Waking the Literary Universe of Hedgehog

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Bernardo Atxaga

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Waking the Hedgehog
The Literary Universe of Bernardo Atxaga

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Lesson 1 is an updated version of “Breve introducción a la literatura vasca,” in Mari Jose Olaziregi, Leyendo a Bernardo Atxaga (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2002), 25–33. Lesson 2 is an updated version of “The Basque Literary System at the Gateway to the New Millennium,” Anuario del Seminario de Filología Vasca “Julio de Urquijo,” ASJU XXXIV–2 (2000): 413–22. The text of Lesson 13 was originally written in February 2004 as an essay for the MA in Studies in Fiction at the University of East Anglia. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Jon Cook for all his suggestions.
I write in a strange language. Its verbs, 
the structure of its relative clauses, 
the words it uses to designate ancient things 
—rivers, plants, birds—
have no sisters anywhere on Earth.
A house is etxe, a bee erle, death heriotz. 
The sun of the long winters we call eguzki or eki; 
the sun of the sweet, rainy springs is also 
—as you’d expect—called eguzki or eki
(it’s a strange language, but not that strange).

Born, they say, in the megalithic age,
it survived, this stubborn language, by withdrawing,
by hiding away like a hedgehog in a place, 
which, thanks to the traces it left behind there, 
the world named the Basque Country or Euskal Herria. 
Yet its isolation could never have been absolute 
—cat is katu, pipe is pipa, logic is lojika
rather, as the prince of detectives would have said, 
the hedgehog, my dear Watson, crept out of its hiding place 
(to visit, above all, Rome and all its progeny).

The language of a tiny nation, so small 
you cannot even find it on the map, 
it never strolled in the gardens of the Court 
or past the marble statues of government buildings; 
in four centuries it produced only a hundred books...
the first in 1545; the most important in 1643; 
the Calvinist New Testament in 1571; 
the complete Catholic Bible around 1860.
Its sleep was long, its bibliography brief 
(but in the twentieth century, the hedgehog awoke).

Bernardo Atxaga, Obabakoak 
Translated by Margaret Jull Costa
As the poem that serves as an epigraph to this book (Bernardo Atxaga’s “I Write in a Strange Language”) indicates, we can think of Basque literature as a hedgehog that has been asleep for too long, but that, fortunately, has managed to awake in the twentieth century. Thus, the last hundred years of Basque our literary history are the most interesting and worthy of review, and for that reason, this introduction will deal mainly with them. There will be few references to Basque literature’s ancient past because from the time that the first book written in the Basque language—Bernard Etxepare’s collection of poems Linguae vasconum primitiae—was published in 1545 until 1879, only 101 books were published and, of them, only 4 can be said to be literary works. It is clear, therefore, that we are dealing with a late-blossoming literature, a literature conditioned by sociohistorical circumstances that have hindered its development and that are tightly bound to the ups and downs suffered by the language that sustains it: Basque, or Euskara.

By way of introduction to the history of Basque literature, it may be useful to make a few general points about the language itself. Basque is a very ancient language of pre-Indo-European origin. And although its origins are unknown to us, most anthropologists, historians, and linguists believe that Euskara was already spoken during the Neolithic period. When we refer to speakers of Basque, we should also keep in mind that we are referring to a very small language community. Nowadays, there are about seven hundred thousand Basque speakers, or euskalduns, who live on both sides of the Pyrenees, in France and in Spain. The political border that divides the Basque Country today (Euskal Herria)
separates two different legislative regions. After the Spanish Constitution of 1978 was approved, the Basque language was accepted as an official language, together with Castilian, in the provinces in the Spanish region. But the same is not the case in the French Basque Country, where Basque has not been given the status of an official language. The consequences of this imbalance are easy to predict: Aspects such as the establishment of bilingual models of teaching and the existence of grants for publications in the Basque language have made the literary system in the Spanish Basque Country much stronger and dynamic than the one in the French side.

But it wasn’t always so. The first Basque-language books were published in the French Basque Country. After Etxepare’s 1545 text, others followed that proved essential to the development of literature in Basque. I am referring to the 1571 translation of the New Testament and several Calvinist treatises by Joannes de Leizarraga, and the publication in 1643 of Gero by Pedro de Dagerre Azpilikueta, or “Axular,” thought to be the best example of mystical prose in the language. The publication of translations and edifying texts continued to take place, and from the eighteenth century onward, the majority of authors and works were published in the Spanish region. In 1765, the Royal Basque Society of Friends of the Country (La Real Sociedad Vascongada de Amigos del País) and the Royal Seminary of Bergara were funded. Under the influence of ideas from the so-called Illustrated Period (La Ilustración), authors such as Francisco Javier María Munibe, Count of Peñaflorida, promoted and enlivened the cultural atmosphere of the era.

From 1794 to 1808, several activities related to promoting the language took place. At that time, the eminent linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt visited the Basque
Basque Literature on the internet.

“These days nothing can be said to be peculiar to one place or person. The world is everywhere and Euskal Herria is no longer just Euskal Herria but (...) ‘the place where the world takes the name of Euskal Herria’“.

This quote taken from the book *Obabakoak* (Atxaga, 1994:324) can summarize very well the impact that new technologies have had in the circulation of information. Basque Literature is not an exception and associations such as the Basque Writers’ Association (www.idazleak.org); the Association of Translators, Correctors, and Interpreters of Basque Language (www.eizie.org), or institutions like The Royal Academy of the Basque Language (www.euskaltzaindia.net) offer interesting information on the internet.

Country and became a defender and disseminator of Basque in European circles. Others would follow in his footsteps, and thanks to the influence of Romanticism, this ancient language sparked the interest of artists and people with a thirst for knowledge, such as William Wordsworth and Prosper Merimée, who made Carmen, a Basque woman, the main character of his famous novel.

However, the first signs of the emergence of a new spirit appeared in the last decade of the nineteenth century—a spirit that would shake the roots and shape the future of the literature. The dominance of works of religious edification and education was eroded, and the spectrum of literary genres widened: The work of poets such as Bilintx (Indalezio Bizkarrondo) and Pierre Topet Etxahun benefited from the emergence of new authors such as Arrese Beitia and the new narrative genres, particularly the novel, which at this point burst onto the Basque literary scene with the rise of Basque nationalism after the loss of the *fueros* after the second Carlist War (1873–76).

The *fueros* consisted of a set of ordinances in public and private law that regulated the way the Basque provinces and Nafarroa were administrated, based not on the wishes of a supreme authority, but on the common practices of the community in assemblies of local inhabitants. They date back to the eighth century and were respected by successive kings and lords. The loss of the *fueros* signaled the start of what critics have called the Basque literary “Renaissance.” During this period—and through the figure of Sabino Arana—the roots of Basque nationalism were firmly settled, and this influenced all the Basque literature of the first third of the twentieth century.

The preeminence of nationalist ideology meant that literary production in the first few decades of the twenti-
The 19th century was characterized by extraliterary aims and was alien to the European modernist movement, which attempted to subvert the language and forms of the modern age. I am referring to the group of writers who, in 1930, chorused Ezra Pound’s proclamation: “Make it new!” The regenerating airs of this movement, however, did not reach the Basque shores until rather late in the twentieth century, around the 1960s.

The Basque novel had taken its first uneasy steps at the end of the nineteenth century, with Txomin Agirre, who tried to portray an idealized, essentialist world far removed from the industrial cities that were beginning to emerge in the Basque Country. This first type of Basque novel was in fact a thesis novel, built around the three main themes of faith, patriotism, and Basqueness, and its influence would last until the 1950s.

As for the other genres, it was undoubtedly poetry that bore the best fruits during the first half of the twentieth century. Its literary tradition was much more established than that of the narrative genres: Xabier Lizardi’s, Lauaxeta’s and Orixe’s post-Symbolist poetry, which explored and stretched the expressive possibilities of the Basque language, is among the best of its kind.

The Spanish Civil War (1936–39) had devastating effects on Basque literary production. The great number of dead and exiled authors, as well as the tremendous repression exerted by the winning side, contributed to this decline. This was an era in which Basque names were prohibited, as well as inscriptions in Basque on tombstones, an era in which streets, government buildings, the cultural world, and more were the channels through which Francoism imposed its censorship.

It has been said that the post–Civil War generation was one of the most important in Basque literature because it was given something it needed more than anything
“I will defend the house of my father ...”
In the 1960s, the Bilbaino writer Gabriel Aresti became the great modernizer of Basque poetry. After the publication of *Maldan behera* (Downhill, 1960), which showed the influence of T. S. Eliot, Aresti turned to social poetry with his famous collection *Harri eta herri* (Stone and country, 1964).
*Photo by permission of Erein (Basque Country).*

else: continuity. The most popular genre at that time was poetry, among other reasons because it was easier to publish a few loose poems than complete works and
because during the years from 1940 to 1950, normal publishing activity was practically impossible.

Jon Mirande (1925–72) stands out among the poets of the time: He was the first to counter the religious spirit that had permeated Basque poetry until the 1950s. Mirande was a heterodox and nihilist writer, a follower of Poe and Baudelaire, and an avid reader of Nietzsche. He also wrote a novel, Haur besoetakoa (The goddaughter, 1970), a sort of Basque version of Nabokov’s Lolita. Both Gabriel Aresti (1933–75) and Jon Mirande belonged to what became known as the ’56 Generation, a generation that tried to modernize Basque literature by bringing into it the propositions of the modern literatures of Europe, but that also, and above all, tried to liberate Basque literature from its political, religious, and folkloric ties and make the aesthetic function paramount to any literary exercise. The events that took place in the Basque Country a few years later, in the 1960s (economic and industrial development, the establishment of Basque schools or ikastolas, the creation of the unified Basque language, or Euskara Batua, political activity against the Francoist regime, campaigns for schooling in Basque, and so on), created a seedbed for new literary propositions. It has been said that the reigning cultural orthodoxy of the time was confronted by the political and cultural heterodoxy promoted by authors such as the aforementioned poet Gabriel Aresti, the famous philologist Koldo Mitxelena (1915–87), and the sculptor Jorge Oteiza (1908–2003). After the publication of Maldan behera (Downhill, 1960), which showed the influence of T. S. Eliot, Aresti turned to social poetry with his famous collection Harri eta herri (Stone and country, 1964).

As for the narrative genre, Jose Luis Alvarez Enparantza Txillardegi’s (1929–) existential novel Leturiaren
egunkari ezkutua (Leturia’s hidden diary, 1957) marked the beginning of the representation of modernity in Basque literature. A few years later, in 1969, the writer Ramon Saizarbitoria (1944–) turned the literary tables with the publication of Egunero hasten delako (Because it starts every day). This book brought about a rejection of existentialist poetics and an embrace of the type of experimental novel exemplified by the French nouveau roman. Thus began a period of experimentation with the genre of the novel. This exploration of form reached a peak in 1976 with the publication of Ene Jesus (Oh Jesus), also by Saizarbitoria.

During the 1970s, the country’s most international author, Bernardo Atxaga (1951–), made his mark in the literary landscape. Although at the beginning of his career he published post-avant-garde and experimental works, he soon moved toward more fantastic and realistic terrains. Toward the end of the 1970s, the Basque novel recovered its love of storytelling, as did the literatures of neighboring countries. The postmodern premise that “everything has been told, we just need to remember it” has influenced many of the texts of the last few decades.

Although the arrival of democracy in Spain in 1975 did not bring about a dramatic change in the Basque literary paradigms of the era, it did provide the necessary objective conditions for the institutionalization of Basque literature as an autonomous activity. (See the description of the Basque literary system in Lesson 2.) In poetry, during the 1970s, the more existential poetry of authors such as Xabier Lete, Arantza Urretabizkaia, and Mikel Lasa took over from Aresti’s social poetry. Other authors took a post-Symbolist stand—their aim was to evolve toward a more concise and synthetic style (e.g. Juan Mari Lekuona) or to move
toward a deeper degree of introspection (e.g. Bittoriano Gandiaga). Koldo Izagirre also started writing in the 1970s. His *Itsaso ahantzia* (The forgotten sea, 1976) dabbled with Surrealist aesthetics, but his poetry became more politicized in 1989 with the publication of *Balizko erroten erresuma* (The realm of fictitious mills). In the same way, Joseba Sarrionandia undertook a journey that revisited the work of Constantine Cavafy, Vladimir Holan, and Fernando Pessoa in a collection of poetry that made many references to high literature: *Izuen gordelekuen barrena* (In the hiding places of fear, 1981), but he, too, moved closer to political poetry in *Marinel zaharrak* (The ancient mariners, 1987) and *Huny illa nyha majah yahoo* (Take care of thyself, gentle Yahoo, 1995).

But the book that truly shook the poetic world of that time was Bernardo Atxaga’s *Etiopia* (1978): It set the standard of modern Basque poetry. The appearance of this collection, together with some of those mentioned above, took place during a period between 1976 and 1983 in which Basque poetry experienced its most avant-garde moment, thanks to the proliferation of literary magazines that acted as springboards for many of these authors. The 1980s started with a variety of poetic tendencies, among which was what was called “the poetry of experience.” Poets of the stature of Felipe Juaristi, Amaia Iturbide, and Mari Jose Kerexeta combined their alliance to symbolism and aestheticism with their private experiences to create poetry. Other authors, such as Tere Irastorza, published poetry more in the intimist genre, focusing on psychological experience.

**Although** the publication of poetic works has declined since the 1990s, new, interesting voices have joined the literary world in the last few years. Ricardo Diaz de Heredia (*Kartografia*, Cartography, 1998), Miren Agur Meabe (*Azalaren kodea*, The code
of the skin, 2000) and Kirmen Uribe (Bitartean heldu eskutik, In the meantime hold my hand, 2001) are but a few examples. In addition, the group of writers that is associated with the magazine Susa who are writing more breakaway, underground poetry—Koldo Izagirre, Iñigo Aranbarri, Omar Nabarro, Xabier Montoia, Jose Luis Otemendi, and Itxaro Borda—has grown, and now includes the new voices of Juanjo Olasagarre (Bizi puskak, Pieces of life, 1995), Harkaitz Cano (Norbait dabil sute eskilar-ean, There’s someone on the fire escape, 2001), and Jon Benito.

As for the narrative genre, which has gained popularity in the last few decades, the proliferation of literary magazines during the 1980s also contributed to the development of the modern Basque short story. Collections such as Joseba Sarrionandia’s Narrazioak (1983) or Bernardo Atxaga’s excellent Obabakoak (1988) transported Basque readers to imaginary worlds that had never before been visited in the Basque language. The modern short story further progressed with the publication of Inazio Mujika Iraola’s Azukrea belazeetan (On the sugar fields, 1987, a collection influenced by the work of Juan Rulfo) and with the gritty realism of Xabier Montoia’s work. In any case, although in the last decade authors such as Pello Lizarralde, Iban Zaldua, Karlos Linazasoro, and Arantxa Iturbe have published excellent short-story collections, Basque literary activity, like that in Spain at the end of the twentieth century and beyond, revolves around the novel.

Nowadays, the novel is the genre with the most literary prestige and impact, and the one that profits publishing houses most. If one had to sum up the most relevant authors and tendencies at present, one could start by pointing out authors who adhere to a type of lyrical novelistic style that first became popular in the 1970s.
A dialogue between the particular and the universal
Joxemari Iturralde belonged to the literary group Pott (Failure) together with Atxaga, Joseba Sarrionandia, Ruper Ordorika, and Jon Juaristi. They were active from 1978 until 1983 and published six issues of the magazine *Pott*, which would become a point of reference for later generations of Basque writers. The members of Pott showed their literary preferences by concentrating on literatures from Central Europe (Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel, Paul Celan, and so on) and the English-speaking world (detective novels, film noir, adventure novels), as Jorge Luis Borges had recommended in his essays. But above all, the members of Pott defended the autonomous nature of literature.
*Photo by permission of Erein (Basque Country).*
Among their works are Arantza Urretabizkaia’s *Zergatik, Panpox* (Why, Panpox?, 1979), an intimist text closely related to the “feminism of difference” of the 1970s; Lourdes Oñederra’s *Eta emakumeari sugeak esan zion* (And the serpent told the woman, 2000); Laura Mintegi’s *Sisifo maite minez* (Sisyphus in love, 2001); Juan Luis Zabala’s *Agur, Euzkadi* (Bye, Euzkadi, 2001), and Unai Elorriaga’s 2002 Spanish Narrative Prize winner *SP-rako tranbia* (A streetcar to SP, 2002). Other contemporary novels have been heavily influenced by the noir novel, especially in its U.S. form. Some examples are: Joxemari Iturralde’s *Izua hemen* (Fear here, 1991), Aingeru Epaltza’s Chandleresque *Rock ’n’ Roll* (2000), Bernardo Atxaga’s psychological thriller *Gizona bere bakardadean* (1994, translated into English as *The Lone Man*, 1996), Jon Alonso’s mystery novel *Katebegi galdua* (The missing link, 1996), and Harkaitz Cano’s intriguing *Beluna jazz* (1996) and *Paisaia blues* (1999).

The contemporary Basque novel looks mostly inward and to the past. This is also the case with the work of Ramon Saizarbitoria. In his *Hamaika pauso* (Innumerable steps, 1998) and *Bihotz bi* (Two hearts, 1999), he uses memory as a springboard for a kind of testimonial novel. In his latest book, *Gorde nazazu lurpean* (Leave me under the earth, 2000), Saizarbitoria “unearths” his literary obsessions and the cruelty of the Spanish Civil War, as well as the difficulty of communication between men and women in the Basque Country. Most of Ramon Saizarbitoria’s books are also available in Spanish translation. *Hamaika pauso* was published as *Los pasos incontables*, (Barcelona: Espasa, 1998). *Bihotz bi* was published as *Amor y guerra* (Barcelona: Espasa, 1999), and *Gorde nazazu lurpean* as *Guárdame bajo tierra* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2002).
In another type of novel, such as the realist novel, the starting point is outside—and this is used to present the internal friction that problems such as terrorism provoke among Basques. This is the case in Anjel Lertxundi’s latest novel, Zorion perfektua (Perfect happiness, 2003), in which we learn of the emotional shock a sixteen-year-old girl experiences after witnessing an assassination. Throughout his long-standing literary career, Lertxundi has also delved into the genres of fantasy—His novel Azkenaz beste (A ending for Nora, 1994), translated into Spanish as Un final para Nora (1996) is one example—and magic realism. Jose Mari Irigoien’s Babilonia (1989) is another magic-realist novel.

Lesson One

Learning Goals
1. To gain an overview of the development of Basque literature.
2. To understand the socioeconomic reasons that provided the basis of its development.
3. To understand the cultural, historical, and geographic characteristics of the Basque Country, as well as the most relevant protagonists in its history.
4. To become acquainted with the historical events that influenced Basque literature in the twentieth century.
5. To become acquainted with the most important writers in all the different literary genres.

Required Reading

SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. In what instances can we talk about Basque literature in the strict sense, that is, about a literature written with aesthetic and not extraliterary aims? Discuss.
2. Why do you think the development of Basque literature in the different literary genres has been so uneven? Discuss.
3. Is Basque literature written only in Euskara, the Basque language, or should we expand the concept to include literature produced in other languages within the geographical boundaries of the Basque Country? Argue your case from the point of view of comparative literature.
4. After reading Atxaga’s “alphabet” in your required reading, write your own alphabet of Basque literature.
2 · The Basque literary system

The polysystem theory developed by Itamar Even-Zohar from the University of Tel Aviv offers interesting methodological tools for studying the many different literatures around the world. Going beyond the limits of formalist approximations, polysystem theory defines literature as a sociocultural system and studies the variables of literary communication. For Even-Zohar, the notion of a “system” demands a definition of “literary activity” and a specification of the relations between the people who take part in it.

When talking about the Basque literary system, I am referring to a structure comprising the production, mediation, reception and re-creation (rewriting) of Basque literary texts, to use Even-Zohar’s terms. Within this structure, the contribution of critics, for example, would fall within the category of mediation.

Regarding the field of production, it is a well-known fact that Basque autonomous literary activity became institutionalized in the 1950s and that the legal conditions for its development only came about after Franco’s death, that is, after the period known as the Transition to Democracy. The Decree on Bilingualism (1982), promulgated on approval of the Estatuto de Autonomía, (the Autonomy Statute, 1979), injected new life into Basque literary production. This new situation, together with the subsidies granted then (and now) to publications, led to the creation of new publishing houses. This all left its mark on the production of books in the Basque language, which is obvious from the resulting figures: Whereas between 1876 and 1975 an average of 31.5 books were published each year, in the period between 1976 and 1994, this number rose to 659.2. In 1999, 1,523 books
The emergence of new women writers

Miren Agur Meabe’s latest volume of poetry, Azalaren kodea (The code of the skin, translated by Amaia Gabantxo), searches for a new code, a new female voice. *Photo by Zaldi Ero.*

were published, of which, according to UNESCO’s classification, 13.1 percent were literary works, 23 percent were literary works for children and young people, and 33.8 percent were textbooks. However, it is particularly interesting to note that this percentage has dropped over recent years and is now comparable to the publication percentages of France and Spain. But what has not changed is the predominance of narrative over all other genres. According to the latest figures, 59.3 percent of all literature published falls into the narrative genre. Eleven percent is poetry and 7 percent is drama. There are no figures for the volumes on literary criticism over the last few years—the latest figures date back to the period from
1976 to 1994. In those years, only 4 percent of literary publications were works of literary criticism.

As regards the situation in publishing houses, the most recent study commissioned by the Asociación de Editores de Euskadi (the Basque Publishers’ Association, 1999) states that there were then 100 publishing houses, 35 percent of which were created after 1990. I should clarify that these are generally small publishers, with an average of four employees, and that their promotional capabilities are worlds apart from those of the big publishers in neighboring Spain and France. Here are a few details that emerge from the study: Almost half of all publications are sold through bookshops and other kinds of modern sales outlets (mail purchase, door-to-door, the Internet, large supermarkets), a marketing strategy that tends not to be so successful in the Basque Country. Today, most Basque publishers find it hard to make ends meet, which is probably the reason behind the reduced investment in promotion and advertising over recent years.

Presently, some three hundred writers write in the Basque language. Ninety percent of them are men and only 10 percent are women. The average age of the Basque writer is forty-nine (although 70 percent of all authors fall within the thirty-to-fifty age group), which shows that contemporary, active authors belong to many different generations. Examples of this are the writers born in the 1920s and 1930s (José Luis Alvarez, Enparantza Txillardegi, et al.); those who belong to the ’64 Generation (authors such as Ramon Saizarbitoria, Anjel Lertxundi, Patricio Urkizu, and Arantza Urretabizkaia); those who are part of what is now known as the “Literary Autonomy Generation,” which comprises authors born after 1950 (Bernardo Atxaga, Joxemari Iturralde, Joseba Sarrionandia, Edorta Jimenez, Laura
Mintegi, Lourdes Oñederra, Mariasun Landa, and so on); and the generation of authors born in the 1960s who started publishing in the 1980s (Pako Aristi, Juan Luis Zabala, Xabier Mendiguren, Aingeru Epaltza, Itxaro Borda, et al.). Sixty percent of these writers have university degrees, and only 6 percent make a living from writing. Also, it is interesting to keep in mind that most Basque writers work as teachers, too.

