

Ramón Saizarbitoria's High Modernist Novel in Contemporary Basque Literature

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Ramón Saizarbitoria is a leading Basque novelist not very well known outside of the Basque Country. His literary work (always originally written in Basque) seeks to create a textual legacy for a language that has historically been by and large oral and does not have a strong literary tradition. Saizarbitoria is not content with just writing, he also wants to elevate Basque literature in one dramatic leap through the history of literature all the way to modernity. To accomplish this goal, his recipe is advancement of the literary technique through the use of formal devices that disrupt traditional narrative linearity. His purpose, as he states, is to place Basque literature among the literatures of culturally advanced nations. However, this seemingly innocent desire for progress should be scrutinized to uncover its traces of bourgeois ideology as part of the liberal, humanist obsession with technical and scientific evolution. Progress, innovation of technique and technology, the emergence of modern art and its obsession with novelty and its estrangement effect are herein analyzed in *Ehun metro* (*Cien metros*) (1976), *Hamaika pauso* (*Los pasos incontables*) (1995) and *Bihotz bi: gerrako kronikak* (*Amor y guerra*) (1996) to reveal the political unconscious of those values as modernist teleology. The presentation of the central argument of my analysis should not be understood to be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is a historically conscious recognition and validation of "vanguardist aesthetics"¹ which embrace the obvious political role of literature. Such a historically conscious reading of literature does not imply the imposition of impoverished, orthodox, realist aesthetics. I

propose, on the contrary, a “historicized” reading that seeks to uncover the ideological traps of the aesthetics of a modernity that refuses to consider its allegiances with capitalism.

A study of progress that equates the existence of a culture with its textual record should be suspect, especially if that textual record is judged according to a concept of aesthetics developed since Romanticism. The mistaken belief that the presence of a textual record reflects an historiographic notion of the receptacle of the soul of a people is ideologically laden. Blind also is any concept of language that keeps up with technological advances yet refuses to parse out the allegiances of such progress with capitalism. At the same time, any reading of literary innovation that denies value to vanguardist aesthetics should also be condemned. Regarding the Basque language, the reason for creating a textual record should not be to document the soul of a people or to keep up with technological innovation or even so that Basque literature can be counted among the “developed” countries in the world. The answer I would propose is that the written form recovers a re-historicization of human existence in the Basque Country. This conclusion still leaves unresolved the problem Basques are facing, which is how to write literature in Basque since there are few antecedents who have dealt with problems involved in the craft of writing.

The craft of textual production requires particular technical innovations for basic problems such as how to phrase the sentence “he said” in Basque. In English any writer has a plethora of choices: he stated, affirmed, surmised, mumbled, declared, spoke, etc. and they all exist because of preceding texts that have already resolved ba-

sic problems of textual language. In Basque, however, authors literally have to invent new words if they want to avoid repeating “he said” constantly when writing a dialogue. The lack of textual antecedents in Basque was the problem that initiated the formal aspects and the content of Bernardo Atxaga’s *Obabakoak*. Since poetry and short stories are closer to the tradition of an oral language, Atxaga created a “novel” with a compilation of short stories that self-reflectively pondered the problem of how to write literature.

Ramón Saizarbitoria had the same challenge as Atxaga. Breaking with traditional narrative, his response was a highly intellectual attempt at writing innovative narrative that follows the pattern of Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau roman*.² While innovation can be positive, there is a limit at which meaningful creation of innovation becomes a futile endeavor of breaking with the old simply for the sake of newness. I interpret Saizarbitoria’s love for innovative narrative as part of modernity’s obsession with progress and change, which develops into an empty aesthetic of defamiliarization.

Supposedly, the *nouveau roman* and post-structuralism brought about a new way of creating art that we now call postmodernism. Saizarbitoria might, then, deserve to be recognized by the Basque community as our best postmodernist author. My understanding of postmodernism, however, does not acknowledge a qualitative break between modernism, in the English literary sense of the word, and postmodernism.³ Both modernism and postmodernism cultivate innovation for the sake of breaking with the past to the extreme of converting it into a fetish. In other words, it seems that art, nowadays, must be ground-breaking by definition and introduce an unfamiliar

method of representation. This fetishization of the unfamiliar has a lot to do with the goal of progress so typical of modernity that we see heightened into an entire aesthetic in Saizarbitoria. It is no coincidence that the rise of a national consciousness in the Basque Country is coupled with the need to establish a history of Basque literature or the need to produce a textual presence for an oral language. The modern need to progress⁴ is, after all, an ideological necessity imposed on all of the advanced regions of the world as a direct consequence of capitalism.

