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## Meta-fiction, Parody, and *The [Basque] Apocalypse Revealed to All*

Larraitz Ariznabarreta, PhD

Members of ethnic and other social and cultural minorities –women, gays, and lesbians– have made creative use of the fantastic and postmodern modes of writing in order to express alterity and otherness: also as means of exposing and disrupting repressive notions of nationalism and identity and the defamiliarizing normative assumptions about the constitution of the real. (Concha & Dobrott, 2006, p. 198)

Over ten years have gone by since Joseba Gabilondo's *Apokalipsia guztioi erakutsia* ["Vulgate of the Apocalypse" or "The Apocalypse Revealed to All"<sup>1</sup>] was published. Although the book obtained the "Erein Narratiba" award in 2009, the collection gained no scholarly attention and hardly received any critical reviews. The exceptions were few and not very encouraging. In a revision published in *Gara* (July 31, 2009) Ion Olano conceded that Gabilondo "had tried to make a liquid book (not to say "postmodern"), using some really interesting ingredients, but all in all, [...] he had stopped short of the attempt" (Olano, July). Similarly, Felipe Juaristi (*El Diario Vasco*, August 28, 2019) underscored the flaws in the collection, questioning the very essence of the parodical technique Gabilondo had opted for:

I do not know what kind of parody Joseba Gabilondo makes. But throughout the book there is a trace of a bunch of pages of Basque literature, a noticeable trace, written in a different way and, therefore, turned into a shadow. After all, what makes a parody of

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<sup>1</sup> These translations were rendered by the author himself. Only one of the short stories of the collection *Apokalipsia guztioi erakutsia* has been translated into English. "Denboraren kondena" ("Time's Sentence") was included in the collection *Our Wars. Short Fiction on Basque Conflicts* (Ayerbe, 2012). All the rest of the translations from the original Basque were rendered by the author of this article.

literature is a parody of society, because literature forms, roughly, of course, the symbolic universe of society. But when the symbolic universe itself is parodical, why parody? (Juaristi, 2009)

The review by the scholar Mikel Ayerbe in the Basque newspaper *Berria* (May 24, 2009) was not explicitly upbeat either. Though Ayerbe did admit that “the more I think about what I read, the more confused my conclusions become. And in these times of ease, achieving that is no small feat”<sup>2</sup> he confessed he had not fully connected with Gabilondo’s fiction. It was the reputed literary critic Javier Rojo (*El Correo*, October 31, 2009) who delivered a critical assessment which emphasized Gabilondo’s expertise as a literary critic and the metafictional nature of his literary proposal.

Joseba Gabilondo does not usually write literature. He has been known for other works so far. Now, however, he has decided to enter the paths of literature and, as a result of this work, he has offered the Basque reader a collection of short stories [...] Joseba Gabilondo knows all too well what the characteristics of postmodern literature are, and by using and playing with these characteristics, he offers humorous and parodic stories. Imitating the literature of the genre, he has written stories with the characteristics of a black novel, and next to stories like this, some that look like reports. Different types of writing and storytelling are used, as well as a full range of rhetorical games, creating an anthology-like collection. On the other hand, there seems to be an ideological approach behind the narratives, because the loss of utopias partly marks the direction of the stories. In fact, utopias no longer put before us the promises of the paradises they dreamed of, and they may even turn to hell. (Rojo, 2009)

We agree with Rojo’s perspective which emphasizes Gabilondo’s work’s “book-conscious-of-its-bookness aspect” (Tani, 2002, p. 322). In fact, from a Basque cultural studies perspective, we are drawn to revisit Gabilondo’s collection of short stories precisely for its para-literary virtues and the metafictional consciousness it reveals. How does the literary scholar who has questioned the *immutable ethos* of Basqueness, criticized its exoticization, and scrutinized Basque literature from the lens of its universalization produce a literary artifact? What are the ideological constituents at play? Was the book maybe too early in reaching its readers and critics?

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<sup>2</sup> “I have not fully connected with all the stories, but I have not even gotten to lose interest. To those who asked me if I liked the book, I said ‘I don’t know’, but I know that I did not even get a negative opinion. The more I think about what I read, the more confused my conclusions become. And in these times of ease, achieving that is no small feat” (Ayerbe, Hondamendiaren atarian, 2009).



*Joseba Gabilondo*

Ten years after its publication, in these ostensibly apocalyptic times of plagues and medieval-like global populism, an in-depth critical reading of *Apokalipsia guztioi erakutsia* seems timelier than ever. The literary scholar Gabilondo would, of course, agree; since, as he conceded to Gorka Erostarbe in a recent interview concerning, among other issues, the Covid-19 pandemic: “Our new horizon is not history, but apocalypse”<sup>3</sup>.

We must face the crisis that is coming, whether we like it or not. Therein lies the advantage of apocalyptic thinking: it is more realistic. Our new horizon is not history, but apocalypse (in a very materialistic sense, not sensationalist). And otherwise look at kids ages 5-6 today (who will be adults by 2050). Therein lies the apocalypse. Gabilondo in: (Erostarbe, 2020).