The fact that stands out among all this information about literary production is the scarcity of women writers. One reason for this may be the scant promotional attention to which they have been subjected for years. As in most Western literary traditions, the Basque literary institutions have regularly turned their backs on women’s literary production. Women writers have been neglected at different moments in the history of Basque literature (a subject thoroughly examined in Linda White’s doctoral thesis at the University of Nevada, Reno, “Emakumeen Hitzak Euskaraz: Basque Women Writers of the Twentieth Century.”) They rarely win literary competitions and are largely absent from the textbooks. It is clear that female writers still have to overcome many hurdles before becoming fully functioning members of the literary market. Chief among these obstacles is the temptation to tar all writing by women with the same brush: for example, the tendency to speak of it not just as “literature,” but as “literature written by women” (which of course also occurs in criticism in other parts of the world) and the overuse of the term “intimist” when referring to works by women.

The influence of the literary platforms that emerged in the 1980s had considerable influence on the rise in the number of writers and hence on literary production. I believe that these platforms succeeded in repairing the weaknesses of the Basque literary scene, since at that
time, neither university degrees nor schooling in Basque were available. The same phenomena that brought about the Basque literary Renaissance in the period between 1876 and 1936 (more than one hundred and forty publications—journals, magazines, and so on—saw the light during those years), also happened again in the 1980s. A large number of remarkable literary publications (Pott, Oh! Euzkadi, Susa, Idatz eta Mintz, Maiatz, and Kandela among them) went on to become essential platforms for the new generations of writers.

These also were years that saw an increase in the number of organizations defending the rights of authors and translators. Such organizations mediate the relations of authors and translators with publishers, literatures in other languages, and the state. In 1982, Euskal Idazleen Elkarteoa, or EIE (the Basque Writers’ Association), was created, and in 1987, Euskal Itzultzaile, Zuzentaile eta Interpretteen Elkarteoa, or EIZIE (the Basque Translators’, Editors’, and Interpreters’ Association) followed. I should also mention the Martutene School of Translators, which was created in 1980 on the initiative of Euskaltzaindia (the Basque Academy of Letters), and the postgraduate masters degree in the Translation Studies Program offered by Deusto University and the University of the Basque Country since the 1990s. This process of recognition and consolidation was extremely important to the realization of a specific objective: the creation of a degree in translation and interpreting at the University of the Basque Country.

There is no doubt that Basque translators have had an invigorating and enriching effect on the literary tradition. The literary horizon of Basque readers has been considerably widened by the addition of books by Mikhail Lermontov, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Primo Levi, among many others, to
the list of publications in Euskara. However, this legacy of Basque translation has not yet received the attention it deserves from Basque critics. If we were to analyze the situation in terms of Even-Zohar’s formulation, we would have to assert that translations, along with literature for children and young people and literature written by women, are marginal or at least peripheral areas in the Basque literary system.

We cannot ignore a figure that has only recently emerged as a mediator between writers, publishers, and the reading public: the literary agent. This figure, well known in the literatures of other languages, is completely new to literature in Euskara. The first Basque agency (Ikeder) was created in 1995 in Bilbao, in the Spanish part of the Basque Country. But the fact is that very few writers have recourse to agents, since they can easily take care of their own business in the small world of Basque literature—they need an agent only if, for example, their work is to be translated into other languages.

As well as literary agents, there are also other mediating elements with a potential influence on the promotion of literary works, such as the yearly Durango Book Fair, where three hundred thousand people gather annually to find out about new Basque publications and about literary awards, which have actually decreased in number since the 1980s.

The importance of literary awards is another unquestionable mediating factor as far as the promotion of writers is concerned (the case of Atxaga is paradigmatic in this sense), although in today’s literary market, it is probably more important to have one’s work mentioned in the media than it is to win an award. Thus, the dynamic mediating effect that newspaper supplements have had on the Basque literary world should also be
Traveling with words
There are few writers who, in addition to the usual genres (poetry, works of fiction, essays), have published as many innovative hybrid texts as Joseba Sarrionandia (1958–). He has shown himself to be a tireless traveler in literary geographies, an ancient mariner dazzled by an ocean of ideas.

Photo by permission of Erein (Basque Country).
noted. Television programs dedicated to literature are still few and far between (the program Sautrela started in 2000 and, although it is a good program, its broadcasting time is unfortunate), but newspapers and the radio programs tend to give quite detailed information on new publications.

And that is precisely the root of the problem: Most of the time, these programs provide only information, not criticism. One of the biggest shortcomings in the Basque literary system is the lack of proper criticism to mediate between authors and readers. It should be noted that no contemporary Basque authors have complained about this lack of criticism. But the reason is not a lack of critics—there are plenty of them. The problem is, rather, that these critics mostly stop short of anything more than giving a few descriptive details about the books. The problem is the absence of real criticism. It remains to be seen who is ready to accept and to give real criticism in such a small country where everyone knows everyone else.

One particularly illustrative aspect in the list of the shortcomings of Basque literary criticism is best understood in terms of Northrop Frye’s distinction between academic criticism and public criticism. Academic criticism is based mainly on a set of theoretical or methodological paradigms and assumes a critical reasoning and distance. Public criticism, on the other hand, consists of the comments, reviews, interviews, and so on published in the media or in specialized journals. The main objective of public criticism is to inform readers and to promote certain works.

Although it is true that the two kinds of criticism do not exactly have to function hand in hand, in the Basque case, the rift between them is tremendous. It is currently very rare to find comments in any of the
Basque newspapers or journals that are more than simply informative. Some Basque writers do complain about this, though, because after the first interview, review, or mention, most of the work goes unnoticed. It is significant that the author who for years enjoyed the best reputation as far as the institution of Basque literature was concerned was a philologist, the renowned Koldo Mitxelena (1915–87).

Whatever the reasons, one thing that has become more obvious over the last few years with regard to institutions mediating between author and reader is the explosive development of academic criticism, which is a direct consequence of the many Basque philology departments that emerged in the 1980s. In 1981, the first twenty students ever to do so received Basque philology degrees from Deusto University. (The same would happen again a few years later in the University of the Basque Country.) That same year, under the direction of Jean Haritschelhar, the Basque Studies Department was created at the University of Bordeaux III (Southwest France). In August 1980, the first Basque language and literature teaching posts were created at schools all over Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia. It is the students who have graduated from these departments who have managed to inject Basque criticism with the energy and modernity it had been lacking. There also has been a remarkable increase in the number of women researchers who have completed doctoral theses in the field of Basque philology over the last few decades.

Despite this weakness in the literary-critical component of mediation in the Basque literary system, literary reception is its weakest point. Despite the multiplying number of Basque publishing houses, the rise of genuine literary criticism in the Basque Country, and the fact that the increase in printed copies suggests a growing
number of readers, no sufficiently wide-ranging study of Basque reading habits exists, and the sociological profile of the Basque reader is still unknown. Although we lack in-depth, up-to-date research, the different studies carried out on different groups of readers of works in Euskara give us a partial diagnosis of today’s situation. In one, from 1990 to 1996, I analyzed 3700 young, bilingual Basque speakers for my doctoral thesis. A summary in Spanish can be read in “Aproximación sociológica a los hábitos de lectura de la juventud vasca,” published in Oihenart, Cuadernos de Lengua y Literatura 18, (2000).

The most important literary awards of Euskadi
The Euskadi Literary Prize is the most prestigious prize in the Basque Country. This photograph shows, in the bottom row, the writers Pedro Ugarte, Aingeru Epaltza, Bernardo Atxaga, the translator Jose Morales Belda, and Ramon Saizarbitoria.

Photo by Zaldi Ero.
Another was a study carried out in 1996 by SIADECO for the *Egunkaria* newspaper.

Two very important details emerge from these studies: First, the habit of reading in Basque is lost with age, and this is related to the fact that readers identify reading in Basque with the educational sphere. The books in Basque that high-school as well as university students chose to read in their spare time had been recommended to them at their educational institutions, whereas the books they read in Spanish were often recommended to them by their friends. In other words, while their reading in Spanish followed the usual line of being encouraged by friends’ favorable comments, the books they read in Basque were exclusively related to schoolwork and, as a consequence, more often than not were not very highly regarded.

Increasing the difficulty of the relationship between schoolwork and reading for pleasure, my study found, the readings recommended at Basque schools were out of touch with contemporary literary culture. Year after year, the same books were recommended, and, most surprisingly, translations from other literatures into Basque were never included in the recommended reading lists. The fact that the responsibility for promoting literary sensitivity and a love for reading is given only to teachers has very grave consequences for Basque speakers, because new books and even catalogues from the publishing houses never reach this professional group.

Second, literate Basque speakers of between 20 and 39 years of age tend not to be great readers (36 percent of them do not even read one Basque book a year). Although it might come as something of a surprise, the results of the survey carried out in November 1999 by the Gremio de Editores de Euskadi (the Basque Publishers Association) were similar to those obtained four
years previously in the survey I carried out among students. The favorite titles among the over-sixteens were: The Pillars of the Earth, The Physician, A Hundred Years of Solitude, The Lord of the Rings, The House of Spirits, and Paula. Bernardo Atxaga was the Basque author mentioned most often (twenty-nine times) and his book Obabakoak was also quoted more times than any others (eleven). My study likewise also showed that very few Basque writers made it beyond the school sector. One of the exceptions was Bernardo Atxaga’s Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (Memoirs of a Basque cow, 1991). In most cases, it had been read as a result of a friend’s recommendation. This is a very meaningful fact that highlights the gaps in contemporary Basque literature and demonstrates the need to promote Basque literature outside the school sector.

In sum, it would seem that, despite the fact that the Bilingual Decree encouraged the development of one hundred thousand new Basque speakers in Euskadi, this increase produced fewer readers than expected. It would also seem that many of the young people who have studied in Basque have not acquired a love of reading in this language and that the Basque literary market is still too strongly related to the teaching world. Most of the Basque books that are considered best sellers are closely linked to school programs, and the many failed attempts at publishing a series of pocketbooks, for example, highlight the limits of the Basque literary market.

People do not read in Basque simply for pleasure, but for a number of practical reasons (to improve their level of Basque, to pass exams, and so on). Although research into the neighboring literatures of France and Spain also shows that the reader-book relationship there is not exactly passionate, the problem in the Basque Country is more serious. As demonstrated
by a series of researchers (including Schüking, Escarpit, and Blanchot), the love of reading never springs solely from the school environment. It is time the Basques became a people who read for the simple pleasure of doing so. In the words of Thomas a Kempis in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*: “I looked for pleasure in all things, but found it only in a book.” For this really to happen, once and for all we need to eradicate obsolete and pernicious educational models and the stifling books that hinder the development of a love of literary language (including texts that have earned awards). Although we always have to deal with the presence of another language—diglossia—in the Basque language, Basque literature has to break away from the usual romantic notions: Language is not the soul of a people—but then, neither is literature.

At present, for a not-very-well-known author to sell 1,000 copies of a book would be an extraordinary feat. The author who has sold most books is unquestionably Bernardo Atxaga. Some of his titles, such as *Obabakoak, Bi letter jaso nituen oso denpora gutxian* (Two letters all at once), and *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* (Memoirs of a Basque cow), had sold fifty thousand copies by 1997. These titles are followed by others like Juan Mari Irigoien’s *Babilonia*, Pako Aristi’s *Kcappo*, and the famous *110 streeteko geltokia* (The stop on 110 street) by Iñaki Zabaleta, all of which had sold over 30,000 copies. Taking into account the fact that the Basque-speaking population is seven hundred thousand, and that, according to different studies, the number of potential readers is sixty thousand, it is obvious that the sales figures given here are extremely high.

One other weak cog in the Basque literary machine is found where the re-creation or rewriting of Basque literature is supposed to occur: in the small number of works
that are translated into other languages. Among the sixty titles that have been translated into other languages, Bernardo Atxaga’s stand out. His books have been translated into more languages than those of any other author (*Obabakoak* is available in twenty-five different languages) and have brought the author more success and recognition than anyone else. Despite the Basque Country’s fine publishing industry, media, and academic system, Basque literature runs the risk of giving the impression that it is not endeavoring to widen its readership. Works in the Basque language do not require translation in order to obtain a reputation for quality or to obtain approval as the equivalent of our neighbors’ literary production. They need it because translation is hugely important to minority languages.

Lesson two

**LEARNING GOALS**

1. To gain an overview of the present Basque literary system.
2. To understand the weak points of this literary system.
3. To become acquainted with the historical events that prompted the renewal of Basque literature from 1960 onward.
4. To understand the complexity of Basque literary reality in all its forms.

**REQUIRED READING**


SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. Is it possible for a minority-language literature to develop without the appropriate objective political situation? Refer to the Basque case in your argument.
2. In your opinion, does speaking of Basque literature mean discussing only literature written in Basque?
3. To what degree does literature written in a minority language depend on the situation of that language? What advantages and disadvantages do you think such literature might have for its development? (You may find it helpful to refer to Atxaga’s interesting opinions on literary tradition in his “By Way of an Autobiography.”)
JOXE IRAZU GARMENDIA, better known as Bernardo Atxaga, decided to take a nom de plume both in attempt to emulate canonical authors and as a result of the problems he faced with the Francoist dictatorship. “Atxaga” is his paternal grandmother’s maiden name, and “Bernardo” is the name of a childhood friend. Atxaga was born in Asteasu, Gipuzkoa, in 1951. The landscape and people of this little village marked the author’s childhood: a green, mountainous landscape dotted with baserris, or Basque farmhouses, and the sound of people speaking Basque—people who enjoyed telling stories about animals and fantastic events. That is the world in which Bernardo Atxaga grew up and the world he tried to revisit in his fantastic tales of Obaba—most poignantly in his acclaimed novel Obabakoak. This is how he explains it in an interview with the writer and journalist Hasier Etxeberria in the book Cinco escritores vascos (Five Basque writers, 2002):

When I wrote Obabakoak, the journey was from the inside out, because of the place where I was born, because of the influence growing up there had on me. People often say things like: “Atxaga describes the rural world, the baserri and the mountains, as if he understood everything.” When I hear them say that, I think: “Poor you! If only you knew what’s inside that rural world!” What I mean to say is that people often simplify things that are actually quite complex and make them into clichés....

When I started looking back into my childhood, I discovered a whole universe. It became a very important aspect of my life. I am not referring to the cliché,
of course. Not at all. When I was nine, ten years old, I used to follow my father on his farmhouse rounds, collecting the electricity money. I witnessed that world, with the animals, the cattle—the homes without sanitation, often without light or running water....

Take this moment here: If I say “witches” now, for example, it means something to me, but there—there it means something else. Because I’ve seen many people say, with all sincerity, things that sounded like pure fantasy—but they told them as if they were true events.

Obaba is that universe. (346–47)

Obaba is an indeterminate place, a virtual infinity into which Atxaga has channeled a mix of memories and fantastic stories that have succeeded in persuading readers in all languages. In an interview with Michael Eaude in The Guardian, (October 20, 2001), Atxaga said: “Obaba is an interior landscape. You don’t remember all the places of the past, but what sticks in the memory is this window, that stone, that bridge. Obaba is the country of my past, a mixture of the real and the emotional.” It is thus much more than a mere transposition of the village of Asteasu in which the author grew up, because as we enter that emotional landscape, the universality of human feelings becomes more and more evident. As with Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County or Juan Rulfo’s Comala, the descriptions of Obaba suggest an “experienced” geography.

As we will see later, when we read Obabakoak in depth, these descriptions not only refer to places in the author’s childhood, but also serve as a narrative excuse to invoke an older world in which magic, rather than logic, reigns. The opposition between nature and culture determines the outcome of events in Obaba, and
this imaginary geography corresponds with a premodern world in which words like “depression” or “schizophrenia” do not exist and animals can explain the inexplicable. For this reason, in the land of Obaba, it is possible to accept a child’s metamorphosis into a wild boar or to believe that a lizard can make you crazy by squiggling into your ear.

Atxaga has never been interested in providing a naturalist testimony of the Basque rural world, and it is important to state that his texts are far removed from what could be described as a mannerist or realist picture of that world. Atxaga has mentioned in several interviews Borges’s assertion that although there are no camels in the Koran, that does not stop us from perceiving the reality of the scenery, the reality of that world. Through the stories that take place in Obaba, the author provides the reader with an insider’s perspective on that primordial Basque world, a perspective permeated by Atxaga the child’s experience of the language and worldview of the farming peoples of Asteasu. For this reason, the author likes to talk about the “interiors and exteriors in [Basque] literature,” the versions of a world, be they hostile or sympathetic, that we attempt to recreate in a text.

In any case, it was an enthusiasm for books, a great love of reading, that determined the author’s literary vocation. “I inherited the love of reading from my parents, he said, “from both of them. Not just from my mother, who was a schoolteacher, but also from my father, who always proclaimed the value of literature and used to say that reading was good for you” (Etxeberria 2002, 315). When, during the author’s teenage years, the family Irazu-Garmendia moved to Andoain (an industrial town a few miles from Asteasu), the public library became one of his favorite places. Atxaga, who was
A suggestive literary map
The Basque Literature Series has been created as a way of introducing Basque literature to an international readership. Its editors hope that the concentrated, intense, and illuminating form of the short story will attract new readers with its ability to capture moments of truth.
Cover of An Anthology of Basque Short Stories, (The Center for Basque Studies, 2004) Cover design by Jose Luis Agote, based on a painting by Juan Mieg.
nicknamed “Fyodor” (Dostoevsky) by his friends and threatened with failure by his teachers if he quoted Giovanni Papini in an exam paper ever again, published in 1971, at age twenty, his first short story “Lo que anhelamos escribir” (What we hope to write) in the newspaper El Norte de Castilla.

These were not the best times for Basque culture, because in the 1970s, Francisco Franco was still head of the dictatorship that had started after the Spanish Civil War and that affected the entire land. The following poem by Atxaga eloquently depicts the political reality of those years (it has been put to music by the singer-songwriter Ruper Ordorika on his LP Ni ez naiz noruegako errege [1983]):

PARTIAL CHRONICLE OF THE ’70s

It was a time when everyday life spilled cockroaches over people nonstop, and everyone cried in their rooms in sniffs or wails—both styles were good. It was a time when people were afraid and screamed if in the night a bell or a shot woke them—and it was on the third-floor flat, or a mistake.

It was a time when we, the young people, read pornography by the white tiles of public lavatories, where we, sometimes, had nosebleeds. It was a time when winter came close, and promised deaths, not all of them natural—when deep in the heart everyone hoped for a call, or a letter, and I did too.
And it was indeed winter, and geese flew
in the sky in a “W” formation,
and it was cold and rainy, and there was a strike
in the midst of an Asian flu epidemic.
And a bar owner, I remember, cited business
reasons when forbidding homosexuals from entering;
tramps reinforced their cardboard homes—
and squirrels, I remember, left the forest and
held up a supermarket screaming, Hands up,
Where's the safe with all the walnuts?

And then carriages full of silence arrived
to fight street by street, home by home,
against Nouns, against Adverbs,
and I was there, it was terrible, oh my God.
And the clinics gave out anti-everything pills,
the banks handed out multicolored leaflets
that read: Pray, but from work don’t stray;
and one evening, at last, she called
from very far away, and her words reminded
me of love, and tasted slightly of honey—
It was a time when everyday life spilled
cockroaches over people nonstop,
and everyone cried in their rooms
in sniffs or wails—both styles were good.

(Poemas & híbridos [Poems and hybrids], translated
from the Spanish by Amaia Gabantxo.)

Until the arrival of democracy, Basque cultural life was
practically clandestine. It lacked the essential structures
that would allow it to develop as a Basque literary system,
as we have noted. It was a silenced world that did not
exist in the school textbooks of Basque children and that
often was associated, pejoratively, with the rural world
as something slightly “savage” and “exotic” and with environments (the rural or fishing communities) far removed from the urban cultural heartlands, whose language was Spanish. They were “heterotopias,” in Michel Foucault’s sense, a concept that we will explore further in future chapters: marginal spaces in which the Basque language developed during those years.

THE SITUATION started to change in the 1960s, when people such as the Bilbaino poet Gabriel Aresti, the philologist Koldo Mitxelena, and the sculptor Jorge Oteiza burst onto the Basque literary scene. Gabriel Aresti especially was to have a great influence on the young Bernardo Atxaga, who had arrived in Bilbao to study economics. Bilbao is the Basque capital, where

**From the Basque Country to the world**

Bernardo Atxaga, the most widely translated and internationally renowned Basque writer, is familiar to readers all over the world.

*Photo by Basso Cannarsa.*
Atxaga was born as a writer, and here he discovered a renewed Basque literary universe, infused with modernity and avant-garde strategies. These were years during which political debate and the vindication of Basque language and culture went hand in hand, and groups such as Ez dok amairu staged shows such as Baga higa higa, which had an enormous impact. Aresti encouraged Atxaga to write and to read the Basque classics Leizarraga and Agirre de Asteasu. In Atxaga’s own words: “I immersed myself totally in the universe of the Basque language and as a result I became the organic writer I am today—organic in the widest sense. In other words: I undertook two jobs, my own as a writer and that of ‘defender of Basque culture,’ and you’ll find I’m still doing that” (Etxeberria 2002, 323).

Bilbao became the city, too, in which the group Pott (Failure) saw the light. To this group belonged, among others, Bernardo Atxaga, Joseba Sarrionandia, Ruper Ordorika, Joxemari Iturralde, and Jon Juaristi. They were active from 1978 until 1983 and published six issues of the magazine Pott, which would become a point of reference for later generations of Basque writers. As Joxemari Iturralde said, the members of Pott manifested their literary preferences clearly by concentrating on literatures from Central Europe (Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel, Paul Celan, and so on) and the English-speaking world (detective novels, film noir, adventure novels), as Borges had recommended in his essays. But above all, the members of Pott defended the autonomous nature of literature.

This, in the context of the era, implied a harsh denunciation of literature that served extraliterary objectives (nationalistic, linguistic, and so on). For this reason, Pott, like the magazine Panpina Ustela (1975), created by Atxaga and Izagirre in Donostia, appropriated the
spirit of the avant-garde and defended the idea that, although the influence of the social context on a literary work cannot be denied, the writer is, before anything else, “engaged” in literary creation and the exploration of new aesthetic forms.

The proposals put forward in Pott were a gust of fresh air across the Basque literary landscape of the era, and the number of prizes the different members of the group received proves that the Basque literary institutions were happy to welcome them. Atxaga and Sarriónandia were repeatedly awarded prizes for their short stories. In 1979, Atxaga received the first City of San Sebastian Prize for his “Drink Dr. Pepper”; in 1981, the twelfth Irun Prize for his “Camilo Lizardi”; and in 1983, the third City of San Sebastian Prize for “Gauero aterako nintzateke paseiatzera” (If I could, I’d go for a stroll every night). Sarriónandia received the ninth Ignacio Aldecoa Prize for “Maggie indazu kamamila” (Maggie, make me a chamomile tea) in 1980 and the City of Bilbao Prize for “Enperadore eroa” (The mad emperor).