The challenge for writers, therefore, is to find a historically conscious form of writing literature that avoids the pitfalls of empty innovation. In the context of Spanish literature after the civil war, Vázquez Montalbán suggests that literary critics should rescue “vanguardist aesthetics” as a useful tool in the “democratization” of human experience. As an example, he offers the role of literature in post-Civil War Spain as a factor in the defeat of Franco’s dictatorship. Could Saizarbitoria’s literary production then have an equally beneficial influence in, as Vázquez Montalbán suggests, the construction of the “democratic city”? I will consider this question in the context of the analysis of individual works by Saizarbitoria.

His earliest work that I will discuss, *Ehun metro*, published in 1976, is the story of a member of ETA as he flees from the police and is eventually shot and killed. The structure of the novella is divided into six chapters and the action of the text narrates literally the last one hundred meters in the protagonist’s attempt to run away from the police. The idea is quite innovative. At the one hundredth meter of the last portion of his run from the police, he is shot and killed. The novella forms part of the group of modern narratives that question the objec-

tivity of time and prefer to measure it according to the internal feelings and reality of an individual. The structure follows the model of *pastiche* in that it borrows texts from other sources (non-literary and literary) in a fragmented manner by placing together texts that have little relation (in some cases none at all) to one another. For example, fragments of news coverage of the chase are included together with police reports, flashbacks about the life of the protagonist and public messages in signs urging people to keep San Sebastian (the town where the action takes place) clean. The core that establishes the central plot-line is a narration in the second person presumably of the protagonist’s feelings and thoughts but told as if the narrator were trying to make the protagonist conscious of them. The ultimate purpose, of course, is to give expression to what is going on in the main character’s mind and to describe with almost medical detail the physical responses that the protagonist’s body has in response to a desperate effort to flee the police.

Ehun metro was less known for its formal features than for the fact it was sequestered and banned by the police in 1974 when the original Basque version was ready to be published. The book was therefore not published until two years later in 1976 (1979 is the year when the Spanish translation appeared). At this time, Spain was going through the turmoil of Franco’s death and a possible opening toward democracy; consequently the publication of a small work written in a language that most people would not read was allowed to go ahead. As Gabilondo states, however, the book was quite popular among Basque readers at a time when political resistance against Franco was an important cause in the community. A banned book at that time had

free publicity and enjoyed automatic support in anti-Franco circles.

By 1979 the Spanish translation (*Cien metros*) appeared and the choice of this particular novel to be the first Basque novel translated into Spanish⁵ made a bigger splash due to its content rather than its innovative technique. Even the publishing house felt obligated to add a clarification about choosing this particular novel to be the first one translated into Spanish because it portrayed a member of ETA in a manner in which the reader is given access to his thoughts and feelings without demonizing him. In the explanation, however, there is no reference to any revolutionary stylistics, simply a brief phrase that in the context of describing Saizarbitoria's work has become cliché: "Ramón Saizarbitoria ha significado [...] una importantísima renovación formal, la ruptura definitiva con la novela de 'tesis'" (17). A three-page editorial explanation of the choice of the novel as representative of Basque literature discusses the conflictive "País Vasco" within the same sentence quoted above.

The novel clearly represents a break with traditional narrative through different formal techniques: fragmentation of the text and disconnected speech as in a schizophrenic world of disjointed images and phrases that accost the brain of a person in crisis or suffering from nightmares. I classify these techniques which aestheticize the schizophrenic as high modernist. Another technique that Saizarbitoria uses in his literary work, including his *Ehun metro*, is the interruption of a fundamental principle of traditional literature: identification with the protagonist. Alienation of the reader is not a particularly new, postmodern characteristic—Bertold Brecht used it in his plays—but it is an effect purposely exploited by Saizarbitoria to create the very modern sense

of disaffection. The reader never knows enough about the protagonist to establish an emotional connection.