The literary and cultural scholar Joseba Gabilondo<sup>4</sup> has exerted considerable influence on the

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<sup>3</sup> See also (Gabilondo, “Apocalypse, Biopolitics and the Destituent State: Precarization in the Time of Cholera”, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Joseba Gabilondo was born in 1963 to a working-class family. Native to a little town in the heartland of Gipuzkoa (Urretxu), his parents moved to the industrial town of Errenteria where young Joseba attended a Basque-language instructional school. After studying Basque Philology in Vitoria-Gasteiz, he received his doctorate from the University of California (San Diego) in 1991 with a dissertation on Contemporary Hollywood: [“Cinematic Hyperspace. New Hollywood Cinema and Science Fiction Film. Image Commodification in Late Capitalism”]. As a scholar, he has taught Hispanic/Basque literature and culture at several American universities, including Duke University (North Carolina), Bryn Mawr College (Pennsylvania), the University of Nevada (Reno) and Michigan State

field of Basque and Iberian Literary Studies. His scholarly work often generating controversy on the opinions expressed about canonical Basque Literature and authors including Bernardo Atxaga<sup>5</sup>, Joseba Sarrionandia<sup>6</sup>, and Ramon Saizarbitoria<sup>7</sup>, among others. Gabilondo is also to be accredited for the first post-national history of Basque Literature<sup>8</sup> and several scholarly works on Populism and Globalization as the new Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> Gabilondo's popularity amidst younger generations of Basque scholars and cultural practitioners is exhibited through his active presence in social media, where he often contributes to debates on literature, politics, and culture. According to the literary scholar Ur Apalategi (2003), Gabilondo falls into the category of authors who have produced hardly any literary work, and yet, paradoxically, are highly regarded as remarkable writers:

Gabilondo has shown a special ability to walk as an equilibrium in this indefinite limit of writing, and if he is someone in Basque literature (Basque literature, not the most critical of writers), it is precisely because he has always proclaimed his sincere intention to be a writer. This or that work that would have made him a permanent writer in front of the reader has not yet arrived, to the displeasure of both readers and publishers. The most curious thing, however, is that the image of this potential writer, who he intends to be –his *ethos*– is constantly sculpted through a later and more well-equipped para-literary work. Therefore, we can say that Gabilondo, a writer without an *oeuvre*, has a very well-established and precise image of a writer, because we all believe that he will publish a piece that we have been promised for a long time. (Apalategi, 2003, p. 98)

As a metafictional stance –literature about literature– *Apokalipsia guztioi erakutsia* was probably not the fiction piece Apalategi and Gabilondo's eager readers were expecting. The

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University. His (New York-Martutene: euskal post-nazionalismoaren utopiaz eta globalizazio neoliberalaren krisiaz, 2013) won the *Euskadi Prize* awarded by the Regional Government of The Basque Country.

<sup>5</sup> See, among other references: (Gabilondo, Bernardo Atxaga's Seduction: On the Symbolic Economy of Postcolonial and Postnational Literatures in the Global Market, 1999); (Gabilondo, Before Babel, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> (Gabilondo, "Literatur politikaz eta ekonomiaz kanona, sariak, merkatua eta globalizazioan. Sarrionandia, multikulturalismo kritikoa", 2012)

<sup>7</sup> (Gabilondo, New York-Martutene: euskal post-nazionalismoaren utopiaz eta globalizazio neoliberalaren krisiaz, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> It was Gabilondo who first introduced the concept of "post-nationalism" to Basque academia and literary criticism. At the same time, his (Nazioaren Hondarrak. Euskal literatura garaikidearen historia postnazional baterako hastapenak, 2006) (Introduction to a Postnational History of Contemporary Basque Literature (1978-2000): Remnants of the Nation, 2019) laid the foundations for a new history of Basque literature. Gabilondo's idea of "post nationalism" radically criticizes the nationalist basis of the hegemonic history of Basque literature to present and accuses it of constructing literary history for the benefit nationalism, rather than following scientific purposes. Gabilondo's proposal of Basque "post nationalism" considers the issue of the nation critically, but also examines linguistic diglossia or biopolitical difference (2006, pp. 7-59). In short, Gabilondo's post-national literary history is concerned with political issues that touch on literature –mostly on the issue of the subaltern– rather than on strictly literary and linguistic issues that have been considered hegemonic.

<sup>9</sup> (Aldekoa, Mercero, Apaolaza, & Gabilondo, 2008); (Gabilondo, Populismoaz: subirotasun globala eta euskal independentzia, 2017); (Gabilondo, Globalizaciones: La nueva edad media y el retorno de la diferencia, 2019).

book's title is obviously reminiscent of the erudite and witty collection of Umberto Eco's essays on mass culture<sup>10</sup>, but it also, and most notably, alludes to the Biblical revelations in the New Testament. An introductory epigraph referring to a translation of 16th century Basque, and Calvinist, author Joanes Leizarraga loom large through the collection. Leizarraga's encrypted Basque casts a spell on the reader: they are about to be the recipients of a revelation, and the revelation concerns Basques and their symbolic world, hence the reference to the 16<sup>th</sup> century author. Eloquently, all the references to the emissary of the message are hidden in ellipsis. Literary and philological fields cannot always be clearly told one from another in the scarce corpus of old Basque written works. It used to be taken as an ashaming fact, but as postmodernism revises what constitutes a (true) literary artefact, almost everything has fallen within the scope of literary studies.

And what is literature? Technically, if we use the narrow sense of literature, which is what most literature has used in the narrow sense, there is no Basque literature until 1932, until Lizardi's *Bihotz-begietan*. In fact, the XVI. Since the twentieth century, the criteria of popularity –Cervantes, Shakespeare–, aesthetics –Kant – and quality – modernism– have been included in deciding what literature is. Lizardi's first Basque work responds in some way to these hegemonic criteria. Accordingly, there is no Basque literature before that; then it is over! The problem with the question is the question itself, precisely because that definition does not help us. Literature is the discourse that a people or community uses to imagine itself, and in the case of minorities, this is marked by extremely limited texts and oral traditions. So, we cannot use a hegemonic definition. We need to use a definition that suits us. Gabilondo interviewed by (Perez, 2016).