Once he had finished his degree in economics, Atxaga abandoned the security of a job in a bank, and, after trying several professions (he worked at a printer’s, as a book seller, as a teacher of Basque, and as a scriptwriter for the radio), he decided to concentrate solely on writing at the beginning of the 1980s. He was in Barcelona studying philosophy at the time. Today, Bernardo Atxaga belongs to that small percentage of Basque writers (about 7 percent of roughly three hundred authors) who earn a living exclusively from writing literature. He has collected more prizes than any other Basque author to date. Besides the Premio Nacional de Narrativa, which he received in 1989, many other awards confirm his status: the Milepages in 1991, the Tres Coronas de los Pirineos Atlánticos in 1995, the Vasco Universal in
2002, and the Cesare Pavese Poetry prize in 2003. As we noted in the last chapter, he sells more books than anyone else writing in Basque. In the years from 1989 to 1998, he spoke at more than two thousand conferences. In other words, he is an eminently “exportable” author. The fact that in 1999 The Observer listed him among the “21 top writers for the 21st century” proves his literary stature abroad. So it is not surprising to find in Atxaga’s bibliography, especially since Obabakoak, writings about famous contemporary people (such as his 1994 text “El diablillo navarro,” about the cyclist Miguel Indurain), about current affairs (his 1994 “Gula: Frenos al buen apetito”), or even about soccer (his 1995 “Sobre el tiempo: Una mesa redonda con un hooligan”). All of these texts exemplify the resonance this Basque author’s oeuvre has had in the last few years. Atxaga has also published more and more collaborative texts that reflect his engagement with ethical causes. Some examples are the texts he wrote in 1996 for Atzegi, a Basque association defending the rights of mentally handicapped children and their families (“A Javier,” “Hara! Bi”), the one he wrote in 1994 for Amnesty International (“Alfabeto [Prólogo]),” in Socorro!, and the pamphlet he wrote in 1996 for the Basque gay and lesbian platform Batzen.

Atxaga is an author who enjoys combining different forms of creative expression and who happily subverts the structures of literary production by superimposing them onto other artistic expressions in order to enrich his creative universe. Thus, Atxaga has written lyrics for many singers (Loquillo, Javier Gurrutxaga, Jabi Muguruza, Ruper Ordorika, Mikel Laboa), and has contributed to many famous artists’ catalogues (Jose Luis Zumeta, Eduardo Chillida, Ramos Uranga, Eduardo Sanz, Ricardo Toja, Andrés Nagel, Ricardo Ortiz de Elguea, Francesc Torres, and others). The most recent
fruit of such collaborations with other writers, singers and painters is the book *Nueva Etiopia* (1996), which juxtaposes songs, interviews and poems with Zumeta’s paintings.

**ATXAGA’S PRESENCE IN THE BASQUE LITERARY LANDSCAPE**

It has been mentioned before that Atxaga started publishing in the 1970s, when Basque literature had become an autonomous social institution. The democratic cultural heterodoxy that emerged from the sociocultural changes of the 1960s created a favorable political situation for the establishment of the Basque literary system. The Law for the Normalization of the Use of Basque (1982), which was approved after the Estatuto de Autonomía was declared in 1979, gave new power to Basque literature and, thanks to the institutional aid for the publication of books in Euskara, literary production increased considerably. According to the sociologist Juan Mari Torrealdai, while 118 books were published in Basque in 1975, 600 saw the light in 1986, and in the last few years, 1500 new titles, more or less, have been published yearly.

In this new context, contemporary Basque literary writers have had to face a new challenges and address the growing aesthetic needs of their rapidly increasing readership. Some of those needs were met by the powerful development of literature for children and young people in Euskara in the 1980s. However, the increasing demand for children’s books in Basque has too often been conditioned by the diglossic situation that Euskara still experiences in the mandatory school curriculum. As I noted in the preceding chapter, this practice of functional reading, which is widely used in Spain, too, is more evident in the Basque case. A glimpse at the results
Bernardo Atxaga: An organic writer

Bilbao, the Basque capital, is where Atxaga was born as a writer. There, during the 1960s, he discovered a renewed Basque literary universe, infused with modernity and avant-garde strategies. Those were years during which political debate and the vindication of Basque language and culture went hand in hand. The poet Gabriel Aresti encouraged Atxaga to read the Basque classics and to write. In Atxaga’s own words: “I immersed myself totally in the universe of the Basque language and as a result I became the organic writer I am today—organic in the widest sense. In other words: I undertook two jobs, my own as a writer and that of ‘defender of Basque culture,’ and you’ll find I’m still doing that.”

*Photo by Zaldi Ero.*
of the survey I conducted from 1990 to 1996 among 3700 Basque-speaking students for my doctoral thesis shows that very few Basque writers made it beyond the school sector. One of the exceptions was Bernardo Atxaga’s *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* (Memoirs of a Basque cow, 1991). In most cases, the book had been read as a result of a friend’s recommendation. This is a very meaningful fact that highlights the gaps in contemporary Basque literature and demonstrates the need to promote Basque literature outside the school sector—but it also gives us an idea of Atxaga’s popularity.

**In any case,** although one of the elements in any author’s success index must be a good reception among his or her readers, as we’ve noted, we cannot ignore the influence other factors in the literary institutions, such as the critics or even the writers themselves, can have on the value or canonical status of an author. In Atxaga’s case, data confirming his status abounds. In a survey carried out by Torrealdai among Basque writers a question that is closely connected to what concerns us was asked: “Which authors have had the greatest influence on your work, both from the thematic and the stylistic points of view?” (Torrealdai 1997, 415). The answers provided were very significant, because most Basque authors consider Bernardo Atxaga to be the writer who has influenced them most, more so than other canonical authors such as Axular, Txomin Agirre, Xabier Lizardi, Orixe, Gabriel Aresti—or even José Luis Alvarez Enparantza Txillardegi, Ramón Saizarbitoria, and Joseba Sarrionandia. Moreover, Basque authors were of the opinion that Bernardo Atxaga is the best contemporary Basque writer.

As well as the writers, Basque critics have had an important role in stressing the importance of Atxaga’s contribution to letters. It should be underlined that
many of his works are perceived as key points in the development of the different genres of contemporary Basque literature. One example is Atxaga’s volume of poetry *Etiopía* (1978). In the words of Joseba Gabilondo, of the University of Nevada, this collection “set the standard for the canon of modern Basque poetry” (Gabilondo 1993). Iñaki Aldekoa, has described *Etiopía* along similar lines: “In the realm of modern poetry it was the most influential and the greatest stimulus” (Aldekoa 1998).

On the other hand, and with reference to children’s literature, Xabier Etxaniz considered that Atxaga’s *Chuck Aranberri dentista baten etxean* (Chuck Aranberri at the dentist, 1982), together with Anjel Lertxundi’s *Tristeak kontsolatzeko makina* (The machine that consoled sad people, 1988) and Mariasun Landa’s *Txan fantasma* (available in English as *Karmentxu and the Little Ghost*) started a new era in children’s writing in Basque (Etxaniz 1997). As for the rest of the genres, including the short story, writers as well as critics have unanimously agreed on the importance of *Obabakoak* (1988). The editor and critic Xabier Mendiguren has written that as far as the contemporary short story is concerned, *Obabakoak* is unsurpassed in the “classic short story” period, which starts in 1983.

In the chapters that follow, we will travel through Atxaga’s literary universe, stopping to study its most important aspects. These are: Obaba and the realm of fantastic literature, children’s literature, poetry, alphabets and other avant-garde ideas, and the realist novels of the 1990s. But before meandering into that Atxagian forest peopled by disquieting beings and texts, we will have a look at the author’s critical reception.
Lesson Three

LEARNING GOALS
1. To gain an overview of Atxaga’s bio/bibliographical evolution.
2. To understand the sociohistorical context of his career.
3. To become acquainted with the author’s literary attitudes.
4. To become acquainted with the author’s current position in the contemporary Basque literary system.

REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. What is Atxaga’s attitude toward literary facts? What does it mean to him to write in Euskara?
2. Can a universal author write in Euskara? Discuss with reference to the concept of the “organic author.”
3. What is the function of literature as far as Atxaga is concerned? Refer to the required reading in your answer.
4. What do you think of Atxaga’s inclusion in *The Observer’s “21 Writers for the 21st Century” list?*
As the Czech structuralist Jan Mukarovsky wrote, we can deduce established aesthetic norms from the critical reception of an oeuvre. For this reason, different critical methodologies (such as the aesthetics of reception and systemic theories) have coincided in stressing the relevance of analyzing the reception of literary works among reading communities. This repertoire of aesthetic norms defined by the literary institution of each literary system brings to mind another important aspect of literary analysis, namely, that the nature of any text is primarily pragmatic: Its meaning is created, as it were, through the reader, during the process of reading itself. An analysis of the reception of Atxaga’s works will serve to prove this author’s high status among different types of readers.

Although Atxaga has been writing professionally for many years, even today, many readers are surprised to learn of the effects that his writing has had outside the Basque frontiers—in places as remote as India, or in Venezuela, for example, where a book entitled La sonrisa de Bernardo Atxaga (Bernardo Atxaga’s smile), was published. When a critic from the New York Times Book Review began his review of The Lone Man with the line “The eminent Basque writer,” he was acknowledging the literary success the author had achieved with his previous publications.

In the Realm of Obaba: The Reception of Obabakoak and Two Brothers
Obabakoak (1988) marks the start of Atxaga’s international career. The author himself translated the book into Spanish in 1989, and translations into other lan-
guages were done from this version into Catalan (1990), French (1991), Italian (1991), German (1991), Portuguese (1992), Dutch (1992), English (1992), and so on. To date, *Obabakoak* has been translated into twenty-five languages and has received the following prizes, among others: The Critics’ Prize (1988), Spain’s Narrative Prize (1989), the Euskadi Prize (1989), the Paris Milepages Prize (1991), and the Atlantic Pyrenees Three Crowns Prize (1995). The book was also short-listed for the European Literary Prize in 1990. Foreign as well as national critics were highly impressed with *Obabakoak*, and their opinions validated Atxaga’s literary propositions.

*Obabakoak* received very positive reviews abroad. Only a Dutch critic stated that the group of short stories making up the text lacked narrative intensity—the remaining 140 reviews I analyzed highlighted the quality of the work. The British press, in particular, praised Atxaga, writing that *Obabakoak* was “an exciting intellectual event” (Pavey) and a “brilliant novel, full of life” (London *Observer*). In Germany, critics described the novel as “a jewel” (Lang), and in Portugal, the critic José Guardado Moreira said it was “unmissable” and “essential.”

But the review by the critic Eugenio Suárez Galbán in the *New York Times Book Review* (June 20, 1993) surpassed Atxaga’s expectations. Under the title “A Village in the Palm of One’s Hand,” Galbán wrote that the work was highly original in the context of Spanish literature and that, even so, the characters and the situations the book proposed were essentially universal. Further, he wrote that in *Obabakoak*, readers encounter a dexterous narrator who makes them think about the world and their lives. The exuberance of styles and languages drove this critic to describe the book as a “delicious paella,
Poetry in progress
Atxaga is fond of collaborating with Basque singer-songwriters in poetic readings. This photograph shows him with Mikel Laboa (left) and Ruper Ordoñika (center) during a performance in Vitoria-Gasteiz.
Photo by permission of Jose Luis Agote.

Baroque and Spanish,” and to highlight the seamlessness of its sumptuous style.

Apart from the general praise mentioned above, the other aspect that the critics remarked upon was the book’s originality. In the Salon du Livre of 1995, the French critics Frédéric Vitoux and Fulvio Caccia expressed their surprise at Atxaga’s style and stressed the exoticism of the book. British critics also echoed the praise for originality, but they argued that Atxaga’s writing followed the current literary tendencies in European writing (Maggie Traugott, 1992). A. S. Byatt, president of the jury for the European Literary Prize in 1990, said that Obabakoak, in line with contemporary European
tendencies, cleverly combines primal stories and motivations with modern metanarrative techniques. Other critics, such as the Italian Antonio Melis (Il Manifesto, May 15, 1991), wrote that the book’s greatest asset is the narrator’s ability to mix the traditional with literary modernity. From these critics’ point of view, Obabakoak proposed a literary journey from the particular—the Basque Country—to the universal.

But the fact that the book was originally written in Basque especially aroused the critics’ interest—it was perceived as a novelty, and by more critics than just Vitoux and Caccia as something exotic. In almost every European state, critics and academics wrote articles that attempted to throw light on the issue of Basque literature, or the Basque language, or even the Basque Country itself (for example, Bernard Daguerre 1992, André Gabastou 1994, Danilo Manera 1991, Frank Degryse 1992, Maarten Steenmeijer 1992, and Sus van Elzen 1992). Eventually the “unpronounceable” title of Obabakoak (London Telegraph, August 10, 1996) became familiar to many. The surprise caused by the fact that the book was written in a language of pre-Indo-European origin that was spoken by such a small number of people was reflected in many of the titles heading the articles: “The Deceptive Caress of a Giraffe” and “Waking the Hedgehog” are but a couple of examples. There were also some surprising commentaries, like that of the critic Manuel Malicia (1992), who wrote that Atxaga is an “Iberian Walt Disney,” and Karl Steinick, a Swedish critic, who wrote obsessively about the lexical and symbolic similarities between the name Camilo Lizardi and the word “lizard.”

But it was the incidence of intertextual references that provoked most comments from the critics. Classical texts such as The Thousand and One Nights and the
Decameron were unanimously hailed as influences, but critics also discovered references to nineteenth-century authors such as Honoré de Balzac, Anton Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant (Euan Cameron, Danilo Manera, Maarten Steenmeijer) and Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy (Manera), and postmodern authors, such as Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, and Italo Calvino (Nick Caistor, Ilse Logie). To this select group of influential authors, other critics added Jorge Luis Borges, Emmanuel Planas, Manera, Peter Pisa), Gabriel García Márquez (Grent, Pisa) and Julio Cortázar (Steenmeijer, Lang, Pisa). Other noteworthy aspects that international critics remarked upon were the book’s stylistic and structural peculiarities, the influence of oral tradition (Abigail Lee Six, Maggie Traugott, Antti Nisula), the use of fairytalelike narrative techniques (Lee Six, Nisula, Grezia, Julio Conrado), and the presence of metanarrative texts.

As far as the reception in Spain is concerned, the fact that Obabakoak was awarded the Spanish Narrative Prize in 1989 meant that reviews, articles, and interviews were published in newspapers, magazines and journals throughout the country in an attempt to satisfy the curiosity provoked by the awarding of the prize. Some of the articles’ titles made reference to the book’s exoticism: “The Mythical, Naive Realm of Obaba” (Santiago Aizarna, 1989), “To Be Read by the Warmth of a Hearth” (Carlos González Espina, 1989), “An Ancient Perfume” (Ramón Pla i Arxé, 1990), and “Virgin Territory” (Cambio 16, 1989). Other titles were very clear in their praise: “Literary Paradise” (Miren Pérez de Mendiola, 1990), “We Can Only Take Our Hats Off to Atxaga’s Magnificent Obabakoak” (Javier Goñi, 1989), and “Literature in Its Purest Form” (J. J. Armas Marcelo, 1989).
However, it must also be said that the Spanish critics were surprised that the book was originally written in Basque, and their surprise showed their ignorance of Basque literature. Some Basque writers, such as Joxemari Iturralde (1991) and Felipe Juaristi (1989), published articles in which they attempted to fill that knowledge void. Equally noteworthy were the Spanish critics’ comments linking *Obabakoak* to the nineteenth-century short-story tradition and to the postmodern aesthetics of the twentieth century (Eva Larrauri, 1989). Some stand out among these: Ignacio Martínez de Pisón’s “Instruction Manual” (*Diario 16*, June 23, 1989) and Amalia Iglesias’s “Literature for the Next Millennium” (*El Correo*, January 31, 1990) because they reminded us that the world is one great Alexandria library and that, thanks to books, we can travel anywhere we like.

Basque critics also echoed the international opinion and praised the exceptional feat the book had accomplished in winning the Spanish Narrative Prize. Basque critics such as Jesús María Lasagabaster, Iñaki Aldekoa, Jon Kortazar, Joseba Gabilondo, and Aitzpea Azkorbebeitia underlined the book’s literary value and its significance in the context of the recent history of Basque literature. It was obvious that *Obabakoak* had scaled a new peak in modern Basque literature and that things would never be the same again. Some critics analyzed *Obabakoak’s* peculiarities in more depth in academic books. Some of these are: Iñaki Aldekoa’s *Antzara eta ispilua* (The goose and the mirror), Angel Askunze’s *Bernardo Atxaga, los demonios personales de un escritor* (Bernardo Atxaga: A writer’s private demons), and Mari Jose Olaziregi’s *Bernardo Atxagaren irakurleia* (Bernardo Atxaga’s reader).

The success of *Obabakoak* is also corroborated by the many dissertations and PhD theses written about
Atxaga’s oeuvre. Among the PhD theses are my own, “Literature and Reading: From Textual Strategies to Sociology in Bernardo Atxaga’s Literary Universe” (University of the Basque Country, 1997), Ur Apalategi’s “L’Évolution de la problématique littéraire de Bernardo Atxaga, du champ littéraire basque au champ universel: Socioanalyse du pathos atxaguien” (Université de Pau et les Pays de l’Adour, France, 1998), and Anna Sobolewska’s dissertation “Intertextuality and Metatextuality in Bernardo Atxaga’s Obabakoak” (University of Jagellonica, Poland, 1992).

The novella Bi anai (1985; Two Brothers, trans. Margaret Jull Costa [London: Harvill, 2001]) has gone through fourteen editions in Basque, and it is the title that, together with Bi letter (Two letters all at once, 1984) and Sugeak txoriari begiratzen dioenean (When the snake stares at the bird, 1984) made Atxaga popular among Basque readers. It has been translated into five languages (as well as Braille) and has been well received abroad. Its reception in the Basque Country, however, was uneven. It received particularly bad reviews during the 1980s (reviews by Jose Luis Ormaetxea and Daniel Izpizua stand out), but in the 1990s, Iñaki Aldekoa hailed it as one of the best novels of the previous decade. It is interesting to contrast this with the reception of Bi anai when it was published in Spanish in 1995. The critics Rosa Mora, Pilar Castro, Javier Goñi and Ramón Sánchez Lizarralde praised the narrative powers of the novella and proclaimed it a masterpiece. There were many comparisons to the mythic world of Obaba and references to the fairytale tradition in many of the reviews. But, above all, the critics highlighted the text’s ability to evoke images and symbols, its polyphonic elements, and its use of a fantastic register. Julian May in Britain’s Independent (November 24, 2001) wrote that Two Brothers
Obabakoak: A journey from the inside out

“[Atxaga:] When I wrote Obabakoak, the journey was from the inside out, because of the place where I was born, because of the influence growing up there had on me…. When I was nine, ten years old, I used to follow my father on his farmhouse rounds, collecting the electricity money. I witnessed that world, with the animals, the cattle—the homes without sanitation, often without light or running water…. I’ve seen many people say, with all sincerity, things that sounded like pure fantasy—but they told them as if they were true events. Obaba is that universe. (In Hasier Etxeberria, Cinco escritores vascos (Five Basque writers), Alberdania, 2002, 346–47, trans. Amaia Gabantxo.)

Cover of Obabakoak. Einaudi (Italy), 1991.
is “a Steinbeckian fable about Paulo and his huge, simpleton sibling, Daniel.” After providing a breakdown of the plot and highlighting several important narrative elements, such as the use of the interior monologue and the animal’s voices’ role in the story, this critic concluded his review by stating that Atxaga had not yet found his narrative voice when he wrote this novella in his youth.

THE RECEPTION OF BEHI EUSKADUN BATEN MEMORIAK (MEMOIRS OF A BASQUE COW)

A glance at the reviews and articles written about Behi euskaldun baten memoriak abroad shows that this book has contributed to the breaking of the stiff and sometimes questionable mould of “young people’s literature” by satisfying older generations of readers. The book’s presence in the IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Honor List since 1994 and the commercial success of its ten translations attest to the book’s excellence. Behi euskaldun baten memoriak sold very well in Basque and has been printed in more editions than any other Basque novel (sixteen so far), but it is important to remember that the book was also a success abroad.

Most of the international reviews that I analyzed started by listing Atxaga’s different works, then gave details of the plot of Behi euskaldun baten memoriak, and finally praised the book’s originality. Aribil (1995) highlighted the book’s poetry and tenderness. The two reviews published in the renowned La revue des livres pour enfants praised the book’s humor and originality above all things and said the book was a gift to all readers. Other reviews, such as the ones published in Inter Cdi and Mairie de Paris, mentioned the intertex-
tual references to Saint Augustine and narrative devices such as interior monologue.

But *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* was best received in Germany. A contributing factor to this was probably the careful translation that the historian Ludger Mees, from the University of the Basque Country, did of the original Basque text and the beautiful edition with which Albertliner Verlag launched the novel. By the end of 1997, two editions of 5,000 copies each were sold out. Both editions were reviewed in newspapers as important as *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and in them, Atxaga’s novel was compared to Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* (1994) because of its philosophical background. The magazine *Focus* included *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* in its lists of the best seven books for November and December 1995 (*Focus* has an advisory panel of twenty-five critics, and the magazine is highly regarded.)

As the critics Sigi Seuss and Marco Möller said, if Gaarder had wanted a bovine protagonist for his novel, he would have conjured up Atxaga’s protagonist, Mo. The philosophical aspect of the novel made it stand out, and this is probably the reason why these two critics said the novel was not just for young people, but that readers of all ages ought to read it. Another German critic, Von Hella Kaiser (1995), pointed out that the references to the Spanish Civil War might be lost on German readers. But in general, most of the reviews (Ostrud Müller 1995, *Die Woche* 1995) highlighted the text’s philosophical qualities as well as its embrace of rationality and humanism as attractive propositions for all thinking readers.

The publication of *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* in Spanish in 1992 caused quite a stir, and newspapers,
magazines and journals such as El Mundo, El País, ABC, El Correo, Leer, and Vida Nueva, as well as specialist publications on the Basque nations, Basque realities.


journals of children’s and young people’s literature such as Clij, Alacena, and Papeles de Literatura Infantil attempted to answer the demand for information. Atxaga himself said, in an interview with the journalist Félix Ibargutxi of El Diario Vasco (July 9, 1992) that he was sure that the Spanish translation was going to be better received than the original Basque text. In his opinion, there were too many prejudices among Basque readers, and a book aimed at “young readers” was at a disadvantage with the traditional “books for grown-ups.”

The book received many very good reviews, including Ángel Cobo’s in El Mundo (July 2, 1992), Manuel Solé’s in ABC, José Luis Barbería’s in El País (September 5, 1992), and Jeús Ballaz’s evocative article in Clij (no. 96, 1997). Cobo described it as a “literary jewel” and praised the poetic wealth of the work, as well as the dexterity with which the narrator dealt with the different registers of style. With reference to this, he highlighted the text’s “Warholism”—in other words, the original combination of French and Basque (Spanish in the translation) in Sister Bernardette’s speech. The green, lush landscape described in the novel was another attractive aspect of the book, in Cobo’s opinion. Other critics, such as Barbería, pointed out the references to poets and musicians in the text. Barbería, like many others before him, said that the book would appeal to readers of any age.

