

# THE NOVELISTIC EVOLUTION OF THE BASQUE SUBJECT: LITERARY-IDEOLOGICAL NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE DESIRE FOR DIFFERENTIATION AND THE SEARCH FOR RECOGNITION

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**Abstract** || The goal of this article is to study the fictional evolution of the subject who thinks himself Basque, from its appearance in the late Middle Ages to the present day. In making an ideological reading of literary production, and a literary reading of political ideology, we wish to highlight the functional nature of national identity. Behind romantic essentialism, modern anti-essentialism, and every attempt to overcome or combine these two formulas, we eventually find a pragmatic player with a reflective capacity who will build or deconstruct a speech, according to the needs of a given time.

**Keywords** || Basque Subject | Basque Novel | Essentialism | Modernity.

## 0. Introduction

This article could have been called: “The Evolution of the Basque Subject in the Novel”, but we have finally chosen a more open and flexible formulation, “The Novelistic Evolution of the Basque Subject”. For one we will not be limited solely to the novel, nor to the history of literature. Why not? Because political discourse —which goes hand in hand with literature in certain eras of our history, while in others it stands firmly in opposition to it— plays a key role in the definition and redefinition of the national subject. As such, we believe that a politically derived definition of the Basque subject could end up being just as novelistic as that derived from the field of literature.

## 1. The Creation of the Basque Subject outside Literature

In order to be as clear as possible with our terminology from the outset, we would like to start offering the minimalist definition that we are going to consider to describe the Basque subject, which is: any subject that considers itself Basque. Of course, the history of the Basque subject does not begin at the same time as the history of the Basque novel, nor it is limited solely to this form. We are aware that, beginning with the creation of the nation-state during the Renaissance and onwards until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the definition of Basque identity understood by the apologetics was somewhat lacking in patriotic objectives. This paradoxical concept of Basque identity\* was created in order to protect the interests of Basque lobbies and the privileged positions they held in the cities of Castile. According to this theory, the Basque subject could no longer be Spanish (since, according to the theory of Tubalism, they were indeed the first to set foot on the Iberian Peninsula) precisely because it was not Spanish (that is to say, they were not like those of *mixed* origin who controlled the old land of Hispania through imperialism). As such, in their condition as Basques, they were at the service of the imperialist, Catholic universalism of the Kings of Castile; paradoxically, they were protected by their status as Basques, whilst simultaneously being limited by it and condemned to constant suspicion (given that the very definition of Basque identity is based on their being different).

On the other hand, we know that during the final moments of the sovereign reign of Navarra, humanist Protestantism held sway and that, in this case, unlike those that preceded it, writings in Basque formed a part of the modernism of the age. The Basque condition, according to Etxepare or Leizarraga, is limited entirely to Euskara, and Euskara is nothing more than a language still not fully developed,

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\* In the original, the author uses the neologism *amერი*, which modifies *aberri* (fatherland) adding an ‘m’ from *ama* (mother) [Translator’s note].

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it is a language that strives, in the homogenizing modern ambition, to attain the same level as the great languages. We find no thoughts on difference in the writings of these authors, just as we find no trace of it in the works of writers like Axular or Oihenart in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (in fact, Oihenart stood firmly against the mythological ideas of difference propagated by the apologists, and worked to demystify them in his work *Notitia utriusque Vasconiae*).

It is well known that, at that time, the literary production was not extensive, and those few literary works that were produced were nothing but reflections of the literary trends of that period; they were subject to ever-present search for approval and recognition. For example, Etxepare's poetry dealt with topics that were similar to the humanist ideas found in the works of the writer Maguerite de Navarre, which are a combination of religious ideas and earthly love, along with praise for womankind, following the ideology of humanist thinking. In much the same way, Lazarraga's works followed the model, extremely popular in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, of the pastoral novel. It goes without saying that Leizarraga's work did little more than follow the pattern established by Luther in translating the New Testament. It is also clear that Axular's work was not 'original', as far as its genre and themes are concerned, since it is just one more work in the long list of books with ascetic principles. From a literary point of view, the refined poetry of Oihenart could be considered the most serious work ever written in Basque language, despite the fact that it is mainly an adaptation of a contemporary European poetic model. In summary, Basque writers of that period did not consider that literature written in Basque language had to be (or reflect) anything special or different. Thus, Basque language itself, Euskara, is the only thing that makes the Basque subject precisely that, Basque, in the literary works of that era. As such, following the desire for approval and recognition, a distinction is made between the different and differentiated subject of the apologists.

## 2. The Basque Subject: a Literary Hero in Romanticism

Romantic ideology would bring about some degree of change in this situation, and convert the different, or differentiated Basque subject of the Apologists into what could almost be called the sole hero and protagonist of Basque literature. Johann Gottfried Herder was a key figure in the pre-romantic and pre-nationalist movement *Sturm und Drang*, and spiritual father of the Enlightenment in European nations. In his work *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-1791) he calls upon Basque people to create their own literature by following the model of Scottish McPherson, that is, by awaking the most ancient and ancestral characteristics of their national identity

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(or by resorting to the invention of such characteristics in case that they did not exist). Along with this call, Herder mentions Larramendi, our last Basque apologist: “ojalá haya un segundo Larramendi que haga con los vascos lo que Mc Pershon hizo...” (Herder, 1784-1791: 161). It should be remembered that Herder was the creator of cultural relativism, which assigned a *Volkgeist* to each nation based on its language and which, from the national spirit of each one, derived its dignity and its position of equality in relation to all others. As such, a new thinking came about to challenge imperialist and Catholic universalism and the individual bourgeois thinking of the French republic. This new force was pluralist thinking, according to which, each nation, however small, had a place on the world stage, precisely because it was different from the others. It is clear that this is the beginning of the great preoccupation with developing and deepening differences between nations, based on language and popular culture, through literary and philological works, among others.

