

# MAPPING THE NATION IN CONTEMPORARY BASQUE LITERATURE

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

*This article examines the importance of memory and reflections on memory in the modern humanities. After a brief review of the concepts introduced by various critics and historians (Muller, White, Hutcheon, Lowenthal, etc.), we consider the prominence of memory and the past in recent narrative. Among these fictional journeys into the past, we call particular attention to Basque narrative concerning the Spanish Civil War, focusing specifically on works by Bernardo Atxaga and Ramon Saizarbitoria.*

## The Past is a Foreign Country

The opening sentence of the well-known novel, *The Go-Between* (1953) by L.P. Hartley (“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”) suggests not only the appeal and element of surprise that the past holds for us, but also its power and omnipresence. Because of this, the quote has inspired critical works like Lowenthal’s (1985), as well as Basque novels like Atxaga’s *Soinujolearen semea* (2003; English translation by Margaret Jull Costa: *The Accordionist’s Son*, Graywolf 2009), in which the historico-political Basque past is revisited in order to analyze the consequences of the bombing of Guernica with respect to the rise of the terrorist violence of ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna, Basque Country and Freedom, a Basque separatist organization that has resorted to terrorism in its fight for Basque independence).<sup>1</sup> In the words of Resina (2000: 3), “whether dreamed or suffered, the past is the stuff we are made of.” The Greeks equated a forgotten past with death, but an excessively remembered past can destroy us, as in Borges’ parody, *Funes el memorioso* (*Funes the Memorious*, 1944). There is no doubt that the past, and memory, lie at the core of our existence. This is clear in post-renaissance works (i.e., Rousseau’s *Confessions*), as well as in reflections like those of Hume (Lowenthal 1985: 197), and governments and modern political organizations demonstrate their

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<sup>1</sup> As Atxaga says, “[*The Accordionist’s Son*] is about the influence of what happened in Guernica on new generations. It is not about recuperating the past or anything like that” (Olaziregi 2008b).

understanding of it when they make a crusade of the possession of the past through their restitution of and claim to archives, monuments and works of art. Picasso's *Guernica* is a case in point.<sup>2</sup>

Müller speaks of an "explosion" of memory with respect to its prominence in the current theoretical paradigm of the humanities, and particularly in that of History: memory as an antidote to the new utopia of globalization; memory as anchorage to reality and contrast to hyperreal space; memory, in short, as the axis of new ethnic maps (Müller 2002: 13-18). The change after the Holocaust from a "History of the Victorious" (or "Monumental History," in the words of Nietzsche in his *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 1874) to a "History of Victims" (cf. Müller 2002: 14), is an attempt to give voice and prominence to certain voices and lives that have been silent for decades. This is what Ginzburg (1992), among others, termed Microhistory, a term that Levi had previously used to describe his work, *The Periodic Table* (1975). The authority of the historiographic story has come under question (White 1978: 41), since any story of the past bears interpretation. Fiction creates its objects, as does History; objects that are ultimately language constructs (Hutcheon 1989: 75). And these constructs, in the case of fictions, reveal dissonances, disrupt the monochrome discourse that has dominated classic historiography. It is not surprising, therefore, that literature in general and contemporary fiction in particular placed themselves in a privileged position from which to show/analyze/deconstruct an historical reality that had been too opaque. Basque writer Saizarbitoria touches on this in a 2002 interview (<http://www.euskoneus.com/0164zbbk/felkar.htm>), as does critic Herzberger in his interpretation of novels by Martín Gaité, Juan Goytisolo and Luis Goytisolo (cf. in Gould & Engelson 1997: 37).