Hence, the scholar Gabilondo is perfectly aware of this advantage and will use it to his benefit to create a book where literature and literary criticism mutually interact to address topics that have long concerned the author. After all, as Gabilondo himself defined it, "Literature is the discourse that a people or community uses to imagine itself" (Perez, 2016).

The opening story of the collection: "Iparralderako hutsegite neolitikoa" ["The Neolithic Blunder towards the North"], which serves somewhat as an introduction, concerns time and the transmission of culture. A highly "self-conscious" (20) and "doomed" (14) narrator, acting as traditional bard or storyteller, voices the history of an ancient tribe that flees the Caucasus to

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<sup>10</sup> According to (Apalategi, 2003, p. 89) the reference to Eco's essays (Eco, 1994 (1991)) is also appropriate for other works by Gabilondo (e.g. *Kaliforniatik bihotzez* ("From California with Love") a compilation of articles – "postcards" the author calls them– Gabilondo wrote for *Zabalik* (the Basque supplement of the popular paper *El Diario Vasco*).

keep a promise and the way in which the prehistoric wanderers reach the North of Africa. In magical fashion, right before she dies, the main priestess of the tribe, the Mother, witnesses a sequence of future events that reveal the future of her tribe members and the generations to come. The revelation is made by means of a high-tech television set in which the Mother is offered a fast forward view of Basques, their history, and their culture. Ultimately the priestess will be asked to pass this revelation to her heir, who will, before her own death, be asked to repeat the ritual. The reader is thus swamped in historic details that briskly take them from the whereabouts of a tribe of wanderers, to the times when the tribe members become sedentary, and, later, settle into centuries of a predominantly rural reality. We witness a long sequence of anthropological elements of folk tradition, and a series of commonplace beliefs and stereotypes traditionally ascribed to Basques to underscore their singular identity; anthropological foundations abounding in the idea of “Basque as an impenetrable language, and concurrently, speakers of the language as a mysterious, primitive, gregarious folk who fail to conform to imposed rules”<sup>11</sup>. In prolepsis, the priestess is also offered a peek into the future, thus envisioning ETA’s bloody struggle, the death of Basque language, the commodification of culture and globalization. The priestess takes it all in but is at a loss to understand why her own people, who were once nomads, fail to welcome migrants in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The seemingly bizarre reference to the TV set clearly suggests the influence that technologies have on the construction of global identities, and hints at contemporary Basques’ fare worldwide in the representations of the media, the arts, scholarship, international politics, and the Internet, all of which are addressed in the story. Gabilondo’s introductory piece echoes the reflection of the literary theorist Trin T. Min-ha (1994, p. 10) where she considers transmission and tale telling:

Journeying across generations and cultures, tale telling excels in its powers and adaptation and germination; while with exile and migration, travelling expanded in time and space becomes dizzyingly complex in its repercussive effects. Both are subject to the hazards of displacement, interaction, and translation. Both, however, have the potential to widen the horizon of one’s imagination and to shift the frontiers of reality and fantasy, or of Here and There. Both contribute to the questioning the limits set on what is known as ‘common’ and ‘ordinary’ in daily existence, offering thereby the possibility of an elsewhere-within-here, or -there.

The idea of historical inter-generational and inter-cultural transmission is, therefore, core to the story –as it has been central to the *ethos of Basqueness* through the centuries: a sort of individual responsibility in the absence of structural sounding boards. The story clearly makes a point about the way in which stigmatized and emblemized identity constituents have been

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<sup>11</sup> (Ariznabarreta, 2019, p. 69)

interiorized by the tribe member's themselves, who passionately contribute to reinforce the outer representations of foreign travelers, tourists, and scholars. The reference to the Mother is, similarly, a whimsical cue that points at the traditional theory of the Basque matriarchy endorsed, among others, by many of the oedipal patriarchs of Basque anthropology and reproduced unceasingly until not long ago. This exotization of folklore and ethnic singularities and their reproduction across generations is addressed in many of Gabilondo's essays and scholarly papers. In a long article he wrote for *Argia* in (2016) he refers to how Basques have perceived and received their history through the centuries and claims "it has always been associated with exoticism". He later goes to defend his position with a reference that is directly reminiscent of the first short story in the collection:

[When I refer to] *Materia vasconica* [I mean] all the debates and discourses that have taken place about the Basque language, and I do not distinguish between local and foreign debates, because they are completely connected. What really defines us is not the question whether the Basque language or the Basques came directly from the Neolithic, but, rather, the debate itself. This debate, a debate that Basques and outsiders have had together.

Within this very context of deep criticism towards the ills of Basque traditional nationalism and its political epitome the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV),<sup>12</sup> the last story of the collection "Apokalipsia guztioi erakutsia (k.o. 2050) [The Apocalypse explained to everyone (A.D. 2050)]" presents the reader with a carnivalesque parade of characters and imaginary, yet fictionally plausible, historic events in which the independence of the Basque provinces is explained in flashback through the reporting of the Basque-French journalist Jean-Pierre Haristoi in *Le Monde* (July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2056). The hyphenated identity of the journalist (Basque-French) is relevant in that at the imaginary space-time stretch in which the story is penned, (2056), "The French Republic (and the suppressed Basque provinces within it) remains the only nation-state which – in "its present isolation"– "has not been sickened by this fever of the apocalypse" (287) and remains faithful to its substances: universality, rationalism and the Enlightenment.

