexico City. Most of these books are self-published—note Nkogo’s work on Ghana—and the majority of the buyers are the writers themselves. Otaola’s novel is reminiscent as well of the writing of another exile who lived in Mexico, Max Aub (albeit somewhat more successful in the marketing sense). The (French-born) Valencian writer’s short story, “La verdadera historia de la muerte de Francisco Franco” (The True Story of the Death of Francisco Franco), is about a waiter in a Mexican café who is tired of listening to all the Spanish patrons rant about having lost the war, and as a result, sets out to assassinate the dictator, not as much as a blow against tyranny as a wish for an end to the hot air of the exiles. It has been said that the politics of exile are filled with “sterile complexities.” And there is certainly a truth to that statement considering the at times narrow attention that modern exiles pay to the circumstances that led them out of their land, an obsession that often falls on the deaf ears of the citizens of the host country, no matter how intellectually curious or cosmopolitan they may be.

Yet the case of African exiles living in the land of formerly colonial powers is somewhat different, not in terms of “sterile complexities”—politics of distant lands always seem arcane to those not of that land—but in the difficult relationship between the previously colonizing reader and the previously colonized writer. The former situation of economic and political dependence is often, and in my view rightly, seen as a major factor in the absence of genuinely democratic and economically viable institutions in Africa. Thus exile and emigration are not as much matters of a “sterile” political complexity in an exotic and little-known land, as they are a direct result of the politics of the host country. In effect, the host country’s history is part of the story of exile, and the result is a relationship filled with tension and conflict. While in France this relationship works itself out in visible ways as immigrants from the former colonies enter French culture, comment on it, and at times even force a face-to-face (or word-to-word) public confrontation, in Spain the situation is different. Perhaps due to the apparent insignificance of the only Spanish-speaking colony in Sub-Saharan Africa, Equatorial Guinea is not as rooted in Spanish historical consciousness as francophone African writing is.

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6. For a thorough and penetrating analysis of the cultural work of Spanish Civil War exiles in Mexico, see Sebastian Faber’s *Exile and Cultural Hegemony* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

7. The term comes from Bertolt Brecht’s anti-fascist activities in the early 1940s when he was living in the US. See my exile book *Shifting Ground: Spanish Civil War Exile Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989) 36; also 234n2.
One of the effects of the deliberate policy of classifying, that is, censoring, information on the horrific events immediately following independence (materia reservada), has been that the Spanish information industry has ignored realities that plague the ex-colony even after the end of Franco’s rule.\(^8\) Also important to consider is Spain’s colonial legacy in Latin America as the definitive indicator of the former colonial power’s relationship with its past colonies, as Spanish activity in Africa becomes eclipsed by the historical period in which Spain was a major world power. The forces of nationalism in the Iberian Peninsula, along with the nostalgia for power, contribute to an effort to restore that power in the form of ventures in Africa in the early and mid-twentieth century. So much so, that the Civil War, the event which shapes the history of Spain in the twentieth century and beyond, might be seen as an event which begins in Africa due to those very nationalist and imperialist ventures. These historical realities, however, are rarely taken into consideration as twentieth- and twenty-first-century Spaniards construct identities and forge a national consciousness. When the ban was lifted on information on Equatorial Guinea with the end of the Franco regime, relatively little note was taken in the Spanish press, and when Teodoro Obiang engineered the coup against his uncle Macías in 1979, the burgeoning Spanish democracy was clearly interested in other more pressing issues such as its own constitution and the political rights of the autonomies. The presence of Africans in Spanish life did not surface until the mid to late 1980s, the period known for the beginning of the dramatic rise in immigration. Indeed, blacks in Spain are not seen as the vestiges of empire as is the case with France or Britain; rather the appearance of Africans on Spanish soil is a sign of Spanish modernity and post-modernity. And like many post-modern cultural phenomena, the black presence seems to have come out of nowhere.

The sudden appearance of the African other in Spain, however ill represented in the mainstream cultural outlets, provides insights into the changing national consciousness. The Spanish publishing industry, in the form of powerful communications conglomerates such as Grupo Prisa (which includes El País, the news daily as well as the publishing house), Grupo Zeta (owned by the transnational Bertelsmann Corporation,) and Grupo Anaya (which includes the prestigious literary publisher, Cátedra), becomes interested in Equatorial Guinean culture when it sees a connection to what it perceives as Spanish sensibilities. Much like the publishers and writers in mid-nineteenth-century Spain who insisted on following French models as a matter of popular “taste,” the twentieth- and twenty-first-century counterparts seek a market that caters to expectations of the nature of African culture vis-à-vis Spain.

\(^8\) For an explanation of Spain’s policy of censoring information related to the immediate post-independence of Equatorial Guinea see Donato Ndongo, Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial (Madrid: Cambio 16, 1977), 111–82. For a concise history of Equatorial Guinea see Justo Bolekia, Aproximación a la historia de Guinea Ecuatorial (Salamanca: Amári, 2003). This book is unique among the histories of Spain’s sub-Saharan ex-colony because it concentrates on the histories of the various ethnic groups that populate the island of Bioko and the continental area of Río Muni (Fang, Bubi, Ndowe, Fernandinos, and Anaboneses). Each of these groups have their own language, and as a linguist, Bolekia devotes much attention to the linguistic aspects of his history. Indeed, a similar scenario—autochthonous history, language variation, the threat of language disappearance—is pertinent to the Iberian Peninsula.
A case in point is a novel *El llanto de la perra* (The Bitch’s Moan, 2005), by Guillermina Mekuy, published by the well-known publishing company, Plaza y Janés, an imprint of Random House/Mondadori (part of the Bertelsmann Group). I cite this novel not as much for its literary merit as for the interest it aroused in the mass publishing industry. Mekuy writes the first-person account of a young woman, Eldaina, born in an unnamed African country, who looks for fulfillment and happiness in Spain, specifically Madrid, where the family moved when she was young. The story involves a variety of mishaps and sexual adventures that are at once typical of modern-day twenty-somethings living and studying in a prosperous European city, and at the same time unique due to Eldaina’s origin. Indeed it is the protagonist’s difference, her otherness, that makes for an alluring story. Comparable, perhaps, to Almudena Grandes’s well-known narrative, *Las edades de Lulú* (The Ages of Lulú), the narrative follows the patterns of a tale of sexual awakening, an experience which is universal almost by definition. While the protagonist is filled with anxiety and sadness, the cause is never explained in a way that allows readers to pinpoint a specific dilemma or malady. She does not suffer from social mistreatment, poverty, abuse, or racial prejudice—class, race, and ethnicity are not integral dimensions of the story. Her sadness and alienation, as the leitmotif of the cry of an abandoned dog shows, always seems to be tempered by the joy of sex—the implicit statement is that sex conquers all. While Eldaina suffers the death of her sister and her mother as well as an expected pregnancy, she withstands these experiences with the help of family, friends, and lovers. In effect, Eldaina’s alienation and sadness are more akin to the youthful angst felt by countless youngsters in developed countries in the twenty-first century. Yet while the author is an African immigrant from a Spanish-speaking country, her “Africanness” is of secondary importance, and these quirks are what saves the novel from a conventional story of post-adolescent sexual awakening. Indeed, the source of her very sense of loss and abandonment may be found in her otherness, even though it is muted.

More significant than the story, in my view, is the marketing strategy of the novel’s publishers. The front cover of *El llanto de la perra* comprises a full-page photo of the author’s face: deep, dark eyes (slightly shaded), lipstick-red lips (more lips of a white woman than an African’s), free-flowing hair, wavy strands running down either side of her face, and an expression more alluring than Mona Lisa yet less sexual than that of a *Penthouse* pin-up. Her skin color tells us that, clearly, she is of African descent, while even this feature is not exaggeratedly African, since her complexion is more brown than black. On the back flap of the novel, we see the back of the author’s head with her sinuous hair covering her left shoulder. On the other side of the back cover, there is the de rigueur marketing description of the novel. This description, like all book cover introductions to novels, reveals the tactics used by Plaza y Janés to find consumers of the book:

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Eldaina, una joven de la alta sociedad de un país africano, sabe desde pequeña que a la felicidad siempre le sigue la desdicha . . . La historia de Eldaina es un viaje por la vida y la muerte impulsado por el motor del deseo, un itinerario en el que se unen los primeros amores con la pasión más arrebatada . . . una historia sin tapujos, que transporta al lector a un universo de sensaciones donde convergen la desorientación de una mujer presa del deseo, los espejismos del lujo o la permanente búsqueda de la propia identidad.

(Eldaina, a young woman from the high society of an African country, knows from the time she is a girl that happiness is always followed by misfortune . . . Eldaina’s story is a journey through life and death driven by desire, an itinerary in which first love comes together with the most intense passion . . . a story without restraint that transports the reader to a universe of sensations where there is a mixture of aimlessness of a woman imprisoned by desire, the illusory pursuit of luxury, and the constant search for identity itself.)