Important historical events, such as the Spanish Civil War, have been constructed on the thematic cores of literary proposals that seek to respond to a political wound that has not had a chance to heal due to the pact of forgetfulness that drove the Spanish transition to democracy.<sup>3</sup> Critics like Sebastiaan Faber (2008: 78) cite specialists who number the books generated by the Spanish Civil War at 20,000, or even 50,000; Faber also notes the partiality of the well-known bibliography of Bertrand de Muñoz (1982), who cites some 500 Spanish novels of the period from 1936 to 1975 that have to do with the Spanish Civil War. According to Faber, that number has already doubled in the last thirty years. Furthermore, the bibliography by Bertrand de Muñoz does not include works like Basque, Galician and Catalan novels that were not originally published in Spanish. Indeed, it was not until the 1990s that the Spanish Civil War became a significant and frequent central theme in Basque narration. It is these works in Basque that we examine here, as well as other contemporary works, whether postmodern historical novels (historiographic

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<sup>2</sup> The present president of the Basque Government, Juan José Ibarretxe, demanded the relocation of Picasso's *Guernica* to the Basque Country to "honor the memory of the artist" (cf. [clarin.com](http://clarin.com), June 29, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Valis (2007), Benet (2007), and Vilarós (1998), as well as my article, "La Guerra Civil y sus representaciones" (Olaziregi 2008a) for an examination of the contributions of hispanic criticism and historiography to the study of the representation of military conflict.

metafiction)<sup>4</sup> or autobiographical narrations and memoirs, that revisit recent important historico-political events.

### The Ghosts of the Past and the Nation

The most definitive event that shaped contemporary Basque literary life occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was not the curiosity that our land and our language would inspire in linguists like Humboldt, nor the exoticism seen in the language by European artists like Wordsworth, Merimée and even von Chamisso, but rather the emergence, under the shadow of Romanticism, of the nationalist ideology. Sabino Arana proclaimed that “Euzkotarren aberria Euzkadi da,” that is, that Euskadi (or *Euzkadi*, as Sabino said) is the homeland of the Basques. By 1847, Iztueta had established an equivalence that would be decisive: that between the Fueros and the Basque language (Aldekoa 2004: 86), and another author, Agustín Chaho, would establish himself with legends like that of Aitor (1847), precursor of the historical-legendary literature that, encouraged in Spanish by nationalist authors like Goizueta, Araquistáin and Villoslada, seeped into both poetry and narrative written in Basque. “Aitor’s lineage” (Juaristi 1987) would provide the fertile soil in which Basque nationalism would sow the “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) maintained, as are most types of nationalism, “by a noble tradition that goes back to time immemorial” (Bhabba 1990: 45).

It is noteworthy that the first novel published in Basque was *Auñemendiko lorea* (*The Flower of Auñemendi*, 1898) by Domingo Agirre, an historical romance similar to *Amaya o los vascos en el siglo VIII* (*Amaya or The Basques in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century*) by Navarro Villoslada. The plot centers on the wife of the Duke of Adalbaldo, Riktrudis, a Christian woman who is wooed by Portún, an unChristianized Basque leader; its intent is clear in its didactic tone and the Manichaeism that dominates the text. Agirre’s influence was crucial in the evolution of the Basque novel for his descriptions of local customs. The three fundamental core elements of his novels, faith, patriotism and Basqueness, served as a model for Basque writing until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a type of fiction that gave expression to an idealized traditionalist vision and supported Sabino Arana’s nationalist ideology, an ideology nurtured by the supposedly noble past of the Basques. Years passed, and in the 1930s, during the time of the Second Republic, poetry in the Basque language attained one of its most important summits at the hands of Lizardi and Lauaxeta, representatives of the Euzko Pizkundea (Basque Renaissance), a movement led by José Aristimuño (nicknamed “Aitzol”), who gave full priority to the creation of a literary output in the Basque language and capable of becoming the symbolic representation of the Basque identity. But neither the postsymbolist poetry that prevails in their texts, nor the Basque they used, often riddled with neologisms, helped this quality literary output achieve a significant Basque readership whose linguistic and literary competence could rise to the circumstances. The Spanish Civil War had devastating effects on

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<sup>4</sup> Mercedes Juliá (2006) offers an interesting analysis of the evolution of the contemporary historical novel, based on works like those of Lowenthal (1985), Hutcheon (1989), Nora (1989) and Wesseling (1991).