*Peru Abarka*, written by Mogel was, without doubt, the first literary work written in Basque language that followed this new (modern?) culturist model based on national differentiation. Within the context of a divided Germany and with the aim of stimulating its union, Herder stated that nationality was based on language. Peru stood up in defence and in praise of Euskara; as such, he was a champion of national union through Euskara (indeed, in the novel, Peru manages to demonstrate to Maisu Juan that his friends from the French Basque country and Gipuzkoa —Joanis and Txorgori— are not foreigners; in doing so he gives Euskara the role of cement and foundation of Basque nationality). In much the same way, Herder maintains that the most authentic representative of a nation is the rural countryman, since cosmopolitan life denationalises society’s elite; Peru embodies this authenticity, claiming that he gathered all his knowledge and good judgement in the “University of Basarte”. Peru Abarka is the first ideological character to follow the path set out by Herder; he is an authentic representation of Basque *Volkgeist*; a proto-nationalist hero of Basque difference. Peru offers us an independent and joyous image of the differentiated Basque subject, which still contains optimistic characteristics of *Aufklärung*. The *fueros* (regional laws) were still in place, and economic and social power still rested firmly in the hands of rural Basque aristocracy.

It is clear that *Peru Abarka* is not simply one more anachronism in the Basque literary tradition, as it was regarded for a long time. Mogel’s work could not be more characteristic of the age in which it was written, if not from a literary point of view, then at the very least from an ideological angle. When an author is at the forefront of ideological innovation, he is forced to turn his back on the search for approval and recognition. Given that Basque culture is *different*,

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it would be illogical to simply imitate the works produced in other countries with advanced literary traditions. On the contrary, Herder's ideas ordain that Basque literature should distance itself as much as possible from the elitist literary model of the elitist, Frenchified Europe; only thus, could it set about creating a true national identity. Popular tradition—oral tradition, folklore, and so on— was, in this case, the catalyst for this literary renaissance. Both philologists — native and foreign— and authors will work together to give Basque literature the national identity that defines it. A century later, these very ideas were reflected on an article written by Gratien Adema 'Zalduby', entitled "Quelques règles de la prosodie ou art poétique basque"; in this piece, he points out that Basque poets (obviously referring to illiterate peasants) carry the very art of Basque literary rhetoric in their blood, and that they have no need to learn anything.

Nonetheless, this differentiated model lost a certain amount of ground as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed. It is well known that, as time went on, the industrial economy found itself, to an ever increasing extent, in the hands of external liberal and bourgeois forces; the Basque country's southern territories (those that belonged to Spain) lost their legal and symbolic autonomy. The hero of the Basque *Volkgeist* —our authentic rural countryman— hence, is no longer either independent or sovereign. In this context, we could draw a comparison between the first edition of *Peru Abarka* in 1881 and the rewriting of *Don Quijote* by Borges' Pierre Ménard. That is to say, the nostalgic, Carlist editors of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century 'rewrote' Mogel's work, in such a way as to convey a different (completely reactionary) meaning, once inserted in the new context. *Peru Abarka* underwent a remarkable transformation; from being the joyous, optimistic and democratic offspring of the German *Aufklärung*, he became the reactionary voice of decadent Carlism; these changes gave rise to what has become a constant misinterpretation of this paradoxically modern work.

The Basque subject in the novels of Txomin Agirre is a threatened, marginalized and almost resentful version of the character of Peru Abarka. The Basque subject no longer finds itself at the very centre of the world; rather, it becomes conscious of the fact that it has become a peripheral citizen. Awareness of this feeling of periphery engenders resentment, and this resentment, in turn, engenders hatred towards liberal modernity, and creates a deep-set phobia of foreigners and intermixing between nations. Peru Abarka considers that Maisu Juan, the urbanised Basque, was not lost, and could be rescued; because of this, he is given a highly sympathetic rendering. The urbanised Basque, in the works *Kresala* and *Garoa* (the wealthy ex-colonist Egurbide, for example), stands in stark contrast; he is considered to be "mala hierba" that must be destroyed. The tension inherent in a Basque national identity based on the concept of difference is

obvious; as such, the novelistic Basque subject reaches an impasse. The evolution of reverend Joanes is a melancholic evolution.

### 3. From the Romantic Subject to the Nationalist-Modernist; Running Away from Melancholy

This same feeling of impasse is the key subject of *Ramuntcho*, a work published in 1897 by Pierre Loti. In contrast to the works of Agirre, however, the impasse, in this case, is given recognition and is accepted. Moreover, a truly interesting hypothesis is devised to help readers to better understand it: the melancholy of the Basque subject stems from its double origin. Even though Ramuntcho considers himself Basque and nothing but Basque (“ni español ni francés”, as he informs his partner Gaxuxa, on the occasion of her mentioning military service), he still harbours doubts over his true identity, and discovers a secret within himself that prevents him from fully embracing a complete Basque identity: his father is not Basque, but French. As such, his real identity is hybrid. To use Oteiza’s words, Ramuntcho is a Basque man with two souls. He contains within him a Basque soul, but he also carries with him a modern soul (be it Latin, or Western, or imperialist), whether he likes it or not.

What follows is a possible interpretation of Loti’s novel: the hybrid essence of Ramuntcho is a metaphor for Basque identity; the Basque *Volkgeist* —however beautiful it may be— is a monster created through the impregnation of a Basque mother by a foreign (European) father. In fact, European Romantics played no small part in the creation of essentialist Basque feeling. Loti would like to believe in this essentialist myth he has created; he would like to deceive himself into believing it, but in his heart he knows that this is nothing more than literature, and the father of this myth is French (Loti himself is, after all, the true creator of this form of Basquism). On the other hand, on an intra-diegetic level, it is worth noting that Ramuntcho still believes in the Basque myth (even after discovering the true identity of his father), and that his melancholy is not a result of his loss of faith in the essentialist myth, but rather quite the opposite: he plunges into despair because he has been denied the opportunity to live the myth (only true citizens can do so; being a hybrid, he is not authentic enough).