While the preface to El llanto de la perra, “Unas palabras de presentación a Guillermina Mekuy” by Emilio Porta, continues in this vein, the reader learns something about the author—that she was born in Malabo, that her ethnicity is Fang, that she came to Madrid at a young age, that she is a law and political science student at the Autonomous University of that city—as well as about her intentions: “Yo quiero ser escritora” (I want to be a writer).11 This, according to Porta, is what the author communicated to him, as she spoke about the possibility of continuing with her studies while she writes fiction. In an uncommon revelation of the communication between the author and the publisher, we also learn why the latter thought the manuscript was worthy of publication: “unquestioned literary skill, a bold book, original, a book that would surprise people because its author was so young, so different, yet so much the same as so many women of her age.”12 Reminiscent of Vicente Granados’s prologue to María Nsue’s Ekomo, Porta describes the conversation he had with the author about the novel: “There are a few things, the theme, the title . . . I don’t know if anyone will be scandalized.”13 Thus it is difficult to ignore the Spanish publication industry’s interest in the novel: it titillates. At the risk of over-interpreting the words of a dust jacket, it seems the fact that Mekuy chooses not to deal with race and ethnicity is for the editors a positive feature of the novel, an indication that Spanish youth have gone beyond these issues. If indeed this is the case, then it is interesting, if not contradictory, that Plaza y Janés chooses to highlight both the author’s and the protagonist’s race on the front and back covers.14

12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 10 (ellipsis in the text).
14. Another novel related to Equatorial Guinea published by a major editorial house, Al sur de Santa Isabel (South of Santa Isabel) by Carles Decors, originally appeared in Catalan. Its subject matter is more “serious” than Mekuy’s novel in that it deals with historical and political issues surrounding the independence of the country coupled with psychological dilemmas. The subject position, however, is that of the colonizer coping with life in the colony as well as with members of a previous generation of Spanish political and economic elites. That this novel was chosen by Alianza is at once perplexing and revealing of the ways in which editors read the market. See Al sur de Santa Isabel, trans. Ramón Minguillón (Madrid:
Thus in the publishing industry, the colonial/post-colonial history of the relation between Africa and Spain is less important than the here-and-now. Yet even as cultural and political critics deal with the present moment of the ex-colony of Spain, the most influential circles of the Spanish communications industry seem not to take notice. Another issue is the lack of visibility of the groups of Guinean exiles and their attempts to establish working relationships with Spaniards interested in Africa as a political reality related to Spain and Spanish history. A counterpoint to this neglect is the influential organization, ASODEGUE (Asociación para la Solidaridad Democrática con Guinea Ecuatorial; the Association of Democratic Solidarity with Equatorial Guinea), a group that continues to be active today. According to one of the association’s founders, Adolfo Fernández Marugán, ASODEGUE was formed in 1993 by Spaniards involved in left-wing politics, predominantly the activists of the labor trade unions of the Socialist (PSOE) and United Left (IU) parties who were concerned about human rights abuses throughout the world, including Africa. After the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the achievement of self-determination in South Africa in 1989, these Spanish leftists turned to Equatorial Guinea with one overarching goal in mind, a principle akin to the policies of the Foreign Affairs Ministry during the early years of the presidency of Felipe González: to move toward the democratization of third-world countries. The realization of this goal involved fomenting relationships with the Guinean opposition to Teodoro Obiang’s dictatorship. According to Marugán, ASODEGUE’s activity was (and remains) similar to that of an NGO, even though there was a loose connection with the Spanish Foreign Affairs Ministry.15

Yet ASODEGUE’s interests are not only political, they have been cultural as well. Mainly through its web page (www.asodegue.org), the organization allows free access to the ideas and writing of virtually all the cultural and political figures this study has dealt with. A link to Ndongo’s anthology of Equatorial Guinean literature (1984), in its entirety, provides anyone interested the texts of writers, many of which have been analyzed here, at no cost other than access to the Web. Equally important is that the organization, again with its electronic site as its main vehicle of dissemination, has provided a forum in which the exiles and emigrants can not only express themselves, but find readers and other activists, people who will listen, react, and enter into a dialogue on Guinean politics and culture. In fact the electronic medium in which this dialogue takes place is the feature which makes Guinean exile anomalous within all other previous exile cultures and experiences of the Iberian Peninsula. The possibility of a different relationship between the Spanish exile writers of the Civil War and their readers had they access to the cyber-world is open to question. As has been pointed out in a variety of other contexts, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Internet has taken the

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form of the new Gutenberg, and as such, it allows for a greater possibility of a presence of and a dialogue with the African other.

Indeed, the floating, virtual, intangible world of the Web may be the medium of exile par excellence. Like the placelessness of exile and emigration, cyberspace engulfs us into a no-man’s-land (and no-woman’s-land) in which we can not only be in two or more places at once, but we can participate in the activities (including the politics) of those places. Cyberspace creates a new and ambivalent location that lays bare the condition of groundlessness. The “sterile complexities” of exile politics may become less sterile and more within our reach. The future of Equatorial Guinea and those who represent it, like all the writers, political figures, and intellectuals I have dealt with here, depends not only on economic factors, such as control and compensation for the vast reserves of petroleum within that nation’s sovereign borders. It also depends on the consciousness and agency of the human beings affected by that economy, for the transition from print to electronic media may make for a change in that very consciousness.

The cultural benefits of what is referred to with such frequency as “globalization,” not only in the media of virtually every country on the planet but also in academic circles, are many. If nothing else, intimate contacts with cultures not our own, especially those considered as our “others,” through images, the Internet, economic relations, travel, tourism, and so on, have given the average citizen of the planet a cultural knowledge perhaps unprecedented in history. Yet the danger, indeed the tragedy, of globalization is evident in the increasing homogenization of culture, a homogenization at times unwitting, at others crassly deliberate, a sameness whose source comes from economic and political power at the expense of that ubiquitous “other.”
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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Salvador Espriu and the Marrano Home of Language

TERESA M. VILARÓS-SOLER

In the 1960s Josep Plà acknowledged Salvador Espriu in his *Homenots* literary portrait series as one of the major Catalan writers. However, it is well known that in spite of his praise, Plà considered Espriu’s work somewhat sinister (“mes aviat sinistre”), depicting a world where illusions were notably absent (“una concepció del món en que les illusions son absents”). For him Espriu’s oeuvre, although deeply inspired by the Ecclesiastés, did not foster any hope for redemption (“no veu la redempció enlloc”).

One needs to look no further than the titles of Espriu’s books to agree that his poetic drive was indeed fueled by a great sense of loss. His work, a seamless “texte únic” as it

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1. Salvador Espriu (Santa Coloma de Farnès, 1913–Barcelona, 1985) was considered the greatest Catalan writer since the Renaissance, and received numerous awards throughout his lifetime: Premi Lletra d’Or (1956), Premio Internacional Montagine (1971), Premi d’Honor de les Lletres Catalanes (1972), Medalla d’Or de la Generalitat de Catalunya (1980), and Medalla d’Or de la Ciutat de Barcelona (1982). He was also a candidate for the Nobel Prize. Josep Plà’s literary portrait of Espriu can be found in “Salvador Espriu (1913),” in *Homenots*, quarta sèrie, *Obra Completa*, vol. 29 (Barcelona: Destino, 1975), 205–42.


4. The title of his first major novel, written in 1931, is already explicit: *El doctor Rip*. Espriu’s delicate heath was probably a sign of a prolonged melancholy more than any physical problem. He once commented to Baltasar Porcel in a 1966 interview that he was “home de poca vida,” and that he was a man “de salut—o constitució—delicada,” although in fact he was never really sick to the point he needed to be in bed. See Baltasar Porcel, “Salvador Espriu, foc i cendra,” entrevista a *Serra d’Or* (1966), *Salvador Espriu. Enquestes i entrevistes I* (1933–1973), in *Obres completes*, annex 1, ed. Francesc Reina (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1995), 49.
has often been referred to, is truly a somber meditation on death just as the great poet of Sinera himself noted many times: “mi obra es una meditación sobre la muerte.”

Espriu was born in 1913, and died in 1985—ten years after General Franco’s death in 1975, and shortly after the consolidation of the democratic state in Spain finally took place with the 1982 general elections. He therefore published most of his major works during Franco’s dictatorship; and because his oeuvre responded profoundly to the cultural and political repression imposed during the Francoist period on all things Catalan, its somber quality has often been tied to the outcome of the Spanish Civil War.

The catastrophe of the Civil War cast a long and dark shadow upon Spanish writers, forced into exile or silence, or even killed in it. However, the Catalan-based writers known as the “generation of 36,” those who at the break of the war were only between twenty and twenty-six years old and were ready to take forward the dynamic linguistic and cultural Catalan heritage of the previous one hundred years (a generation that among others included Espriu, Agustí Bartra, Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel, Pere Calders, Jaume Vicens Vives, Mercè Rodoreda, and Rosa Leveroni), also had to endure the devastation the war brought upon their native language. They were witness to the repression of Catalan culture in the wake of the Nationalist victory of 1939, and were left with a language wounded to such a degree that, still in 1953, the reality of its weakness prompted the poet Gabriel Ferrater to echo Paul Valery in a now famous line: Madame is dying (“Madame se meurt”).