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<sup>12</sup> Criticism to what Gabilondo has coined "The Basque Oasis" —"an accommodationist enthusiastic social tone about the prodigious achievements of the BNP's (PNV-EAJ) policies after Francoism" (Ariznabarreta, 2019, pp. 19-20)—; are pivotal in the scholars work and interviews. In his own words: "The ideology of the Basque Oasis refers to the fact that in the middle of the Spanish 'desert'—a desert defined by violence, economic decline, and corruption— the Basque Country (the Basque Autonomous Community and, sometimes, Navarre) is an Oasis of economic prosperity, social assistance, human rights, and political transparency. Although in comparative terms, it could be proven in general terms that the Basque Country has higher rates of prosperity and justice than one of the most unequal countries of the OECD (Spain), it is far from an oasis: corruption, social disparity, and violence continue to define the Basque Country." (Gabilondo, "Postimperialismo, estudios ibéricos y enfoques comparativo sistémicos: pornografía neoliberal española, terrorismo antropológico-turístico y oasis vasco", 2019).



Likewise, both irony and parody are used in the story to describe the central importance of the international glimmer of the Bilbao-Guggenheim Museum and the Basque politician Xabier Arzalluz<sup>13</sup> in recent Basque history. In fact, both Arzalluz –described as the “Machiavelli of Mediocrity” (253)– and the Guggenheim Museum –signaled first as a “postmodern and liberal cromlech” (264); later criticized as “The Newest Cultural Disaster” (266) and a “mausoleum” (276) (282)– are credited as the two most salient elements which ultimately lead to Basque independence. In a parodical turn of events, Arzalluz’s death and the Guggenheim’s closing coincide in 2037, when a global populist revolt, an “apocalyptic fever”, is sparked in Bilbao, despite the initial reckless attitude of Basques themselves. The central revolutionary, a mediocre Chinese ambassador is officially visiting Bilbao, the “Basque Samarkand” (275), a city which has “expelled its own middle-classes from the promised land” (261) through gentrification; an exclusion that is referred to as a “biblical prophecy” (261).

Gabilondo’s narrator acts a reporter/ventriloquist for a vanishing old world which is fearful of the “apocalyptic fever that a minority has spread around the world” (287) and underscores the perils of populism (“a new democratic Leviathan”) (286), namely the disappearance of the nation-state and the dismantling of the EU. Of course, the reporter also remains wary of the impact this new world order may have on the citizens of the French Republic, some of which have “allegedly started the construction of a new titanium mausoleum in the ancient city of Samarkand” (286). The charade involved in the narrators alleged self-referentiality and consciousness establishes a connection with the omniscient narrator in the aforementioned opening story of the collection “Iparralderako hutsegite neolitikoa” (“The Neolithic Blunder towards the North”) in which the narrator is similarly aware of the responsibility entailed in the storytelling he is involved in. In fact, the latter does so under the commission of Death itself, and under the fear that if he does not pursue his “mission he will eventually be slain for treason” (14).

The *ethos* behind *authorial consciousness* appears as one of Gabilondo’s preferred narrative strategies through the collection –conspicuous tales which fight with the limitations of language, narrative voices that split between the third and the first person or take the form of

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<sup>13</sup> Xabier Arzalluz (1932-2019) was an outstanding figure of the BNP (PNV-EAJ) whose vexed opinions about Basque ethnicity and politics granted him a controversial stance in Basque society and politics. A former Jesuit, Arzalluz was often described as a shrewd politician whose Janus-like two-facedness –compromising while keeping a radical discourse– was often seen as a synecdoche of his own party’s duality in politics. Hence the parodical reference Gabilondo makes when he makes his fictional Arzalluz exclaim: “Le Pays Basque c’est moi” (253) and the narrator states that “It was as if Arzalluz’s heart beat had kept the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country alive”.

authoritative documents (letters, reportages); narrators trying to recount elapsed past events that are critical to the character(s) survival; detailed time-spatial references to provide narrative reliability, acute efforts to make sense of mirages and dreams –all remind us of the imperative “mission” alluded to in the collection’s introductory biblical epigraph, if only in ellipsis:

The Revelation [...], which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony [...], and of all things that he saw.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the binary opposition that applies to all the characters in Gabilondo’s collection is likewise applicable to his narrative voices, since not even one of them manages to live up to their commission and oscillate between responsibility and failure. Though, as the first-person narrator in “Ez naiz inoiz abenidan geratu”<sup>15</sup> [“I never stop at the Avenue”] echoes when confronted with the futility of her endeavor, the real opprobrium would be not to assume one’s toll: “I do not think anyone will understand or believe what I am saying. But the most incoherent truth is always more bearable than an unexplained mystery.” (125)

Basque/Migrant *otherism* and the lover/enemy dichotomy is the motif of “I never stop at the Avenue”, a story that could be condensed as the clash between “two differing Basque identities, two vastly different humanities experiencing the same historic event [...]; a rupture”. (Gabilondo, 2012, p. 80). References to migration to and within the Basque Country in the sixties is a recurrent topic in Gabilondo’s scholarly and personal reflections. As he conceded to (Zabala, 2007):

The demographic changes that that took place in those years heralded a new era. In the 50s and 60s, the population of the Basque Country almost tripled [...]. Economic growth rates were formidable, like those of China or India today. There was a new social reality that could not be reversed, conveyed by a dense process of industrialization and a great influx of migrants with all the changes that entails. Migration from abroad (Spain), and, on the other hand, from the traditional (Basque) rural world to the cities. A new Basque Country was waging, and so many new ways to be Basque. How should we interpret this? How do we interpret this unique time as we interpret two drastically different ways in which it was experienced? I would say that the answer lays here, in that rupture.