Incidentally, it could be argued that Loti foresaw the emergence of the modern Basque subject. The subject embodied by Ramuntcho is split in two: the father figure —representative, according to psychoanalytical thinking, of law and order— is linked with France or with Spain, or, in other words, with those imperialist states where the Basque language is not spoken; the Basque mother figure,

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meanwhile, is linked with the aggressive side of his identity. The maternal side is therefore regressive and backward looking, since pathological attachment to a mother figure is representative of a desire to remain forever in childhood. The excessive attraction that Ramuntcho feels towards his land is an attraction towards something that is taboo, since a taboo is an object of unconscious desire, and the stimulus for all future political misdemeanours.

Ramuntcho does not forgive his father for having abandoned his mother when she falls pregnant. This absent father figure is the state; he has seduced the mother, conquered the motherland\*, only to leave her alone with their hybrid-bastard son. This son is a bastard since the state refuses to recognise him; to accept the role of father would be to give the son the same status as the father. The motherland feels betrayed because the state only bequeaths upon her desire as an inferior, not as a self-sufficient subject with the same status as him. Consequently, Ramuntcho's mother never forgives herself for what occurred with the French man. Ramuntcho decides to burn all the letters that reveal the truth about his hybrid identity; in doing so he reaches something comparable to an inner peace. He believes that "through this show of contempt [the symbolic execution of his father] he could cleanse his mother's memory, and simultaneously exact vengeance, and retrieve the sweet veneration that he felt for her" [free translation]. Unfortunately, Ramuntcho's hybrid identity is ultimately the undoing of his plans for an endogamous marriage; his neighbours do not look kindly upon a union between an authentic Basque girl and a hybrid-bastard man. For this reason, while he still abounds with love for the motherland, Ramuntcho cannot remain in the Basque country and flees to America, turning his back as he does so on the Oedipus complex that draws him to his motherland (both to his mother and to the young Gaxuxa). Within the mental framework that this novel provides us with, it is possible that the most important element is not the duplicity in the soul of the Basque subject, but rather the competition and division of roles between these two souls. The Basque soul is, of course, feminine and, as such, recessive, while the French soul is masculine and dominant.

Ramuntcho also had a third option available to him, even though he never took it into account: patriotism. If he had been able to express political patriotism —following in the footsteps of his contemporary Sabino— he could have taken vengeance for his mother, carrying her (raising her) from the level of object to that of subject, in order to fill the empty space left by his father; in this way, he could have converted the motherland into the fatherland. In the same way, he would have paid a paradoxical tribute to the spirit of his French father; he would fully observe the law, and would promote the abstract model

\* In the original, the author uses the neologism *amერი*, which modifies *აბერი* (fatherland) adding an 'm' from *ამა* (mother) [Translator's note].

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of the state, as long as that state was Basque. It seems, hence, that Ramuntcho is a late Romantic Basque, who is right on the edge of patriotism. He is a Basque subject undergoing a complete transition to nationalist modernity.

The Basque subject conceived and conceptualised by Sabino Arana towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is simply a melancholic, Oedipal, rebellious version of Ramuntcho. It could be said that this description could also apply to Peru Abarka, the protagonist of the novels by Txomin Agirre, with respect to this same hatred and these same phobias. Nonetheless, Arana uses the idea of a warrior soul to order the Basque countryman within each person (in other words, the Basque soul) to take back the power for the Basque country, and to throw out immigrants (Latin-Western soul) to recover their basic values (their blood, Catholicism, and to a lesser extent, Euskara) and to convert their villages into the nation's palaces and fortresses. Being a member of the decadent bourgeois (a man of leisure who lives off the wealth of his father), Sabino wanted to complete his personal regeneration by marrying a rural countrywoman of pure Basque blood. Through both his nationalist ideology and his marriage to Nikole Atxika, Sabino hoped to provide the Basque subject with a Basque father figure, thus eliminating the melancholy brought about by the duplicity in his soul. If both souls, the feminine and the masculine, were Basque, then the dominance of the male soul would no longer pose a problem. He would make use of the non-authentic side of his identity (the urbanite, the non-Basque speaker) to give his fiancée a bourgeois education (to open up their villages to the world, to convert the people into actors on the non-Basque speaking world stage, and to create a modern woman out of Nikole) and to offer his masculine side to the Basque motherland, for the Basque people, through acceptance of the state.

In recognising the necessity of a State that is yet to be formed, Sabino clearly places the golden age of Basquism in the future; this instigates a Copernican revolution in contemporary Basque thinking; whereas before it had been nostalgic, Basque thinking would, from that point onwards, be utopian. In the same way, this Sabino's premise of striving for a State gave rise to a second revolution (this one was not Copernican in essence, since it involved returning to the thinking of Basque humanist of the Renaissance): the need for the state to achieve "el nivel de los demás", that is to say, to be on the same level as the rest of the modern nations. Putting both these revolutions together —one looking forward to the future, one striving for equal status and position with other modern nations— we can see that the result is the modern Basque subject. As such, Sabino's paradox is this: he drives the Basque subject towards modernity, using as a starting point a form of romantic essentialism that is entirely reactionary.

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The Basque subject in this transition conceived by Sabino is perfectly mirrored in the poetry of Lizardi. An excellent example can be found in the poem “Bultzi-leiotik”. The authorial voice travels by train — a symbol of modernity— and undertakes a journey from the village to the city; he venerates the romantic figure of the rural countryman whilst simultaneously taking his leave from him, since he is pushed ever forward by the “beeko bear goriak” (the city and the modern world). This subject, originally romantic in nature, but converted to nationalism, knows that Basquism will have to face many challenges from the modernism that drives the desire for acceptance and standardization, if it wants to survive; it will be often fighting for ground. However, it does not want to cut the visceral tie that binds it to Romantic mythology. Forming an identity in a time of modernity is just as bittersweet as entering the world from the womb of mother/nature; just as painful and as pleasant as a new birth, for, in essence, it is nothing more than a birth.