The text of the novel, as has already been mentioned, is fragmented, and this complicates the reader's understanding of the protagonist's past. The practice of reading becomes detective work rather than a traditional process of identification with the main character. The reader must join a puzzle of disconnected pieces. When the reader learns about the oppression of the Basque-speaking community represented in the particular instance of a small child punished for speaking Basque and for having a Basque surname, the link between the story about the child in school and the man being chased by the police is not initially apparent. The consequence is that, due to the fragmented nature of the text, the continuity needed for emotional attachment never exists and the reader is left with an empty feeling, wondering about the ultimate purpose of representing the final one hundred meters of a person's last run. The purpose seems to be solely literary or artistic. Clearly Saizarbitoria represents a modern aesthetic as well as a marker of "progress" in the process toward achieving "maturity" in the textualization of an oral language. The bourgeois ideology that believes in modernity can declare that the Basque community has finally achieved the modern literary era that places us (with more than a little wishful thinking) among the grand literary traditions of the English, French, and Spanish languages. This blind belief in progress and textuality needs to be revealed as the political unconscious of bourgeois ideology.

Is there any possible value in the sense of Vázquez Montalbán's "vanguardist aesthetics" that can be rescued in *Ehun metro*? I would say no. I refer the reader to

the discussion of the third novel in this study in order to find a positive answer to the previous question. My negative answer regarding *Ehun metro* is based on two parts. The first theoretical principle that undergirds my rejection is that aesthetics, in the understanding of the concept we have inherited from the Romantics, buttresses the existence of the bourgeois subject by stressing the libidinal response of the subject to the object. As Terry Eagleton states:

The construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artifact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order. (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 3)

Just as Eagleton argues, however, I also agree that the concept of aesthetics on the whole should not be dismissed as bourgeois. We should be vigilant, however, for any surreptitious appearance of the centrality of the subject in ways that are not altogether obvious. I would contend that Saizarbitoria's *Ehun metro* does just that. Despite the fact that the text presents itself as fragmented, it is ultimately the sensorial perceptions of one individual living the last few minutes of his life. The novella is a puzzle of different pieces strewn about for the reader to reconstruct. It is ultimately a story about the death of an individual in circumstances that enhance the schizophrenic, emotional responses of the main character. It is a frame that privileges the self over the contextual historicizing of Basque life at more levels than that of the tragedy of the subject's demise. Although superficially it might appear a fragmented modern text, its ultimate

underlying principle is the unity of the piece as the tragedy of the death of the subject that the reader puts back together again. The apparent fragmentary nature of the piece is ultimately an invitation to the creation of the unitary work of literature that always shadows its fragmentary nature. The ultimate trap is the recreation of the text as a unit where we finally are able to connect at an emotional level with the death of the subject. These are the reasons I fail to see in this novella any recoverable aspect of a subversive aesthetic.

The unrecoverable condition for a subversive aesthetic we see in the previous novel is also the case with *Bihotz bi: gerrako kronikak*, published in 1996 in its original Basque version. Formalistically, this novel is a more traditional narrative, although it does contain clear elements of a modern novel. The plotline delineates the completely disaffected and lonely life of the protagonist in a style that Gabilondo calls "hybrid realism."⁶ *Bihotz bi: gerrako kronikak* narrates the drifting of an unsuccessful door-to-door encyclopedia salesman who is unable to connect with a wife trying to rekindle a shaky marriage. Both are involved in extramarital affairs, but the wife, Flora, ends hers in order to concentrate on resolidifying her marriage whereas her husband, unnamed throughout the novel, is plotting her murder and ends up pushing her out a window.

Although the form might be more traditional, the content is particularly post-modern in the creation of a nihilistic and self-centered criminal character. The first-person narration is a slight break with traditional third-person narration, but the tangled and muddled narration from the point of view of the protagonist is thoroughly frustrating because of its banality

and its unnecessary, insignificant detail which irritatingly drags on. A passage from *Hamaika pauso*, in fact, would describe *Bihotz bi: gerrako kronikak* and its exasperating narrative more accurately than the novel within the novel that the passage describes in *Hamaika pauso*:

[...] pasarte askotan, perpaus luze eta korapilotsuen bidez, kontakizuna iluntzeraino eskaintzen baititu zehaztasun erabat ezdeus eta, itxuraz behintzat, alferrikakoak. (27)

[...] en muchos pasajes, a través de párrafos farragosos y enrevesados, prodiga datos absolutamente insignificantes y en apariencia inútiles, aun a costa de embrollar la narración por completo. (Juaristi 23)

Clearly, the anti-social and self-centered, pathological character of the husband protagonist is not coincidental but instead another advancement of the technique of modern narration consciously and artfully created.