Madame, that is, Catalan, was indeed on the verge of dying in postwar Catalonia, a land devastated by silence in Maria Aurèlia Capmany’s words (“tierra devastada por el silencio”); a wasteland where silence spoke of fear and humiliation in Josep M. Castellet and Joaquim Molas’s description (“un silence plè d’humiliacions i de por”). A land, and


6. Cited in Salvador Espriu. Enquestes i entrevistes, in Obres completes, annex 1, 89. Throughout his life, Espriu continually insisted upon his work being a meditation on death, and on its testamentary condition, including that which is considered to be his most successful linguistic achievement, Primera història d’Esther (1948; Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1966). See, for example, his comments to Ricard Salvat in the appendix to this work following the dramatization of the text. Here, Salvat explains that Espriu greatly emphasized the fact that he composed Primera història “com una mena de testament de l’idioma,” Primera historia d’Esther, 66.

7. In Miquel Villalonga’s words “Si la catàstrofe va inmutar tothom . . . [aquells] qui, en esclatar la guerra, comptaven de vint a vint-i-sis anys i eren en plena etapa d’iniciació literària . . . l’impacte de la guerra . . . ha obtingut sobre ells una projecció més tèrba i violenta,” Autobiografia (Barcelona: José Janés Editor, 1947), quoted by Maria Aurèlia Capmany, Salvador Espriu (Barcelona: Dopesa, 1971), 27. Joan Fuster also writes of “the generation of 1936” to imply those writers who “en esclatar la guerra, comptaven de vint a vint-i-sis anys i eren en plena etapa d’iniciació literària.” Joan Fuster, “La poesia de Salvador Espriu,” in Contra el noucentisme (Barcelona: Crítica, 1977), 66.


a language, hurting so intensively that in 1968, Espriu expressively and poignantly told the journalist Joan Vidal:

Vostès no saben el que fòren els anys 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50 i bona part de la dècada següent. Ho detallo així, perquè si dius “del trente-nou al cinquanta,” de seguida ho has enllestit. Vegin perquè només dit d’aquesta manera ja pren un altre relleu. Imaginim’s doncs què va ser aquest lapse, passat dia rera dia. Per a mi va ser terrible.

The early postwar period was indeed terrible for Espriu. He retreated into a solitary state of mind, deeply in mourning for his old friend, the Mallorcan poet Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel, who died of tuberculosis in 1938 as a consequence of the war, and also for his father, who died shortly after the end of hostilities. It was not until 1944–45 when he was able to overcome his depression and revisit with Cementiri de Sinera the literary themes of his prewar years. After Cementiri, all his work, but especially his postwar books from the 1940s to the early 1960s—Cementiri de Sinera (1944–45), El caminat i el mur (1952), La pell de brau (1960), Llibre de Sinera (1963), and his festive Primera història d’Esther (1948)—extensively address in a more or less hermetic way the everyday reality of the harsh military regime that put to an end the vibrant cultural atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s, Espriu’s most formative years.

Cementiri does not have an explicit addressee, although it was likely written in memory of Rosselló-Pòrcel. It is one of his most anguished texts. It is also one of Espriu’s most significant books, not only because it provided him with a literary venue to resume his writing when in mourning, but also because it marked the return of the theme of “Sinera” as the poetic site of dwelling for the poet’s somber inner world. Sinera, his beloved Mediterranean “petita pàtria” and home to “Salom,” Espriu’s literary alter ego, had long been one of his main motifs, first conceived in the summers he spent as a child in the house the family owned in the little coastal town of Arenys de Mar, and from where Espriu took the name of Sinera, spelling Arenys backwards. And so had been Salom: Espriu’s inverted poetic voice was named after one of his maternal family names, Molas,

10. The death of Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel, who was killed in the Spanish Civil War, left Espriu inconsolable. They had been very good friends since meeting at the Universitat of Barcelona, where both studied humanities, and Espriu loved him dearly. Their friendship was consolidated during an educational Mediterranean trip with their university class in the early 1930s to Egypt and the Middle East. However, they separated when Roselló-Pòrcel became a communist.


also spelled backwards, and came to literary life in Espriu’s second book of youth, *Salom el caminant* (1929).\(^{15}\)

Salom and Sinera were expressions of lost worlds and words way before the explosion of the Spanish Civil War, and reflected from the very beginning the dark tonalities of his writing. They also confirm from early on Espriu’s profound fascination with the history of Israel and the Hebrew Bible,\(^{16}\) an interest he complemented later as a university student engaging in ancient art and history, and in the classic and ancient languages of the Mediterranean cultures and civilizations. But while Espriu’s extended somber meditation on loss and death was present before 1936 and his earlier literary work was already permeated with Hebraic themes, it was nevertheless the onset of the war and the devastating reality of the Francoist aftermath that, in the end, pushed him toward a definite poetic engagement not only with the history of Israel but also with the *converso-marrano* experience of Spain. In an unexpected turn of poetic justice, the outcome of the war and the Francoist repression undoubtedly pushed Espriu to inscribe his texts in a peculiar, almost hidden code; a secret register that ultimately marked his writing with a *marrano* quality and at the end confirmed him as a universal writer.\(^ {17} \)

*Cementiri* was Espriu’s first book written after the war. An impressively sorrowful and pained text, it provided him with the poiesis of real, personal mourning for the lost poet-friend, Bartomeu. But above all, the book opened the path for what would be from then on Espriu’s characteristic *marrano* literary gesture: his linking to 1492 the nature of things lost and of things remaining in the wake of the events of 1936, and from which Sinera would emerge in his writing as a real and spectral site of collective dwelling. It became the house and home of language, the site from where the nature of things in the event of destruction could perhaps be thought whole, and in all its infinitude—that is to say, in all that was, but also in all that still perhaps is; in all that is dead, but also in all that is not yet dead.

The building of Sinera, the thinking of Sinera, and the dwelling in sepulchral Sinera as the poetic and collective site of tolerance, heritage, and memory was precisely what Espriu understood as his calling, as his literary mission.\(^ {18} \) He undertook his task exclusively in Catalan, a language that in spite of its sorry state after the war, he was determined to revive and nurture. Perhaps because to understand “the nature of things” one needs to understand “the nature of language,” as Martin Heidegger puts it in his essay

\(^{15}\) *Salom el caminant*, a book of poems, was published privately in 1929 by Espriu’s father. It was reprinted by the Abadia de Montserrat press in 1994, in the children’s literature series. See Salvador Espriu, *Salom el caminant* (1929; Barcelona: Abadia de Montserrat, 1994).

\(^{16}\) Espriu’s first book, and his only one written in Castilian, was actually *Israel*, written when he was fifteen.

\(^{17}\) It was during the devastation of postwar Catalonia, as Gareth Walters explains, “that his career as a poet was confirmed”; but he was left with no name, and no symbol. Walters, “‘Sense cap nom ni símbol,’” 879.

on language. But only perhaps, since Espriu’s way to language, grounded in the Jewish spiritual archive as he said insistently throughout his life (“jo vinc d’un mon peculiar i força insòlit i m’he apuntalat bàsicament en la Bilbia, en els llibres sapiencials del Vell Testament”), was evidently not Heidegger’s.

Espriu, however, was not Jewish. He was an agnostic, a Republican liberal educated in the secular and anticlerical creed of his father, and amid the tolerant Catholic milieu provided by his mother. He personified the prototype of the urban, young bourgeois intellectual of the early twentieth century, joining the elite of cultivated and socially committed youth that in Spain, as well as in Catalonia, gravitated toward the philosophy of Republicanism, and were in great part recipients and inheritors of the educational spirit founded in the Spanish-speaking areas of Spain by the Instituto Libre de Enseñanza, and by its more or less equivalent Catalan counterparts in the late nineteenth century. It is therefore no coincidence that he decided to join the group of students in the humanities of the famous Crucero Universitario organized by the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la República in Madrid during the summer of 1933: an educational Mediterranean cruise to Greece, Egypt, and the Middle East, and where he solidified on board his friendship with Roselló-Pòrcel.

Espriu was extremely well-read. At the onset of the war he was already a highly learned scholar deeply familiar with the Book of the Dead, with Classical Greek and Latin, with ancient history and art, especially of Egypt. But most of all, Espriu insatiably


21. As Rosa Delor explains, “El pare de Salvador Espriu, el notari Francesc Espriu i Torres, segons explica la mateixa família era un anticlerical conveu que no va permetre que el seu fill estudiés en cap dels ordres religiosos de prestigi que freqüentava la burguesia; la mare altrament practicava un catolisidme tradicional, ingenu.” See Delor, “Introducció a Israel,” Salvador Espriu, Israel, in Obres completes, vol. 1, xxxv.

22. Espriu was part of the same 1936 generation of truly talented Spaniards, Catalan and non-Catalan, that includes Luis Buñuel, Federico García Lorca, Salvador Dalí, Joan Salvat-Papasseit, and so on.