#### 4. The Iconoclast Era of the Basque Subject and the Creation of the Modern Hero

Decades later, those writers who first began the Basque narrative tradition, recognised and repaid the debt they owed to Sabino through allegory. In the case of Mirande and Saizarbitoria, it could be said that the figure of Sabino stands for what Napoleon means for Julien Sorel in *Le rouge et le noir*: an insufferable model of heroism and primary attraction of the romantic imagination. It could also be said that, just as Peru Abarka was the paradigmatic Basque character of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sabino Arana was the model for modern characters in novels in the Basque literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century —he was the mythical figure that stimulated the imagination of patriots (both writers and members of ETA); a man who single-handedly took on Imperial Spain, who knew what it was to be imprisoned, and who paid for his patriotism with his own death. Several works by Ramon Saizarbitoria focus on this exact subject: the irresistible attraction and utter impotence of the *imitation vita Sabina aranae*. In most of Saizarbitoria’s tales, we find the figure of the fallen father —fallen, because he was unable to achieve the same level of sacrifice as Sabino; unable to offer the motherland his Basque masculinity because he let the western-latin part of his soul control him. As such, the subject conceived by Saizarbitoria is founded, in his neurotic character, on failure, cowardice, and his father’s lack of consistency and heroism. This psychological framework, heavily influenced by Sabino’s ever present shadow, is seen again and again in Saizarbitoria’s work (explicitly and paradigmatically in *Asaba zaharren baratza*, but also in *Bi bihotz. Hilobi bat, Hamaika pauso, Ene Jesus*, and *Bihotz bi*). It could be said that *Ehun metro* (1974) is

an exception, since there the protagonist does manage to reach the same level of sacrifice as Sabino.

Although *Haur besoetakoak* (1959) relies, to a much greater extent, on allegory, it still has strong ties to Sabino's nationalist hagiography. The masculine character of Mirande is a bourgeois who hates the bourgeoisie, and is willing to go to self-destructive lengths in order to live out his anti-conformist ideals. Just as Sabino did with his wife Nikole, the bourgeois Mirande is a Pygmalion to his goddaughter, despite the fact that their relationship is generally considered to be somehow unnatural (just as Sabino's acquaintances were unhappy with his marriage to a peasant). As such, we can gather that the girl in this novel is a metaphor representing Euskara and Basquism, as Mirande herself explains to Txomin Peillen. Therefore, by giving his goddaughter an elitist education, Mirande is trying to show that Basque people and their "euskera infantil", to use Unamuno's words, must grow out of infancy and create a place for themselves in the world; they must develop from a nation consigned to the annals of intra-history, into a nation that plays on the world stage, taking its place among other adult nations.

On the other hand, the fact that the first three modern, masculine characters in the history of the Basque novel —Leturia by Txillardegui, Mirande's godfather, and the protagonist of *Ehun metro*— all die at the end of their respective stories is not a simple coincidence. These tragic endings symbolise the impossibility or the aporia of the modern, self-sufficient Basque subject: having to die in order to fulfil his destiny. The reality of the situation (whether it be the Francoist regime on one side, or the fundamentalist, monocultural French Republic on the other) was unavoidable; it was ever-present, solid and impassable, like an obstacle or *skandalon*, obstructing the path of utopian desire of the Basque subject, who is unable to take on the role of the non-Basque father in order to liberate and save his mother. Nonetheless, thanks to Sabino's contribution (or due to this contribution, depending on whether it is seen as positive or negative), the novelistic Basque subject is converted from a passive melancholy character into a tragic one.

We can consider *Leturiaren egunkari ezkutua* (1957) as the beginning of the iconoclastic age of Basque novel, in the most literal sense of the word iconoclastic. Breaking away from the poets of the previous generation, Txillardegui, Mirande and Saizarbitoria removed any representation of the rural village scene —and hence, removed any trace of the essentialised Romantic Basque subject— from the literary field. The literary production of that period was radically urban, both in terms of the setting of the drama, as well as in the use of a pre-unified neo-Euskara instead of dialects. Years later, Atxaga would refer to this period as the rejection of the mountains (1982).

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Once the iconic image of the Basque peasant had fallen, the modern Basque subject was once again forced to confront questions about its own identity: What am I if I no longer hold the essence of the iconic peasant? Am I really anything? These are exactly the questions that form the basis of Leturia's existential ideas. Txillardegui comes from a small bourgeois family that has lost touch with its Basque roots; he is a Basque man unaware of the fact that he knows nothing but modernity. If we accept the idea that Leturia is a fictional analogy for Txillardegui, we must pose this question: What is symbolised through his love and marriage to Miren? It represents his relationship with traditional patriotism during his first steps along the path of becoming Basque —following the romantic-essentialist ideas of Sabino as we have seen. Txillardegui-Leturia attempts to rediscover his Basque roots —his essence— through his marriage to Miren. However, he soon realizes that this marriage does nothing to assuage his existentialist worries, or to fill the gap left within him by his uncertain identity. Txillardegui knows perfectly well that the romantic *Volkgeist* is nothing more than a myth. What is left for Leturia, thus, once he has realized this? Nothing. According to the modern point of view, the Basque subject does not exist; it is nothing. From this realisation stems his decision to take his own life. Literature alone is unable to find solutions for these problems; literature alone cannot find a path for the modern Basque subject of the future, which will lead it out of this impasse. In order to exist, the Basque subject must make use of some form of representation with which to combat modernity; it needs visibility and a voice. The romantic image of the Basque subject took it down a path to structural subordination, and for this reason it was rejected. Could this representation be substituted for another? Two years after Leturia's fictional suicide, Txillardegui played a key role in the creation of ETA. Mirande also made a public appeal for a return to arms. A few years later, in his work *Ehun metro*, Saizarbitoria used a member of ETA (the modern Basque subject, now de-romanticised) as a central character, and one that has become emblematic. The Basque subject made a departure from literature (Romanticism) to politics (nationalism) during this 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it is now making a return journey to literature (modernism). *La boucle est bouclée*. Basque literature can make a return to strength; it has a story to tell, with a new novelistic subject: the modern, de-essentialised patriot, a subject created to last.