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<sup>14</sup> In Leizarraga’s 16<sup>th</sup> century translation: “eta *hark* bere Aingeruarekin igorririk loanes bere zerbitzariari signifikatu ukan drautza. Zeinek testifikatu ukan baitu lainkoaren hitzaz eta Iesus Kristen testimoniajeaz eta ikusi ukan dituen gauza guziez”.

<sup>15</sup> The short story was awarded second prize in the contest “Imaginate Euskadi” and was published by the Banco Hispano Central in (1993).

The chronicle of a migrant family from Tarifa (Spain) who has educated their daughter to become a “full breed Basque” by sending her to a grass-root Basque instructional school and coaxing her to only meet with Basque bourgeois children. In order to adapt to the Basque environment, Isabel, an over achiever who has made it up the social ladder and works at a bank in the center of San Sebastian, hides her childhood/family background and suppresses any memory reminiscent of her roots, pointing at the idea that “any change is a betrayal of the origin” (Gabilondo, 2012, p. 84).

The story takes a psychoanalytical turn when Isabel decides to write a cathartic letter to her boyfriend in which she shares a science-fiction like epiphany through which she is liberated of the constraints that were imposed on her through her upbringing. Her encounter with a vampire (sic) amidst an atmosphere of hallucinations (perfume/shop window mirrors), as she leaves work one evening, breaks lose a repressed psyche of sexual desires, memories of teenage lesbian lust, coming to terms with her migrant background, and a profound understanding of her mother’s impulses towards her toxic rearing . She becomes whole, precisely, when she is fractured and aware of her split self.

The androgynous, well-read, Itziar Benitez de Cearreta in the story “Banpiroen habanera faborittoa” [“The favorite habanera of vampires”] is also a lesbian. The character’s self-acceptance of her own sexuality and her strong erotic drive are fictional recourses to set the protagonist in a search to revenge for her proletarian father’s miserable death as the result of years working in a factory in the Basque Country. Closely following her father’s long-time foreman, Juan Bidarte, Itziar travels to Galicia where she hopes to kill Bidarte, and, immerses the reader in a melancholic atmosphere of cloudy skies (202), traditional mythical creatures (228) and contemporary gothic characters. Early on, the reader is reminded that “the boundaries of fiction and reality are always blurry” (228), which allows for the Galician scenario (were Celtic *meigas* and Christian *animas* both inhabit its mythical past) to become a fictional space where rational thinking is purportedly suspended. A setting, however, where the presence of medieval authors, vampires and gothic characters allows the narrator(s) (first person-third person) zigzagging voice(s) to reflect on political issues as real and contemporary as the ills of capitalism, globalization, and the emancipating possibilities of populist movements. In fact, Itziar’s strong desire for revenge is presented as social rather than personal. It concerns retaliating her own father’s working-class alienation and long exposure to the evils of capitalism, but, also, violently countering the modern-day prominence of the political heirs of Francoism and their inexpugnable present-day power. As such, Gabilondo seems to suggest that all the fictional anecdotes and characters in the story are prone to be disturbed by their

political past (223) and that none of us can easily excise ourselves from our own time's societal structures and past political vampire hosts.

Fear of demise and treason are also core to the second story of the collection. "Denboraren kondena" ["Time's Sentence"]. A seemingly realist account<sup>16</sup> of an ETA member escaping his former comrades, and Spanish security forces alike, affords a mere anecdote to fictionalize an insightful historiographic metafictional reflection on violence and time. Through the story, the ETA activist mutates into the ruthless Basque conquistador Lope de Aguirre, a 16<sup>th</sup> century historic character of immense transcendence in the imaginary of the Spanish colonization of the Americas. The metamorphosis concerns both the character and the natural environment he is surrounded by –the moss-covered hilly forests of the Basque Country are transformed into the Venezuelan rainforest (39)–, yet the conquistador is, in fact, facing almost an identical situation to that of the Basque activist; a coincidence suggesting a fatally repeated eternal *return*, or, rather, an endless relapse into brutal violence.

Likewise, the long epigraph introducing the story ends with an allusion to the comment of 16<sup>th</sup> century theorist Saavedra Fajardo on the unstoppable passing of things along with time. In the epigraph, Fajardo declares that natural cycles of living creatures are an appropriate metaphor for political institutions too; which clashes with the Basque activists ideal historic materialism; or, for that matter, Lope de Aguirre's alleged utopian ambition to become "*A future monarch who would bring a thousand years of peace to the Indies*". The author resorts to a hoax-like epilogue, since it provides the story with a mythical, historiographic, and metafictional closure through a quote which is difficult to verify in classical historiography. After all, "(let us not forget) literature, is [...] a way of narrating history: history in lower case letters" (Zaldua, 2009).

Through the story, Gabilondo appears to be addressing yet another central issue of postmodern poetics: "How can we hope to re-present the past as it was when we must do so through present day (re) creations?" (Berkhofer, 1997, p. 3). Postmodernity emphasizes the recurrent repetition of all events, thus undermining the (repeated) illusion of meaningful progress. Gabilondo reminds us that, we are now –and we cannot longer pretend to ignore it– condemned to this perception of things *repeating* themselves in circles of time –or as Beckett illustrated it: just *too stirring or not moving at all*.