In his article “The Social Function of Literature” (Clij 96, 1997), the writer and editor Jeús Ballaz made use of the Romantic poet Novalis’s statement that literature romanticizes reality, in other words, that it interprets it. In line with Fernando Savater’s proposition in his La tarea del héroe (The hero’s job), Ballaz defended the Basque author’s decision to use fiction to illustrate the need for maintaining an ethical attitude in life—an attitude defined by reason and a critical stand against
the world. In conclusion, Ballaz praised the quality of *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* and Atxaga’s ambition as a writer.

There were also a few critics who doubted the literary quality of *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*. The writer Pedro Ugarte, in an article in *El Correo* (September 23, 1992) described the book as an unexciting, “weak fabulation.” In Ugarte’s opinion, *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* did not contain the evocative power of parables. He felt the only reason why he was writing the review was the author’s status and fame. For him, the book was suitable only for children, not of very high quality, and lacking in ambition. Ugarte concluded his review by criticizing what he saw as the excessively positive reception of Atxaga’s work abroad, which he put down to the fact that foreign critics were blinded by the exoticism of a work written in Basque. Thus, in his review, Ugarte attempted to move beyond the limits of a simple commentary on a particular book and put forward several extraliterary reasons that, in his view, explained Atxaga’s success.

Not many reviews appeared in the Basque press and journals, and the few that appeared did not praise the novel very highly. Of the four reviews I analyzed, most expressed surprise at the novel. The critic Gerardo Markuleta (1992) wrote that he expected something else and that he was disappointed by the book. He also pointed out that he had to read the text twice to realize the philosophical dimensions of the novel. The writer and journalist Juan Luis Zabala (1992) said he did not consider *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* to be Atxaga’s best work, but that the book deserved to be read. In most of the reviews published in Basque, after describing the plot, the critics listed the author’s narrative strategies. Ángel Zelaieta (1992) pointed out the Basque intertextual levels of the novel, and Karmele Olano (1992) remarked
on the irony of the title and the book’s engagement with the theme of marginality—made obvious by the fact that the main character is a cow.

It could be said that the lack of reviews and articles was later remedied, to an extent, by the many interviews of Atxaga that appeared in Basque newspapers and magazines (e.g. Argia and Egunkaria). In them, the author spoke about the novel’s realist aspects and its intertextual references and stated that his intention had been to write a book that, like Treasure Island, would be admired by children and adults alike.

IN THE REALM OF FEAR: THE LONE MAN AND THE LONE WOMAN

The Lone Man has been translated into fifteen languages and has received several important prizes, such as the Spanish Critics’ prize in 1993 (it was also short-listed for the Aristerion and the IMPAC prizes in 1996). The book was very well received abroad. In Italy, France, and Germany, the critics viewed it as an attractive, interesting novel. British critics in particular took very enthusiastically to The Lone Man, and the reviews published in the Times Literary Supplement (by David Horspool, August 2, 1996) and The New Statesman (Julian May, August 9, 1996) underlined that Atxaga’s novel was not a conventional thriller and that he developed location and action symbolically through a use of evocative imagery that enriched the plot. Meantime, Richard Gott in The Guardian (July 29, 1996) remarked on the originality of the theme and the rhythm of the novel, and Peter Millar in the London Times (August 3, 1996) said the novel is a captivating odyssey into the mind of the protagonist.

In Spain, the reviews were equally positive. The critic Jordi Gracia in El Periódico de Cataluña (May 4, 1994) wrote that it was a novel “we can’t do without,” and
Bernardino M. Hernando in *Tribuna* (June 11, 1994) asserted that this is a novel by a great writer, a risky novel, full of detail and irony. The critics mentioned the sparseness of the prose, the seductiveness of the language, the subtleness of feeling, Atxaga’s ability to evoke images, and the novel’s intense structure, like that of a puzzle (e.g. Ramón Sánchez Lizarralde in *El Urogallo*, September–October 1994; Mercedes Monmany in *Diario 16*, April 3, 1994; and Elvira Huelbes in *El Mundo*, March 19, 1994). Basque critics, on the other hand, highlighted the novel’s narrative pace and its ability to create suspenseful situations (Iñaki Aldekoa in *Bitarte* 9, 1996), the powerful dialogue and the plot structure (Felipe Juaristi in *El Diario Vasco*, April 1, 1994), as well as the techniques borrowed from fantastic literature and the unreliable information with which the reader is presented (Jon Kortazar in *Insula* 580).

*The Lone Woman* is another example of a novel structured around a single character. The novel caused great controversy from the start because its main character, Irene, is an ETA prisoner who volunteers for the Social Rehabilitation Plan, leaving behind, in doing so, both the organization and jail. For this reason, the novel was harshly criticized by the radical nationalist left wing. A first edition of 20,000 copies of the Spanish translation came out in 1996 and sold out very quickly. The novel’s political background resulted in many long interviews with Atxaga. During these interviews, Atxaga criticized the excessive political romanticism that, in his opinion, was predominant in the attitudes of nationalist politicians in the Basque Country (e.g. *Diario 16*, May 31, 1996; *ABC*, May 29, 1996; *Tiempo*, May 13, 1996; *El País*, May 10, 1996; *El Correo*, April 17, 1996).

The critic Santos Sanz Villanueva wrote in *El Mundo* (May 18, 1996) that *The Lone Woman* is a short, intense,
intimist novel in which the objectivity expected from a third-person narrative is put into question by the closeness with which the reader is made to experience the protagonist’s feelings. The critics wrote that the novel is limited by its thematic development, and although its quality could not be doubted, they generally agreed that it was a minor work in comparison with *The Lone Man* (Ricardo Senabre in *ABC*, May 3, 1996 and Francisco Javier Díaz de Castro in *Diario de Mallorca*, June 14, 1996).

The public libraries in Madrid nominated it for the IMPAC prize in 2001. Among the many reviews published abroad, James Hopkin’s in *The New Statesman* (June 28, 1999) praised the text’s achievements: “In taut, elegant sentences which generate a sense of restlessness and foreboding, Atxaga reveals the uncertain mind of a fugitive fleeing the past and, by identifying only the salient details in each scene, he creates a disturbing, transitory world in which all proportion and compassion have been lost.” Hopkin is referring to the effect of the sparseness of the prose, which invites the perception that what is being suggested, what is left “outside” the text, is more important than what is left in.

**Lesson Four**

**LEARNING GOALS**

1. To reflect on the function and characteristics of what can be called “public criticism” (newspaper or magazine reviews).
2. To compare different reviews of the same book.
3. To reflect on potential prejudices or preconceived notions in the minds of reviewers who write about minority literatures.
4. To reflect on how the pleasure of reading is related to the suggestive power of literary texts.

REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING
WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION

Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.

1. To what extent is the critical reception of an oeuvre conditioned by its belonging to a minority language? Is this topic touched upon in any of the reviews we have analyzed?

2. Do you believe that particular genres or types of text tend to receive specific types of reviews?

3. After reading some of the critics’ opinions about Atxaga’s work, would you say that his texts are endless sources of interpretation?
As we noted in Chapter One, the events that took place in the Basque Country in the 1960s and 1970s created the right kind of environment for a radical literary revolution to take place. The world of Basque publishing felt the change in the air: New publishing houses flourished, and as a result, literary production in Basque increased, especially during the 1970s. The following are some of the publishing houses created during that time: Gordailu (1969), Lur (1969), Etor (1970), Iker (1972), Gero (1973), and Elkar (1973). This cultural revolution gave new life to Basque musicians and songwriters, too, and it could be said that the group responsible for creating a new era in Basque music was Ez dok amairu (1965). In 1965, the first Basque book fair took place in Durango, and at the same time, innovative groups like the dancers Argia and the dramatists Jarrai burst onto the scene and demands for a formal publishing policy were met—the aim was to disseminate Basque culture as widely as possible. As we also noted, artists and intellectuals such as Gabriel Aresti, Koldo Mitxelena, and Jorge Oteiza moved Basque culture away from the cultural orthodoxy of the Franco era, but the Basque literary system would not be firmly established until the 1980s, after Franco’s death and after the Basque language had achieved official status and funding was given for literary production in Basque.

Atxaga, Euskal Herria’s most universal writer, is someone for whom literature is a continuous search for new aesthetic possibilities, and for this reason, he enjoys
exploring the borderland between children’s and adults’ literature and mixing narrative, poetry, and short stories in his public readings. This tendency to crisscross the borders of literary genres became a constant in the author’s later work. He continuously surprised readers and critics alike with innovative texts such as _Henry Bengoa inventarium_ (1988) and the suggestive Oulipian artifacts of _Lista de locos y otros alfabetos_ (List of fools and other alphabets, 1998).

Even Atxaga’s early literary attempts in the 1970s were avant-garde and experimental in nature. I am referring to his 1972 play _Borobila eta puntua_ (The circle and the dot), to his 1976 novel _Ziutateaz_ (About the city,) and to his volume of poetry _Etiopia_ (1978). The poetic tedium that the end of modernity had provoked is latent in these works. Later on, in the 1980s, Atxaga moved toward more traditional narrative forms, and in line with the literary tendencies of the last few decades, his prose works reclaimed a love of storytelling and his poetry evolved toward a more narrative style, far removed from modern aesthetic influences and firmly rooted in the oral and musical traditions.

After publishing, in 1971, a short story entitled “Lo que anhelamos escribir” (What we hope to write) in the newspaper _El Norte de Castilla_, the young Atxaga published, this time in Basque, his first dramatic work, the symbolist text _Borobila eta puntua_ (The circle and the dot). It was published in 1972 in the volume _Literatura 72_, together with work by other authors. It was obvious even then how important scenography was for him: The text was peppered with drawings explaining the actors’ locations and movements on the stage. He mixed avant-garde elements such as the use of color and physical expression with more traditional aspects of the theater, such as a choir.
In 1974, he came up with what would be known as the founding manifesto of modern Basque theatre: “Euskal theatro berriaren bila” (In search of the new Basque theater). In it, after praising Gabriel Aresti’s contribution to the theater, Atxaga listed the characteristics the new Basque theater should have: It should be a theater for everyone in the Basque Country, engage with the nation’s contradictions and problems—that is, be able to confront reality—and be a theater that knew how to bring together foreign influences (Konstantin Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht, Roy Hart, Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud) and traditional Basque theatrical forms (improvised verse singing, pastorals).

During these years, Atxaga started a collaboration with a Bilbao theater group called Cómicos de la Legua-Kilikariak and, in an attempt to bring together the avant-garde and the experimental, wrote the following plays: *Nafarroa 1500 (A Basque Adaptation)*, *Tripontzi jauna*, and *Prakaman*. Later on he wrote plays for children, which were staged by the group Maskarada. Some examples are *Jimmy potxolo eta zapataria* (Chubby Jimmy and the shoemaker) and *Logalea zeukan trapezistaren kasua* (The case of the sleepy trapeze artist), which was provocative in the style of Alfred Jarry and had a touch of the Theater of the Absurd about it. During the 1980s and 1990s, Atxaga continued writing drama and collaborating with Basque and Spanish theater groups. Plays such as *Henry Bengoa inventarium* (Hika, 1995), *Xolak badu lehoien berri* (Shola and the lions: Porpol, 1999), and *Bambulo* (Ados Teatroa, 2001) have been very well received by the public.
Avant-garde literature
Since his early avant-garde days, Atxaga has enjoyed experimenting with literary boundaries, creating hybrid texts that combine fiction with metaliterature. 


EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVE AND POETRY: ZIUTATEAZ AND ETIOPÍA
The novel Ziutateaz (About the city) is a hybrid text, a narrative that includes poems, descriptions, and dramatic fragments. Ziutateaz portrays a terrible world. The
story is peopled with executioners, and the main one is Scardanelli, a cruel and bloodthirsty creature. There are beaten boxers there, soldiers who are used for sordid spectacles, frustrated torturers—the city is a metaphor for hell. The characters who inhabit it, such as the aforementioned Scardanelli (who is reminiscent of the poet Hölderlin), or Theo (a reference to Van Gogh’s brother), or Bilintx (the ill-fated Basque Romantic poet), bear the stamp of madness—they are marginal beings. As the writer Joxemari Iturralde wrote in the introduction to the second edition of the novel, the text takes us back to a time (1975) when “the main executioner” (Franco) was still alive. Ziutateaz symbolizes an entire era of political repression and denial of liberties, and its dramatic fragments can be easily compared to Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty. Atxaga has often explained that he wrote the novel while he was doing mandatory military service and that it reflects the depressing universe he witnessed and the terrible experiences he endured while he was there. Depicting the marginal worlds that the avant-garde and Surrealist movements had suggested, the story takes its textual shape from a combination of different registers, Expressionist imagery, and alternative narrative voices—all these strategies combine to create a layered, rich text. Because it is an experimental work, it is not a complete surprise to find the implied author suggesting different endings in a note or to read that the narrator lives in the “city of the mute.” These poetics of silence were to reach their peak in the volume of poetry Atxaga published two years later, Etiopía.

With the benefit of hindsight, very few now doubt that the publication of Etiopía (1978) was of extraordinary importance for the Basque poetry of that generation. Joseba Gabilondo has defined it as “the canon of modern Basque poetry,” while Iñaki Aldekoa
has written that, “in the field of poetry, it was [the book] that had the greatest influence.” Jon Kortazar used the word “earthquake” to illustrate the ground-breaking power of *Etiopía*. Things were never the same again in Basque poetry after the publication of the book: Today, *Etiopía* is considered a poetic monolith.

*Etiopía* is a collage of poems and stories with a circular structure. Two narratives open and close the book. In between, a utopian journey to Ethiopia is laid out in nine circles of sand, as is the journey in Dante’s famous poem. In that sand, the reader will find broken watches, yellowing pages, a Lilliputian dictionary, and a hidden, rusty Spartan shield. The defining characteristics of the journey to Ethiopia are given in the poem “Of Sand.”

**OF SAND**

*Sand earth most anonymous.*  
*Sand formations the columns of distopia.*  
*And on planet Earth even wind Is sand.*

*Satellites of Sand,*  
*Uranus,*  
*Venus also Sand.*

*Hearts repelling sand*  
*attracting sand. Sand.*  
*But not only sand.*  
*With sand the essential tear*  
*and a vessel full of blood.*

*And you too beneath the sand, you yellowing pages, you broken*
Mixing poetry, music, and painting

*Nueva Etiopia* (New Ethiopia, 1996) is a good example of the aesthetic renewal for which Atxaga is searching. Atxaga’s is a literature of frontiers, a literature that subverts the narrow margins of the literary text and takes pleasure in blending different artistic environments, such as painting, music, and literature. *Nueva Etiopia* includes a very exclusive selection of illustrations by the painter Jose Luis Zumeta, songs with lyrics by Atxaga, and various brief narratives.

Cover of Nueva Etiopia. *El Europeo* (Spain), 1996.
watches.
Lilliputian dictionary, rusty Spartan shield;
You are coming, you too.

But everything disappears with evening twilight,
like you or the light.

Only sand remains, every night
under the cruel moon. Sand.
Sand earth most anonymous,
sand formations the columns of dystopia.

(Poemas & híbridos, translated from the Basque by Amaia Gabantxo)

As exemplified in this poem, the historical patri-mony that forms the basis of Western culture is also what will surface in the end. Or, to put it in other words, the poet here addresses the poetic tedium brought about by the end of modernity, the impossibility of addressing poetic language itself, or what has been referred to as “the poetics of silence,” which Mallarmé pioneered and the impossibility of which was finally revealed with Wittgenstein’s final assertion in his Tractus Logico-Philosophicus: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” It is very significant that the two Basque canonical texts of the 1970s are Ramon Saizarbitoria’s Ene Jesus (Oh Jesus) and Bernardo Atxaga’s Etiopia. Both texts mark the beginning of postmodernity in Basque literature and show us the extent to which language can be stretched.

In Etiopía, Atxaga wants to revolutionize a poetic language saturated by rhetoric, and for this reason he announces that the silence-filled carriages arrive to join the fight against adjectives. Ruper Ordorika put “Crónica
parcial de los 70” (Partial chronicle of the 70s) to music on his album *Ni ez naiz Noruegako errege* (I am not the king of Norway, 1983]), thus finding a way to express the tedium latent in the poem.

There are ways to mock the sterility of language, to deny the Romantics’ idealized assertions, and Atxaga used the spirit of Dadaism and made it present in the scattered “blah, blah, blahs” and “etceteras” of his poetry. He also included references to comics, pop music, film, and modern marketing campaigns in his poems. Iñaki Aldekoa gave an excellent description of the tone of *Etiopía* in his introduction to *Antología de la poesía vasca / Euskal poesiaren antología* (1993):

*Etiopía* (1978) stormed into the small world of Basque poetry and wrecked the place. The protagonist responsible for this was dressed up as Dada-Tzara and imitated Rimbaud; he incited a riot by trashing the sterile notions of time and space and gathering the masks of characters and the names of cities of distant eras in concentric circles. The protagonist is a landless being, who, like Cain (whose story initiates the book), has been forever banished from paradise and condemned to wander around a vast city of unreadable maps, because precisely the maps that were supposed to substitute the ideal city are now old and useless. The city is a great labyrinth inhabited by passers-by who wander the streets. (26)

This is why we empathize with the lost protagonist in that labyrinthine city of Expressionist and dramatic qualities. In the city, the losers who are always present in Atxaga’s literary universe, the antiheroes, are found in the shape of exhausted explorers, boxers, and suicidal poets. His traveling companions are Gérard de Nerval,
Jacques Rigaut, Arthur Rimbaud, and Arthur Cravan, who also tried to escape from the finality of the city, of language. *Etiopía* is characterized by savage irony, tenderness, and the desire to break away from the poetry of the modernist tradition.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF HENRY BENGOA INVENTARIUM**

After *Etiopía* was published, a few years passed before Atxaga emerged with another collection of poetry: *Poemas & híbridos* (1990). The aesthetic breach between the two works cannot be understood without looking at the text that was published in the interim: *Henry Bengoa inventarium* (1988). This is not just because it was the point of departure for a simpler kind of poetry that was more firmly rooted in music making, but because the seeds of the later realist narratives and “literary artifacts” (inventories, alphabets) were sown here.

*Henry Bengoa inventarium* is a collage made from different texts, and contained within it are the inventories of Henry’s belongings, stories by different authors, poems, and songs. It may seem unlikely, but the apparently cold structure of the inventory provides a very convincing picture of the character. Starting from his clothes and medicines and ending with the messages written to his girlfriend, Henry’s world is presented to us in an immediate, concise manner. *Henry Bengoa inventarium* was the first fruit of the Emak Bakia Baita (Don’t Bother Me Either) group, and it would seem that just as had happened with *Pott* and *Ustela* before, Atxaga was seeking to establish literary coteries by supporting different groups of friends.

The name of the group itself is interesting, because it paraphrases the title of a Dadaist film by the North American photographer, filmmaker, and painter Man Ray. The affiliation to the Dadaist movement that is so
evident in *Etiopia* the references to Cravan, Tristan Tzara, and Francis Picabia and the never-ending etceteras that populate the poems—is a way of subscribing to a particular understanding of literature. As Theodor W. Adorno says in his *Aesthetic Theory*, the Dadaists wanted to separate the artwork from any metaphysical content or message, and for this purpose, they attempted to bring together different artistic expressions: poetry, music, photography, painting, sculpture, even collages. In the savage, suffocating atmosphere after World War I, the Dadaists felt the urge to denounce the paralysis and laziness of bourgeois society. Their most important weapon was their call for a renewal of a decrepit poetic language, and it was the Dadaists again who a few years later spearheaded the “poetics of silence” that spread to the realms of art and philosophy.

It cannot be said that Emak Bakia Baita’s shows were as provocative as the Dadaists’, but the original and evocative qualities of the literary events that Joxemari Iturralde and Ruper Ordorika from the group *Pott* staged cannot be denied. Their performances between 1986 and 1988 met with unprecedented success, and they had the innovative qualities of *Henry Bengoa inventarium* to thank for that. More than a mere poetry reading, Iturralde and Ordorika wanted to offer a revolutionary performance that would throw the audience’s preconceptions into disarray.

In choosing the structure of an inventory, Atxaga thus emulated Dadaists like Duchamp: He used elements that were not inherently artistic to create a work of art. In this manner, he demystified the work of art and put forward a completely new reading of the artwork.
A sober and personal voice ... deep songs

“Ruper Ordorika was born in Oñati (Basque Country) in 1956.... He was already known in many cultural circles when he recorded his first album Hautsi da Anphora in 1980.... The record was highly praised by the critics, although it was eccentric in the context of Basque songs. With Bernardo Atxaga’s lyrics, this first record is from the time when the singer and the writer lived in Bilbao and is a testimony to a certain poetic.” (From www.ruperordorika.com.)

Photo of by Zaldi Ero.

POEMAS & HÍBRIDOS AND NUEVA ETIOPÍA

Over the years, Atxaga’s poetry became more “original” in Chesterton’s sense of the word: It is a poetry that seeks the origins of things. Freed from baroque extravagance and far removed from the dramatics of his previous work, in Poemas & hibridos (1990) Atxaga tries to recover poetry’s essential sense. For this purpose, he
tears up the nonneutral, topical language that is traditionally used in poetry and mixes it with Dadaist strategies, with the primitive, with the infantile. From then on, humor and tenderness reign in the author’s universe, but more importantly, he feels the need to distance himself from any sort of elitist conception of poetry making, and thus his poems become more narrative. In his *Alfabeto sobre la literatura infantil*, Atxaga stressed the importance of humor in children’s literature. He mentioned Roland Barthes and his ideas about poetry: “Barthes once said that the *gag*, the humorous element, freed the poem from its poetic mania, or in other words, from its need to strive for effect, its sickly sweet, pompous excesses” (63).

The poetry of *Poemas & híbridos* is sensitive and appears to be prosaic. It is close to song and wants to recover an innocent way of looking at the world. That innocent way of looking at the world is precisely what “The Tale of the Hedgehog” offers us. As we will see, the protagonist’s narrow vocabulary (twenty-seven words) provides a different and genuinely primitive way of looking at the world, a different time-space, far removed from today’s technological advancements. The contrast between the poet’s and the hedgehog’s perspectives is in the end tragic, because the hedgehog’s entrance into the poet’s time entails its death. The use of repetition, parallelism, and enumeration gives the language that the poet uses to reflect the hedgehog’s viewpoint a naïve tone similar to children’s speech. As in some of the stories that take place in Obaba, the opposition between nature and culture (logos) underlies the poem. The reader is saddened by the hedgehog’s tragic destiny when, following an old law of nature, it seeks nourishment at night and does not understand the meaning of the threatening lights on the road.
THE TALE OF THE HEDGEHOG

In his nest of dry leaves the hedgehog has woken his mind so suddenly filled with all the words he knows. Counting the verbs, more or less, they come to twenty-seven.

Later he thinks: The winter is over, I am a hedgehog, up fly two eagles, high up, Snail, Worm, Insect, Spider, Frog, which ponds or holes are you hiding in? There is the river, this is my kingdom, I am hungry.