23. Espriu and Roselló-Pòrcel’s friendship still calls for a general overall study. Although somewhat neglected until quite recently, some authors have begun to address this topic. For a study of the friendship, see Xavier Abraham, Dos amics de vint anys. Salvador Espriu i Bartomeu Roselló-Pòrcel (Palma de Mallorca: Conselleria d’Educació i Cultura, 2009). For literary, intertextual study see Rosa Delor’s La mort com a intercanvi simbòlic. Bartomeu Roselló Pòrcel i Salvador Espriu: Diàleg inter textual (1934–1984) (Montserrat, Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Abadia, 1993). Javier Marías takes the aforementioned 1933 Mediterranean cruise as a literary trope in the first book of his trilogy Tu rostro mañana, although he does not mention Espriu, nor Bartomeu Roselló-Pòrcel or any other Catalan writers. The cruise, explains Marías, took faculty and students (among them his father, Julián Marías) “hasta Túnez y Egipto, Palestina y Turquía, Grecia e Italia y Malta, Creta, Rodas, Mallorca, a lo largo de cuarenta y cinco entusiastas y optimistas días del verano de 1933, en uno de los cuales los pasajeros se vieron honrados con la visita del gran Valle-Inclán, quien no sé dónde ni por qué motivo subió a bordo para partir. El barco de la Compañía Transmediterránea que los condujo se había llamado Ciudad de Cádiz, y a todas sus travesías les puso fin el submarino italiano Ferrari, orgullo de Mussolini, que lo tropedeó y hundió en aguas del Mar Egeo el 15 de agosto de 1937, ya en plena guerra.” Javier Marías, Tu rostro mañana. Fiebre y lanza. (Madrid: Santillana, 2002), 191–92.

24. For detailed biographical studies on Espriu see Rosa Delor’s and Sebastià Boneu’s extensive introductions to, respectively, Espriu’s Israel and Primera història d’Esther. Rosa Delor, “Introducció a Israel,” Espriu, Israel, in Obres completes,
studied the Hebrew Bible and Biblical Hebrew, a passion stemming from a deep interest he first acquired reading in the library of the house of Arenys. He continuously searched for wisdom in the Torah; in the Mishnah; in Mysticism; in Gnosticism; in the Kabbalah. He was conversant with Judaic texts and authors of medieval Iberia, from Maimonides to Salomon Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra, Shem Tov, Hasday Creques, and Abraham Shalom, with whose names the writer used to play hide-and-seek throughout his life. He admired the *converso* culture of Spain and the Spanish Baroque. And he also engaged with the writings of Baruch Spinoza, especially his *Ethics*.

Rosa M. Delor notes incisively that Espriu grounded his work extensively in the Kabbalah and the Hebrew Bible because he had seemed to have found in Judaism the possibility of linking myth and history for Catalonia. However, and for all of his brilliance and erudition, Espriu could not have performed his radical literary transmutation from Spain back to Sepharad, and from the Hebrew to the Catalan nation, in Judaism alone. He knew very well that the Five Books of Moses, as Spinoza reminds us, “are uniquely adjusted to understanding the character of the Hebrew nation, and therefore relevant to the prosperity of their state alone.” Something else was needed, something that would provide him with a poetic opening from which to link myth and history: a gesture or a secret formula, perhaps, just as Josep Plà noted somewhat sarcastically and with great intuition.

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25. *Rosa M. Delor was the first observer to draw attention to the Kabbalistic structure of Espriu’s texts. See, for example, Delor, “Israel i la iniciació a la càbala,” Espriu, *Israel*, in *Obres completes*, vol. 1, xxxv-xlvi; and her critical biography “Salvador Espriu, els anys d’aprenentatge. 1929-1943,” in *Obres completes*, vol. 1.

26. As Delor reminds us, Espriu enjoyed signing work with their names, especially that of Ibn Gabriel: “Ricard Salvar explica que Espriu s’agradava de signar amb el significatiu pseudònim de Shalom ben Shelomó ibn Gabirol el Sineri.”

27. *Spinoza’s influence on Espriu’s work, although quite evident, has not yet been studied. That said, Delor notes the importance of Spinoza in Espriu’s Gnostic line of thinking. See “Introducció a *Israel,*” Espriu, *Israel*, in *Obres completes*, vol. 1, xxxvi. Delor also provides Espriu’s careful annotation, in Spanish and Latin, as well as its source, of the following Spinoza quote: “Deus se ipsum Amore intellectual infinitum amat=Dios se ama a si mismo con amor intelectual infinito,” taken from Spinoza, *Ethices*, Pars V, Propostio XXXV (1677; Amsterdam: Van Vloten, 1862), 266. Isabel Turull notes that the same quote is used by Espriu in the poem “Hermes,” from *Les roques i el mar, el blau*, but without providing its source: “De Spinoza hi trovem una cita a Hermes sense esment de l’autor a ‘Hermes’: ‘Deu, acte pur, s’estima a si mateix amb un amor intellectual infinit.’” Turull, “Fonts antigues i modernes de Les Roques i el mar, el blau,” in *Salvador Espriu. Algunes cartes i estudis sobre la seva obra*, ed. Josep Maria Castellet, edició en homentage al 10 anys de la seva mort, Centre de documentació i estudi Salvador Espriu. (Monserat: Publicacions de l’Abadia, 1995), 203.

28. “En el judaisme Espriu va trobar el que cap altra religió no havia fet: la resolució del problema del mite i la història.” Rosa Delor, “Significació de la càbala en Espriu. Metafísica i comprimís,” *Nexus* 31 (December 2003), 24. In Espriu’s lifetime, however, and in spite of his continuous allusions, literary criticism did not have much interest in exploring these sources, and it was not until the 1990s that they would be studied in depth; this was the same for the explicit acknowledgment of the profound implication of Kabbalah on his work. Delor and Bonet are two of the leading critics in the study of Hebrew sources in the work of Espriu.

Plà said in *Homenots* that Espriu gave him the impression of being an alchemist, “un home dedicat a una o altre forma d’alquimia, o sia a una feina rara, llarga, complicada i singular,” and Espriu might certainly be conceived this way, as a reserved and aloof poet performing a series of cryptic and strange permutations in the dark ages of Francoism. But although Plà was, in fact, one of the first observers to point intuitively to some sort of secret workings in Espriu’s writings, he was nevertheless incapable of completely comprehending the full radical nature of Espriu’s gesture: “Jo no sé pas si aquesta transmutació formà part de la finalitat literària d’Espriu. Ignoro quin fou el seu projecte.” He could not grasp Espriu’s project, nor understand his poetic goal. Yet Plà was aiming in the right direction: Espriu was an alchemist performing a radical transmutation: a prodigious, magnificent, fabulous transmutation, in Plà’s words (“una transmutació . . . prodigiosa, fabulosa, magnífica”). A transmutation sometimes hidden in plain view, but otherwise, as in *Primera història d’Esther* and in *La pell de brau*, often quite explicitly displayed in his books.

*Primera història d’Esther* and *La pell de brau*, two of his major works, clearly mirror one another; both texts juxtapose the intolerant nature of Francoist Spain in the postwar period with Spinoza’s indications in his *Ethics* that the spiritual teachings of the Bible, if correctly transposed into the state of nature, are also uniquely apt to the building of a secular state of tolerance, one where different peoples might coexist. Espriu took Spinoza almost to the letter: *La pell de brau* transports Sepharad to the reality of Franco’s Spain, mourning the old land where languages were many and diverse (“a Sepharad diverses són les llengües”), *Primera història*, a festive although very dark puppeteer piece, takes Catalonia to the Judaic site of Sinera and the garden of the five trees, where people from today and yesterday literally celebrate the Purim days of triumph over repression.

However, and although both books made abundantly clear the writer’s intellectual conversation with the Hebrew Bible, Espriu’s dialog with the teachings of the Bible was not based solely on Judaism and the pre-1492 Judeo-Iberian culture. He performed something else, that “magnificent transmutation” Plà could not completely grasp: a full engagement with the Judeo-Iberian culture and with the converso-marrano experience of Spain, which Espriu transported to the literary plane as the spectral site from where he could painfully, but securely, concoct his poetics almost in secret, and almost as a riddle; or, perhaps better said, considering Espriu’s extensive knowledge of Hebraic themes, to construct his literary project almost like a shibboleth.

Jacques Derrida reminds us that the shibboleth does not allow for translation. It “can be uttered only in a certain way in a certain language,” he explains, and it is “as a chance, or aleatory effect, that the untranslatability of this formal economy functions like a secret

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31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 221.
within one’s so-called natural or mother-tongue.” Espriu’s cryptic poetics—his untranslatability—function in a similar register. His writing emerges hermetically from within his mother tongue: a riddle uttered secretly in an old and broken language that nevertheless opens the way, almost magically and magnificently, to an all-embracing language—a language for all, a jargon-like language that, if embraced, would shed light, as Giorgio Agamben says of the language of the Gypsies, “on that truth which the correspondence between language and people was secretly intended to conceal: all peoples are gangs and coquilles, all languages are jargon and argot.”

The lively Catalan jargon Espriu concocted in Primera història d’Esther, a festive language pointedly described by Arnau Pons as “el Barbalès d’Espriu,” is definitely not identity-specific. It aimed to break down precisely all that rigid correspondence between languages and peoples, and was created to open the door to hospitality. As Pons writes:

Esther, una Moreneta judeocatalana i alumna rodolinaire destacada, no autoritzarà “expressions de raval ni cacofonies” en un poema que expressament n’és ple. I que n’és ple amb una traça que mareja. Seria excessiva sino fos que l’artista ha infectat el seu estil amb parles forasteres . . .—caló, hebreu, llatí, xarnec, patuès—per tal de configurar un sistema personal de figures idiomàtiques certes i inventades.