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<sup>16</sup> The appearance of realism is provided, among other recourses, through exact dates and attention to detail. For example, the escape of the ETA activist is dated November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1990. "1990eko azaroaren 11 da. Goizeko hirurak dira Donostian" (It is November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1990. It is three o'clock in Donostia) (Gabilondo, *Apokalipsia guztioi erakutsia*, 2009, p. 28)

“To remind readers what we did not know that we already knew” (Gabilondo, 2020), such is the literary intention of Gabilondo’s second story. An intention which is plainly articulated from the very title: “Time’s Sentence”. Still, we are left with one possibility to *escape* that immobilizing turmoil: to keep *playing the game* of literature (or life, at that). For one always has the fictional passport to be (or mimic) whomever one suits, just as the activist does. Indeed, the narrator warned us early enough about the ETA member’s identity: *José López Aguerre, Born in Oñate, Guipuzcoa*. If only the reader had paid attention to the hints!

Hints, mirrors, masks, clues, labyrinths, and deceiving traces are metaphorical recourses often at play in (post)modern fiction. Authors such as Henry James, Borges, A.S. Byatt, or Eco are all examples of a wide tradition of authors who have resorted literary detectives in search of lost manuscripts, apocryphal documents or metaliterary hypotheses. In the realm of Basque literature Zaldua (2009, p. 103) theorizes that “the weakness” of the Basque literary tradition has allowed for the proliferation of narratives where detective like characters are out to find the one enigmatic text that remains unfound and, if/when discovered, it will ultimately change the vision Basques (and outsiders) have of their own feeble literary tradition (Zaldua, 2009).

As our own tradition does not satisfy us (how could it be otherwise!), writers have, imitating Borges (sometimes unconsciously), made one up. Camilo Lizardi, a character in Bernardo Atxaga’s *Obabakoak*, reappears “recycled” in Pedro Alberdi’s *Orhoit gutaz* (2003); Saint Francis Xavier by Jon Alonso in *Katebegi galdua* (1995); Pedro Mari Arrieta in *Sasiak ere begiak baditik* (1986) and Joanes Mailu in *Mailuaren odola* (2006), both from the pen of *Aingeru Epaltza*; Joanes Etxegoien in Joan Mari Irigoien’s *Lur bat haratago* (2000); Gaston Berrizar in Ur Apalategi’s *Gure Gauzak SA* (2004); the meta-literary hypothesis of a possible second volume, as a sequel to Axular’s *Gero* (1643), which appears from time to time in short stories or novels, and so on, are evidence of our longing for a fictitious corpus of forerunners that “book by book” is becoming more interesting than the original one.

The third story in Gabilondo’s collection concerns precisely that: a scholarly and intellectual quest for the “Apocryphal Text Which Shows the Universality of Basque Literature”. This in fact was the original title of the third story of the collection, which (Zaldua, 2009, p. 103) regards as “the most outstanding attempt to date” of the literary detective tradition in Basque literature<sup>17</sup>. The short story was later retitled for this collection as: “Tolstoy zulua, Proust

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<sup>17</sup> “Perhaps the most outstanding attempt to date was the short story “Euskal literaturaren unibertsaltasuna frogatzen duen apokrifoa” [Apocryphal Text Which Shows the Universality of Basque Literature] by Joseba Gabilondo. [...] I think we should vindicate this newly invented tradition as much as the original one. To begin with it is very funny and entertaining, and the invented authors and works are closer to the literary evolution of their

papuarra” [“the Tolstoy of the Zulus, the Proust of the Papuans”] as an allusion to a quote attributed to Saul Bellow: “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I’d be glad to read him”. Bafflingly, the epigraph itself happens to be somewhat of an apocryphal hoax since Saul Bellow himself always denied having written it<sup>18</sup>.

This literary detective story –which is in fact more philological than literary– is delivered in the form of one long letter whose addresser is a restless, fidgety (47) Basque scholar living in London. The narrative technique, a conventional document imitating reality, allows the author to provide the narrator with a combined authorial status. The middle-aged researcher, whose name remains unknown to the reader, is writing a doctoral dissertation on Old Biscayan Dialect, and is granted access to the secret archives of the British Library by a young (librarian) lover. The love-story offers flesh to the scholar’s pure intellectual quest while it *functionally* contributes to the plot and the denouement of the story. The narrator/writer of the letter is in fact in a previous relationship with a Lacanian psychoanalyst (sic) who charges him with projecting his childhood desires into his intellectual quest (53). The quest, indeed, looks more like a means to quench his scientific ambition, a mission to wager against his own idea of the Basque intelligentsia, which he deems as “scholarly out-of-date” (48), and “lazy” (51). The narrator himself is portrayed as an egotistical, learned pedant who has trouble thinking in Basque and often intercalates English substitutes for Basque words. His ambitions concern accessing the Basque Regional Governments grant (53), making money with lectures (80) (48), and having his name inscribed in gold in the pages of Basque literature (48). Indeed, the scholar’s constant fear of being followed and haunted by some evil forces is archetypal to the genre.