And he repeats: This is my kingdom, I am hungry, Snail, Worm, Insect, Spider, Frog, which ponds or holes are you hiding in?

However he remains still like a dry leaf, too, because it is but midday and an old law forbids him sun, sky, and eagles.

But night comes, gone are the eagles; and the hedgehog, Snail, Worm, Insect, Spider, Frog, Disregards the river and undertakes the steepness of the mountain, as sure of his spines as a warrior in Sparta or Corinth could have been of his shield; and suddenly, he crosses the boundary between the meadow and the new road with a single step that takes him right into my and your time. And given that his universal vocabulary has not been renewed
An original inventarium

*Henry Bengoa inventarium* was the first fruit of the Emak Bakia Baita group. Just as had happened with Pott and Ustela before, Atxaga was seeking to establish literary coteries by supporting different groups of friends. The name of the group paraphrases the title of a Dadaist film by the North American photographer, filmmaker, and painter Man Ray, *Emak Bakia*, (Don't bother me).

in the last seven thousand years,
he neither understands our car lights,
nor realizes his forthcoming death.

(Poemas & híbridos, translated from the Basque by Amaia Gabantxo, 6–9)

Here, Atxaga is attempting to overcome the elitist aspects of poetry through tenderness and humor. Often, humanity’s inevitable tragic end is transformed through that humor. In other words, humor helps us get over our fear of death. This is precisely what the poem “Silly Song” from Poemas & híbridos achieves. With its acute sense of irony, the poem’s humorous tone confronts the anxiety that knowledge of our mortality provokes in us, and the lines that are repeated as an inane incantation deny the possibility of considering the subject from a tragic perspective.

SILLY SONG

I will die, dooheedoobee
I will die, dooheedoobah
It’s possible, dooheedoobee
Almost certain, dooheedoobah
But who will kill me?

Perhaps I’ll be killed
By the terrible First,
Or his baby brother,
The Little Second;
The Third’s a possible,
And the Fourth and the Fifth
And even the Sixth.
But in November
My ideal choice
Is lucky Seven.

I will die, doobeedoobee
I will die, doobeedoobah
It’s likely, doobeedoobee
Almost certain, doobeedoobah
But who will kill me?

The lurid Eighth
Could be my killer,
Or the rainy Ninth
If it’s got any sense.
And there’ll be a night
'Twixt the Tenth and the Eleventh
When I might get taken
for a late-night ride.
The kindly Twelfth,
From time to time,
Covets the role
Of the fateful Thirteenth.
Even the Fourteenths,
Normally anodyne,
Waits with a knife.

I don’t want to die
On the Fifteenth day,
Or the Sixteenth either,
And to tell the truth,
The Seventeenth
Just wouldn’t suit me at all.
But then neither would the Eighteenth
—for reasons sentimental.
And the Nineteenth somehow
Would seem unnatural,
While the Twentieth sounds banal,
And I’d rather not talk
About the Twenty-first
Let alone the Twenty-second.

I will die, dooheedoobee
I will die, dooheedoobah
It’s possible, dooheedoobee
Almost certain, dooheedoobah
But who will kill me?

On the Twenty-third
I’ll go for a walk,
On the Twenty-fourth
I’ll be in Baghdad;
On the Twenty-fifth
I’ll slip away
to Isfahan;
Catch me if you can!
On the Twenty-sixth
And Twenty-seventh
I’ll eat only apples;
Poison them if you dare!
On the Twenty-eighth
I’ll go for a swim,
On the Twenty-ninth
I’ll be floating blissfully—
Whip up a whirlpool
If you know how.
I will die, doobeedoobee
I will die, doobeedoobah
It’s possible, doobeedoobee
Almost certain, doobeedoobah
But who will kill me?

The Thirtieth, because
It’s an even number,
The Thirty-first,
because it isn’t.
Both are criminal,
Both are professional,
In every hospital
They haunt the terminal:
They know when it’s finally final.

(Poemas & híbridos, translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa, 80–83)

The characters that inhabit Poemas & híbridos, like the child Ainhoa, the immigrant, or the “mysterious” dog Shola (see “Familia IV”), show us Atxaga’s humanist, morally engaged side. His poetry is a homage to people or things that are apparently insignificant, like an apple tree (see “Familia VII”), or like some seagulls that know too much about loneliness and lost battles, but still wish to swerve in the sky and exchange notes on their loves.

SEAGULLS

They exchange notes on their loves
the city seagulls by the station
on an afternoon;
Poetry for the new millennium

Atxaga, Euskal Herria’s most universal writer, is someone for whom literature is a continuous search for new aesthetic possibilities, and for this reason, he enjoys exploring the borderland between children’s and adults’ literature and mixing narrative, poetry, and short stories in his public readings. This tendency to crisscross the borders of literary genres became a constant in the author’s later work. He repeatedly surprised readers and critics alike with innovative texts such as *Henry Bengoa inventarium* (1988) and the suggestive Oulipian artifacts of *Lista de locos y otros alfabetos* (List of fools and other alphabets, 1998).

*Cover of 9 kiveä, 27 sanaa. Tammi Publishers (Finland), 2001.*
In their memory book
a sandalwood flower on a page
for the bridges
and vagabond thieves

A good idea, too,
think the cracked roofs
and the rubbish
from the nearby market

But their swerving acrobatic hearts,
what can they love
most;
what,
if not
the never-ending changes
of the skies and days;
What,
if not
the infinitely
changing days.

(Poemas & híbridos, translated from the Basque by Amaia Gabantxo, 10–11)

NUEVA ETIOPÍA (New Ethiopia, 1996) is a good example of the constant need for aesthetic renewal for which Atxaga is searching. It could be said, in the terms of Claudio Magris’s definition, that Atxaga’s is a literature of frontiers, a literature that subverts the narrow margins of the literary text and takes pleasure in blending different artistic environments, such as painting, music and literature: “All writers, whether or not they know it or want it, are frontier people: they move along frontiers, they undo, deny, and propose values and
meanings, they articulate and disarticulate the sense of the world in an endless movement that is a continual sliding of frontiers” (68). Nueva Etiopía includes a very exclusive selection of illustrations by the painter Jose Luis Zumeta, songs with lyrics by Atxaga, and various brief narratives.

Lesson 5

LEARNING GOALS
1. To consider the influence of the poetic avant-garde and experimentalism in Atxaga’s work.
2. To gain an overview of the development of Bernardo Atxaga’s poetry.
3. To become familiar with the authors and tendencies of contemporary Basque poetry.
4. To read poetry in translation by contemporary Basque poets.

REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING
Peter Bürgér, Theory of the Avant-Garde (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. What are the fundamental differences between the poetic strategies of *Etiopía* and *Poemas & híbridos*? Why?
2. In your opinion, what poetic concept (e.g. the avant-garde) is most relevant to Atxaga’s work? Why? You may wish to refer to Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.
3. Write a commentary on the four translated poems included in this chapter.
4. Try to write a poetic *inventarium* of Atxaga’s work.
5. Jacques Derrida’s brief essay “Che cos’ la poesia” attempts a definition of poetry using the figure of the hedgehog. Read it and try to answer the following questions: Can Atxaga’s “The Tale of the Hedgehog” be understood in the sense that Derrida understands poetry? Could Atxaga’s poem be interpreted as a reflection on the essence of poetry as something that is learned by heart, something that is bound to disappear, die, when it’s confronted by the logos? The following extracts from Derrida’s essay “Che cos’ la poesia” contain his main ideas:

In order to respond to such a question—in two words, right?—you are asked to know how to renounce knowledge. And to know it well, without ever forgetting it: demobilize culture, but never forget in your
learned ignorance what you sacrifice on the road, in crossing the road. (534)

The unicity of the poem depends on this condition. You must celebrate, you have to commemorate amnesia, savagery, even the stupidity of the “by heart”: the hérisson. It blinds itself. Rolled up in a ball, prickly with spines, vulnerable and dangerous, calculating and ill-adapted (because it makes itself into a ball, sensing the danger on the autoroute, it exposes itself to an accident). No poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding. You will call a poem a silent incantation, the aphonic wound that, of you, from you, I want to learn by heart. It thus takes place, essentially without one’s having to do it or make it: it lets itself be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober pathos, a stranger to all production, especially to creation. The poem falls to me, benediction, coming of (or from) the other. (536)

You will call a poem from now on a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the logos, ahuman, barely domestic, not reappropriable into the family of the subject: a converted animal, rolled up in a ball, turned toward the other and toward itself, in sum, a thing—modest, discreet, close to the earth, the humility that you surname, thus transporting yourself in the name beyond a name, a catachrestic hérisson, its arrows held at the ready, when this ageless blind thing rears but does not see death coming. (537)
ON OPENING Obabakoak, new readers realize straightaway the novelty of what they are holding in their hands. All the elements not directly involved in the narrative (the title, the chapter headings, the prefaces, notes, etc.)—in other words, all the elements that make up the paratext—create the sensation of being faced with something new. This novelty is more clearly present in the original Basque text because it contains a note by the author after the table of contents. In this note, he explains that the short stories can be read in any order, except those with titles in italics—which he recommends should be read in order. This suggests that rather than being confronted by a collection of short stories, readers are being offered a series of stories that are related in some way. Thus, the readers’ expectations are baffled, because the truth is that what they are holding in their hands is not a novel, but neither is it a mundane short-story collection.

This desire to play with the limits of genres, to subvert them, is one of the constants in Atxaga’s oeuvre, and it is confirmed by the fact that in the original Basque version, the second part of the book includes a group of short stories organized in alphabetical order. From that point on, the reader realizes that apart from the narrative lines in the stories, the book is organized according to some sort of a structure or scheme, and in consequence, a second reading starts imposing itself on the initial one. Since he published his “Abecedarium haur literaturari buruz” (Alphabet about children’s literature) in 1986, Atxaga has enjoyed writing alphabets, inventories, and “literary artifacts” that allow him to explore different textual propositions in ways already explored by authors
such as Edward Lear and later the Oulipians Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec.

Thus, on first inspection, *Obabakoak* appears to be a group of interrelated short stories that is organized in a very peculiar way. This is a structure of short stories that is very close to the novel form and that since the 1970s has been referred to in the Anglophone world as a “short-story cycle.” As Susan Garland Mann established in *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (1989), two studies aided the systematic description of the genre. Garland Mann is referring to Forrest L. Ingram’s well-known book *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (1971) and Joanne V. Creighton’s dissertation “Dubliners and Go Down, Moses: The Short Story Composite.” (1969). For Ingram, the similarities between the short stories that make up a cycle can be based on different aspects such as repetitions or symbols, themes, types of narrator, or places and characters.

In *Obabakoak*, we find all sorts of similarities or relations between the different short stories that make it up. All the stories in the first part are spatially similar in that they take place in Obaba. In terms of thematic similarities, loneliness and fatality are the themes that define the first and last parts of the book. There is also the title of the book, which encompasses the whole universe of Obaba and which might be translated into English as “The People and Things of Obaba,” or “Stories from Obaba,” as is indicated in the poem at the beginning of the book.

But apart from these links, in the section entitled “In Search of the Last Word,” *Obabakoak* includes narratives that frame the different stories told in the book. The scheme follows a pattern.
In the realm of Obaba

The title *Obabakoak* makes reference to a narrative place that was already familiar to the readers of Atxaga’s work: the imaginary village of Obaba. Obaba is an indeterminate place into which Atxaga has channeled a mix of memories and fantastic stories that have successfully reached readers in all languages.

*Cover of Obabakoak. Erein (Basque Country), 1998.*
In the realm of Obaba: Obabakoak (I) · 101

Framed narrative

This pattern frames the different stories that are told in the Obabakoak narratives. The need to use a narrative frame, whether similar to those used in the classical works such as the Decameron or a preface to an introduction to a character who purports to be the author, decreased as the twentieth century approached.

As Garland Mann reminds us, although framed narratives have certainly existed for a long time (some examples are the Panchantantra, compiled before 500 A.D., and Ovid’s Metamorphoses, written in 1 B.C.), English
literature—for example Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—was mainly influenced by medieval tales such as Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. In these “framed tales” or “framed miscellanies,” a narrative situation acts as a frame for the telling of different stories. The influence of the *Decameron* was more strongly felt during the Renaissance. In any case, the need to use a narrative frame, whether similar to those used in the classical works mentioned above or a preface to an introduction to a character who purports to be the author, decreased as the twentieth century approached. “Writers appear more self-confident about the validity of the genre, thus eliminating the necessity of an explanatory preface, one of the chief functions of the frame. Furthermore, writers apparently feel less need to transport the reader from the ‘real world’ to a fictional one,” according to Garland Mann (1989, 6–7).

In *Obabakoak*, the narrative that serves as a frame and an excuse to weave together different stories is the trip that the main protagonist and his friend undertake to Obaba. Ostensibly, the aim of the trip is to meet at the home of the uncle from Montevideo—as they do every first Sunday of the month—to read short stories together. However, that aim becomes irrelevant when the main protagonist and narrator finds an old school picture. In it, a rather special school companion, Ismael, holds a lizard of the species *Lacerta viridis* in his hand while standing behind a child called Albino María, who later on became mentally weak. The popular Basque belief that lizards squiggle into the ears of people who fall asleep on the grass and then eat their brains up begins to obsess the protagonist-narrator, and, inadvertently on the reader’s part, the reader, too.

As we can see, frame narratives are premodern, and yet they are an appropriate structure with which to express
a modern preoccupation: the search for the last word. (Consider the title of the second part of the book: “In Search of the Last Word.”) The few references to this search (in “Young and Green,” “Regarding Stories” “Mr. Smith,” “Finis Coronat Opus,” “In the Morning,” “Samuel Telleria Uribe,” and “X and Y”) come together at the end of Obabakoak when Atxaga quotes the French author Joseph Joubert, who preceded Mallarmé and Hölderlin in his discovery of the abyss of silence:

I wanted to find a word to finish the book with. I mean I wanted to find one word, but it couldn’t be just any word, it had to be a word that was both definitive and all-encompassing. I mean, to put it another way, that I wanted to be another Joubert, that he and I shared the same goal: “s’il est un homme tourmenté par la maudite ambition de mettre tout un livre dans une page, toute une page dans une phrase, cette phrase dans un mot, c’est moi. [If there is a man tormented by the accursed ambition to put a whole book on one page, a whole page in a phrase, that phrase in a word, it is I]. (317)

That “definitive” and “all-encompassing” word for which the narrator searches is to sum up the entire book, but, as is to be expected, no such word exists. Borges’s shadow is very noticeable in this search destined to failure and madness. The Argentine author had created a literary universe filled with one-word poems in the short story Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius (1941), and he summed up an entire poem in one word in the case of Undr (1975). In an interview for the Buenos Aires magazine Latitud, he defined his literary objective as to “write the book, chapter, page, or paragraph that is meaningful
to everyone.” The similarities between Borges’s and Atxaga’s objectives are evident.

METALITERATURE
The reader who wades into Obabakoak soon realizes that the trip the protagonist-narrator undertakes to Obaba is, above all, a literary journey. The literary soiree that is going to take place in the house of the uncle from Montevideo is an excuse to think about short stories, about a short story’s ideal characteristics. As a result, many of the book’s pages are taken up with metaliterary discussion. Precisely this aspect, which in the 1970s was described as “metaliterature” by William Gass and Robert Scholes in their theory of literature, is mentioned in Obabakoak in the passage describing a method for plagiarism.

And metaliterature?
Well, as I said, we writers don’t create anything new, we’re all continually writing the same stories. As people often say, all the good stories have been written already, and if a story hasn’t been written, it’s a sign that it isn’t any good. The world today is nothing but a vast Alexandria and we who live in it merely write commentaries on what has already been created, nothing more. The Romantic dream burst long ago. (271)

Works of metafiction question the relationship between literature and reality. For Linda Hutcheon (1984), the aim of all metafiction is didactic: It attempts to explain to the reader the source of writing. The consequence of this mode of operation is that readers are confronted with an unfinished product, something that needs to be worked on. In this way, readers become co-creators of the work that unfolds before their eyes: “He
Obaba stories
The novella *Bi anai* (Two brothers, 1985) has been reprinted in Basque more than fifteen times. Along with *Bi letter jaso nituen oso denbora gutxian* (Two letters all at once, 1984) and *Sugeak txoriari begiratzen dionean* (When the snake stares at the bird, 1984), which were later published together in one volume in Spanish translation under the title *Historias de Obaba* (Obaba stories, 1996, 1997), it made Atxaga a household name among Basque readers. *Bi anai* has been translated into five languages and belongs to what could be defined as “the Obaba cycle.”

*Cover of Storie di Obaba. Einaudi (Italy), 2002.*
is left to make his own meaning, to fill the void, to activate the work. He is assaulted, frustrated in his normal novelistic expectations. The author seems to want to change the nature of literature by altering the nature of the reader’s participation in it,” Hutcheon says (1984, 150).

The metaliterary references are most explicit in the section entitled “Regarding Stories.” It is as if Atxaga were appropriating the first rule from Horacio Quiroga’s 1925 text “Decálogo del perfecto cuentista” (Decalogue for the perfect storyteller): “Believe in a master as in God Himself.” The narrator of Obabakoak mentions masters of the short story such as Anton Chekhov, Evelyn Waugh, and Guy de Maupassant. Later on, Marcel Schwob and Gilbert Chesterton are mentioned, to complete the list.

Once his preferences are established the protagonist-narrator starts to detail the characteristics of good short stories. Brevity is the main one, as is to be expected. To prove this point, he compares short stories to poems, because they are both short and both have their roots in the oral tradition. The point is to “say many things with very few words.” And this, as Julio Cortázar wrote in his “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores” (On the short story and its environs, 1969) is one of the main characteristics of the modern short story after Edgar Allan Poe.

But brevity in itself is not necessarily enough to guarantee the quality of a short story. As well as being brief, good short stories have another characteristic: They talk about “essential things,” as the narrator of Obabakoak says (172). In other words, they deal with the “eternal themes” that concern us all: life, death, love, loneliness. However, the protagonist of Obabakoak and his soiree companions soon realize that choosing a transcendental theme does not guarantee a striking outcome. For this
reason, they conclude that “the author’s eye,” in other words, the point of view, is also fundamental to achieving “something that has universal value.” Authors make use of elements and events from their own lives: “The key lies in the author’s eye, in his way of seeing things. If he’s really good, he’ll take his own experience as his material and extract its essence, something that has universal value. If he’s a bad writer, he’ll never get beyond the merely anecdotal” (171). Through the prism of the author’s eye, a simple phenomenon becomes an experience, and, like a photographer, the writer tries to push the reader beyond the simple anecdote. Cortázar’s reflections in “Del cuento breve y sus alrededores” (On the short story and its environs, 1969) put what Obabakoak attempts to achieve in a nutshell: “the photographer or short story writer is obliged to choose and limit an image or event that is meaningful, worth more than its face value, able to act on the spectator or the reader as a sort of aperture or ferment that projects the mind and emotions towards something far beyond the visual or literary anecdote contained within the photo or the story” (Cortázar 1993, 385).

This is precisely what happens in Obabakoak: Following Cortázar’s advice in Las babas del diablo (1958), the narrator takes an event as a point of departure—a photograph of a lizard, to be precise—and trespasses against the limits of reality and fiction, destabilizing the reader’s expectations.

The final characteristic of a good short story is “an ending that’s both a consequence of everything that’s come before and something else besides” (173). To back up this assertion, the narrator leaves out the endings of all the short stories that are transcribed in “Regarding Stories.” Not much imagination is needed to deduce that all of them end with a very significant event: death. A
A delicious literary paella

“Here is a writer to shares generously his sheer delight in language and styles of writing. Here are the magical and the real (but not simply another docile imitation of Latin American magical realism), the scientific and the supernatural, psychology and superstition, diaries, poems, crime stories, tales within tales, both contemporary and archaic language and dialogue, and an invented language (at least haven’t found it in any dictionary) to describe Latin American animals and nature. All are wonderfully blended in what can truly be described as a delicious literary paella.” (E. Suárez Galbán, “A Village in the Palm of One’s Hand,” The New York Times Book Review, June 20, 1993).

title in that section already gives us a clue: *Finis Coronat Opus*, “the ending crowns the work.” It is precisely a very alarming kind of ending that crowns the disquieting *Obabakoak*. But let us hold back our reading and postpone that moment for now.

ABOUT THE TITLES
In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), Wolfgang Iser has underlined the hermeneutic importance of titles and first sentences in literary works. Jacques Derrida has similarly stated that the titles and footnotes configure an essential marginalia for the interpretation of the text. In *Obabakoak*’s case, the importance of the title is made evident in the very many translations into other languages: *Obabakoak: Ein literarische Puzzle* (Obabakoak: A literary puzzle [German]), *Obabakoak of het Ganzenbord* (Obabakoak, or The game of the goose [Dutch]), *Obabakoak: Um lugar chamado Obaba* (Obabakoak: A place called Obaba [Portuguese]). These are only some of the variations that this elemental aspect of the book has undergone. The object of these changes is to help the non-Basque reader, but as I mentioned earlier in the discussion of the reception of Basque literature abroad, this title has led to many headaches and debates.

The title *Obabakoak* makes reference to a narrative place that was already familiar to the readers of Atxaga’s work: the imaginary village of Obaba. After 1982, when he wrote “An Exposition of Canon Lizardi’s Letter,” this imaginary place provided many of his shorter works with a narrative unity. Some of the ones that take place in Obaba are *Sugeak txoriari begriratzen dioenean* (When the snake stares at the bird, 1984) and *Bi letter jaso nituen oso denpora gutxian* (Two letters all at once, 1985), which were published jointly in Spanish translation in
the book *Historias de Obaba* (Obaba stories, 1997) and the novel *Bi anai* (available in English as *Two Brothers*). Atxaga has often explained how important the titles of his books are and how he came up with that imaginary place that feels so familiar now. The word “Obaba” comes from a lullaby from the province of Bizkaia that he heard while living in Bilbao. He was persuaded by the word from the beginning because it includes the first letter children pronounce when they enter the cultural world: the letter “b,” as he explained in “Obabakoak-en gainean” (*Enseiuicarrean* 5, 1990, 11–31).

In other words, all children, when they are born into the cultural world, when they face culture, don’t pronounce an “a,” but a “b,” for this reason: just as in Basque we say *obabatxu*, in Spanish they say *bebé*, the English say *baby* and the Italians *bambino*. And, in general, all things related to childhood are pronounced with a “b,” and that’s why I think that the first letter of our culture is “b.” And since my intention was to speak, among other things, about a world of beginnings, about a forgotten world—and also because my intention was partly to capture that world like the Jews do: Primo Levi said “nothing that’s ever been life should be lost” … and because I wanted to capture the Basque world of beginnings, I decided that my geography, my place, had to contain the letter “b.” And that’s how the village of Obaba was born.