Primera història, the text that perhaps provides Espiru with his most splendid heim of language, fully acknowledges its Catalan heritage; however, it does not assign identity, nor enforces norms of propriety: Caló, the gypsy language of Spain and of Catalonia; xarnec, the broken catalastellano of the rural Andalusian-speaking immigrants that had flocked to Catalonia in search of work since before the Civil War; Hebrew; Castilian; Latin; and many other expressions uttered in languages dead and alive that have traversed Catalan in one form or another and at one point or another, populate this fabulous theatrical piece—a text that, written in the Spanish tradition of the grotesque, linked Espriu marvelously to Goya’s drawings and Valle-Inclán’s esperpentos, and left the audience totally perplexed at its representation première.

Espriu’s poetics, expressed in Catalan, no matter how fascinating, sinister, or grotesque, is the home of language. Derrida writes that language ties us “to the home, to the motherland, to the birthplace . . . in short to the family and to the family of words derived from heim—home.” Espriu’s cryptic jargon, sometimes festive as in Primera història, but most of the time somber as in Cementiri, La pell de brau, or in El caminant i el mur, clearly points to this familial inheritance or heritage. Language and heritage remain undeniable

for Espriu, who sees it as his duty to pass them on to the next generation: “Jo vaig en una solemne processó duent als dits una prima candela si no una trista cerilla. I com és natural, em cremaré. En aquesta processó tothom hi cap . . . Jo em moriré i de la meva obra no quedarà rés com és just i bo que sigui així. Però la processó continuarà.”

But all the same, what Espriu’s hermetic language mutters to him time and time again in the desolate wasteland of the Francoist years does not point toward a single, identity-based point of origin, but to the heritage of the *converso-marrano* experience of Spain: An experience always of loss, of de-appropriation, a heritage that repeatedly leaves him at his most intimate, and us with him, “sense cap nom ni symbol” (without name or symbol) as he wrote in poem “XXXIII” of *Cementiri de Sinera*.

Language dictates to Espriu a reading of the *converso-marrano* experience of Spain; it calls him to a mission, and he commits to this literary enterprise fully. He is just part of a procession open to all, a humble poet trying to keep the flame of language alive, even if it only burns like a squalid little candle. Silence is not an option, even if in order to let language speak through him, the poet must choose stoically to inhabit death, to accept death—embrace death in order to let writing live, as he would describe it to Baltasar Porcel in an extraordinary interview given in 1966 that left Porcel aghast: “Aquesta és la suprema dignitat de l’home: haver-se de morir, i arribar-ho a entendre i aprendre, i acceptar-ho sense escarafalls. I la resta es lliteratura o silenci.”

The gift of death: “literature or silence,” says Espiu; “l’écriture ou la vie” in Jorge Semprún’s words; “(se) donner la mort” Derrida would say. There is a kindred spirit among all three men, but especially between Derrida and Espriu. Derrida was of Sephardic origin, an assimilated French-Algerian. He did not speak Biblical Hebrew, at least not well, nor his own historical language, Judeo-Spanish. Instead, he knew only French; he was monolingual in a language that was not his: “I have only one language. And it is not mine.”

I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it, and inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element. Not a natural element, not the transparency of the

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41. Jorge Semprún, *a member of the French Resistance as Primo Levi had been in Italy*, gave the title *L’écriture ou la vie* to his 1995 memoir as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald, where he was deported in 1943. Semprún’s book was first published in French by Folio in 1994, and in Spanish by Tusquets Editores, Barcelona, in 1997. Semprún’s narration closely echoes Levi’s splendid and terrible *Se questo é un uomo*, a memoir of Levi’s own time in Auschwitz, written in 1946 and first published in Italy in 1947. In 1959, Stuart Woolf translated *If This Is a Man* into English in close collaboration with Levi, and this was published in the UK by Orion Press. Semprún, like Espriu, was born into a Republican family. Levi was born into a liberal family of sephardic origin, like Derrida.

ether, but an absolute habitat. It is impassable, indisputable. I cannot challenge it except by testifying to its omnipresence in me. It would always have preceded me. . . . It constitutes me, it dictates even the ipseity of all things to me, and also prescribe a monastic solitude for me; as if, even before learning to speak, I had been bound by some vows. This inexhaustible solipsism is myself before me. Lastingly . . . Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine.43

Unlike Derrida, Espriu was not Jewish.44 Born into a Catholic tradition, he did not use Hebrew as the sacred language of prayers, although he probably knew it better than Derrida.45 He was not of marrano origin either, at least as far as he knew.46 But Espriu’s series of expropriations and inversions closely echo those described by Derrida. Catalan was Espriu’s native language; but in a turn of the screw that, to a certain extent and in inverted fashion, mirrors Derrida’s linguistic experience, Catalan was not totally “his” language, either. Espriu was not monolingual. He was bilingual in Catalan and Castilian; multilingual if we consider his competency in classical and ancient languages.47 He admired Cervantes and Gracián,48 Dante and many other classics in different languages; and yet, throughout his writing, his fidelity to Catalan is impassable and indisputable.

As noted, Derrida observed that he only knew one language (French, that of the colonizer), and it was not his. Espriu might have said that he knew only one language (his wounded native Catalan), and still it was not his. Catalan constituted him through a series of expropriations, not appropriations that, in a doubled or tripled way, mirror the series described by the French philosopher in a truly relevant note of his book Monolingualism of the Other: the understated but long note 8 where Derrida quietly explains that even if Biblical Hebrew, as explained by Franz Rosenzweig, were the only language “proper” to the Jewish peoples as the sacred language of prayer, for him however “expropriation,” and not appropriation, would still best summarize his situation:

43. Ibid., 1–2.
44. In an interview with Jordi García-Soler, Espriu remarked that he was not Jewish: “No tinc ascendència jueva. Almenys no està comprobada.” Nevertheless, he gave room to the possibility of a marrano origin: “Si de cas, serien dels que restaren aquí i caigueren sota l’àmbit vigilància del Sant Ofici.” See “Salvador Espriu, escritor de Sinera, Barcelona,” Tele-El Tel (1966), in Salvador Espriu. Enquestes i entrevistes, Obres completes, annex 1, 64.
47. Espriu often said cryptically what he recounted in half-words to Salvador Pániker in 1966: “He de decirle que soy un lector constante y empedernido de la Biblia. Leo el Antiguo Testamento en castellano, en catalán, en el idioma que se presente.” The Old Testament refers to the Torah, which Espriu was also able to read in old Hebrew. See Salvador Pániker, Conversaciones en Cataluña,” Salvador Espriu, Entrevistes i Enquestes, in Obres completes, annex 1, 89.
48. Espriu repeatedly expressed his admiration for Cervantes and Gracián. In 1961, he told A. Figueruelo in El noticiario universal that he had read widely, and that his favorite works were “La Biblia, el Quijote, La divina Comedia, el Discreto de Gracián, y Cartas a Lucilio de Séneca.” “Salvador Espriu, un escritor catalán,” in Salvador Espriu. Enquestes i entrevistes, in Obres completes, annex 1, 16.
The typical situation of the Franco-Maghrebian Jew that I am trying to describe is one in which . . . expropriation extends to the loss of these three resorts:

a. “Authentic” French (a French ostensibly maternal . . . But only a French of the colonized—something that the German . . . of the Ashkenazic Jews of Europe was not). [for instance the German of Rosenzweig, Hanna Arendt, or Walter Benjamin]

b. Judeo-Spanish (which was no longer practiced).

c. The sacred language . . . used in prayers.49

In note 8, Derrida attempts to describe himself as a Franco-Maghrebian Jew, and he practically ends up describing himself as a (linguistically French) marrano. His monolingualism was in French, he says, but French was not his language; nor was Ladino, the ancestral Judeo-Spanish language of Derrida’s family that had already vanished in Algiers during his lifetime; Hebrew was only used in prayers, and Derrida, alas, was a secular Jew. Note 8 makes Derrida’s whole oeuvre speak in a doubled, and even tripled register (his three resorts of expropriation) very much akin to what Alberto Moreiras has conceptualized accurately as “the marrano register.”

“What is the marrano register?” asks Moreiras; and answers:

It is first of all the short name of what we should properly call a converso-marrano register. We understand converso as a reference to the abandonment of what was previously one’s own in order to embrace a social truth, a dominant state of the situation. And marrano is the state of return, or rather the melancholy state where the shadow of the lost object falls upon the subject and splits it or destabilizes it. I am making obvious reference to Spanish and Portuguese Jewish history and its avatars. My purpose, however, is not to elaborate on it, but rather to take it as the symptomatic point of torsion of a history of the practice of freedom that, as such, has never relented in its struggle against the logics of imperial domination.50

The shadow of Derrida’s three losses falls upon him, splitting in a threefold way the subject he will never be: a Frenchman. Espriu’s poetics also fall in the marrano register. His writing is constituted by it, and the shadow of a melancholic state of return that his fidelity to Catalan entails, also splits his poetic being into two, or even three registers: the poetic voice of “Salom,” that of “Espriu,” and that of “Salvador” Espriu.