Basque literary production in the great number of dead and exiled authors, as well as the tremendous repression exerted by the winning side. This was an era in which Basque names were prohibited, as were inscriptions in Basque on tombstones; it was an era in which streets, government buildings, the cultural world, and more, were the channels through which the Franco regime imposed its censorship. In the case of the Basque novel, nine years passed between the publication of the last pre-war works (*Usauri* [1929] and *Donostia* [*San Sebastian*, 1933] by Anabitarte, and *Uztaro* [*Harvest Time*, 1937] by Toma Agirre) and the appearance in 1946 of *Joanixio* by Irazusta, published in Buenos Aires by Ekin.<sup>5</sup> It is strange that, in Basque narrative, until very recently, there were such limited repercussions of a conflict that solely in the Basque Country during wartime saw the exile of more than 150,000 people, including 30,000 children; the execution/death of 13,000 people; the arrest of more than 50,000 people charged without cause...; and an interminable postwar period (cf. the “Víctimas del franquismo” [“Victims of the Franco Regime”] website of the Departamento de Vivienda y Asuntos Sociales del Gobierno Vasco [Department of Housing and Social Affairs of the Basque Government]). Indeed, Basque literature has been reproached for its lyricism and the fact that it lived without facing the true Basque reality even as late as the 1980s (Lasagabaster 1990: 22). And this reality, of course, evolved with the exorcism of the dramatic problem of the terrorist violence of ETA, a reality also highlighted in the most recent Basque narrative (Olaziregi 2008c).

Although the war appears as a backdrop in Irazusta's *Joanixio* (1946) and *Bizia garratza da* (*Life is Bitter*, 1950), neither of these works deals with the drama of the political exile suffered by many Basques. The political circumstances that surrounded Irazusta himself and his forced flight (cf. Iturralde's *Bidegileak* [*Travellers*, 2003]), are reflected in the sad endings of both stories. With respect to previous narrations such as Azkue's novel, *Ardi galdua* (*The Lost Sheep*, 1918), and the stories in *Bigarren abarrak* (*Second Branches*, 1930) by Kirikiño, the representation of America as a destination for Basque emigration is largely negative and clearly affected by the eternal illusion of return to the native country. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, America becomes the OTHER of Basque literature. This otherness is clearly rooted in the term that writers, journalists, politicians, etc. use to refer to the Basque exile in America: ERBESTE, a compound word whose etymology is HERRI (country, people) + BESTE (other). Other novels published in exile, such as *Ekaitzpean* (*Under the Storm*, 1948) by Partido Nacionalista Vasco (Basque Nationalist Party) representative José Eizagirre, although written, as noted in the prologue, for the survival of the Basque language, did focus more on the subjective narration of the drama of the war.

It was not until the stories of Martín Ugalde that the drama of the Spanish Civil War and subsequent exile was told, in all its harshness, in Basque fiction. His col-

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<sup>5</sup> The first novel published in the Basque Country after the war, *Alos-Torrea* (*The Tower of Alos*, 1950), by Jon Etxaide, is a classical historical novel in the style of Walter Scott in which the author recreates the “Gau illa” (“Night of the Dead”) legend by Araquistain, an author who, like many others (Villoslada, Larra, Hugo, Merimée, Manzoni, Fenimore Cooper, etc.), imitated Scott's novels. According to Javier Rojo, whose unpublished doctoral dissertation examines Etxaide's historical novels, these novels, among which *Gorrotoa lege* (*Law of Hatred*, 1964) stands out, seek in the past the causes of the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War in the Basque Country.

lection of short stories, *Iltzalleak* (*The Assassins*, 1961), was, as Andima Ibinagabeitia says in the foreword, the first work of “Basque literature about the war.” Ugalde’s *Itzulera baten historia* (*The Story of a Return*, 1989) is a work with a clearly autobiographical background that tells of a Basque family in exile and without cultural or family roots because of the Spanish Civil War. The narrator focuses above all on the protagonist, a young girl from Caracas who returns to the Basque Country in 1945. The drama of the exile: the impossibility of return; feeling like an exile in one’s own country. Ugalde’s novel, *Pedrotxo* (1994), and short story collection, *Erretiradako tren* (*Retreating Train*, 1997), are also noteworthy as good examples of the dramatic exile that many Basques like Ugalde himself suffered.