The general, unsavory feeling created by the protagonist throughout the novel is enhanced by references to the art of the like of Edward Hopper. The references to art underline the alienation of the protagonist who is clearly established as an anti-hero, frustrating any attempt at emotional attachment the reader might expect as a ritual of a more traditional narrative. The nihilism and alienation of the protagonist, in a world of very sympathetic characters such as his own wife, create a general feeling of disgust that colors the novel itself. It is also important to note the interpretative work on the book's cover in the Spanish translation. The design represents the central theme of the novel through the art of Lucien Freud whose artistic life-work is particularly modern.

Freud's art presents people and bodies in stark, unrelatable ways that create a deep feeling of an empty void. The book cover is a section of a larger painting that portrays a lone figure (a self-portrait) looking down on the reader in a posture that conveys dismissive superiority. All of the above might be characterized as plausible modern techniques of alienation of the reader and the interruption of any possibility of empathy with the protagonist, but my evaluation identifies these techniques as an aestheticization of the schizophrenic and a fetishization of the estrangement effect.

Indeed, the schizophrenic rupture of the text in *Ehun metro* and the inability to establish human connections with the criminal and pathological mind of the protagonist in *Bihotz bi: gerrako kronikak* are reified into literary archetypes that, due to their formulaic use, turn into an aesthetics of modernity. Both novels include references to significant historical moments: the former refers to ETA in the context of Franco's dictatorship and the latter refers to a symbolic novel that parallels domestic violence and abuse with the Spanish Civil War. The historical contexts, however, are reduced to a vague background in which the very modern experiences of alienation, schizophrenia, and meaningless death are the focus of the narrative. In other words, in trying to avoid a typically traditional novel about a life experience with which anyone can identify, Sazarbitoria chooses the postmodern condition of alienation as his aesthetic choice to create modern literature.

Besides the alienation of the reader, another formal device Sazarbitoria uses to create the necessary estrangement effect supposedly characteristic of literary modernity is arranging the plotline of the novel into cyclical patterns. In *Ehun metro* the death

of the protagonist occurs at the feet of an unknown character that happens to be sitting at a table in San Sebastián's central plaza. This fortuitous coincidence establishes a connection between two apparently unrelated worlds, which is solidified through a key that both the protagonist and the unidentified man mysteriously possess. The police naturally suspect a connection between the two when in reality both men happen to have had relations with the same woman, someone who apparently gives copies of the same key to all her lovers. Ironically, when giving the protagonist the key, in her own words she says in French: "*J'en fais cadeau seulement à mes grands amours*" (45). The presence of the key is very mysterious and possibly symbolic, but in the end it merely adds dramatic tension when the police suspect a connection between the two men who had never met. It ultimately can be understood as another piece of a mystifying puzzle that creates a confusing picture of a literary work that obsessively repeats unlikely coincidences in order to establish circularity as the ultimate sign of modernity. The mysterious symbols and whimsical coincidences are simply part of the ambition to create innovations of technique which ultimately, I argue, are indices of the bourgeois ideology discussed in this analysis. The experimental nature of the text with its cryptic, pseudo-symbolism and aesthetic excesses, have only one ambition: to realize progress.