In the early years of Francoist Spain, that kind of marrano fidelity understood (in Moreira’s words) as a kind of “struggle against the logics of imperial domination,” necessarily meant making oneself invisible. “Acceptar la mort. El reste es literatura o silenci”: to keep language alive, Espriu had to retreat—“sense cap nom ni symbol.” To let language be in others, he had to disappear from or within the collective; he had to hide in language, give himself to the words—just like in 1954 Espriu wrote in Les hores: “He donat

49. Jaques Derrida, Note 8, Monolonguialism, 84.

Espriu or Arenys no more; just Salom and Sinera: dead, spectral people dwelling in a lost and no less spectral site. Espriu “se donne la mort” with his fidelity to literature in Catalan, fully embracing after the war the experience of the marrano Jewry of Spain.

Catalan was the only language he had to understand “the nature of things”; to understand that indecipherable period of intolerance brought about by the Spanish Civil War—although not in the same way as Heidegger. Heidegger’s gesture toward language is, ultimately, one of propriety that leads to nation and empire, and to that end, to exclusion. It is not Espriu’s poetic way of dwelling in language. Espriu’s way to language aims at exactitude, but not at propriety. It aims for a mathematical, infinite exactitude: for the infinite exactitude of the Kabbalah, embracing the multiple and different losses at the heart of translations, conversions, and inversions of language and history. Espriu’s writing speaks of de-appropriation and expropriation, of moving away from the notion of the “proper.” And in doing so, Espriu’s way to language goes through his own personal exhaustion. He writes in Cementiri:

No lluito més.
Et deixo el sepulcre vastíssim
que fou terra dels pares,
somni, sentit. Em moro
perque no se com viure.

Cementiri is a poem of love and death meant as a literary testament to his poet friend. It speaks of the broken, devastated world left behind, of the long gone land now turned cemetery, of death and of all of those dead before him. Yet unlike Santa Teresa’s, echoed in the last verse of the fragment, Espriu’s poetics does not long for redemption, nor for a mystic embrace. Its voice embraces the bare reality of death in the face of not knowing how to live in his devastated land of sorrow. He recoils. And he almost gives up on life, literally and personally, performing a kind of civil death.

Maria Aurèlia Capmany writes that Espriu chose death, civic death, as a kind of a last-resort ethical weapon against the dictatorship: “Espriu escull la mort, la mort cívica, la mort com única arma ética que li queda.”

“Civic death” is a terrible state to be in, nonetheless. Civic death is, in fact, the quintessential quasi-death of the marrano, who is left after the catastrophe without name or symbol, without palliative and in a state of continuous and precarious survival. Espriu’s poetic voice in Cementiri is already that of a

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52. Cf. Espriu’s cryptic tone in note 47.


54. Capmany, Salvador Espriu, 22.
wandering marrano always hoping to return to Sinera, the cemetery of lost words, worlds, and loved ones. Capmany, like Plà, does not fully grasp Espriu’s secret formula, the marrano register, of his writing. She does point out, however, that Espriu’s poetic voice rose up with the ethic of the vanquished: “En un univers que cultiva les ràpides ascensions, la superviència precaria, [Espriu] alça l’ètica del vençut, sense palliatius de cap mena.”55 She understands this well: instead of accepting defeat, Espriu began the hard, painful, and very solitary work of approaching and building language. True, his writing emerges from the dead, and is a meditation on death, but in an extraordinary tour de force, Espriu was able to dwell in the lost world of the Iberian Hebrew tradition, and build from it the language of the dead as a language that could and would be the language of the living. His giving up to “civic” death is not a suicide. He chose to give himself to language in order to give us, as a future inheritance, a world that had existed once and may be spoken again by language. Sinera, the heim of language, the site of dwelling, is his testament.

In Cementiri, then, Sinera turns out not to be (as it has often been idealized) a small, gentle, and mythical pàtria mediterrànea. It does not point to any idealized Mediterranean site, but rather to the reality of a truly devastated homeland:

Quina petita pàtria
encercla el cementiri!
Aquesta mar, Sinera,
turons de pins i vinya,
pols de rials. No estimo rés més, excepte l’ombra
viatgera d’un núvol.
El lent record dels dies
que son pastas per sempre
(Cementiri de Sinera, II)

In Cementiri, Sinera is the heim of the dead, the site nestled within the walls of a cemetery, not beyond them as has been often understood. The sea, the hills, the dust, the vineyards—everything dwells in a cemetery, it is the cemetery. Sinera is the cemetery, secretly oozing out into the open the voices, characters, bodies, songs and dances, sites and fights of a world long gone and buried. In Cementiri, Sinera exudes sorrow, pointing to a lost heim of language, a lost and loved petit objet mourned now by the poet in solitary despair: “Quina petita patria / encercla el cementiri!”

But it is precisely in the marrano way of his mourning, in the gesture with which Espriu gives himself up to death, that Sinera is made to exist with the ethic of the vanquished. Carefully, delicately, patiently, surmounting pain and sorrow, Espriu’s marrano gesture makes the world of Sinera incipiently and secretly speak to us.

After Cementiri, Espriu’s writing would secretively, but very clearly, speak that “state of return, or rather the melancholy state where the shadow of the lost object falls upon

55. Ibid.
the subject and splits or destabilizes it,” as so expressively described by Moreiras.\footnote{56} Sinera, built and thought up in infinite mathematical exactitude, grew patiently in his writing; step-by-step and word-by-word, as Antonio Machado would have it: “Mi lengua es difícil porque es exacta, precisa. A veces me he pasado meses buscando una palabra . . . Yo me he planteado la lengua como un problema matemático.”\footnote{57} Sinera, the inverted Arenys, that Kabbalistic Sinera, bears the mark of the marrano. And its is in choosing to inscribe his writing within that kind of register, in the gesture that accepts the doubled and tripled inversions at the heart of a very cruel and sad Spanish history, that Espriu’s language, his building of language, his dwelling in language is necessarily and radically distinct to that of Heidegger’s.

The difference is that Espriu’s understanding of the dwelling, building, and thinking of language does not point to empire, but rather to republicanism: “Yo soy republicano,” he said often.\footnote{58} Espriu’s poetics dwell in a Republican Spinozian and marrano Sinera; not in Heidegger’s Nazi Germany, not in Francoist Spain, not in Catalonia, nor in Barcelona; not even in Arenys de Mar, nor in the old house inherited by the family from his grand-uncle, the learned bishop. They dwell in the library left behind by the quasi marrano bishop-turned-politician-turned-scholar in the house of Arenys; a Borgesian-like, jam-packed library; full with the literature of the Jewish spiritual tradition, and full of books about Israel that Espriu voraciously read; full with the many different Bible translations, orthodox and unorthodox, in Greek, Castilian, and even in Catalan; Catholic and Protestant bibles that he devoured; full, even, with a Torah and a Mishnah, in old Hebrew; full with books of the Spanish Baroque authors; and full with books of Catalan literature.

The library was in the house in Arenys to which he often returned; the house where he was seduced by the French romantic engravings that hung in his room as a very young child—those depicting various moments in the history of Queen Esther that belonged to “la senyora Maria Castelló,” his maternal great-aunt.\footnote{59} It was from this poetic and at the same time real register that the mythical site first conceived and loved in the summer house of Arenys de Mar, would finally emerge anew in Primera història d’Esther as a marrano house and home of language: the house of the garden of the five trees that Espriu, engaging in his methodical, mathematical Lullian building of language, turned into the mythical Sinera following the teachings of the Jewish Kabbalah.\footnote{60} This was the literary garden

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\footnote[56]{56. Moreiras, “Common Political Democracy.”}
\footnote[57]{57. Roman Gubern, “Entrevista con Salvador Espriu,” Barcelona, Primer Acto (1965), Salvador Espriu. Enquestes i entrevistes, in Obres completes, annex 1, 29.}
\footnote[58]{58. Espriu’s interview with Josep Niella, in “Gentes que cuentan. Habla Salvador Espriu,” El Pensamiento Navarro (1966); rpt. in Salvador Espriu. Enquestes i entrevistes, in Obres completes, annex 1, 61.}
\footnote[59]{59. “Maria Castelló, germana gran de la meva mare i padrina meva, era un dona grossa, d’escassa alcària, nerviosa, enèrgica, fidel a una tradició honesta de cuina csolana. Sortia poc ‘perquè els peus li feien sempre molt de mal’, i va viure i es va morir a la nostre vila de Sinera, sense haver quasi rondat per l’incomprehensible món exterior.” Salvador Espriu, Primera història d’Esther, in Obres completes, vol. 11, ed. Sebastià Bonet (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1995), 9.}
\footnote[60]{60. As noted, Bonet is also one of the leading critics in the study of Hebrew sources in the work of Espriu. See his excellent introduction to Primera història d’Esther, “Primera història d’Esther. Improvisació pera titelles,” in Obres completes, vol. 11, vii–lxix.}
where Espriu, giving his poetic voice forever to “Espriu,” announced (like a prophet; or a magi, a “fadri,” or an alchemist) that he was following an ethical, almost Spinozian dictate: “Tinc missió de convocar nens i crescuts . . . al jardí dels cinc arbres, sota el roser de la pell leprosa, la troana, la camèlia, el libanenc i la palmera gànguil.”