In order to persuade the readers that the world of Obaba is truly a special place, the narrator describes it as a mythical, even unreal location. In the book, the landscape of Obaba is described as “a toy valley,” and walkers need to follow a “narrow and somewhat ill-suited” road to get there, a road that has 127 bends. This
description combines fantastic elements with actual places in the village in which Atxaga grew up. The reader is told that the village once had a mine and a mental asylum, and then the names of many houses are given, such as Ilobate and Muino. In the translations, all these are complemented with details such as “the hill known in Obaba as Canon’s Hill” (13) and the translated names of the three rivers that border the village. But other well-known literary geographies are also mentioned in Obabakoak. The first these is the island in Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic, Treasure Island, and the second is William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. The differences between the two are explained in the book: While Stevenson simply gave names to fictitious places, Faulkner marked the places through “stories or anecdotes.” The narrator of Obabakoak is closer to Faulkner because the geography of Obaba is an experiential geography, a geography that is gradually impregnated with feelings and human experiences. In other words, it is a genuinely personal geography.

In addition to the overall title of the book, the different titles of the short stories tease the reader’s expectations and fulfill different functions. Thus, some titles give the reader a synopsis of the story. Examples of this are “An Exposition of Canon Lizardi’s Letter,” “How to Write a Story in Five Minutes,” and “How to Plagiarize.” At other times, the titles hint at the transtextuality of the short story in particular. An example of this is the story “Esteban Werfell,” which alludes to the Austrian author Franz Werfel (1840–1945), one of the leaders of German literary expressionism from 1905 to 1923. This movement adopted the relativism that was prevalent in the different spheres of thought in the early years of the century and echoed the resigned sensitivity of the young people of that era.
Werfel was a friend of Kafka and one of the members of the School of Prague. The relationship between the writer in Prague and the character in Obaba becomes more relevant if we are attuned to the literary clues in the Basque short story. Thus, the continual references to the swans that Esteban sees from his window remind us of Werfel’s poem “My Garden’s Voice,” while the conversation that the protagonist exchanges with his mirror is an homage to Werfel’s play Der Spiegelmensch (The mirror man, 1921), and the promise of love that Esteban receives from Maria Vöckel when he faints in the church is a direct reference to a Werfel’s poem “The Kiss.”

This is not the only homage Obabakoak makes to the German writers of the early years of the century. The story “Margarete and Heinrich, Twins” alludes to the incestuous relationship between the Austrian poet George Trakl (1887–1914) and his sister Margarete (better known as Grete). The tale in Obabakoak deals with this kind of forbidden love. The short story follows Trakl’s poem “PSALM”: “There are rooms full of chords and sonatas / there are shadows which embrace before a mirror gone blind.” Heinrich, after donning his dead sister’s clothes, looks into the mirror and sees reflected in it the image of Margarete. In the end, as if he and his sister had become one, the protagonist will feel that suicide is the only way out of their tempestuous, illicit love.

Another author and another tradition are suggested by the title “Young and Green.” This story is a homage to Dylan Thomas’ poem “Fern Hill.” In it, the poet’s childhood and adolescence are evoked with suggestive imagery.

FERN HILL

*Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was*
Obaba, a film by Montxo Armendáriz

“Lurdes, scarcely 25 years old, begins on a trip towards Obaba’s territories. She is carrying a small video camera in her luggage. She wants to catch Obaba reality, its world and its people. She wants to catch the present, and show it the way it is. But Obaba is not the place that Lurdes had imagined, and she discovers that the people who live there, like Merche, Ismael o Tomás, are trapped in a past that they can not—or they do not want to—escape from.” (Synopsis of the film Obaba, taken from www.egeda.es/oriafilms/enObaba.asp.)

Image taken from the Web page of Oria Films, S.L.
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the Windfall light.
And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
And the Sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.

Although other titles in the book do not make explicit transtextual references, they do underline certain important aspects of the stories—as for instance in the titles that contain the names of the main characters in the stories: “Esteban Werfell,” “Hans Menscher,” “Klaus Hanhn,” “Maiden Name, Laura Sligo,” and “Wei Lie Deshang.”

Lesson Six

LEARNING GOALS
1. To read and analyze Obabakoak, paying special attention to its structure and themes.
2. To become familiar with the text’s metaliterary discussions, especially those involving different discourses about the short story.

3. To reflect on the characteristics of Obaba, the imaginary geography that unifies the text.

4. To reflect on the different readings (the order of the short stories, the alphabetically arranged contents, etc.) that the author proposes.

REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.

1. Some of the translations of *Obabakoak,* such as the English one, give the book the subtitle *A Novel.* Do you agree with this description?

2. Choose a story in the book and investigate whether it fulfills the characteristics described in the section “Regarding Stories.”

3. *Obabakoak* is divided into three parts: “Childhoods,” “Nine Words in Honor of the Village of Villamediana,” and “In Search of the Last Word.” Why is the book structured in this way?
4. The world of Obaba appeals to readers in different languages. Compare it with other imaginary literary geographies and point out their main differences.

5. Referring to Rodríguez’s statements, discuss whether or not you think a concept of a multicultural identity is being proposed in Obahakoak.
Therefore, naturalist literature often makes the mistake of explaining characters ... from a certain point of view, in an understanding manner, with some sort of logic, and so on, that is not innate to the characters themselves. Fantasy is nothing other than the reality of others (in this particular case, the reality of a female farmer), the beliefs of every individual. Thus—and I am making a very complex process short here—I deduced that to be able to talk about a world such as the one I had known, I had to place it in an imaginary location. And so, Obaba was born, the space of the short story collection called *Obabakoak*, where I could narrate an imaginary life with an alternative logic, because it happened in a place that was outside this world.

—Bernardo Atxaga, “Interiores y exteriores de la literatura (vasca)” (1997)

ATXAGA’S READERS know how important fantastic literature is to his literary universe. Atxaga’s bibliography includes many articles and short stories about this type of literature. The most relevant ones are “Literatura fantastikoa” (Fantastic literature, 1982), “Alfabeto sobre fantasmas en el que sólo la M habla de milagros” (An alphabet about ghosts in which only M talks about miracles, 1991), “Alfabeto francés en honor a J. L. Borges” (French alphabet in Honor of J. L. Borges, 1993), and “Versión monstruosa de un cuento de Hemingway” (Monstrous version of a short story by Hemingway, 1993).
A book for the new millennium

*Obabakoak* (1988) marks the start of Atxaga’s international career. To date, the book has been translated into twenty-five languages and has received, among others, the Critics’ Prize (1988), Spain’s Narrative Prize (1989), the Euskadi Prize (1989), the Paris *Milepages* Prize (1991), and the Atlantic Pyrenees Three Crowns Prize (1995). The book was also shortlisted for the European Literary Prize in 1990. Critics were highly impressed with *Obabakoak*, and their opinions have validated Atxaga’s literary intentions.

In any case, it is clear that the concept of fantastic literature, like that of realism, is problematic, controversial, and often a subject of debate. The critic Pampa Olga Arán (1999) writes that fantastic literature began with the secularization of European culture at the end of the eighteenth century and with the arrival, in the years between 1780 and 1790, of what became known as gothic literature. In texts such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), madness, perversion, the demoniacal, and the tenebrous appeared for the first time, presenting an irrational world that had been avoided in the classic period. The great masters of the genre in the nineteenth century (August Heinrich Hoffman, Edgar Allan Poe, Jan Potocki) followed on this tradition, but gradually, the concept of fantasy changed. Certain literary devices that appeared in traditional fairy tales (sprites, miracles) were no longer in vogue, and, as Guy de Maupassant had warned, it became necessary to adopt a type of fantasy that was more intellectual, a fantasy on a level with the expectations of modern readers. Thus, the fearful and the perverse became, in the fantastic texts that appeared after Kafka, the expression of the inability to understand the nature of what we call reality. Because of the flexibility of the concept of the fantastic, Arán concludes that to talk of the fantastic genre today means to talk of “a stylistic variation of modern literary narrative characterized by the secularization of the traditional themes of the collective imaginary linked to the experience of the supernatural” (28).

**Atxaga Touches** upon some of the theoretical aspects relating to fantastic literature in his essay “Literatura fantastikoa” (Fantastic literature, 1982). Thus, after making reference to well-known works such as Louis Vax’s *Les chefs d’oeuvre de la littérature fantastique* (Masterpieces of fantastic literature) and Tzvetan
Todorov’s *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970), he concludes that the definitions those authors put forward, as well as others offered by Roger Caillois or Jorge Luis Borges, are “full of contradictions, and are strictly utopian.” Atxaga writes that he agrees with Antonio Risco’s view in *Literatura y fantasía* (1982) that fantastic literature has no formal peculiarities and like Risco considers it to be any literature that is read or written without any regard for the difference between the real and the unreal. This way of understanding fantasy is close to Borges’s viewpoint—for him, literary realism is more absurd than any utopia.

This lack of distinction between fantasy and reality drives Atxaga to a double conclusion: On the one hand, fantastic literature is true literature, and on the other, it is, above all, revolutionary. And he writes that fantastic literature is true because it is close to the human being and because it mostly deals with a very human feeling: fear. “I think Borges is right,” he says in “Alfabeto francés en honor a J. L. Borges,” and that the adjective often applied to fantastic literature is well justified: It is a true literature. I think this is so because it is born largely out of fear, one of the truest, most transcendent feelings that exist. Fear is everywhere, fear generates all sorts of behaviors, fantastic characters are born out of fear.”

This is the reason why fear is present in all of Atxaga’s fantastic short stories: It is a feeling that is very close to people. Fear is a source of fantasy and nightmare both in his works of children’s literature such as *Chuck Aranberri en casa del dentista* (Chuck Aranberri at the dentist), 1982; and *Jimmy potxolo* (Chubby Jimmy), 1984; and in novels such as *Gizona bere bakardadean* (The Lone Man, in its English version). It is interesting to note in this novel the reference to Gonzalo de Berceo’s Don Beldur, the character in his *Los mila-
The superstition most relevant to Obabakoak, which is also the origin of the text’s most fantastic elements, is the myth about lizards. Many traditional Basque tales warn of the danger that awaits those who fall sleep in the grass. One of the texts that might have inspired Atxaga is Mikela Elizegi’s Pello Errotaren bizitza (The life of Pello Errotaa), in which the author writes about the dangers posed by lizards. Another could be Resurrección María de Azkue’s Literatura popular del país vasco (Popular literature from the Basque Country), and another could be José Miguel Barandiaran’s Mitología del pueblo vasco (Mythology of the Basque Country). The latter two make reference to the advice mentioned in Obabakoak: “Not to go to go sleep on the grass” and, if a lizard manages to get inside your ear, “to run as fast as you [can] round seven villages and ask the parish priest in each of them to ring the church bells, because then, unable to bear all that bell-ringing, the terrified lizard [will] leave your head and run away” (155).

The narrator also gives the reader several clues about the beliefs described in traditional Basque tales. The clues warn us about the dangerousness of some characters, and, in particular, of the character called Ismael in the translated versions, or Okerra (“twisted”) in the original. It is well known among Basque speakers, and especially among readers of Basque literature, that the term “gizon okerra” (“twisted man”) is a synonym of the term “gizon muskerra” (“lizard man”). The closeness of the two terms is explained in the first attempt at...
a novel in Euskara, *Peru abarka* (1880) by Juan Antonio Moguel.

Fantastic literature offers the reader alternatives to standard readings and almost always challenges the credibility of what is being told in the story. In *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* Todorov wrote that fantastic literature is defined by the doubt it instills in the reader and that this is the fundamental characteristic of fantastic tales from the eighteenth century until the stories of Maupassant. The narrator of *Obabakoak* is a master at instilling this doubt in the reader. Whereas in the beginning, the superstition relating to the lizard is denied by the narrator (“What if the lizard really had crept inside Albino Maria’s ear? No, it simply wasn’t possible,” 156), in the end, it becomes totally credible. For this purpose, some fictitious scientists (Massieu, Pereira, Spurzhein, Bishop) and some also fictitious scientific studies on the lizard of the species *Lacerta viridis* are mentioned. All these apparently scientific references bring to mind the invented authors and book titles of Borges’s fiction and magnify the reader’s sense of doubt. At the end of the book, the beliefs about lizards seem as credible to us as to the protagonist.

The fantastic tale “An Exposition of Canon Lizardi’s Letter” also instills doubt in the reader. In this memorable short story, the canon’s exposition travels a path that winds from initial skepticism through doubt to final certainty (“Then, amidst the panting, I thought I heard a voice. I listened more carefully and what do you think I heard? The word that any boy would have cried out at such a moment: Mother!” 47). The reader is immersed in the uncertainty that threatens the protagonist-narrator. Although it is logically impossible for a boy to turn into a wild boar, at the end of the tale, the reader feels infected by the religious man’s unease.
The church of Obaba

“The time was approaching. As my father would have put it, I would soon be On the Other Side. A moment later I was entering the church for the first time. The massive door was extremely heavy. I had to lean the whole weight of my body against it before it yielded. ... ‘It is so dark!’ I exclaimed as soon as I went in.”

(“Esteban Werfell,” in Obabakoak, translated by Margaret Jull Costa [Hutchinson, 1992], 14.)

Photo of the church of Asteasu (Basque Country) by the author, 2005.
Fantastic Characters: Metamorphoses and Deformations

In an interview, Atxaga has said that the white wild boar of Obaba could be the result of the literary transformation of different characters such as Moby Dick, Victor d’Averyon, or even the author’s own autistic cousin. In any case, whether the tale is rooted in reality or not, what matters here is that the metamorphosis of a child into a white wild boar symbolizes punishment for transgressing the moral code. Fantastic literature in Obabakoak also has a subversive function, in the sense that it tries to illustrate the lies inherent in any social order. This idea is similar to the point Rosemary Jackson makes in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), that fantastic literature arose in order to give a voice to the Other, the marginalized, elements silenced by society:

> In a rational, “monological” world, otherness cannot be known or represented except as a foreign, irrational, “mad,” “bad.” It is either rejected altogether, or polemically refuted, or assimilated into a “meaningful” narrative structure, re-written or written out as romance or as fable…. The “other” expressed through fantasy has been categorized as a negative black area—as evil, demonic, barbaric—until its recognition in the modern fantastic as culture’s “unseen.” (173)

In Obaba, this otherness is made manifest in deformed bodies (see the cartoonish description of the dwarf Tassis) or in people who metamorphose into animals (the white wild boar). They are all marginalized by society, and this rejection of everything that presented some sort of physical or psychological abnormality was widespread throughout the Western world, especially
from the eighteenth century onward. Before this date, monsters had their place in society, in the sense that it was widely accepted that matter could take any shape. Rationalism broke with this belief and prompted the rejection of monsters, who would run away to the forest—the refuge of the despised. As Atxaga put it in, “Literatura fantastikoa”:

The poor monsters, who used to live in peace, became highly significant elements, because not only did they put the mechanical theories into question (this was the main problem), they also defied the natural order. Eighteenth-century man ... took two different views on monsters: one of panic in the face of the chaos that could be intuited behind anything unusual, and the other of fascination with everything that veered from the norm. (76)

Romanticism tried to change this situation by turning monsters into weapons with which to fight the prevalent ideology. As a result of this new perception, many literary works by Romantic authors were populated by monstrous, incredible beings that subverted the established social order (e.g. in Frankenstein). The monsters in Atxaga’s texts should be seen in this light. They are beings who put us in touch with what is forbidden, with what lies beyond the path laid out by society.

THE MARGINAL SPACE: THE FOREST
In Obaba, the beings who for various reasons are marginalized find refuge in the forest. This is the case with Javier, who finds there the peace that is denied to him in the town, and Tassis the dwarf, who turns it into the preferred peaceful space for his walks. The opposition between forest (nature) and culture (civilization) thus
Green mountains, white farmhouses
Dotted with farmhouses and tiny hamlets, the valleys of inland Gipuzkoa are green and charming. Asteasu, the natal village of Atxaga, is a small village situated in one of those valleys. In the center of the village, near the town hall, the visitor can walk through a street named Obaba and begin to feel the magic of Obabakoak. *Photo of Asteasu (Basque Country) by the author.*

becomes the leitmotiv of Obabakoak. As the historian Jacques Le Goff writes in *The Medieval Imagination*, such places were particularly important in the medieval West:

In the medieval West, in fact, the great opposition is not the opposition between the city and the country, as had been the case in antiquity ... rather, it is the fundamental duality between culture and nature that is expressed through the opposition between everything
built, cultivated, and inhabited (the city, the castle, the hamlet) and things that are wild by nature (the sea, the forest, which are the equivalent to the desert in the East), the universe of men in a group and the universe of solitude. (38)

In the West, the forest played the same role the desert played in the East, as the place where hermits would go to do penance or undergo trials. And it is precisely in the forest, the refuge of all marginalized characters, where traditional fairy tales take place—what Atxaga has referred to as “forest fairy tales,” which had such a strong influence on the first part of Obabakoak.

DIFFERENT DUPLICITIES: NARRATIVE LEVELS, DOUBLES, AND MIRRORS
A whole series of narrative strategies underscore Obabakoak’s fantastic register, and the characterization of monstrous characters is one of them. These strategies, following Borges’s line, are dualistic in nature and attempt to underline what is deceitful about the act of literature itself. Jackson, in the book mentioned above, highlights the fact that duality is one of the essential aspects of fantastic literature. She writes:

Themes can be clustered into several related areas: (1) invisibility, (2) transformation, (3) dualism, (4) good versus evil. These generate a number of recurrent motifs: ghosts, shadows, vampires, werewolves, doubles, partial selves, reflections (mirrors), enclosures, monsters, beasts, cannibals. Transgressive impulses towards incest, necrophilia, androgyny, cannibalism, recidivism, narcissism and “abnormal” psychological states conventionally categorized as hallucination, dream, insanity, paranoia, derive from these thematic
concerns, all of them concerned with erasing rigid demarcations of gender and of genre. (49)

The presence of doubles, both in the stories that take place in Obaba and in the more realistic ones, make it clear that Atxaga likes to use this strategy in his fantastic tales. An example of this is his 1984 collection of short stories *Siberia treneko ipuin eta kantak* (Songs and short stories from the Siberian train), in which several names that could be said to represent the author’s own literary doubles (Atxaga, Atxagof, McAtxagen, Atxagini, and so on) remind us of Borges’s short story “Borges and Myself.”

Although we can find examples of duplicity at the very beginning of literary history, it was the Romantic movement that, in taking the internal world as its central theme, made the most use of duplicity. Relevant in this context is Freud’s well-known analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story “Der Sandman” (1816) in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919). In this analysis, which has provoked many different psychoanalytical readings, Freud states that “the double, once a comforting spare soul, became, at a later stage of civilization, ‘a thing of terror.’” In the case of *Obabakoak*, the short story “Margarete and Heinrich, Twins” is a homage to the German Expressionist poet Trakl and his obsession with his sister Grete, as we have already noted. Other short stories that take place in Hamburg also make reference to several psychological pathologies, such as schizophrenia (“Klaus Hanhn”) and hallucinations (“Hans Menscher”).

In the short story “Klaus Hanhn,” schizophrenia is presented through the voice of the protagonist’s brother, Alexander—which he hears in his head. This voice is not the same as the narrator’s interior voice, which Atxaga
has used so often since he wrote Two Brothers. He has also used it in The Lone Man, The Lone Woman, and in Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (Memories of a Basque cow). In “Klaus Hanhn,” the protagonist’s madness is so manifest that the voice ceases to be merely a voice and becomes his brother, whose body he feels inside his and who not only speaks to him, but also kicks him (“‘Klaus, get up this instant! Get up, you idiot!’ shouted Alexander, giving him a kick in the ribs,” 242). As well as the interior voices that frighten Klaus, other elements of this short story suggest the madness of its protagonist. I am referring specifically to the role played by elements such as mirrors, shop windows, the golden columns in a restaurant, and especially, the metaphor of the fish that is mentioned again and again (the narrator even says that Klaus’s brain is “unworthy of a fish”).

What can be said about the mirrors? As in some of the tales analyzed by Vladimir Propp in Morphology of the Folktale, in Obabakoak, too, they are there to introduce the idea of self-reflection or self-consciousness. There are many instances in which this happens in Atxaga’s text—mirrors are ever-present in the following tales: “Esteban Werfell,” “Klaus Hanhn,” “Hans Menscher,” “Post Tenebras Spero Lucem,” and “Margarete and Heinrich, Twins.” In all of them, when the characters see their reflection in the mirror, they learn the bitter truth, the truth they have been trying to hide from themselves. In other short stories, beyond the realist esthetic, the mirror suggests that reality is an imitation—for example in “Dayoub, the Rich Merchant’s Servant,” in which, thanks to his image being reflected in seven mirrors, the protagonist manages to fool death. The limits between reality and fantasy are subverted to remind us that everything is fiction, pure speculation.
The strategies for unfolding narratives in fantastic fiction also include questioning the limits between dream and reality. Dreams have traditionally been the state in which characters have important revelations, and there are many examples of this in works by authors such as Coleridge and Stevenson. In *Obabakoak*, the dream that the uncle from Montevideo has is an excuse for the narration of a fantastic event. During the dream, the Basque writer Pedro Dagerre Azpilikueta “Axular” (1556–1644) reveals to the uncle from Montevideo that plagiarism is the way forward for Basque literature and the Basque language. Entering a gloomy, vermin-infested forest, the narrator speaks with Axular, just as Dante did with Virgil. This dream would not be in any way special were it not that, because of its elimination of logical causality, the narrator finds, on waking, that the figs Axular gave to him in the dream are within his reach. Thus, the text questions the limits between dream and reality, and as more than one person has remarked, in *Obabakoak*, Coleridge’s flowers (see Borges’s “Coleridge’s Flower”) have turned into figs.

One of the most popular devices in fantastic fiction, in Borges’s opinion, is the use of multiple narrative levels achieved through the insertion of tales inside tales, as well as through other types of narrative duplicity. There are many examples of this in *Obabakoak*. It could be said, for example, that all the short stories in the first section (including “Nine Words in Honor of the Village of Villamediana”) include another narrative, although in this instance, other short stories are not inserted into the main narrative: the two stories the narrator includes in what he refers to as “The Prologue” (the case of the man who, as in Borges’s “Funes the Memorious,” remembered too much, and the one who is left without
Axular's Gero: A good example of mystical prose
Since the first book written in the Basque language—Bernard Etxepare’s collection of poems *Linguae vasconum primitiae*—was published in 1545, others followed that proved essential to the development of literature in Basque: the 1571 translation of the New Testament and several Calvinist treatises by Joannes de Leizarraga and the publication in 1643 of Pedro de Axular’s *Gero*, thought to be the best example of mystical prose in the language. *Picture of Axular taken from Literatura vasca, Etor-Ostoa (Basque Country), 2002.*
memories) introduce the short story that takes place in the Castilian village.

In general, this inclusion of other narratives is presented by a narrator who is a mere transcriber (an example would be “An Exposition of Canon Lizardi’s Letter”) or by an omniscient narrator who is outside the diegetic level (an extradiegetic narrator). In every case, there is a character who tells a different story at a second level, and the same could be said of the short stories that make up “In Search of the Last Word,” which, as I have mentioned, are placed inside a frame narrative. It is clear that the act of writing and the act of reading are being highlighted through these devices.

Other short stories in Obabakoak offer an unexpected use of multiple narrative levels, as well. In “Post Tenebras Spero Lucem” and “Esteban Werfell,” we do not find a narrator-transcriber. Instead, we find an example of extradiegetic narration that, as well as telling us the life stories of the main characters (who have written a diary or a memoir), provides the reader with a running explanation or commentary that often offers a window onto the things the characters cannot see and details that can aid the reader’s understanding of the text.