Through the long account of his scholarly findings the researcher looks back on his younger years and describes the social and moral climate of the Basque Country in the 1980s. The description, which will crop up in other stories of the collection is gloomy and depressing with a landscape of drugs, AIDS, and a bleak future for the narrator’s generation: You know the end of the 70s was not easy for our generation, too much change: the bureaucratic and money-thirsty democracy fucked with all our Marxist and hippy dreams.

Such a depiction clashes with the numerous references made in several of the stories to the Basque Country as an “anthropological museum” (239), a theme park for ethnographers and

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own times than the ones written by the clerics who mark the history of Basque literature. And last but not least, any writer knows that the best books are those which never get to be written.” (Zaldua, 2009, p. 103)

<sup>18</sup> For the reference and full story behind the quote ascribed to Bellow see (Foster Jr., 2001).

scholars (248), a fake arcadian milieu which none of the characters recognize as their own. On the contrary, recollections of the turmoil experienced in the Basque Country during the 70's and 80's and a reminiscence of wild street festivals like San Fermin (162) are the backdrop to several of the stories in the collection. Often, events, smells, tastes, and people that constitute the affective landscape of the characters' childhood and early youth come to haunt them producing a contradictory encounter of spectral and sweet memories. The young José Luís in "Hildakoak" ["The dead"] is confronted with a ghostly cohort of family members who come to comfort him before he dies of AIDS in London, the city in which the protagonist had taken solace to flee "military service" (169) and the stagnant atmosphere of the Basque Country of the 70s and the 80s.

Escaping the homeland, detaching themselves from the familiar, remains the thrust of many of the characters in the stories, but as José Luis confides to Amaya, a fellow squatter, "London is as boring and as dirty as Bilbao" (168). In that sense, Gabilondo's characters can never do away with a sense of *estrangement* regards their (native/adopted) environments and are often restless or in transit. As one of his characters exhorts: "estranxeira na mina propia historia, na miña propia paisaxe"<sup>19</sup> [foreign to my own history, to my own landscape] (211).

Always a foreigner to her own homeland, always lonesome in History. A loneliness which covers her as a second casing that cannot be removed; an exile in which not even rain befriends her.

Since Gabilondo himself belongs to the same generation as the characters he depicts, one cannot but wonder how much of this uprootedness fictionally transmutes personal experience and pertains to the author's own recollections of his young years. As Apalategi contends when discussing Gabilondo's work: "[even if] these [Cano and Gabilondo] are, of course, not writers who escaped Spanish repression; to what extent have they not absconded (the homeland) to flee a stagnant or confused atmosphere in Basque society?" (Apalategi, 2003, p. 88). Fictional metaphors through the collection are too pervasive to believe otherwise.

The fourth story in the collection "Madril, New York, Tokio"<sup>20</sup> starts out with an epigraph from

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<sup>19</sup> In Galician in the original. The sentence pays homage to the Galician poet Rosalía Castro. Gabilondo has written quite extensively on Galician literature.

<sup>20</sup> "Madrid, New York, Tokyo" was awarded 1st prize in the "Ignacio Aldecoa" short story contest and was first published in *Revista Kultura* (1992). It has not been translated.

the Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, a cultural allusion that crops up in a myriad of obvious references and intertextual mentions through the story. A nightmarish, labyrinthine, account of a journey of an Spanish movie director from Extremadura in search of the love of his youth, a Basque *beau* with whom he shared political affiliations to the Communist party and a homosexual crush that remains a central thrust for the protagonist's whereabouts.

Madrid, New York and Tokyo serve as a postmodern backdrop –a virtual *hologram* (98)– for the wandering of the main character, a hollow, Prufrock-like character, clung to a recurrent memory of past lust which he can only endure through etherizing himself with alcohol and his addiction to *benzodiazepines*. Hallucinatory states, deceiving mirrors, blurry visions, and fuzzy memories conform the scenario for the perfect “anti-detective” narrative, which suggests that “as individuals we now occupy roles rather than selves” (Waugh, p. 239). Although the actual identity of the protagonist is never made clear (we are barely given a few hints about his background) the narration comes out as a story on the construction of sexual and ideological identity in which mystery and a hide-and-seek narrative technique are used at service of the character's personal identity quest and the construction of a psychological alter ego, a double to the main protagonist.

To offer a literary parallelism, while reading Gabilondo's *Vulgate*, one often thinks of the maze-like techniques that constitute Paul Auster's masterful (*The New York Trilogy*, 1990/1987), but Gabilondo's characters are far too parodic to retain the mystery they claim. To put it differently, Gabilondo's characters are pawns of the author's self-consciousness of what constitutes a character in postmodern narrative, which “insists on offering the merest fragments of character, without ever allowing for a fully coherent construction of an identifiable whole” (Docherty, 2002, p. 359).

Since images of Basqueness (Jon) and otherness (protagonist) stand in tension through the story, there seems to be an invitation to argue in favor of a personality split on the part of the central character, which does not constitute a fixed identity. Whereas the Spanish film director –revealingly from Extremadura, the region where most immigrants to the Basque Country in the 60's originated– is only able to speak his native language, his idealized Basque lover is a well-rounded polyglot who speaks over six languages. The strong tension, both sexual and ideological, between the two characters hint at a hidden desire to assimilate each other, an unsuccessful aspiration to become one and whole again. The story, of course, acquires a deeper impact when the reader becomes aware it was, in fact, authored by the main protagonist of



another story of the collection: “Ez naiz sekula abenidan geratu”<sup>21</sup> [“I never stop at the Avenue”] who is likewise searching for her vanished identity, albeit unconsciously at first. Through the discovery of this authorship the collection unfolds yet another web of fictional connections which abound on the metafictional character of Gabilondo’s writing. The constant focus on narrative discoveries, and fictional breakthroughs contribute to the idea of all the characters being “haunted by the sensation that they are characters in a novel” (Concha & Dobrott, 2006, p. 68) who are about to make a discovery. The epiphany in “Ez naiz sekula abenidan geratu” [“I never stop at the Avenue”] concerns a parasitical lover that looks identical to the actress Angelina Jolie, a lustful fallen angel that lacks any psychological depth, yet is outlined as somewhat of a mythical (vampiric) presence.<sup>22</sup>