The mission undertaken by Espriu in the garden of Sinera and under the five trees that echo the five books of Moses is an embracing one—a mission of hospitality directed at building a world, and a language, that should remain tolerant and open to all; a splendid language for a splendid world, full of irony and playfulness: “Apotòtic! Aquest mot exòtic em torna neurotic, prostàtic, cianòtic, elefantiàtic, penibètic, tìtic, i àdhuc apoplectic i arteriosclèrotic.”

In Primera història, Espriu carries us into the marrano side of language where Sinera exists as a site of mourning and loss, yes, but also of love and desire. Espriu offers it to us as the heim of tolerance where the pained “petita pàtria” portrayed by Cementiri reemerges in Primera història as a “petita pàtria entre les vinyes i el mar,” full of promise. Every voice in Primera història, thanks to Espriu’s language, is now made suddenly alive and well, playfully celebrating the festivities of a splendidly marrano Purim:

Pel baptisme, cristià
Pels sentits, pilloc pagà.
Per la peg, català.
La carota, d’Albardà.
I aquest morro, de senglar
Barrigant rera la glà.

Primera història d’Esther does not speak of one nation, nor even of a hybrid, multicultural nation; it does not speak of Judaism as a stand-in for the Catalan community, either, or as the marrano experience as a site for identity. Moreiras specifically warns us that “the marrano register is not primarily interested in a relapse into Judaism.” Instead,

It concerns, rather, the pulsional drive to find strength in the subjective deconstitution caused by the fall of the shadow. The marrano shadow ciphers the melancholy moment in the wake of which it becomes necessary to develop an affective position that would not simply be anti-melancholy. The game consists of embracing melancholy and its other. From its inception the marrano register is already a double register.

Sinera, the marrano site at the heart of Espriu’s universe, is precisely the secret site of all de-appropriation. It is an alternative and radical site, from which Espriu builds for us the possibility of a language that poetically speaks in another way: The marrano way. A marrano poetics we might say, that, in Espriu’s own words, hopefully would help us live a

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62. Ibid., vv. 76–86.
63. Ibid., 7.
64. Ibid., vv. 94–99.
65. Moreiras, “Common Political Democracy.”
life of rectitude, and maybe even lead us to “a good death” (“No se que és la Poesia, a no ser una mica d’ajuda per a viure rectament i pot ser per a ben morir”).

“Bon morir” says Espriu: a good death that uncannily relates again to (se) donner la mort, that very elusive and exquisite poetic quality that has also nothing to do with nationalist vindication, in spite of the fervor that Espriu’s poetry paradoxically inspired in the milieu of the Catalan nationalist revival of the 1960s. If his gesture points toward Sinera, and not to Catalonia per se, and if his is a literary marrano gesture, and I believe it is, then, as Moreiras points out, what is important is “to establish the conceptual possibility of a marrano register for thought,” and not for identity:

It is then a matter of establishing the conceptual possibility of a marrano register for thought. But in opposition to what? What is, in the history of thought, which is also the history of political action, the alternative register, that is, any register incapable of assuming the marrano name? Let me call it the identitarian register, so that the fact that this is the register of a multiplicity of registers is duly indicated. If the marrano register is the abandonment of what was previously one’s own and the embrace of the dominant state of the situation, and at the same time the abandonment of the state of the situation without the recovery of what was previously mine, the identitarian register is the embrace of what was previously mine insofar as I identify it in the state of the situation, and the militant abandonment of the alien as non-dominant. The marrano register is double because it takes off from a double exclusion: from your own and from the alien. But there is no exclusion without at least a double exclusion: the first gesture of exclusion is always inclusive, and it is only the second gesture that opens to exposure. The identitarian register is therefore a register of inclusion that excludes whatever is differential. But it only requires affirmative exclusion: it is thus not properly exclusion, but only rejection.

The nationalist mentality of the 1960s, locked in a nationalist struggle, responded to the political force of Espriu’s work mostly from this “identitarian” register. His poetry was heralded as a flagship for the nationalist demands of the Catalan language and culture. This is precisely the sense in which, in a speech delivered in Jerusalem in 2007, the former president of the Catalan Generalitat, Jordi Pujol, acknowledged that fairly common identification established between Catalans and the Jewish people by the intellectual bourgeoisie of the 1960s:

Procedeixo d’una família, en principi, més aviat simpatitzant amb els jueus, però no especialment interessada. No obstant això, hi va haver alguna cosa que va incrementar, per reacció, l’actitud pro jueva, i va ser que el Règim franquista va ser antijueu. Ho va ser sobretot en la propaganda i en la doctrina. Crec que en la pràctica ho va ser molt menys. Però el discurs oficial estava molt ple d’al·lusions al que anomenaven la “conspiració juedo-masònica” i d’afirmacions antisemites. I curiosament barrejava sovint el judaisme amb el

67. Moreiras, “Common Political Democracy.”
catalanisme. En moments de gran exaltació franquista i de xenofobia espanyolista se’ns acusava als catalans de ser els jueus d’Espanya.68

Espriu’s writing certainly carries with it a strong and radical political stance. As Arnau Pons notes, a valuable contribution of Delor’s study of the Jewish fonts for Primera història was that of establishing the correspondence between Espriu’s Queen Esther and the Our Lady of Montserrat, patron saint of Catalonia, in the wake of the festivities imposed by Franco in the Montserrat Abbey:

[Delor estableix] la correspondència entre el text d’Espriu i les festes del tron de la Verge de Montserrat (la reina Esther), presidides per Franco i esbombades per la premsa del moment (la vena sarcàstica d’Espriu s’encarregarà de transformar els capcirons dels bisbes i els tricornis de la Guàrdia Civil en epígons d’en Banyeta). El poeta haurà dotat el text d’una necessària significació històrica i llavors hi haurà inscrit el seu propi veredicte, contra el “golafre pop.” També l’obra llançarà a tort i a dret els seus tentacles.69

Pons and Delor sharply grasp the force of Espriu’s political voice, which, while very powerful, works in fact against the grain of the expansive nationalist ideology of the 1960s. This is why Espriu’s universal voice had already lost its local political nationalist attraction by the time of the writer’s death in 1985. Miquel de Palol explains that the loss of interest in Espriu’s writing was due probably to the fact that “the new democratic period demanded another kind of literature, less pained; one that would address a world now in evolution to other horizons.”70 Espriu’s radical political stance is, in fact, not well heard when rigidly tied up with the ropes of identitarianism. And yet, Espriu’s work is of a profound political nature, although not one of easy definition. Espriu embraced a politics and a poetics of infinite time, literally taking us as far back as five or six hundred years: back to the infamous dates of 1391 and of 1492, and then forward again to July 18, 1936, when Salom de Sinera died.71 After that date, time lapses: 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, and so on, until 1948, when Primera història d’Esther emerges singing with a full and powerful marrano voice.72
In his introduction to *Primera història d’Esther*, Sebastià Bonet cleverly notes some of the *marrano* features of Espriu’s writing, pointing to the appeal the figure of Queen Esther had for the *marranos* of Iberia:

A més d’una agraïda i inusitada imatge d’un ‘triomf momentani’ de l’Israel de l’exili babilònic en que automàticament s’han projectat, generació rera generació, els desigs dels jueus de la diáspora definitiva, més específicament presentava com a positiu un comportament basat en l’ocultació de la identitat judaica que feia d’Esther una heroïna molt qualificada perquè s’hi sentissin identificat els marrans. I qui diu els marrans pot dir, per obvia extensió, tothom que estigui obligat a viure en un ‘exili interior’: com ara per exemple, Salom de Sinera en el de Sepharad.73

Bonet is certainly correct in pointing to the *marrano* side of language as an interior exile. But it can be argued that in *Primera història*, Salom does not enact the figure of the *marrano*, but rather that of the spectral Iberian Jew of the Catalan language who dies in 1936—echoing the real disappearance of the Catalan-Aragones Jewish people in 1391, and of the Iberian Jews in 1492. In fact, the poetic voice of “Espriu,” and not that of “Salom,” fulfills the role of the *converso-marrano* as a crypto-secular, agnostic, Republican poet. In Espriu’s *Primera història*, as in most of his works, the poetic voice of the *marrano* oftentimes speaks in a double register shared by “Salom” and “Espriu.” Most often, however, the *converso-marrano* voice is given to “Espriu”: the secular poet who chooses to remain in Sinera, completely aware that, after 1492, as well as after 1939, Sepharad ceased to be the home for many, and became the broken, fractured land of the wounded bull.