## 5. The Postmodern Basque Subject and Literary Autonomy

In literature, the eras filled with heroes tend to be followed by periods of disillusionment and depression. The end of Francoism allowed the modern and newly political Basque subject to move into a real

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(institutional) space where it could plan its future path. In this new context, literature's social function necessarily had to change. It was impossible to maintain the ethos of the author putting himself at risk for his work; Basque politics had become patriotic and professional, and the input of authors was no longer necessary, unlike in previous eras. The figure of the author was no longer at the forefront of the construction of the Basque political subject. It became an excluded, impotent figure. Atxaga expresses this sense of futility in the creation of the universe of Obaba. In one section of the book *Obabakoak* ("Hamaika hitz Villamedianaren ohoretan..."), the narrator, and alter ego, confesses that he had to leave the city due to depression. Depression is simply a modern name for what we have already seen under the designation of romantic melancholy. It is not surprising to note that the modern, impotent Basque writer finds solace in the hills and villages of the past, within the landscape of the pre-modern Basque subject; it is almost as if the modern Basque writer is forced to return to literature's Romantic childhood in order to recreate himself. Atxaga suggest that we take a step back; that we forget the modern Basque subject and that we return to Ramuntcho, taking up the melancholic Basque subject created by Romanticism, but leading it along a new path: anti-Romanticism.

The spokesman for this proposal was Esteban Werfell. It is well known that several tales from *Obabakoak* are palimpsests, and "Esteban Werfell" is no exception. This tale is essentially a re-writing of the novel *Ramuntcho*, in which Atxaga tackles, once again, the subject of duplicity within the Basque soul, in such a way as to recover what was rejected in the iconoclast era. Just like Ramuntcho, Esteban Werfell has a foreign father and is the result of an illegitimate relationship. The mother in both cases is a rural dweller, and is of humble origins. For this reason, the character is singled out as different within the village, and lives a marginalised life. In both tales, we are presented with a closed, impermeable society, in which —due entirely to its complete lack of permeability— values and customs are passed down from generation to generation (the ever burning flame of the altar candle in the church is symbolic of this essentialised eternity in the story of "Esteban Werfell"). So far, we have encountered only similarities between the two narratives. Now we will examine the differences, the fruit of the creative re-writing of Loti's work.

Esteban does not live with his mother, who died a long time ago, but rather with his father. Therefore, in this case, the absent figure is the mother. It could be for precisely this reason that Esteban finds it so difficult to love the motherland, and to become involved in the customs of the others in the village. He longs deeply for integration, but he is unable to attain it. He lacks an emotional bond with the traditional Basque Country. His father is a German engineer who can almost be considered the antithesis of Ramuntcho's father; he was never

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in love with the idealized image of the Basque Country, but rather with one specific woman: Esteban's mother (it should be recalled that Loti, in the spirit of the craze begun by Sabino, fathered a child with a Basque woman because he wanted heirs with Basque blood). His father, a product of the Enlightenment and a representation of the western side of the divided soul of the Basque subject, does everything he can to prevent Esteban from falling into the identity trap that has been the downfall of so many others. He is even willing to turn himself into a manipulating Pygmalion (much as Mirande's godfather) in order to instill modern values into his son. As such, up to this point, Esteban's enlightened, German father is portrayed as sympathetic with iconoclastic heterodoxies of the post-war period.

What happens next, however, directs us to a very different conclusion. The engineer, Werfell, employs a fictitious feminine presence — Maria Vöckel, an imaginary girl who has come to fill the empty space left by Esteban's mother— in order to distance his son from Obaba. Although Esteban will eventually forgive his father for this deception, he realizes that distancing himself from Obaba comes at a price; he is left with no roots, with no motherland, and he lives in the melancholy that stems from the intrinsic aridity of modernity. Obaba is another name for that homesickness and sense of emptiness that a stateless person feels. This is what Atxaga condemns in the article "Euskal narratibaren arazoak": he claims that modern iconoclastic Basque writers from the heterodoxical generation have mutilated part of the Basque identity; they have condemned its citizens to live in a rigid, abstract, rational modernity (of revolutionary socialist nationalism and of standardized Euskara) in which literature is subjugated by politics. He also claims that the time has come to take back the natural habitat of the Romantic Basque subject; the countryside, the hills and the mountains (see Atxaga, 1982*b*).

The truth of the matter is that history never goes backwards however much it might, at times, waiver one way then the other, and returning to the countryside would do little to recapture that essentialist Romantic vision. Even though Obaba is clearly a palimpsest of Basque literary costumbrism, it is not a world that is viewed solely from a nostalgic point of view. Obaba is a monstrous version of Arranondo, a mythical creation of Txomin Agirre. Obaba is a dystopia, and a fierce criticism of the Romantic Basque myth, although rather than being a modern criticism (as it could have been made by Esteban's father) it is a more postmodern one. The world of Obaba could be considered a criticism put forward by an author that was equally angry at modernity, as it was angry at romanticism. Following these iconophilic, recycling, and omnivorous postmodern tendencies, the postmodern Basque writer aimed to make peace with the costumbrist *Volkgeist* and, in doing so, put an end to the iconoclast era of Basque literature. This would, however, be limited to the literary domain; it would describe

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ideological reactionism, without spurning the contributions of those that sought to demystify modernism. In this context, the Basque subject's melancholy, represented by Esteban Werfell, would not be the same as that of Ramuntcho. Werfell never truly believed in the Basque Romantic myth (his father took pains to make sure he was never infected with this belief when he was young), and it is precisely this impossibility that brings about his melancholy. On the other hand, the melancholy of Atxaga's subject in *Obabakoak* is a double melancholy; the narrator himself, Atxaga, has lost the hope in patriotic modernism of the previous generation—the Grand Narrative of modernity is revealed to be another false lead. Does Atxaga's postmodern Basque subject really believe in anything? He believes in universal literature, and the humanizing effect of literature, as well as in utopian universalization of Basque literature, which can give to Euskara (and Basque-speaking citizens) that which politics was unable to give: visibility and recognition. This brings us inevitably to the following conclusion: we cannot say, definitively, that Atxaga's Basque subject (the principal narrator of *Obabakoak*; he who wishes to open Euskara up to the world with the help of a universal library and plagiarism) is entirely postmodern. Postmodernism is described by the loss of faith in grand narratives; yet Atxaga's subject believes in the salvific grand narrative of universal literature, and he does so in a distinctly modern manner.