The reference to the actress Angelina Jolie is by no means an exception, since the collection is a *who-is-who* of global cultural references, and, similarly, brims with name-games concerning well known, easy to track, persons in Basque culture. The profuse references to pop-cultural icons –Dylan, The Sex Pistols, Quadrophenia, Henri Moore, Kurosawa, Ridley Scott, Fritz Lang, Hitchcock, Hilary Swank– and canonical authors –Joyce, Rosalía de Castro, Hemingway, Sartre, Conrad, Bellow, Deleuze– stem from Gabilondo’s familiarity with cinema, pop culture and canonical literature. On the other hand, the traceable Basque references often serve as a means for caricaturesque social criticism concerning Basque society.

All the allusions –Basque and global; high-brow and popular alike– are made blatantly and scaffold the plot and the stories’ symbolism to the limit. To give but an instance of their functional role in the stories we may return to the stories “Hildakoak” [“The dead”] –in which the literary wink to Joyce’s short story is made unashamedly obvious– and the fourth story in the collection: “Madrid, New York, Tokyo”. In the latter, as the main character is about to board the return plane that will take him back home, a reference to Joseph Conrad’s “the horror” helps close a journey that was started as vital in the protagonist’s quest of himself yet proves to be futile.

Ostensibly, Conrad’s Kurtz’s final judgement on his own life and the iconic horror cry towards the dangers of imperialism have here transmuted into to a perceived rampant totalitarianism to which the characters themselves have contributed through self-betrayal and the neglect of the

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<sup>21</sup> The short story was awarded second prize in the contest “Imaginate Euskadi” and was published by the Banco Hispano Central (Gabilondo, *Ez naiz sekula abenidan geratu*, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> The name chosen for the lesbian-tempting vampire –*Angelina Jolie*, or *Pretty (female) Angel*– helps the double-sided voyage to Itziar’s *un-Basquening*, via un-repressing desires, both to her Andalusian past and global present.

political *ethos* that guided their younger years. A tyranny which, as the character finally acknowledges, has killed any possibility of human emancipation.

The ubiquitous references to hard ideologies the characters lived by in their youth, namely Marxism and radical Basque Nationalism, are reminiscent of a past where “utopia marked a direction” (Aldekoa, 2005). Jon’s (the protagonist’s Basque *beau*’s) militancy in the Basque armed group ETA speaks of a time in Basque history when such a reactive stance was of relative hegemony. Jon’s involvement with the “yakuza” mercenaries reaffirms a symbolic contemporary reality in which ideals such as national emancipation or communalism have been dispatched: all those words, "negotiation", "revolution", "freedom", “Proletarian class," the deadly words that had long haunted me, now returned to seek revenge. (115)

In the absence of hard ideologies –and since the power of subject and history has been dismantled– the question remains what intellectual weapons remain available to wage such an uneven combat. Indeed, the power of language as emancipatory force does not seem to offer much of an answer. Gabilondo’s narrators and characters alike struggle with language and its opacities. Foreign languages and the characters’ failure to learn or understand them (101), the recourse to code-switching (48), mixing different foreign (88) (191) and national peninsular languages (54) (204) (212) –such as Portuguese, Catalan, Basque and Castilian– the use of scholarly jargon (64), popular colloquialisms (198) (164) and slang (205), the broken language of new Basque speakers (163), archaic language (63) (190) (194), Latinisms (226), and the resort to Basque dialecticisms (202) create a universe of misinterpretation that enhances the characters’ and narrators’ inability to make sense of the surrounding reality and events.

To Gabilondo’s characters, who mostly communicate through desire, lust and sex, language is treasonous and the source of profound misunderstanding. Through the collection, only the affective small talk of lovers and close friends overpowers uncommunication. That, and the joy all the characters find in sharing food and sex –flesh and meat– resulting in a sort of carnival of (mutual) symbolic cannibalism; physical contact constituting the only truth that can overpower the masquerade of discourse and language (words, words, words).

Alterity, multiplicity, detachment, metafiction, and parody, and even caricature, constitute the recourses around which Joseba Gabilondo constructs his *Vulgate of the Apocalypse*, a collection that comes out as an authoritative moral and social inquiry into *the ethos of Basqueness*, an autopsy of the *contemporary ills of a global world*, and an *analysis of postmodernism*. By describing an *assemblage* ( (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/1980)) — a concurrence of bodies, coincidences, and affects: *a multitude*—, while parodically revisiting the past in the light of the

present, Gabilondo fictionally scaffolds his reflections on issues that have long concerned him as an intellectual and have occupied most, if not all, of his scholarly work. The lack of worldliness and roundness of his fictional proposal in favor of a *literature-of-ideas* does not do away with the overwhelming impression the reader is left with. Indeed, we have been the recipients of a shrewd revelation. Admittedly, a revelation that twinges the reader who shares the author's fears with a sharp pang; yet does not impact those who fail to admit them.

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