For Espriu “La pell de brau,” the skin of the bull, is all that remains of Sepharad after the catastrophe: a land under the boot of the repressive dictatorship in place from 1939 to 1975; the land that very early on Espriu started to name Kolinòsia, the land of rabbits. The sad, gray, and weak Kolinòsia: the land of the *marrano-conversos*, the land of those who in 1492, as well as in 1936, could not choose to leave. Espiú’s land of misery: Kolinòsia, Lavinia, Alfaranja—all marks and sites of a profound defeat:

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Oh, que cansat estic de la meva
covarda, vella, tan salvatge terra,
i com m’aadressaria d’allunyar-me’n,
nord enllà,
on diuen que la gent és neta
i noble, culta, rica, lliure,
desvetllada i felic!
Aleshores, a la congregació, els germans dirien
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Espriu and the conversos did not/could not go north. The impossible north of Espriu/Salom is the impossible north of the converso-marrano. With Sepharad gone, there was no gentle Amsterdam for them. Not even in fact for Benedictus (Baruch) Spinoza, “the marrano of reason” as Yirmiyahu Yovel once qualified him, and whom the marrano universe of Espriu’s “Assaig de Càntic en el temple” implicitly addresses.

In the poem, Espriu’s voice chooses to abandon neither his land nor his language. He accepts defeat, with no illusions of utopia or of redemption, as Josep Plà noted. He confesses himself a coward, forced to accept the humiliation of the unjust but powerful master, just as Espriu wrote in “Mishnà” (1956):

demano avui, amb el llums que miren
l’abisme i la llum,
demano avui amb la mort alaçada
que algún dia guanyi la barca la riba del cim.

In “Mishnà” and in “Assaig de càntic” Espriu’s converso-marrano voice speaks from the side of defeat of the marrano register, a pained and melancholic surrendering to the lost heim of language. However, in both poems, just as in the totality of Espriu’s work, acceptance of defeat emerges as a strategy of survival. In “Assaig de càntic” the marrano voice acknowledges his cowardice; but also his wild side. And if Espriu’s marrano writing can be read as akin to the “marrano register” notion conceptualized by Moreiras, the


75. In his critical study of Primera història, Bonet reminds us that Espriu incorporates “dos enunciats importants de l’Ethica . . . [que ens conduieixen] a la interpretació (intrinsecament discutible) per el qual el famós *sive natura* del gran heterodox d’Amsterdam voldria dir que si be Deu es tota la natura, tota la natura no és pas Deu.” See Bonet, “Primera història d’Esther. Improvisació pera titelles,” Espriu, Primera història d’Esther, in *Obres completes*, vol. 11, xlv.

gesture put forward by Espriu with his writing would not be well-served if it were read as only an expression of defeat. Espriu’s poetics has a double register that allows for a new reading: one that may accept death and defeat (how could we do otherwise?), but one that fearlessly and relentlessly also demands the arrival of a state of tolerance. He writes at the end of “Mishnà”:

\[
\begin{align*}
demano avui, amb el llums que miren \\
l’abisme i la llum, \\
demano avui amb la mort alaçada \\
que algún día guanyi la barca la riba del cim.77
\end{align*}
\]

In “Mishnà,” the poem knows defeat, just as the Mishnà of the Hebrews accepts the loss of the Second Temple: each is a poetic and spiritual expression of a vanquished thought. But within defeat, Espriu’s marrano-poetics is able to conceptualize, build, and dwell in a site of language where a “common political democracy” (in Alberto Moreiras’s words) might perhaps be possible. As Moreiras explains:

The question that concerns me is the possibility of offering a conceptual determination for a register of vanquished thought, of the thought and experience of the vanquished, in the name of common political democracy . . . Defeat has secularly forced the defeated into hegemonic submission, and it probably could not have been otherwise. But conversion to hegemony is never the last word. Common political democracy is the result, wherever it appears, of the forcing of that conversion, of hegemonic submission, into something else, which is not quite victory. I am going to use a particular name for it: marranismo, which has of course a particular validity for the history of modernity. Marranismo is also a register of power, as it is not impotence: but it is the register of a power for freedom.78

Moreiras’s notion of marranismo as a “common political democracy” and as the “register of a power for freedom” profoundly relates to Espriu’s poetic will of building a linguistic heim of tolerance. A poetic state of tolerance that, while present in Espriu’s whole body of work, perhaps reached its maximum expression in La pell de brau, the book that, wholly embracing the remnants of Sepharad, revisited the bloody fratricidal war of 1936–39 head on. This was the book in which Espriu, as he told J. M. Gironella in 1970, explicitly proposed to substitute “la dialecta de dominador-dominado . . . por un tipo de ‘pragmatismo’ real o eficaz;”79 that is, where Espriu faced “el complexíssim conjunt dels essencials problemes ibèrics,” and tried to comprehend “la tan difícil, entrabancada i entrabancosa convivència ibèrica”:80

77. Ibid.
78. Moreiras, “Common Political Democracy.”
El brau en l’arena de Sepharad,
Envestia l’estesa pell
I en fa, enlairant-la, la bandera.
Contra el vent, adusta pell de toro, del brau cobert de sang,
Es ja parrac espesès pè l’or
Del sol, per sempre lliurat al martiri
Del temps, oració nostra
I blasfemia nostra.
Alhora víctima, botxí,
Odi, amor, lament i rialla
Sota la closa eternitat del cel.

Today the war is almost forgotten, and the bull seems now to be resting. Espriu’s language and his poetic world, however, are still here with us as a testament: as the gift of death and of the dead, if we read Espriu in a Derridian way. As a radical politico-theological proposal for Republicanism, if we hear the subtle Spinozian and marrano ways of Espriu’s poetry; a proposal for a marrano politics of our time, if we choose to read him according to Moreiras’s argument.

We could read him also in a Benjaminian way—not a theoretical stretch, if we remember that, after committing suicide in Portbou, Walter Benjamin was unexpectedly interred in 1940 in a marrano-like way: buried as Catholic with the inverted Christian name of Benjamin Walter, just to give up both names when, after the end of World War II, after five years that poetically echo the five trees of Espriu’s garden and the five books of the Torah, Benajmin shared his remnants anonymously with all who, like him, sense cap nom ni symbol, rest in the little common mass-grave in Portbou’s cemetery.

Or we might read Espriu in a spiritual Gaudinian way perhaps, if we can trace to the open infinitude the uncanny, hallucinatory, heavenly path laid out by Gaudi’s tall stones, carved from his tomb-cave in the heart of Lavinia.

Or, in a Dalinian way, a hellish and no less hallucinatory way, if, following his lead, we take the train from Barcelona/Lavinia to finally go north along the coastal side of the dead: pass the cemetery of Arenys/Sinera and the garden of the five trees; pass Portbou and its cemetery, and stop at the ominous site of the cross-rails; pass Colliure and Machado’s burial site; and then continue north, until, shortly after, we arrive not at Amsterdam, but to our unexpected destination: La gare de Perpignan, Dalí’s Perpignan train station: the pictorial site where that other very sinister and fascinating Salvador, a few miles from Machado’s burial site, some thirty miles up from Benjamin’s, one hundred and fifty from Espriu’s, and about one hundred and seventy from Gaudi’s, unmercifully confronts us with the event of our own very real, contemporary collective death.

Mentrestant, platja avall, viu la sepulcral Sinera.
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Bernardo Atxaga (Jose Irazu) belongs to the group of young Basque writers who began publishing in their mother tongue, Euskara, in the 1970s. He graduated in economics from the University of the Basque Country. He is a member of the Royal Academy of the Basque Language and is the most internationally renowned Basque writer. His first novel, Ziutateaz, was published in 1976 and his first poetry collection, Etiopia, in 1978. Both works received the Spanish National Critics Prize for the best works in their categories in the Basque language. Besides the Premio Nacional de Narrativa, which he received in 1989, many other awards confirm his status: the Milepages in 1991, the Tres Coronas de los Pirineos Atlánticos in 1995, the Vasco Universal in 2002, the Cesare Pavese Poetry Prize in 2003, the Grinzane Cavour Prize in 2008, and the Montbello Prize in 2008. He writes in most genres: poetry, short stories, novels, essays, and more. His national (and, soon after, international) recognition followed the publication of Obabakoak, which was awarded the Spanish Premio Nacional de Narrativa in 1989, among other prizes. Obabakoak has been translated into more than twenty-six languages. The Lone Man, The Lone Woman, Two Brothers, and The Accordionist’s Son are the titles of his other novels translated into English so far. His latest work is the novel Zazpi etxe Frantzian (Seven Houses in France, 2009).

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Zulaika, Joseba, 106–7, 126
This book is a collection of the contributions made by Basque writers and American and European academics to the international symposium, “Writers in Between Languages: Minority Literatures in the Global Scene,” held May 15–17, 2008 at the Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, in the United States. Our symposium attempted to think about the consequences of bilingualism for writers in a minority language, like Basque, in that they are located in that “in-between” of different cultural and identity communities and subjected to constant exchange and recognition of differences. One could say that practically all the current 800,000 Basque-speakers or euskaldunak who live on both sides of the Pyrenees in Spain and France are bilingual. And that this bilingualism is formed in conjunction with such widely spoken languages as Spanish and such prestigious languages in literary circles as French; languages that, in turn, have been displaced by the enormously central and legitimizing place that English occupies in the current global framework. The symposium attempted, moreover, to debate the consequences implied by linguistic extra-territorialization for many authors in a minority language, the realignment implied by the hegemony of English for all other literatures, and the options open to a minority author to get their voice heard in the World Republic of Letters. Together with the above themes, certain aspects of the academic study of a minority literature such as that of Basque completed the list of subjects we intended to examine.