Spanish and international recognition of *Obabakoak*, from 1989 onwards, encouraged writers to distance themselves from national political discourse, and instils in them the courage necessary to set off on the path of independence and autonomy, and, in the midst of this battle, to drift from neo-rural allegory to realism. Although *Gizona bere bakardadean* is the first disillusioned work to explicitly take this step, it is *Hamaika pauso* (1995) the one that truly reaches the peak of this literary trend. *Hamaika pauso* tackles the Basque subject's internal struggle (the moment where politics and literature took their two separate paths). The character of Daniel Zabalegi represents the (still) modern, *whole* (or simple) Basque subject from before the period of autonomy, that is, from Txillardegui's era. He is, at the same time, a militant and a writer, and these two sides of his personality are indivisible. Even if Zabalegi is not actually a Basque writer by profession, as his death draws near, due to his unfaltering commitment, he becomes, to a certain extent, a writer, despite the fact that his literary works are nothing more than a signature that becomes more and more elaborate. This pseudo literary work undoubtedly reminds us of Aresti's poem *Nire izena* ("nire izena nire izana da", "ez naiz ezer ez bada naizena"). The poor quality of Zabalegi's literary works is an allegory for the state of development of Basque literature in the national-modern era, in the same way that his militant side symbolizes the lack of maturity in the political domain. However, this novel offers us an epic narration of the split in the modern subject.

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From this point of view, it can clearly be seen that ETA member Ortiz de Zarate and writer Iñaki Abaitua are independent results of the two sides of Daniel Zabalegi's split personality. It could also be said that this split is linked to a process of learning and development: Ortiz de Zarate is no longer an amateur, but rather a hardened, ruthless fighter. Following the same logic, Abaitua is no longer an amateur writer, but a Basque Kafka (the nickname he was given by his friends) who springs from the sophistication of the *nouveau roman*. Abaitua is, in his own way, merciless (as the conclusion of the novel demonstrates). By intentionally bringing about Zarate's death, Abaitua takes the final step in the process of making Basque literature truly autonomous.

## 6. The Market Era and the Inevitable Basque Subject

The process that led to autonomy in the 1990s, however, is only one half of the story. It must be considered in the context of another process: the internationalization of Basque literature, generally speaking, shaped and influenced by the domain of Spanish literature. Exportation of translated editions provided the Basque writers with new symbolic spaces, and opened the door to potential universalization. The non-tragic development of the novelistic Basque subject is a direct consequence of this new commercial opportunity. No longer did characters in Basque novels resort to suicide; not when there was the possibility of translation and export into other languages and cultures. The autonomous position that was furthering Basque literature was no longer suicidal. And why not? Because the Basque author was now able to benefit from a new, potential readership; if his local readership should fail him, if they should refuse to forgive him for his lack of commitment, for his position of artistic autonomy, he can rely on this new potential readership. In other words, the tightrope walker now has the benefit of a safety net.

On the other hand, we cannot forget that, as more and more literature is available to them, Basque readers reach a greater level of maturity; their literary appetite is directed, to an ever-increasing extent, away from political and non-literary themes. The change in tastes and interests leads to the first appearance of consumer literature: mainly, those genres that are currently most popular (thriller, science fiction, chick lit or non-feminist literature aimed at women). In these new types of book, the Basque subject does not appear (or Basquism in itself is not problematic; it is an explicit element that is entirely omitted). Nonetheless, within the tradition of Basque literature, these genres are still in the minority; much more frequently does one come across hybrid literature in which the Basque subject is not omitted entirely, and in which, the impossibility of its omission actually becomes one

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of the narrative's principal themes. This is the case, for example, in Juanjo Olasgarre's paradigmatic work *Ezinezko maletak* (2004). It could be said that the main character, Carlos, was a modern Basque subject in his youth, but on reaching adulthood, he decides to rid himself of the burden in order to give priority to the homosexual side of his multiple identities. However, he discovers that it is impossible to achieve this goal since his friends pursue him until his death (and even after it), trying to convince him that he is still a Basque subject, even though he is an unwilling one. The same can be said of (post) feminist literature written by women (from Urretabizkaia and Itxaro Borda to Eider Rodriguez, without forgetting Uxue Apaolaza); this is a type of transition literature which does not entirely manage to remove the Basque subject (and which, perhaps, did not actually want to remove it in the first place; it just wants to distance it a little from the nucleus of the novel and the protagonist, with the aim of freeing it from nationalist phallogocentrism).

Many of the works of Iban Zaldúa are grounded in the ironic realization that it is impossible to remove the Basque subject entirely from a work. Basquism is, whether we like it or not, the most powerful tool (or even the only tool) capable of attracting the attention of local and foreign readers, and Basque writers are, hence, inevitably forced into using it. And since it is impossible to extract the Basque subject from the epicentre of Basque language literature, Basque writers are left to play with it, with ever increasing manic desperation. A significant example, which perfectly illustrates this tendency, occurred when Zaldúa began to write in Euskara, after having begun his career writing in Spanish, with a book of short stories entitled *Ipuin euskaldunak* (2000). Since then, the subject of Basquism, or *la Cosa* as he refers to it (the Basque conflict), has been the principal topic of his works, even when he writes in Spanish (see the novel *Si Sabino viviría* from 2005 or the essay *Ese idioma raro y poderoso* published in 2012). He tackles the subject with a unique, imaginative style that unites the history of the evolution of the Basque subject with its various avatars in literary discourse; examples can be found in his excellent "Gerra zibilak" or in the delightful pochade *Euskaldun guztion aberria* (2008). It could be said that the principal hero in Zaldúa's works is the meta-Basque subject. His almost pedagogical reflections manage to achieve a distancing effect with the figure of the Basque subject—a defusing effect—and give everything a semi-transparent, ironic gloss, similar to that which we find in the works of Woody Allen, between the reader and the crude reality described within. Zaldúa's literary attitude towards Basquism is very similar to the humour employed by this great New York writer and filmmaker when he tackles the theme of Judaism.