The duplicity of the short story “If I Could, I’d Go Out for a Stroll Every Night” lies in the parallel stories of the two narrators, Katharina and Marie. Through these narrations, we realize that both stories arise from one narrative event, even though apparently they are not related. Katharina’s loneliness is provoked by the absence and forgetfulness of the train conductor, Sebastián, while Marie’s horse, Kent, will be taken to Hamburg on that same train. The meeting point between the two stories and the element that involves the reader in the narrative is the moment when Katharina, the schoolteacher, is
seen talking with the man in the train in Marie’s narrative. In this instance, the train represents the frustrated illusions of the characters—which is contrary to the usual symbolism of the train in Atxaga’s poetry.

The painter in *Obabakoak*, a friend of the Norwegian Expressionist painter Edvard Munch, and a dreamer like Oskar Kokoscha, is called Hans Menscher. The story that carries his name is also important because of the use of multiple narrative levels. An observer (who calls himself “a passer-by”) tells the story using first-person and third-person narratives. It is the story of the painter in his garden who painted Arabic landscapes and characters as if he had really known them, as if “he really was, body and soul, in the midst of a Mediterranean landscape” (217). However, as the main story progresses, the narrative levels become more complicated, because the narrator starts using a chronicle in the newspaper *Bild Zeitung* to clarify the story. Thus, the initial narrator becomes an intratextual reader (a narratee), and the journalist becomes the new narrator. The first-level narrator (the passer-by), links the passages in the chronicle through metanarrative commentaries and through the questions he asks himself as he tries to direct us to the most important gaps in this disquieting story.

In “Margarete and Heinrich, Twins” Atxaga achieves duplicity, via a metanarrative: From the very start, the text seeks an implied reader, or a narratee, who is invited to reflect on the writing of the story. The fictitious nature of the short story is brought up time and time again. “Let us suppose that what is about to begin is a story of some ten to twelve pages in length, and let us make that hypothesis more specific by saying that the protagonists of the story will be the characters whose names appear in the title” (244).
Thus the narrator presents to us the writing of the short story as the development of a hypothesis—and this is precisely the point that is underlined by the quote by Jean Santeuil (1630–97) that headed the earlier versions of this short story: “Literature is but the development of a painful hypothesis.” In this way, as the hypothesis gradually develops and the story is consolidated, the tale itself takes on consistency—and the narrator asks the reader’s permission to do this. From that point on, the narrator tells the story in the form of a third-person omniscient narrative, providing comments and information that are necessary to understand the plot. Among these bits of information, one of the most interesting is the mention of the book on homosexuality belonging to Walter’s lover, which is revealed at the very end.

As we have seen, the use of different narrative levels allows for the inclusion of fantastic short stories in *Obabakoak*, and because these stories are presented with a certain degree of narrative distance, they increase the reader’s sense of doubt and disquiet.

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**Lesson Seven**

**LEARNING GOALS**

1. To understand the concept of fantasy that Atxaga puts into practice in *Obabakoak*.
2. To explore theories of fantastic literature, especially those of Todorov and Jackson.
3. To understand the textual strategies Atxaga uses to create his fantastic world.
REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. Read “Red para atrapar fantasmas” and answer the following question: In Atxaga’s opinion, which situations are conducive to writing fantastic fiction? Would you add others to that list?
2. Compare two stories from Obabakoak that are, in your opinion, fantastic in different ways. Explain the differences.
3. Where, in Atxaga’s opinion, do ghosts come from? Are there any ghosts in Obabakoak?
4. What is the narrative function of the fantastic tales in Obabakoak? Give examples.
8 · Obabakoak (III)
An intertextual journey

ONE THING is clear from the previous chapters: Obabakoak is a repository of many literary affinities and references. As we have seen, the book embraces many of the main tendencies that have defined the history of the short story as a literary genre. Atxaga’s literary journey starts with tales that have an obvious oral tradition (“Maiden Name, Laura Sligo”), continues with stories influenced by classic Basque writers (such as “An Exposition of Canon Lizardi’s Letter,” in which that influence is more evident in the original, because Euskara is spelled the way it was a few centuries ago), and later teases us with quotes from nineteenth-century short stories. As might be expected, postmodern poetic references, such as the Oulipian literary games the author is so fond of, conclude the odyssey. Short stories such as “How to Write a Story in Five Minutes” belong to this later group. In it, as the title suggests, the narrator describes the steps to follow in order to write a story in five minutes. (Atxaga’s Ipuin bat airean idazteko metodoa [How to write a story in the air], published in 1994, shares the same spirit and form.) “How to Write a Story in Five Minutes” follows the path set out by Italo Calvino in his fascinating novel Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore (1979, available in English as If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler). Atxaga’s short story lays down the fundamental points for potential short-story writers: how they ought to sit, how they should relieve themselves as soon after they feel the need to, and so on. What Atxaga and Calvino are talking about, in the end, are two sides of the same coin: writing and reading.

Remembering T. S. Eliot and “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Atxaga reminds us that every text
belongs to a certain literary tradition, and that writing, in the end, is but the absorption and replication of an earlier literary corpus. Or, as Roland Barthes said in The Rustle of Language, literary style is a continuous process of quotes from books, “a body of formulas, a memory ... an inheritance based on culture and not on expressivity” (Barthes 1989, 99). The presence of quotes, expressions, and themes and the interplay of structures, styles, and genres in any given text is known in literary theory as intertextuality or as transtextuality. Transtextuality demands a certain literary competence from readers, because they will be able to place the text in a literary context and enjoy the richness of the work only if they can recognize those connections.

One of the most recent and important literary theories about intertextual relationships is that proposed by the French critic Gérard Genette in his book Palimpsests. For Genette, all texts, sometimes secretly and sometimes overtly, make reference to other texts, and this transtextuality can take five different forms. With reference to Obabakoak, we will analyze two of the five kinds of transtextuality that Genette defines in his book. One is intertextuality (the physical presence of a text inside another, achieved through quotes, résumés, or translations from the original text), and the other is hypertextuality (the author’s transformation of different elements, texts or styles from his literary inheritance).

Generally, Atxaga employs two strategies to suggest his book’s textual connections with other books (or transtextuality) to his readers. The first consists of leaving several clues for them to pick up (in the titles, the names of characters, etc.). The second involves mentioning directly the names of authors or texts that might be of interest (an example is the chapter “Regarding Stories”). Apart from those mentioned already, some of the other
Obaba, a virtual infinity

The descriptions of Obaba suggest a geography that has been experienced, and these descriptions not only refer to places in the author’s childhood, but also serve as a narrative excuse to invoke an older world in which magic, rather than logic, reigns. The opposition between nature and culture determines the outcome of events in Obaba, and this imaginary geography corresponds to a premodern world in which words like “depression” or “schizophrenia” do not exist and animals can explain the unexplainable. For this reason, in the land of Obaba, it is possible to accept a child’s metamorphoses into a wild boar and to believe that a lizard can make you crazy by crawling into your ear.

authors that appear in the book are Hesiod, Pascal, Rousseau, Montaigne, Balzac, Lewis Carroll, Robbe-Grillet, Faulkner, Saki, Buzati, Hemingway, Hoffman, Hardy and Pirandello. Other works that are alluded to are *Nana*, *The Lady of the Camellias*, and *Blade Runner*. This latter strategy is what Anna Sobolewska, the Polish translator of *Obabakoak*, dealt with in her 1992 dissertation for the University of Jagellonika. In the comparative reading that follows, the stops and incursions along the way will demonstrate that “nothing can be said to be peculiar to one place or person” (*Obabakoak*, 324), and that reading is, before anything else, a transtextual journey.

**INTERTEXTUALITY**
In this first section, I will look at the quotes, translations and transcriptions that appear in the text. What Genette calls “intertextuality” treats the original text with respect and lets the reader know it is doing so.

**QUOTES**
In this context, we define a “quote” as the introduction, in a literary text, of a short story (or a poem) that has previously been published. In this sense, “The Rich Merchant’s Servant” is one of the most important quotes of the book, because, as is well known, that story is a transcription of a Sufi mystical tale.

The tale was published in 1923 by Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) in *Le grand ecart* (The great split) under the title “Death and the Gardener.” Years later, it was reedited by Jorge Luis Borges and Bioy Casares as “El gesto de la muerte” (The face of death), in the anthology *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios* (available in English as *Extraordinary Tales*). Such is the seductive power of this tale that it has even been made into a film by director Peter Bogdanovich.
SUMMARIES
As mentioned, the section “Regarding Stories” is full of summaries of different short stories. The protagonist and his friends talk about the characteristics that a short story should possess in order to be considered good, and as they expound their arguments, they sum up the plots of many canonical short stories. In the gathering the characters attend—a reference to similar meetings that writers belonging to the “Other Society” used to attend. In a conversation with Atxaga, he told me that the writers in the “Other Society” and Foster Harris’s manual are real—that he’s referring to real people and events of nineteenth-century Britain. The running metanarrative commentary explains Atxaga’s own poetics of short-story writing.

Three short stories are summarized: Chekhov’s “Sleepy” (1888), Evelyn Waugh’s “Mr. Loveday’s Little Outing” (1936), and Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” (1887). But despite this gesture of complicity by the author, the endings of the two first short stories are not mentioned. The summary, therefore, is not complete—and this is no mere coincidence, given that the high point of the plot in those two stories comes at the end. Thus, in Chekhov’s story, Varka the servant is exhausted because the baby she has to look after at night never ceases to cry and won’t let her sleep—so she decides to kill him. In Waugh’s story, however, Mr. Loveday, an apparently kind-hearted, normal sort of man, is taken over by a murderous instinct when he leaves the mental asylum after years of incarceration and strangles a young woman. By omitting the endings of these short stories, the narrator of Obabakoak highlights their surprising resolutions and draws attention to one of the defining characteristics of a good short story: a startling ending.
TRANSLATIONS
The translation that the protagonist reads in the section entitled “In the Morning” refers to Borges’s short story “Odin.” This is made clear by the title the uncle from Montevideo gives to his story: “Odin or a Brief Story by a Writer Currently Much in Vogue, in a Translation by the Uncle from Montevideo” (Obabakoak, 212).

HYPertextuality
The type of transtextuality that Genette calls “hypertextuality” refers to an author’s rewriting of different elements, themes, texts, or styles in a given literary tradition. While this rewriting can give clues about the tradition or the work that underlies the text, mostly it is its adherence to a certain poetics that defines the text’s relationship with other texts. I will follow Genette’s point-by-point framework to analyze the following hyper textual relationships: periphrasis, plagiarism, pastiche, and imitation.

PERIPHRASIS
“Dayoub, the Rich Merchant’s Servant” is a periphrasis of “The Rich Merchant’s Servant,” although this narrator gives the story a more optimistic ending: The servant manages to escape death. Therefore, in Genette’s terminology, what has taken place in the text is a “thematic transformation.”

In Obabakoak, the intertext of the frame narrative of Atxaga’s book, Julio Cortázar’s “The Devil’s Drivel,” which, as we noted, also was the inspiration for Antonioni’s film Blow-Up (1966), undergoes a formal and thematic metamorphosis, so much so that the basic elements of the original story (the character who looks out of the window, the couple in the park, and so on) are completely transformed.
The short stories “Hans Menscher” and “Wei Lie Deshang” are also products of formal and thematic transformations. The latter story’s subtitle—“A Fantasia on the Theme of Marco Polo”—suggests that the thematic origin of this short story can be found in the narrative of the voyages of Marco Polo. As in so many other writers’ texts, the voyages of the indefatigable merchant of Venice have become a literary stepping stone in Atxaga’s work—and in this instance, the Basque author offers a highly sophisticated reading.

**Atxaga explained** the origin of this short story in an interview with Sobolewska published as “Intertextualitateari buruz” in *Luxia* 1 (1993). Atxaga’s text is based on the following chapters of *The Travels of Marco Polo*: chapter 42, “On the Valley Where the Old Mountain Man and His Assassins Live” and chapter 44, “On How He Instructed His Assassins to Do Evil.” As is well known, there have been many and very significant literary variants of and references to *The Travels of Marco Polo*. I will mention here only the authors that are closest to the universe of *Obabakoak*: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote *Kubla Khan* (1816) after a dream he had under the influence of opium; Jorge Luis Borges, who made reference to this event in his short story “Coleridge’s Dream” (1952); and Italo Calvino, who wrote of the different cities a fictional Marco Polo described to the Tartar emperor Kubla Khan in *Invisible Cities*.

As for “Hans Menscher,” while in Germany critics identified Michel Tournier’s “La reine blonde” (The blonde queen) from the collection *La goutte d’or* (available in English as *The Golden Droplet*) as the intertext for this short story, in the Basque Country the critics Xabier Kaltzakorta and Joseba Gabilondo have suggested that there are traces of the Basque author Joseba Sarrionandia’s *Enperadore eroa* (The crazy emperor) in
A fantasia on the theme of Marco Polo

“Wei Lie Deshang was not like the other servants at the palace that Aga Kubalai, the latest governor of the city of Kiang’Si, had had built on a small island in the bay, and he never resigned himself to his fate. Whilst the others complained about their lot, he reflected in silence; whilst their eyes flowed with tears, his eyes, full of hatred, remained coldly watchful.” (“Wei Lie Deshang: A Fantasia on the Theme of Marco Polo,” in Obabakoak, translated by Margaret Jull Costa [Hutchinson, 1992], 295.)

Picture of Marco Polo (1254–1324) from Libro de las maravillas, Ediciones B (Spain), 1997.
“Hans Menscher,” as well as of works that have been influenced by the eastern tradition such as Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Nouvelles orientales* and *Opus nigrum*. As Gabilondo rightly has pointed out, the kind of motif that we would identify as Chinese in origin is deeply rooted in Western narrative and painting. (Velázquez’s *Las meninas* would be an example of this.)

What we find again and again in this fruitful search for intertexts buried within *Obabakoak* is the formal and thematic transformation of several literary themes. However, this does not necessarily mean that the author deliberately took these other texts into account when he wrote his. Because all interpretations are a form of reading, they unveil the implicit reader we have in mind, but fortunately, the number of readings (and intertextual relationships) is infinite. Despite the fact that the book is deeply immersed in certain traditions, Atxaga’s rewriting of those traditions is highly original.

**Plagiarism**

Sobolewska reminds us that the term “plagiarism,” which derives from the Latin “plagiarius,” used to mean “thief, kidnapper, slave merchant.” The concept of plagiarism is opposed to the concept of artistic originality, but this meaning has not been unanimously accepted throughout history. Thus, during the Renaissance and the Neoclassical period, it was not only permissible, but praiseworthy for a writer to plagiarize. With the arrival of Romanticism, though, this technique was rejected as a result of the emergence of the concept of genius, which spread throughout Europe during the eighteenth century.

It is Atxaga’s intention to oppose the idea of literary originality with *Obabakoak*. We can detect in Atxaga’s
vindication of plagiarism not only his admiration of other writers such as Charles Nodier (1780–1844), who was also a plagiarist, but also the influence of Oulipo: “True, I have been influenced by the group Oulipo…. This influence has lasted until now. One of the short stories in the book, for example, is called ‘How to Write a Story in Five Minutes’ and another ‘How to Plagiarize.’ That’s called situationism, an avant-garde movement that still exists: There is a Glaswegian group called ‘The Plagiarists’” (interview published in *Man* 26, [December 1989]: 114,118).

Daringly, Atxaga plagiarizes a short story by Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (1838–89) to subvert the idea of originality. Before providing an example of his decision to adapt plagiarism as a technique, the narrator dwells for a long time on the appropriateness of and need for plagiarism in the short story aptly titled “How to Plagiarize.” As mentioned, the method is introduced by means of the dream in which Axular appears, and the narrator’s conversation with Axular in that short story plagiarizes Dante’s with Virgil in the first canto of *The Divine Comedy*.

After this dream has taken place, detailed advice for successful plagiarism is given. This is reminiscent of the sharp, ironic tone that Dylan Thomas uses in his essay “How to Be a Poet” (1950). Subtly and cleverly, through his “method,” Atxaga offers the reader some advice: Avoid the spiteful literary relationships that tend to be the norm in small, cramped cultures and unmask the ignorance of journalists. The recommendations that Atxaga goes on to suggest (to scatter “traces” of the plagiarized text throughout the work, to find out a little about metaliterature, and to achieve a degree of fame) unveil the hypocrisy and ignorance that reign in the literary world.
Dancers from Zuberoa

“Carnival representation and farce is seen at its best at the winter masquerades in the Zuberoa area. Itinerant dances are mixed with games, gags, curious dress, tattered clothing, money collection, popular participation, exhibition, mock trades and marginal races, varied satirical languages and music…. Dances are taken in turns, featuring the most important characters: Txerrero, Gathuzain, Zamaltzain, Kantinierts and Banderari.” (From the Culture Department of the Basque Government, www1.euskadi.net / kultura / danza / danzao2_i.htm.)

Pictures taken from Xamar’s Bajo el Orhi / Orhipean, Pamiela (Basque Country), 1998.
However, since we are discussing hypertextuality, let us investigate how the method of plagiarism is put into practice by looking at how “The Crevasse” plagiarizes “Torture par espérance” by Villiers de l’Isle-Adam. To begin with, the two stories differ in terms of time and location. “Torture par espérance” takes place during the sixteenth century, in a prison in Zaragoza, whereas “The Crevasse” takes place during the second half of the twentieth century, in the area surrounding Lotse (Nepal).

Although both versions of the story share basic similarities, the chronotopic changes that are introduced make the plagiarism completely undetectable. As Sobolewska suggests, in order to make up for this, the narrator of Obabakoak scatters several “traces” for the reader. The names of the characters Philipe Auguste and Mathias are present in both short stories. Also, the character Vera—who appears only in Atxaga’s version—makes reference to the title of a short story by Villiers de l’Isle. In addition, traces are to be found in geographical details. For example, the name of the lake is “Villiers.”

The message that the author suggests through the idea of plagiarism is very attractive: originality—absolute innovation—is impossible in literature. As we have seen, the protagonist of Obabakoak says, “all good stories have been written already, and if a story hasn’t been written, it’s sign that it isn’t any good” (271).

Pastiche
A pastiche is a text that imitates the style of an earlier text, usually with polemical intent. In the short story entitled “Finis Coronat Opus,” the narrator imitates the style of Théophile Gautier’s (1811–1872) Voyage en Espagne, and when the narrator refers to the dancer from Zuberoa, he quotes paragraphs from Gautier’s book that do not in fact exist. Although this has escaped the
attention even of French critics, this is the most evident pastiche in the entire book.

PARODY
A parody imitates the style of another text in an attempt to ridicule it. Everything can be parodied—concrete literary texts or the style of any given author. In “How to Plagiarize,” the narrator parodies literary theory to great comic effect. Readers soon detect the ironic intent of the text, but their expectations are thwarted to a certain extent, because the narrator is speaking about plagiarism—which is usually deemed “incorrect” and “outside the norm”—in an academic style that suggests that the proposed methodology is serious.

IMITATION
Through imitation, the narrator appropriates a certain style, a way of writing. But in this case, the intention is not to ridicule, but to direct the reader toward a literary canon, or, as Umberto Eco might say, an “encyclopedia.”

The most blatant imitation in Obabakoak takes place in the short story “An Exposition of Canon Lizardi’s Letter.” In it, Atxaga imitates the style of the writer Juan Bautista Agirre (1742–1823), also from Asteasu (in the original version of Obabakoak, Atxaga replicates Agirre’s Basque spelling). It is well known that Atxaga spent long hours reading this author in his early days as a writer. However, although Atxaga imitates Agirre’s style in this story, it is important to remember that Canon Lizardi’s story takes place in 1903 and that, therefore, both the spelling and the style used are anachronistic. At the root of this stylistic choice (which is not simply aesthetic) lies the author’s desire to enter into the worldview of a particular era. The short stories that take place in Obaba—the ones we have called “for-
“est tales”—try to adapt themselves to the era that the author is attempting to evoke, as well as to the cosmology of its inhabitants. As a consequence, Canon Camilo Lizardi cannot express himself in the same manner as the uncultured people of Obaba, because since he is a cultivated person, his world is far removed from that of the inhabitants of Obaba, who believe that a person can metamorphose into a white wild boar. Thus, what Atxaga has called his “biblical peasant style” communicates a stylistic and symbolic distance to the reader.

One more point about the kind of language that is imitated in “How to Plagiarize.” As is to be expected, the narrator aims for credibility, and for this reason, when Axular speaks in the dream, he uses the Basque dialect he would have used in real life, from the French-Basque region of Lapurdi.

POLYPHONY: THE ABUNDANCE OF VOICES IN OBABAKOAK

Dialogism or polyphony are the terms that Mikhail Bakhtin uses to define the character of the novel. In Bakhtin’s opinion, the most important aspects of a novel are the abundance and richness of the voices that form it. This dialogism brings about heterophony (diversity of voices), heteroglossia (the presence of different registers of language) and heterology (the alternation of types of discourse understood as individual linguistic variants). Although strictly speaking Obabakoak is not a novel, but a collection of short stories, it can be said that in reading Obabakoak, we immerse ourselves in a sea of voices, of different styles and registers that are held together by the book’s thematic and structural unity.

I have already mentioned several examples of this polyphonic richness, mainly while dealing with hypertextuality in “How to Plagiarize” and “An Exposition of Canon
Lizardi’s Letter.” Another of the more evident examples of the book’s variety of styles and levels of language is the story “I, Jean Baptiste Hargous.” Here, it is not just the stylistic peculiarities that are interesting. The heteroglossia in this short story is highlighted by the use, in the original text, of vocabulary from classical Lapurtera, a dialect of Basque from the Lapurdi region. It does not matter that, to achieve his end, the author makes use of a much later variation of the language to write a story that takes place in 867. In this particular case, linguistic and chronological precision are not important.

But it could also be said that in Obabakoak, all characters have a voice of their own: While Esteban Werfell’s language is cultured (he, too, uses classical Lapurtera), in the original Basque version of Obabakoak, Camilo Lizardi speaks like Agirre, the writer from Asteasu. The same happens with the voices and narrative styles of the people of Obaba—they belong to a completely different register. Atxaga described the Euskara he uses in the story “Jose Francisco: Obabako erretoretxean azaldutako bigarren aitortza” (José Francisco: A second confession appeared at the house of the canon of Obaba) as Cherokee, because its main character speaks like people who live in the mountains of the Basque Country, which is to say, with a very distinctive accent that is difficult to understand. This story, peppered with turns of phrase that are heard only in those regions of Euskadi, exists only in the Basque version of Obabakoak (23–40), for it was deemed too difficult to translate into the Spanish language, and all translations of Obabakoak into other languages were done from the Spanish version of the book.