It is clear that Ugalde’s work, as well as that of authors like Sebastián Salaberria, whose autobiographical novel, *Neronek tirako nizkin* (*Maybe I Shot Them*), was published in 1964, has the distinctive strength and dramatic quality that comes from personal experience of that tragic period. Such works demonstrate that political, emotional and intellectual distance with respect to the narrated events has evolved, in Basque literature as in Spanish literature, from novels that “tended to be autobiographical, anecdotal, strongly grounded in historical events, and clearly identifiable with a particular position” (Faber 2008: 82) to novels written by new generations of writers who expanded and diversified the themes, styles and approaches employed to deal with the events in question. After the death of dictator Franco, novels that touched on or recreated an historical event like the Spanish Civil War expanded their thematic and stylistic repertoire, creating new ways of looking at the past.<sup>6</sup> The orthodox, monolithic and Christian concept of the Spanish Nation was thus overturned by new literary proposals (Herzberger 2008: 113), as happened also in the case of the Basque literature and Nation.

### Cracks in the Basque Nation: the Legacy of Nationalism

Although the arrival of Spanish democracy in 1975 did not bring about a drastic change in Basque literary paradigms, it nevertheless made possible the objective conditions for the consolidation of the Basque literary system. The passing of the Statute of Autonomy (1979) and the Law of Standardization of the Use of the Basque Language (1982) permitted, among other things, the incorporation of bilingual education and assistance for publishing in Basque. With these changes, new publishing houses were established and the number of books published in Basque increased significantly. The Basque literary network now consists of more than 100 publishing houses and approximately 300 writers (85% men, 15% women), and some 1,500 new titles are published every year. In a previous work, we noted that the Basque narrative of the last three decades is eclectic, and that there is therefore no particularly prominent style or typology (cf. Olaziregi 2008c). There is no doubt, however, of the importance that the past and memory have had. The loss of an innocent belief in History, the realization that the past is a mixture of facts both imagined and true

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<sup>6</sup> “It is often said that the current interest in memory goes back to the 1980s, a decade that saw an increased attention to national identities and the disappearance of the generation that had experienced the dramatic mid-century events, most notably the survivors of extermination camps” (Resina 2000: 1).

and that our present situation modifies it (Halbwachs 1992: 49), and the certainty that the past is, in the final analysis, our own invention (Lowenthal 1985: 145) are only some of the factors that have contributed to the sensibility of our time. In the case of recent Basque narrative, there is a clear domination of approximations of the past that seek to narrate or deconstruct historical or political events through a prism that eschews mythification or a Manichaean presentation. These are narrations written by authors who have no personal experience of the Spanish Civil War but who wish to reflect on other realities, other truths (with a small “r”), that Historiography and Politics have not revealed. With this in mind, Ramon Saizarbitoria (1944- ) and Bernardo Atxaga (1951- ) are two authors who clearly stand out because of the importance of historical memory in their works.<sup>7</sup>

Atxaga's career includes recent textual offerings like his poetic essay, *Marcas. Gernika 1937* (*Scars. Guernica 1937*, 2007), in which, following the example of Barthes' *La chambre claire* (*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1980), he analyzes the effects and emotions that arise due to the scars left by the bombing of Guernica. Physical scars, testimonies, carvings, poems, chronicles, letters, etc., rescue from the past the ghosts of the victims of that atrocity. In his acclaimed *Obabakoak* (1988; English translation by Margaret Jull Costa: *Obabakoak*, Vintage, 1994), however, it was a different type of memory and testimony that Atxaga wished to capture. The imaginary geography of Obaba was born of Basque legends and an oral tradition that opened a door to an ancient world, a world that had already disappeared and in which memory was a living and natural form of transmission, the identifying mark of a community; a collective Basque memory, that is, and one about to disappear due to globalization had Atxaga not placed it forever on the literary map of the world. In Atxaga's words: “These days nothing can be said to be peculiar to one place or person” (p. 324 in the English translation). Another well-known novel by the same author, *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* (*Memories of a Basque Cow*, 1991), recounts as a fantasy the biography of a cow born during the postwar period (Olaziregi 2008b). The chronotopical elements of the text as well as the person who inspired Atxaga, the antifranquist guerrilla Juan Fernández Ayala (nicknamed Juanín), shaped this narration that emphasizes reflection and denounces the cruelties of war. Atxaga's latest novel, *The Accordionist's Son*, examines the consequences of the bombing of Guernica for the Basque Country: primarily, the rise of the terrorist violence of ETA in