A special case is the genre of the historic novel, which has undergone a great deal of development in the last few years (J.M. Irigoien, A.

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Epalza, Martínez de Lezea). Since it clearly falls under the banner of genre literature, it obeys all those rules that bind consumer literature, and thus seems to assume an apolitical subject. Nonetheless, since history is almost invariably the history of a nation, the Basque subject remains at its epicentre but in a role that causes it to be somewhat less problematic; it is always easier to bring to life the Basque subject of the past than that of the present, since the temporal gap mitigates the risk to a certain extent, or cauterises the wounds.

Among the authors that managed to export their works to Spain and, to a lesser extent, to other foreign countries —authors who, incidentally, can be considered a new social class within the field of Basque literature— we can detect some feelings typically linked with the idiosyncrasies of the new rich. Firstly, new riches often see themselves (or wish to see themselves) as having risen above the class in which they originated, and they show a clear desire to stand out thanks to their new station. Secondly, however much the new rich strives to adopt the tics and habits that are synonymous with the authentic bourgeois lifestyle, they never manage to get rid of the suspicions, in true bourgeois, that they are not truly, or entirely, who they claim to be; that they are impostors (and with reason). The various strategies employed by exported authors with regard to the Basque subject are reflections on this exact sentiment.

Firstly, a trend that has predominated for a long period of time (which appears principally in the works of Atxaga, but can also be found, to a certain extent, in those of Saizarbitoria) is that of showing the Basque subject as it undergoes the process of becoming fully independent. The advantage of this subject has been evident to authors since the 1990s; in defending and reclaiming autonomy in Basque political circles (that is to see, with respect to nationalist ideology), they could kill two birds with one stone. On the one side, they made their contribution to the (internal) process of ratification and normalisation of the Basque literary field. On the other side, simultaneously, public rejection of nationalism became the *conditio sine qua non* for gaining acceptance in the Spanish and international market. In this sense, it was a literary strategy that was conceived *ad extra*.

There exists a second trend that has grown in popularity over time among exported Basque authors: it could be termed as the temptation to silence the Basque subject. This strategy is based in the belief that the Basque subject is nothing more than a burden that Basque writers must bear in order to be active in the world of rich literary tradition (the first literary world). This is the case with Unai Elorriaga and also in the later works of Atxaga —*Zazpi etxe Frantzian* (2009). In truth, in Elorriaga's case, the change of strategy was not triggered by export; it was conceived beforehand. Where Atxaga is concerned, however, it is well known, since the author himself has stated so on several

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occasions, that representing Basquism abroad (in both senses of the expression: showing Basquism, and writing on its behalf) has become an unsupportable burden over the years. The Basque subject has become something that gets in the way of the universalist author's desire to write, even though, he must be conscious of the fact that he is only known internationally because of this same subject. It seems that for a long time the burden of this knowledge stopped him from going ahead and disposing entirely of the Basque subject in his works. It is also true that in the field of Spanish literature, he was presented as an assimilated Basque writer, in order to play this same role. Due to this reason, and the problems presented by the Spanish and international publishing world, it became difficult for him to publish a work that did not tackle the theme of Basquism. It seems that with the arrival of *Zazpi etxe Frantzian*, Atxaga finally manages to put an end to Obaba (and the Basque subject) and begin again, as a new author, both amongst foreign audiences and his Basque readership. In this work one can clearly appreciate the reappearance of that freshness that the author had lost for some time.

It remains for us to analyze the final strategy conceived by these 'new rich' exported authors, represented by Kirmen Uribe's *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* (2008). This work, which has incited a lively debate over its quality and content, shows us a mercantile attempt to resurrect the Romantic Basque subject. Ibai Atutxa's 2012 essay, entitled *Kanonaren gaineko nazjoaz* offers us a clear cutaway image of the ideological subtext of this novel: by creating a neo-costumbrist Basque subject, the writer wishes to avoid the problems of the modern-nationalist Basque subject, and break open into the external market, easily and painlessly (under epidural, as it were). The problem stems from the fact that this painless penetration (criminally) sacrifices both the modern-nationalist Basque subject and artistic autonomy, whose battle to conquer Basque literature cost so much to so many. Just as Atutxa states, when Uribe examines Basquism and Basque literature through a bio-political lens —“no hay nada por encima de la vida, ni la política, ni siquiera la propia literatura, la vida es el valor absoluto, es decir, el único modelo posible es el de la vida dentro de las coordenadas del sistema neoliberal-imperialista”— the principal actors of Basque literature are sent back to the phase that preceded nationalist modernism (whose goal was literary recognition) and, simultaneously, the Basque text is bequeathed the status of a Romantic ethnographic testimony that forces Basque literature to take a sizeable step backwards. The manner in which Basque literature is presented in the last pages of *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao*, “Euskaldunok beti pentsatu dugu literatur tradizio txikia dela gurea [...], ez dugula erreferentea izango den literatur lanik sortu, ahozko tradizio aberatsa izan arren” (Uribe, 2008: 223), is a stunning negation of the recent history of Basque literature. It is a negation that has achieved instant acceptance in the Spanish literary domain,

just as it has (to a somewhat lesser extent, for the time being) in the French domain. The surprising and significant conclusion that we reach, hence, is that the first work in Euskara that Gallimard has agreed to publish is nothing more than a book denying the existence of Basque language literature.