The textual cyclicity of plot in the novel, the "oldest model of temporality" (Jameson 4), is established from the very beginning in *Bihotz bi: gerrako kronikak* by references to the dialogue between Flora and the protagonist before he kills her. These references before the murder are like disconnected flashbacks in a film with techni-

cal difficulties that gets stuck and projects the same scene over and over, repeating specific portions of dialogue. The repeated dialogue is presented early in the novel and contains the protagonist's comments to Flora's response to his sexual advances. Flora has come back from a tryst with Adolfo and the main character suggests having sex with his wife, knowing she has just been with Adolfo. She comments that she needs to take a shower and the protagonist responds with an unsavory thought: "tenía todavía el esperma de aquel tipo, pegajoso como un moco, suspendido de sus trompas de Falopio" (12). The same scene is repeated on page 146 with a recurrence of other bits of dialogue. The choice of this particular passage to introduce the central problem of the novel, the marital troubles between the narrator/protagonist and his wife, is telling in its rather unpleasant, graphic nature. It is no coincidence that this passage is a significant one in that it establishes the circularity of the novel because of its placement early on, its reference to the murder that will follow, and its overall fractured and cynical tone of postmodern life.

Admittedly, the purpose of presenting a cyclical order to the plotline of the novel is to place it in stark contrast with the traditional chronological timeline in narrative. Poststructural literary criticism has identified the linearity of traditional narrative as one of the ideological constructs to be deconstructed, but it was identified as a foundation of traditional narrative much sooner than the second half of the twentieth century. The goal of disrupting chronological linearity is a reinvention of earlier modernist experimentation. Fredric Jameson refers to how postmodernism reinvents past techniques and presents them as ground-breaking and revolutionary:

in order to keep faith with the aesthetic modernism hidden away within his ostensible political post-modernity [...], Lyotard found himself obliged to reinvent one of the oldest models of temporality on the books, namely the cyclical one, which alone would authorize the suitably outrageous position that postmodernism does not follow, but rather precedes, true modernism as such, whose return it prepares. (4-5)

The cyclical pattern is also a recurring device in Saizarbitoria's fiction to the point of losing its innovative value when used in apparently pointless, dysfunctional lives. All three novels discussed here as well as others that I do not analyze⁷ have as a defining characteristic this circular pattern in their narration.

Unlike Saizarbitoria's other two novels, his *Hamaika pauso* (*Pasos incontables*) deserves more praise. This novel, published in 1995, broke an eleven-year silence in Saizarbitoria's literary creation. The basic plot entails the competitive relationship between the protagonist, Iñaki Abaitua, and an ETA member who slowly takes over the main character's life, first by moving into his house and using it at his convenience, then by dating his girlfriend. The slow takeover of Abaitua's life occurs while the protagonist is hallucinating from having contracted syphilis through a different relationship. As a subplot to the story, Iñaki Abaitua is reconstructing the circumstances of the assassination of a member of the Spanish Civil Guard for which they executed a collaborator named Daniel Zabalegi and never caught the perpetrators. Abaitua, in recreating the circumstances of Zabalegi's execution and the assassination of the member of the Civil Guard, is writing a novel with

the same title as Saizarbitoria's, therein closing the circular, self-referential pattern of modernist metaliterature. Metaliterature, the references in the text to itself as a fictional creation that break the traditional principle of the suspension of disbelief, is another example of the advancement of technique in the search for the creation of modern literature following methods that are superficially held as new but have been part of literature for decades.

Hamaika pauso is the result of a smart interweaving of different textual and semantic devices that establishes its unconventional and nontraditional nature. It is a text that announces its high ambition albeit overly academic from the very first page by weaving the typical devices of non-traditional writing into a complex creation. For example, metaliterary references are numerous throughout the text, announcing its self-awareness as a fictional work. Also, the direct discussion of the craft of writing unapologetically breaks through the narrative line in several occasions. Both examples merit further discussion below.

Regarding the disruption of the chronological order in the narrative, we have several examples in which chronological linearity is discussed as a false principle of the ideologically laden traditional narrative. The novel begins with a statement about how the effort to tell stories is inherently futile:

[...] gauzak hasieratik kontatzeko ahalegina alferrikakoa denez, zilegi da historiari edozein pasartetatik ekitea. Eta amaieratik hobe. Amaierak bai, zehatzak baitira, erabatekoak askotan. (7)

[...] como sea vano el esfuerzo por contar las cosas desde el principio, la historia puede empezar por cualquier

parte. Y mejor por el final, pues los finales, al menos, son concretos; a menudo definitivos. (Juaristi 7)