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<sup>7</sup> Other contemporary Basque narrators who have dealt with the Spanish Civil War and who have been translated into Spanish are, for example, Joxe Austin Arrieta, *Abuztuaren 15eko bazkalondoa* (*La sobremesa del 15 de agosto*, Hiru, 1994, translated by the author; *Dinner Conversation on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August*); Koldo Izagirre, *Euzkadi merezi zuten* (*Merecieron un país llamado Euzkadi*, Egin, 1995, translated by Bego Montorio; *They Deserved the Basque Country*); Inazio Mujika Iraola, *Azukrea belazeetan* (*Azúcar en los prados*, Atenea, 2006, translated by Jorge Giménez; *Sugar in the Fields*) and *Gerezi denbora* (*Tiempo de cerezas*, Alberdania, 2006, translated by Jorge Giménez; *Cherry Season*), *Sagarrak Euzkadin* (*Manzanas en Euzkadi*, Alberdania, 2007, translated by Gerardo Markuleta; *Apples in the Basque Country*); Edorta Jiménez, *Azken fusila* (*El último fusil*, Hiru, 1995, translated by Bego Montorio; *The Last Rifle*) and *Kilkerren horsak* (*El canto de los grillos*, Tarttalo, 2007, translated by Bego Montorio; *The Song of the Crickets*); Martín Ugalde, *Itzulera baten historia* (*Historia de un regreso*, Hiru, 1995, translated by Koldo Izagirre; *The Story of a Return*); and Jokin Muñoz, *Antzararen bidea* (*El camino de la oca*, Alberdania, 2008, translated by Jorge Giménez; *The Way of the Goose*).

the 1960s. The memories of the narrator go back to his idyllic childhood in Obaba and to his awakening to brutal postwar repression. The protagonist realizes that his father collaborated with the fascists and that therefore, he is the son of a traitor. Although he embraces the violence of ETA, he decides to leave the terrorist organization and begin a new life on his paradisiacal farm in California. As Gorka Mercero (2006) showed, the concept of Nation in Atxaga's novel is not consistent with an essentialist concept, but with a differential one, more similar to contemporary readings like that carried out by Derrida<sup>8</sup> (1997). The poem that begins *The Accordionist's Son*, "Life and death of words," testifies to this: "This is how / ancient words die: / like snowflakes..." but the poet finishes the text by affirming that new words rise to the heavens in the mouth of future generations. Utopia (Paradise) and hope are present in this ethical novel, as well as in Atxagan concepts like *Euskal Hiria* (the Basque City), a city of the future in which the coexistence of all Basques is possible ("Otra mirada" ["Another Look"], [www.atxaga.org/testuak-textos/otra-mirada](http://www.atxaga.org/testuak-textos/otra-mirada)).

Since his first novel, *Egunero hasten delako* (*Because It Begins Every Day*) was published in 1969, Ramon Saizarbitoria's career in the contemporary Basque novel has made him worthy of the canonic position he currently holds (Olaziregi 2008c, 2009). Similar to the *nouveau roman*, his work has been described as "experimentalist" and "modern". Paraphrasing Samuel Beckett, Saizarbitoria says that it was his bad memory that drove him to write. Writing helps one to remember, and to imagine, he says through the character of Robbe-Grillet in his novel, *Bihotz bi: Gerrako kronikak* (1996; translated into Spanish by Bego Montorio: *Amor y guerra*, Espasa-Calpe, 1999; *Love and War*). Trying to restore the past, of course, means constantly reinventing it (cf. Lowenthal 1985: 410).