## 7. The Time of a Mental Return

The Basque writer has been surrounded by dreams and promises of export (including a large number of writers who, despite never achieving export, were truly desperate to do so) for two long decades. However, it seems that the results of export have been wholly unsatisfactory for the majority of those writers that did actually realise this dream. At the same time, alongside the increase in strength of Basque literary criticism, an ever growing section of Basque readers has begun to put under scrutiny Basque literature conceived solely to be exported. Consequently, it seems that Basque authors have begun to think seriously, once again, about their origins. This mental return has brought about changes in the novelistic Basque subject. Here, in the way of an epilogue, we shall mention three novels that are exemplary of this change.

We must mention the novel *Londres kartoizkoa da* (2009) by Unai Elorriaga. Even though the title is a clear confession of those broken dreams of export, the content of the novel is a clear nod to Basque readers. Unlike in his previous works, here Elorriaga offers us clear allegories for Basque conflict (dictatorship, kidnapping, secrecy, a witch hunt, and so on) and brings a critical, realist touch to his normally naïve literary universe.

Secondly, we have the case of Harkaitz Cano. His most recent work, *Twist* (2011) —which from an ideological point of view appears, *a priori*, to be nonexportable— clearly shows us some of the symptoms of the mental return (following his 2004 work, *Belarraren ahoa*, in which no Basque subject was present). The plot follows the fantastic resurrection of an ETA member who has been murdered; as such, it (literally) digs up the modern, nationalist Basque subject in order to place it in the very centre of the Basque novel, even though it is done with an acute sense of euphemism (since, in any case, this character, who returns from the netherworld, is nothing more than an inoffensive zombie; he is no longer an unfeeling, dogmatic militant). The book is narrated from the point of view of a solitary author —an ex-militant— who is constantly suffering from the nostalgia of a distant friendship with the revived ETA member. As such, in this palimpsest of *Hamaika pauso*, published after the ceasefire, neither Diego Lazkano (the replacement for Abaitua) nor Soto (the replacement for Zarate) is as

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merciless as their predecessor. Of course, the purpose of this novel is not to revert to create a new, hypothetical Daniel Zabalegi; that would be impossible. Moreover, it is in nobody's interest to do so, neither in the literary domain nor in the political; Basque literature has been independent and autonomous for some time now, as has been Basque nationalist politics. *Twist*, in any case, is, without doubt, a novel written *ad intra*.

Finally, it should be mentioned the most recent work of Saizarbitoria. In *Martutene* (2012) we can sense the development of something that was not apparent in *Bihotz bi*: recognition, or vindication, of the Basque neo-bourgeois novel. It might not be entirely coincidence that, at exactly the same moment as *Martutene* was published, the growingly sociologically-bourgeois *abertzale* leftists won power in the regional government of Gipuzkoa and San Sebastian city council. Both events seem to foretell the late coming of the Basque bourgeois era —along with that of the bourgeois novel. The Basque subject in *Martutene* is no longer a semi-Romantic, semi-modern subject, as one might have found in the works of Sabino; nor is he, however, a modern iconoclast subject, nor a post-modern, post-nationalist commercial subject. He is, instead, a Basque nationalist-bourgeois-neomodern-reactionary subject. As could be imagined, the principal theme in *Martutene*, the first Basque bourgeois novel, is adultery —the existential and idiosyncratic adventure of the bourgeoisie. In this new context, modern aesthetics (which the author adores and employs when describing the author-character Martin) becomes more and more a fetish or charm inherited from the past; it is a fetish that wants to become the symbol of the gradual conquest of the bourgeoisie in the culture of the Basque literary world. Of course, on the flip side, we find doctor Abaitua, a socially and economically bourgeois nationalist Basque subject. Abaitua must surely be the first bourgeois Basque character to be presented as a frequent reader of Basque literature; he is the first culturally refined Basque bourgeois that has been seen in this novelistic literary tradition. It is well known that modern literary art was created —in the era of Baudelaire and Flaubert— by the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie. For many years, Basque authors have been considered modern, even though they lacked the fundamental condition to construct their modernity: a local, nationalist, Basque speaking bourgeoisie. Given that the bourgeoisie had previously only been foreign and/or non-Basque speaking, every effort by the anti-conformist modernists was doomed to be nothing more than part of the implicit nationalist-Basque discourse.

Saizarbitoria's neo-modernism, which is intrinsically reactionary (as are all philosophical positions that carry the prefix 'neo-'), could be seen as a 'world view' —to use the language of Goldmann's genetic structuralism— of a society that lives in relative comfort, having put

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aside, apparently, ideas of war and fighting, and having taken on a permanent role under the statues of autonomy. This bourgeois partnership of Martin and Abaitua offers us a fictional *analogon* of a Saizarbitoria who is well installed in the centre of the Basque literary system. Martin, a bourgeois Basque writer, could end up by saying to Abaitua, the Basque reader “hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère”. In the same way, the political status quo that the novel implicitly defends could be seen as a defence of the other status quo—that is to say, the literary status quo. So, why would it be necessary to pull down the current Basque literary system, which is now fairly stable, and in which Saizarbitoria is the dominant author?

As a final hypothesis, we would even go so far as to say that *Martutene* could be seen as a work principally aimed at non-Basque speakers within the Basque Country (by way of the Spanish translation which has just been published), to strengthen their feelings of Basquism, that it is conceived with the intention of blurring the boundaries between those feeling *euskaldunes* (Basque speakers) and those feeling *vascos* (Basque citizens). Through the creation of a bilingual (*Spanish-friendly*), slightly distanced (Basque, yet civilized), bourgeois version of the Basque subject, he creates a subject which the vast majority of the society of Southern Basque Country\* would accept; a subject for whom Basque identity holds a purely academic, cultural interest (it is a topic for discussions and introspections). Saizarbitoria has come up with a (semi)normalised Basque subject that is currently right in the middle of the process of leaving the periphery of society and taking on the advantages, and disadvantages (like losing the aura of marginality or *mojo*, among others) of taking centre stage.

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\* Here the author refers to the four provinces, out of the seven, which form Euskal Herria and that belong to the Spanish State: Araba, Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Navarra [Translator’s note].

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