Even though Saizarbitoria seems to suggest a reversed order by proposing the end of a story as its beginning, as the novel reaches its later stages he suggests: “azken hitz(aren) ezinezkoa” (408) [“la imposibilidad de la última palabra” (Juaristi 338)] in Daniel Zabalegi’s story before he is executed. This passage is among the many metaliterary references that the novel within the novel (Abaitua’s book) establishes as it narrates the subplot of Zabalegi’s life, which is itself a storyline in Saizarbitoria’s novel. The impossibility of narrating a story from its beginning as well as the impossibility of “la última palabra” frames Saizarbitoria’s effort to debunk traditional narrative linearity in favor of the internal logic of dreams or thoughts:

oroitzapenak apetaren hegaletan etorri ohi direnez, zilegi da haien ordena ilun eta misteriosua errespetatzea, kontakizuna konbentzionalki, kronologikoki edo linealki egokitzeaz arduratu gabe. (25)

como los recuerdos suelen llegarnos en aras del capricho, es lícito respetar su orden secreto y misterioso sin preocuparse de seguir en la narración una disposición convencionalmente cronológica. (Juaristi 21-22)

Saizarbitoria also wants to acknowledge the basic fragmentary nature of memories: “memoria plater hautsi bat da” (26) [“la memoria es un plato roto”] (Juaristi 22) comparable to the artistic tile mosaics of the Parque Güell in Barcelona. The break with the chronological conventional order, favoring the fragmentary logic of dreams, and the repeated self-references in the text are

elements in Saizarbitoria’s effort to create novelty and estrangement by breaking with traditional narrative.

The most ingenious aspect of the metaliterary device is its awareness of being a work of art. Saizarbitoria uses the image of a window as a reference to the art of painting in discussing the function of the aesthetic and the representation of landscapes and their intrinsic beauty. Although the philosophical significance of aesthetics is not discussed in relation to the novel, one cannot but suspect that Iñaki Abaitua’s discussion of landscapes and art, their association with the idea of beauty, and their political correlation with the idea of nation is necessarily developed with a high degree of self-reference to the novel as art as well. As a highly intellectual text, these connections appear obvious in light of the several different parallel planes in which Saizarbitoria functions simultaneously as a scholarly author. The circularity of the references to the window; its function, literally and figuratively, as a frame; the real landscape beyond the window as a virtual work of art; and their strategic placement at the beginning and at the end of the novel reveals the degree of the author’s self-awareness. One does not remain oblivious of the historical circumstances of the novel and the role of a Basque landscape (in this case the view of a picturesque and small fishing harbor) in representing Basque national sentiments. The idealization of the landscape and its concomitant representative value of national identity is fundamental to Romantic political philosophy. Saizarbitoria is aware of this symbolism and even creates an intellectually cynical character, Abel Osa, who is particularly dismissive of all of the above. Beauty, Basque national identity, and, one presumes, traditional narrative as well are viewed by Osa as ideological and primitive, seemingly

representing the author's critical and academic skepticism.

The purpose of creating such a highly complex text that uses very intricate techniques to thwart any traditional reading is partly to create a deserving Basque literature. I believe this last novel has more valuable attributes than its mere innovative value. According to the introduction he writes for the English translation of *Ehun metro*, however, Saizarbitoria has a clear goal in writing modern narrative that values little else other than progress defined in surprisingly simplistic terms:

This is why we are trying to build a culture in Basque, capable of actively participating in the literary and artistic advancement of the rest of nations, not with the intention of preserving a curiosity to excite learned scientists or gaping tourists, as a tribe might safeguard its particular garb or feathers. This is why Basque, a rural language only a few years ago, is now the cultural arm of a nation fighting for his life, a language which is adapting by trial and error to the world of electric home appliances, and which is spoken by a people who, without renouncing cultural advancement, is conscious of the historic responsibility of not losing a millenary heritage. (19)

The goal of my analysis is to reveal the political unconscious of sentences such as: "we are trying to build a culture in Basque, capable of actively participating in the literary and artistic advancement of the rest of nations" and the phrase, "a rural language trying to adapt to the world of electric home appliances." The author benefits from presenting the Basque culture as mired

in the rural past because he attributes an automatic value to his efforts to innovate such a backward language. As Jameson believes, readers/critics should contemplate with high suspicion any desire for innovation as progress, any technical, literary, or textual break-through as revolutionary based solely on its newness. To do so would be to reproduce the foundations of modernist teleology. The supposed radical technical innovations of modernism and postmodernism frequently guarantee the conditions in which capitalism thrives. The inability of postmodern art to divest itself of the supreme value of innovation and its obsession with the fetish of Difference must be revealed as ideological constructs of capitalism:

[...] once the decision has been made not only to read change as innovation, but also to transcend the latter in terms of technique and of technical developments within the medium itself, the transfer is complete, and the modernist teleology can be celebrated perfectly adequately and with a new force within the framework of technological (and sometimes even scientific) progress as such. This is to say that the various defenses and apologia of an emergent modern art can now borrow the force of an already-existent technological ideology, which becomes a blind behind which the more embarrassing logic of the commodity form and the market can operate. (154)

It would be unjust, however, to completely dismiss the hard work of any author such as Ramón Saizarbitoria as simply the product of capitalist expansionism. In particu-

lar, I would rescue his *Hamaika pauso* as an example of intelligent narrative. Although the novel contains all the technical aspects of a supposedly postmodernist narrative, I favor any text that includes a recognition of its own nature as a fictional, aesthetic piece. The self-awareness present in this novel intimates that any aesthetic creation is an artifact. The self-awareness of the novel can be observed in the reference to its author as an overly intellectual misfit battling the converging violence of ETA and the police. The richness of the narrative is increased also by including other, complicated dimensions of the life of the protagonist, writer, and author that contribute to a more “realistic sense” in the portrayal of the life of a regular Basque citizen. All these elements are admirable. The constant self-deprecating humor, the artistry of weaving such a complex group of characters and actions that relive an already experienced reality in parallel planes needs to be recognized as a deeply irreverent text. The novel seeks to undermine all certainty about simplistic evaluations of good and evil in a conflictive world such as that of the Basque. Despite a good dose of cynicism about self-appointed cultural or political heroes that purport to rescue everyone else, there is no disaffection. The world of *Hamaika pauso* is not populated by criminals and fools tottering along the edge of history toward a fateful end as a deserved demise for a condemned world.

The historicizing intervention in literature that I support does find in *Hamaika pauso* an example of a good “postmodern” narrative. I would still argue the primacy of rehistoricizing the discussion of postmodern aesthetics. The approach aims to be inclusive (and not reductionist) but at the same

time does not refuse to contemplate the dominant influence of capitalism in postmodernist aesthetics. I would agree with the general tenor of Vázquez Montalbán’s effort to rescue a political role within a historically conscious approach for what he proposes as vanguardist aesthetics. The concepts stated by the young Saizarbitoria when discussing the goals of Basque literature are not principles that I can embrace but the older and more mature author did create *Hamaika pauso*. As Vázquez Montalbán states, I would support a situation that avoids the pitfalls in which the elite circles of literature and criticism in Spain have fallen. He says: “la alta escritura especializada cada vez más [se] dedica a la filología que al pensamiento” (123).

Notes

¹ In using the phrase “vanguardist aesthetics,” I am borrowing from Manuel Vázquez Montalbán’s terminology in his *La literatura en la construcción de la ciudad democrática* to mean a rehistoricization of cultural production (literature as its basic reference in Vázquez Montalbán’s book) that avoids dismissing all aesthetic production as unavoidably bourgeois.

² Here I am echoing the words of two other critics, Olaziregi in “La novela de Ramón Saizarbitoria” and Joseba Gabilondo in “Terrorism As Memory. The Historical Novel and Masculine Masochism in Contemporary Basque Literature.”

³ For a discussion on whether postmodernism presents any real qualitative break with previous movements, refer to Alex Callinicos’s *Against Postmodernism*, although the preface of Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity* would be a shorter overview of the most fundamental arguments that understand postmodernism as a “recrudescence of the language of an older modernity” (7).

⁴ See Jorge Larrain's *Theories of Development* for a discussion of how the concept of progress is linked to the rise of the bourgeoisie.

⁵ Ibon Sarasola, "Prólogo (para el lector de lengua castellana)." *Cien metros* (6).

⁶ "Terrorism as Memory" (125).

⁷ His last novel *Kandiskyren tradizioa* (*La tradición de Kandinsky*) is another example.

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