The memory invoked in Saizarbitoria's novels refers us often to a Basque historical past. Although his second novel, *100 metro* (1976; translated into Spanish by the author: *100 metros*, Nuestra Cultura, 1979; Orain, 1995; *100 Meters*), narrates the last 100 meters run by a member of ETA before being gunned down by the police, in reality, the text in fact encompasses much more. The narrative techniques used to shape the six different levels of the novel (alternating between second- and third-person narrative, continual flashbacks, the inclusion of extracts from the press and from tourist guidebooks, the heteroglossic use of both Spanish and Basque to transcribe the police interrogation and the extracts from the press and tourist guidebooks, etc.) portray a specific historical scene: the Basque Country at the end of the Franco dictatorship (the year 1974 is mentioned on page 91),<sup>9</sup> a period of undeniable cultural and political repression. *100 metro* thus reveals not only the diglossic situation of the Basque language at the time, but also the marginalization of a collective Basque identity at the hands of a Franquist discourse; this is made clear in descriptions of the city of San Sebastián as the "summer capital of Spain" (p. 59), as well as in the denial of such a collective identity by the inhabitants of the city, who don't know which language to use to talk to God (p. 81). In the novel, the Guipuz-

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Derrida, J.: "The Villanova Roundtable", in Caputo, J. D., 'Community Without Community', in J. D. Caputo (ed.), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham U.P., 1997), 106-124.

<sup>9</sup> Page numbers refer to the first edition in Basque, which was published in 1976 by Kriselú.

coan capital appears with the remains of the Franco occupation evident in the names of its streets and emblematic places, such as the Plaza de la Constitución, which under Franco was called the Plaza 18 de Julio (p. 27). Likewise, the narrative that precedes each chapter recounts a scene in a typical Franco-era school: a Basque student is punished (he must write "The separatist Reds shot the statue of the Sacred Heart in the school Chapel" five hundred times, p. 93) and humiliated (the teacher is unable to pronounce his Basque name, p. 25) when he fails to recognize the Spanish flag as his own (p. 51). In the analysis of theorists of postcolonial criticism based on the works of Frantz Fanon, the imposition of a language and culture aims to achieve the negation and submission of a collective identity.

It could be argued that the narrator of the novel *Hamaika pauso* (1995; translated into Spanish by Jon Juaristi: *Los pasos incontables*, Espasa Calpe, 1998; *Innumerable Steps*) claims for his own the task that, according to Walter Benjamin (1997), is the territory of the historian: that of being a collector who strolls through the ruins of the past to reconstruct valuable fragments of what existed from a few shards. The statement attributed to Claude Simon, "memory is a broken plate", serves to redirect once and again the complex palimpsest that is *Innumerable Steps*. The story told in the novel is, a priori, quite simple, consisting of the attempts of the protagonist and intradiegetic narrator, Iñaki Abaitua, to write his novel, "*Innumerable Steps*", which tells of the agony and execution in 1975 of Daniel Zabalegui. The story begins in approximately 1973 and ends in 1984, after the assassination of Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) senator Enrique Casas by autonomous commandos. As the plot advances, the biographies of Zabalegui and Abaitua intertwine, with the themes of death, loneliness and human impotence becoming so obsessive that Abaitua is doomed to suicide. The fact that the narrator uses part of the police record of ETA member Angel Otaegi to create the character of Daniel Zabalegui, and that the novel is full of references to real people and events in the Basque cultural and political life of the 1970s and 1980s led critics to define the work as a generational novel. But what the author is trying to tell us is that the past, constructed from texts and official chronicles, can be reconstructed with the ethical objective of telling what the official story surely does not tell: the very real suffering brought about by Basque terrorism. Furthermore, the narrator offers a complete reflection on the development of Basque politics, from the time when militancy was almost an obligation (1960s and 1970s) to when its supporters decreased to a minority and it came under question in the 1980s. It is for this reason that, following the philosophy of "historiographic metafiction", Saizarbitoria created a novel in which Basque historical reality, including the apparently heroic reality of radical nationalist militants, is a cultural construction fed by a sector of nationalism. As Anderson (1991: 4) says, "nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind". To dismantle this discourse, Saizarbitoria created a novel that is a palimpsest, that is, a text of great complexity of levels and an exuberant intertextuality with respect to the theme of death (with references to works by Morin, Unamuno, Pavese, Camus and Sartre). This intertextuality is intended to communicate exactly the lack of heroism in the death of any person, including the death of those whom a political context, such as the Basque political context, has elevated to the status of hero.

The reference to the (Civil) War is clear in the paratext of Saizarbitoria's next novel, *Love and War*. The novel tells the story of the disintegration of conjugal relations between a couple – the narrator, whose name is not given, and his wife, Flora. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator confesses that he has killed his wife by throwing her out of the window of the kitchen of the apartment where they lived. At this point, the narrative thread leaps backwards in an analepsis, allowing the narrator-protagonist to recount the steps he took to plan the murder and to recall the most important episodes of the couple's domestic "war." The consecutive adulteries committed by the couple and the continuous persecution and vigilance to which the wife is subjected by her husband are only a few of the incidents that are narrated. In addition, there is another war to which the novel refers, the Spanish Civil War, which is told through the encounters of the protagonist couple with a group of old soldiers in a cider house. These old soldiers of the Spanish Civil War (Samuel, Ino, Nicolas, Benito), members of opposing groups and ideologies during the conflict, meet in the afternoons and, curiously, always recall the same scenes. As if they had already told each other everything, or were being careful not to anger each other, silence presides over many of their meetings (p. 14).<sup>10</sup> Sentences constantly repeated, such as "They didn't have to kill Carrasco" (p. 58) renew their conversation once and again, a conversation that is often bogged down in details in an effort at objectivity (p. 24). It is also worth pointing out that in *Love and War*, as in his previous novel, *Innumerable Steps*, Saizarbitoria again fulfills the objectives of historiographic metafiction: it is not a question of painting a faithful portrait of an historical past since that is impossible, as recognized by White (1973: 7). Saizarbitoria uses the group of retired people who lived through the Spanish Civil War to remind his readers that there are many unknown truths, many microstories in armed conflict. Because of their symbolic weight, all of the scenes that take place on the 13<sup>th</sup> days of different months are notable: on September 13, 1936, troops entered San Sebastian; on September 13, 1996, the couple who are the protagonists of the novel got angry with each other and the husband met his lover Violeta; the photograph of the protagonist's father and Mikele de Abando is dated February 13, 1936; and Calvo Sotelo was assassinated on July 13, 1936. All of these events show that a single date can contain a multitude of stories and people, anonymous or known, and that visiting the past is a definitively subjective act. The words of the character Samuel summarize the message of the novel perfectly: "war is idiocy, because in the long run the winners also lose. (...) nobody knows why he goes to war" (p.31). A statement that, of course, is also true of the other war narrated in the novel, the marital one.

In 2000, Saizarbitoria published *Gorde nazazu lurpean* (translated into Spanish by Fundación Eguia Careaga: *Guárdame bajo tierra*, Alfaguara, 2001; *Let Me Rest*), a collection of five stories. In 2001, this excellent book was awarded the Premio de la Crítica (Critics' Prize) and the Premio Euskadi de Literatura (Basque Country Prize for Literature), and was a finalist for the Premio Nacional de Narrativa (Spanish National Prize for Narrative). In this book, Saizarbitoria has recreated in a literary way the primary themes of his work of the previous two decades: the suffering caused by

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<sup>10</sup> Page numbers refer to the first edition in Basque, which was published by Erein in 1996.

the Spanish Civil War, and complicated relationships, the problems in communication between men and women. Saizarbitoria himself explained the aim of the book as follows:

In the five novellas that comprise *Gorde nazazu lurpean*, it is clear, perhaps too clear, that I try to show the tremendous weight that falls on the shoulders of those born in small nations, in nations whose existence is unsure, whose existence is disputed, that have confusing borders and boundaries, and that live with a linguistic and political schizophrenia. All this is supposed to make us be a certain way, those of us who are born in the bosom of a nationalist family. It's a very heavy burden. (Barberia 2002: 2)

This burden is clear not only in stories like *Rossettiren obsesioa* (translated into English by Madalen Saizarbitoria: *Rossetti's Obsession*, Center for Basque Studies-University of Nevada, Reno, 2005), but particularly in the two stories that open and close the volume: *Gudari zaharraren gerra galdua* (*The Lost War of the Old Soldier*) y *Asaba zaharren baratza* (*The Orchard of Our Forefathers*). The former narrates the vicissitudes of an old Basque soldier, a *gudari*, who lost his leg in the Spanish Civil War and who goes to a notary to request an affidavit with which to claim his pension. The narration, which is dedicated to an old *gudari* friend of Saizarbitoria's, recounts the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> of April, 1937, on the mountain Inchorta when the protagonist, a member of the Martiartu batallion, is injured in the leg and transferred to the hospital, first in Durango and then to the Basurto hospital in Bilbao. The metanarrative comments in the text ("It often happened to him that he did not know where to begin telling something", p. 38)<sup>11</sup> place us before an historiographical metafiction riddled with references to real people and events, but that makes clear that any attempt to recuperate the past leads us to reinvent it. The attention to detail with which the protagonist's two witnesses tell their stories, as well as the constant interruptions of the notary, asking them to be brief and stick to the facts, leave no doubt that any attempt at objectivity is in vain. Not only is the affidavit full of errors (the names of the batallions, for example; p. 22), but also the witnesses were not even present for the events they narrate. Nevertheless, none of this matters for the old soldier, who cannot stop thinking about the war (p. 46; he obsessively repeats "I lost it in the war", p. 27), because what he lost in the battle, i.e. his leg, is merely the external mark of his internal loss: the woman he loved, and who cannot be regained. This is why his watch stopped at 4:30 (p. 23): because that was the time at which the events in question occurred, the time at which his life stopped forever. The words of Adolfo Suárez that are invoked in the text, "War wounds must be healed" (p. 27), underline the impossibility of any such attempt. When at the end of the story the soldier returns to the mountain to try to find his leg where his friend buried it, he realizes that such an act is impossible, and upon accepting the loss of his leg (and his loved one), he dies.

The last story in the book, *The Orchard of Our Forefathers*, speaks of the burden of the nationalist ideology that generations of Basques have suffered. The narrator and protagonist, Policarpo, is the son of a Basque nationalist who worked as a chauff-

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<sup>11</sup> Page numbers refer to the first edition in Spanish, which was published by Alfaguara in 2001.

feur during the conflict and who was present at the exhumation and relocation of the remains of the founder of Basque nationalism, Sabino (Policarpo) Arana. Arana's relics, a few small bones stolen by the chauffeur during the relocation (p. 472) become the inheritance that he leaves to his son, the narrator. The text gradually reveals the family's past, which is laden with moments of intimacy between father and son, an intimacy that carries with it physical pain (p. 436-437) because of the burden (both physical and symbolic) entailed each time the father tells of his "legendary" nationalist past. The different versions of the relocation of the remains of the founder reveal obvious contradictions between the story that the father tells his son, the statement written by Ceferino Xemein at the time, and the "true" story of the relocation. Consistent with the theories of White (1978), what Saizarbitoria conveys is that History is really Narration, that is, a construct written from an interested ideological position. At the end of the story, when the protagonist decides to rid himself of the legacy left to him by his father by throwing Sabino's bones into the sea, what he is actually doing, according to psychoanalyst Mariasun Landa (2002), is freeing himself of the ideological legacy that has come down to him from his father, a legacy symbolized by the relic, which is obviously phallic, and placing himself in a position to face desire. He tells the woman he loves, who is also a victim of the nationalist legacy, "You are my homeland" (p. 490), which perfectly summarizes the message of Saizarbitoria's compelling story.

Memory, Nationalism, Desire... an interesting trinomial for a literature, Basque literature, that attempts to exorcize its most sacred demons.

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