The short stories “Maiden Name, Laura Sligo” and “Wei Lie Deshang” also have a lively narrative rhythm thanks to their indebtedness to oral speech: The char-
Obaba Street
They say that we recognize good literature because it weaves itself into our biographies. This is exactly what has happened with *Obabakoak*. The people of Asteasu have dedicated a whole street to the imaginary geography created by their most universal neighbor, Bernardo Atxaga. Passers-by can read extracts from *Obabakoak* on the walls of the houses on either side of Obaba Street.
*Photo of Obaba Street by the author, 2005.*

The narrator called Samuel Tellería Uribe narrates them, and they are both musical and vivacious. The orality of these short stories aids the listener’s understanding. Among these helpful elements I would highlight repetitions (of sentences, above all; demonstrative adjectives and modal adverbs abound in “Wei Lie Deshang.”), and the simple syntax, which makes use of coordinate clauses. In
addition, and especially in Laura Sligo’s story, the repetition of names of Amazonian birds gives the tale a lively rhythm. (These names are taken from a book written by the erudite from Iquitos, Cesar Calvo, as Atxaga told me in an interview. Calvo becomes a character in Atxaga’s short story.) By means of these devices—which Walter J. Ong, in *Orality and Literacy (New Accents)* considers characteristic of the oral tradition—the author attracts the readers’ or listeners’ attention.

Indeed repeated references occur throughout the text to the tradition of oral literature. There are many references to ancient Basque superstitions and popular tales in *Obabakoak*. Some of these include the beliefs concerning the powers of lizards, the reference to Mateo Txistu, the tale about the malevolent father, which also appears in Atxaga’s *El mundo y Marconi*, the story of the rabid dog, and so on.

Lesson Eight

**LEARNING GOALS**

1. To understand the concept of intertextuality and apply it to *Obabakoak*.
2. To consider concepts such as literary originality and plagiarism.
3. To become familiar with some of the intertexts in *Obabakoak*.
4. To think about the core questions of contemporary literary criticism, such as the concepts of text and oeuvre, author and reader, literature and game.
5. To consider the sense in which is *Obabakoak* a postmodern work.
REQUIRED READING
———, “Leccioncilla sobre el plagio, o El alfabeto que acaba en P,” in *Lista de locos y otros alfabetos* (Madrid, Siruela, 1998).

SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. Read the chapter in Bennett and Royle and consider whether or why *Obabakoak* is a postmodern work.
2. Write a short story plagiarizing one of the stories in *Obabakoak*.
3. Read Barthes’s articles and assess whether *Obabakoak* is a “text” or a “work,” and consider the idea of the death of the author in relation to the concept of intertextuality.
4. Read Atxaga’s “Leccioncilla sobre el plagio, o El alfabeto que acaba en P” and answer the following questions: What is Atxaga’s stand on plagiarism? Is a text’s originality a sign of its quality?
ATXAGA has written more than thirty books for children. These books are not marginal to his literary development. Rather, they demonstrate how innovative and daring a writer Atxaga is. With the publication of “Abecedarium haur literaturari buruz” (An alphabet about children’s literature) in 1986, Atxaga demonstrated his deep interest in and wide knowledge of classic children’s literature: He mentioned Stevenson, Kipling, and Melville, among others.

For Atxaga, as for Borges, the texts themselves do not change, but rather the way in which we read them changes. Consequently, writing children’s literature does not imply some sort of secondary form of literary creation, but adapting to the literary strategies demanded by children’s literary abilities. This was the argument he used in his Alfabeto sobre la literatura infantil (1999). Atxaga believes that children’s literature is, above all, literature: “When we speak of children’s literature, the balance should tilt toward the second part of the term, that is, the strictly literary part. If we don’t do this, if we start separating terrains, if we consider that the adjective ‘children’s’ is weightier than everything else and that writing for children is completely specific—then we’re in troubled waters” (10, 16. Translated from Spanish by Amaia Gabantxo). Consequently, we should “reject theatrical literatures, which are excessively infantile; reject the habit of filling our mouths with the word children. Let those ideas perish. The best works of literature for children were not written like that. The very opposite is true: the best authors were people who insisted on the literary part of the equation, people
who were convinced ... that to write a text for children is basically the same as writing a text for adults.”

Having established these parameters in *Alfabeto sobre la literatura infantil*, Atxaga goes on to point out some of the characteristics children’s literature should have. The letter “A,” for “Alice,” helps explain the importance of dialogue and illustration in texts written for children. Atxaga uses the opening of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to introduce the subject:

**DOWN THE RABBIT-HOLE**

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversation?”

Atxaga highlights the importance given to illustration since the first books for children were published in the eighteenth century. Illustrations were designed to fill “the gaps caused by the absence of description” and, through dialogue, the narrator achieves the kind of movement (or rhythm) his young readers demand. The aim, therefore, is to adapt to the curious nature of children, a nature that does not easily tolerate the long, detailed descriptions of other types of texts. This is because, as Atxaga writes, “they lack the experience of life, and don’t know about the complexities of reality, and what they wish for, therefore, are texts with movement, texts that are full of action, which they can follow fuelled by curiosity and the what happens next” (Atxaga 1999, 25).
An amazing literature for children
Atxaga has written more than thirty books for children. These books are not marginal to his literary development. Rather, they demonstrate how innovative and daring a writer Atxaga is. For Atxaga, writing children’s literature does not imply some sort of secondary form of literary creation, but is an adaptation to the literary strategies demanded by children’s literary abilities.

Cover of Sara izeneko gizona, designed by Josemi Goyena. Pamiela (Basque Country), 1996.
The “B,” for “Baghdad,” is a clear reference to *The Thousand and One Nights* and is used to introduce the idea of the importance of fantasy in children’s literature—although fantasy can accompany moral teachings, as in the case of *Pinocchio*, which is introduced by means of the letter “C,” the initial of its author’s name, Collodi. Atxaga’s alphabet lists a series of literary affinities, such as Michael Ende (“E”) and Edward Lear (“L”), highlights the relevance of fables (“F”), nursery rhymes (“N”) and fairy-tale collections such as those compiled by the Grimm brothers (“G”), and stresses the importance of elements such as humor (“H”). This very personal Atxagian alphabet ends with an homage to the character Zazie (“Z”), from Queneau’s *Zazie dans le métro*.

**LITERARY EVOLUTION**

The first children’s book Atxaga published was a translation into Basque of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, published by Cinsa in 1974. Later he would publish *Nikolasaren abenturak* (Nikola’s adventures) and *Ramuntxo detektibea* (Detective Ramuntxo), both in 1980. These two books were full of humor, adventure, and playful linguistic games inherited from the oral tradition. They were excellently illustrated by the author’s great friend, the illustrator Juan Carlos Eguillor. Eguillor also illustrated the fantastic tale *Chuck Aranberri dentista baten etxean* (Chuck Aramberri at the dentist, 1982).

In *Chuck Aranberri dentista baten etxean*, we read about the dreadful fear that Chuck experiences during his visit. As in many other texts by Atxaga, the fear experienced by the main character triggers a series of fantasies that are narrated as an adventurous journey. During this journey, Chuck runs away from the dentist and meets a number of very peculiar characters in a strange
city (with Surrealist undertones) where a goldfinch, Mr. Cardellino, becomes his guide. The following paragraph perfectly portrays the panic felt by little eight-year-old Chuck:

On top of the bed’s coverlet—embroidered with white thread—the face of a man laughed and laughed and laughed: Ha, ha, ha, he laughed, showing all of his teeth…. A shark’s head hung on the wall in front of the bed. Its mouth was wide open, and the many hundreds of teeth and molars of this prince of the seas were clearly visible. Fillings, bridges, prostheses, gold caps ... there was a bit of everything among those sharp, abundant teeth.

(24. Translated from Basque by Amaia Gabantxo)

At the end of the story, Chuck wakes up and realizes it has all been a dream and that, luckily, the dentist has been able to extract his molar while he slept. The last paragraphs in the tale could be seen as a summing up of Atxaga’s view of the relationship between literature for children and literature for adults: “In the end ... there isn’t such a big difference. Dreams or not dreams, they’re almost the same” (43).

Alison Lurie’s investigation into children’s literature, Don’t Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children’s Literature shows that all the most famous works of children’s literature are groundbreaking in one way or another, because they reflect the ideas and forbidden experiences of each era. Some well-known examples would be Peter Pan by James. M. Barrie, in which the Victorian family model is criticized, and Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer, where instead of reading about the adventures of an obedient, exemplary boy, readers encounter
the politically incorrect adventures of a naughty boy who
tells lots of lies.

Keeping this perspective in mind, we can note that in
the majority of his stories for children or young adults,
Atxaga, opposing the traditional family model, presents
single-parent families (for example, Txitoen istorioa
and El mundo y Marconi), characters who live alone or
with the animal that is the main character of the story
(such as Shola y los leones, or Shola y los jabalíes), or
characters like Nikolasa, who lives with her lazy, careless
brother and who has to look after such “insignificant”
matters as daily survival while her brother stays in bed
reading “important things.” It therefore is not a surprise
to find several of Atxaga’s titles listed in the recently
publicized Hezkidetzarako literatura: Literatura para
la coeducación (Literature for coeducation), a 1999
publication by the San Sebastián City Council’s Women’s
Department, because in his books, like in most of the
books by Mariasun Landa (1949–), the female characters
do not play the roles society normally (and unfairly)
ascribes to them.

However, I do not believe that Atxaga’s texts for
children and young adults are attractive only at an
ideological level—I am especially persuaded by their
innovative and experimental nature. Recall that the gen-
eration of writers born around the 1950s were called the
“Literary Autonomy Generation.” As Peter Bürger notes
in Theory of the Avant-Garde, the concept of autonomy
was linked to avant-garde ideology. The avant-garde
attempted a critique of traditional values, not through
innovative critical reasoning, but through the creation of
new artistic realities—in other words, by concentrating
on form and artistic techniques. It is certain that in Atxa-
ga’s case, the same wealth of strategies and the intention
to renew and is found in his literature for children and young people as in his literature for adults.

A clear example of this is in the four stories that make up the collection *Siberia treneko ipuin eta kantak* (Songs and stories from the Siberian train). In them, Atxaga experiments with the different possibilities and models of classic children’s literature. Thus, fantasy is present in the story “Txitoen istorioa” (The story of the little chicks who loved the movies). In this story, the effect achieved with mirrors in the fantastic short stories of *Obabakoak* is achieved with a cinema screen, which becomes the narrative trigger for a surprising story. The plot is very innovative: A group of cinema-addicted baby chickens who are particularly fond of the cowboy hero Bakarty James (*bakarti* in Basque means “lonesome”—it is an obvious reference to *The Lonesome Cowboy*) are left alone because their mother has to work. The aunt who is looking after them is not so fond of the cinema, and the chicks escape her to see their hero in the big screen. The commotion that takes place in the cinema (the chicks have sneaked into the cinema without paying, and their aunt tells on them) is resolved when Bakarty James transcends the limits of the screen (a reference to Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo*) and saves the chicks.

And then, right at that very moment, a deep voice came from the screen. “Leave the chicks alone! Let the chicks go free!”

Everybody turned to see where the voice was coming from. And right there they saw Bakarty James with his black hat on, Bakarty James riding his white horse.

“Oh, my! Bakarty James!!!” The people were afraid.

“Bakarty James!” called the ten chicks cheeping, all ten together.
A frightening visit to the dentist

In *Chuck Aranberri dentista baten etxean* (Chuck Aramberri at the dentist), we read about the dreadful fear he experiences there. As in many other texts by Atxaga, the fear experienced by the main character triggers a series of fantasies that are narrated as an adventurous journey.

*Cover of Chuck Aranberri dentista baten etxean, illustrations by Juan Carlos Eguillor, Erein (Basque Country), 1982.*
“Yes, here I am, Bakarty James!”

And just after that announcement, the bravest cowboy ever got off his horse, stepped out of the screen, and walked right up the aisle of the theater. Then he turned to the chicks’ aunt.

“Why won’t you let the chicks go to the movies?”

“Be ... be ... be ... because we’re so poor ...”

“Take this bag of gold,” said Bakarty James, tossing the bag to the aunt, “and from now on, the chicks will have dinner first and then they’ll all come to the movies!”

“Hurray for Bakarty James! Hurray for Bakarty James!” shouted the chicks.

“And you,” said the cowboy to the ticket taker, “why are you chasing the chicks?”

“Be ... be ... because they snuck in without paying ...”

“Take this money and get out of here!”

“Yes, Bakarty James, I’m going.... And thanks!”

“And now let’s get back to the movie! Goodbye, everybody! Goodbye, my little chicks!”

“Goodbye, goodbye!” said the people.

“Goodbye, Bakarty James! Goodbye Bakarty James!” called the ten chicks cheeping, all ten together.

(Translated from Basque by Kristin Addis. Unpublished).

The next story in the Siberia treneko ipuin eta kantak collection, “Antonio Apreta,” incorporates narrative techniques (beginning and ending formulae, repetitions) and motifs from traditional tales, such as the use of a magic potion that can solve the problem the inhabitants of the village have with a giant. The third tale, “Jimmy potxolo” (Chubby Jimmy), on the
other hand, appropriates the techniques of crime fiction, presenting the intriguing case of a town in which all the sweets are disappearing. Finally, in the fourth tale in the collection, “Asto bat hypodromoan” (A donkey at the races), Atxaga brings traditional elements from fables into the narration, presenting a story in praise of study and reasoning, with the astronomer donkey Mauricio as protagonist.

As with many other contemporary authors, the presence of animal protagonists becomes more and more important in Atxaga’s writing. He proposes a literary universe in which animals and humans live together, thus encouraging a worldview that promotes understanding, dialogue, and solidarity with the weakest among us. In this sense, Atxaga joins ranks with other authors of children’s literature who have consciously renewed the genre of the fable by introducing modern themes and readings. (Think of Kipling’s Jungle Book, 1901.) Atxaga included poems such as the ones he dedicated to Tomasa the dog in La cacería (1986)—Tomasa evolved into the well-known Shola of later books—and songs in the four stories that make up Siberia treneko ipuin eta kantak, just as he did in Flannery eta bere astokiloak (Flannery and his donkeys, 1986), which appeared with a tape containing the lyrics set to music by J. C. Perez.

Originality is also the main ingredient of a literary school diary entitled El mundo y Marconi, with illustrations by Mikel Valverde, which the author brought out in 1995. In it, Atxaga breaks down the narrow margins imposed by the genre and develops a story interspersed with food recipes and the narration of historical events. The same can be said about the series dedicated to the dog Bambulo. As works such as Las bambulísticas historias de Bambulo: Los primeros pasos (The bambulistic stories of Bambulo: The first steps,
The Story of the Little Chicks who Loved the Movies

Fantasy is also present in the story “Txitoeen istorioa” (The story of the little chicks who loved the movies). In this story, the effect achieved with the mirrors in the fantastic short stories of Ohabakoak is achieved with a cinema screen, which becomes the narrative trigger for a surprising tale. The plot is very innovative: A group of cinema-addicted baby chickens who are particularly fond of the cowboy hero Bakarty James (bakarti in Basque means lonesome—it is an obvious reference to The Lonesome Cowboy) find themselves in danger at the cinema.

Cover of Txitoeen istorioa, illustrations by Asun Balzola, Erein (Basque Country), 1984.
1998) and *Las bambulísticas historias de Bambulo: La crisis* (The bambulistic stories of Bambulo: The crisis, 1998) show, Atxaga undertakes literary—and therefore fantastic—journeys through the most important classic texts of the literary canon: the Bible and the Greek myths. Here we encounter a kind of fantasy that ignores surprises, apparitions, and even reasonable doubt and proposes instead a humorous reading of the classic literary tradition. As Borges did in his day, Atxaga invents historical characters such as Bambulegui (who discovered America), Bambulsson (who discovered the South Pole), Bambulillo (whose figure can be discerned in a painting by Goya), Bambulias, Bambulo Trojanus, Menalipa Bambulo, and so on, in an attempt to demonstrate that “true” history and “true” myths are still to be told. This metaliterary fantasy is rooted in the testimonies of individuals (of each of the text’s different “individualities”), testimonies that always stand outside the historical narrations of heroes’ achievements. Beyond the jokes, what the author hopes to demonstrate is that reality, and the discourses of reality—of history, in particular—is fictional: only discourse. This approach is similar to the ideologies of the New Historicist movement in the United States and the cultural materialism movement in the United Kingdom. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle note in their *Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory: Key Critical Concepts*,

New historicists argue that any “knowledge” of the past is necessarily mediated by texts or, to put it differently, that history is in many respects textual. A number of major consequences follow this assertion. In the first place, there can be no knowledge of the past without interpretation.... This is one of the ways in which new historicism is specifically Nietzschean:
as Nietzsche said, “facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations.” (113)

In order to give verisimilitude to Bambulo’s attempt to rewrite history, the narrator multiplies the narrative levels and makes use of a secretary, an extradiegetic narrator who orders and classifies documents and tries to infuse the narrated events with veracity. The use of diaries, letters, and personal communications allows us to enter a private world that is far removed from the pompous style of the great heroic narratives.

This fantastic approximation of the history of our ancestors would be but a journey around the library of Babel, were it not for Bambulo the fantasist’s intention to “dedicate myself to history. To correct it, mind you. There will always be in my writings room for dogs and other marginal individualities.” Here the author’s moral stand is made apparent, because once again, Atxaga has given precedence to the weakest and has marginalized in his own writing the kind of characters who are never otherwise marginalized: heroes. It could be said that, in line with the research undertaken by Carlo Gizburg and others, Atxaga is making use of a “microhistoric” method to bring the reader closer to the historical realities that are ordinarily excluded from the tales that make up the culturally accepted discourse. Seen from this perspective, the possibility that a dog called Bambulo might have accompanied Ulysses and even released him from the pull of the song of the sirens can only bring a smile to the reader’s face, because just as Atxaga does, the reader knows it is possible that the reality that we experience or that has been transmitted to us is just a fantasy, mere fiction.

Although the Bambulo series has many literary merits, I believe that *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* (Memoirs
of a Basque cow, 1991) is one of Atxaga’s best works. The relevance of this novel does not arise only from the richness of its textual strategies (which will be explained in detail in the following chapter), but from the influence it had on the writings that came after it. Some of its thematic and formal elements, such as chronotopic realism and the use of internal voices to narrate the characters’ thinking, influenced the change in direction Atxaga undertook in the 1990s.

I would not want to finish this section on children and young people’s literature without mentioning the tales whose protagonist is Shola the dog: *Shola y los leones* (Shola and the lions. Madrid: SM, 1995) and *Shola y los jabalíes* (Shola and the wild boars. Madrid: SM, 1997). These are two beautiful stories that are magnificently illustrated by Mike Valverde and are deeply moving. Written in the past tense and with a third-person narrator, they have a lively narrative rhythm. One of Atxaga’s textual strategies is to borrow from the oral tradition, as we have noted. Another is the use of irony. In *Shola y los leones*, Atxaga writes again about a theme that is a constant in his work: the rejection of heroism. Shola thinks she is a lion, and this notion lends the story humor. Once again, we encounter some of the recurrent elements of Atxaga’s fantastic fiction: mirrors that distort their objects and people who believe wholeheartedly in fictions. This is precisely what happens to Shola when she decides to believe to the letter what she reads in a book. The scene is narrated with great humor and alludes to things that have happened to other important characters in world literature (Don Quixote, Emma Bovary). The story tells us how “dangerous” it is to take the things that are written in books too seriously.
When she was alone, Shola noticed that Grogó’s friend had left a book on the chair, and she craned her neck to read the title. Her heart turned over, and that was because of what was on the cover, and what was on the cover was this: *The Lion, King of the Jungle*.

That was just what she needed if she was to find out if she really was just a mutt or if she was, in fact, a lion. Shola opened the book at the first page and started reading, and what she read was this:  
*The lion is a strong, powerful and noble animal, feared by all.*  
*He is the undisputed king of the jungle.*

“So everyone agrees, then,” thought Shola, remembering what Grogó’s friend had said.  
“I must study this book properly.”

She picked up the book and carried it off to her hidey hole, the place where she kept her bones and her toys. Then she returned and lay down on the armchair, where she remained until Señor Grogó came back.  
“Shola,” said Grogó as soon as he came in the room, “have you seen a book lying around? My friend left it in here somewhere.”

“I haven’t seen anything,” she said.  
“Are you sure?” insisted Grogó, who knew what a liar she was.  
“Powerful, noble creatures like myself never lie,” declared Shola, who was already feeling a little like a lioness.

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa. Unpublished.)

In *Shola y los jabalíes*, her yearning for heroism again puts Shola in a difficult spot. The continuous accumula-
I’m not a lioness! I’m just a little dog!

“One day, Señor Grogó had a visit from a friend who had been traveling round Africa and was longing to tell Grogó about everything he had seen there. Grogó’s friend talked a lot; he talked about the Sudan, about Zimbabwe, Kenya, Nigeria, he talked about the Masai, the Batusi.... And after talking about all these things, he talked about the jungle and about lions.

"The lion is a magnificent beast,’ said the friend....

“Shola, who had been dozing in the armchair, pricked up her ears. What sort of beast was this lion, so like herself in so many ways? She too was strong, powerful and noble.” (“Shola and the Lions,” translated from Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa.)

*Illustration of Shola by Mikel Valverde, from Xolak badu lehoien berri, Erein (Basque Country), 1995.*

...
compromises we make in our lives. Choosing common sense and reason will help Shola escape the danger that lies ahead of her. The ending of the tale is very revealing:

“What are you saying? Don’t you want to be a heroine? Don’t you want to wear the crown of laurels? What about your obligation?”

At that precise moment, Shola set off across country, running hard. Toward the rock where the boars were hiding? Certainly not. Shola was not that stupid. She was following the road back, heading first for the house and then for the place where Grogó had left the car.

As she retraced her steps, never once slowing down, she kept shouting:

“You can keep your obligations and your heroes and your crown of laurels. I just want to get back to my armchair!”

Behind her, another voice shouted:

“Wait for me. I want to go home too! I’m fed up to here with these hunters!”

It was Señor Grogó. He, too, had left the group and wanted to get away from there. A few hours later, they were both back home.

“Well, that’s the last time I promise to do something like that!” said Señor Grogó as he walked into the living room.

“Me too,” said Shola, overtaking Grogó and jumping gleefully on to the armchair, happy again.

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa. Unpublished.)
Lesson Nine

LEARNING GOALS
1. To become familiar with the evolution of Atxaga’s books for children and to understand their importance in the context of his oeuvre.
2. To read some of Atxaga’s books for children and consider the relevance of his contribution to the genre.
3. To think about questions such as the marginality of children’s literature, its characteristics, and tradition in world literature.
4. To make links between the characteristics of Atxaga’s books for children and some of the other books at which we have looked.

REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. Read the two chapters in Lurie’s book and answer the following question with reference to them: Would you say that children’s literature is subversive?

2. Write a short alphabet based on the books for children by Atxaga mentioned and analyzed in this chapter.

3. Consider the themes, characters, and techniques used by Atxaga in his books for children.
ATXAGA’s intention in writing *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* (Memoirs of a Basque cow) was to write a book for young people that, like other classics (e.g. *Treasure Island* or *Kim*), would be attractive to readers of all ages.

In *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*, Mo, the cow protagonist, offers a summary of her life and journey to adulthood, describing in humorous and intriguing anecdotes the events that have marked her. The cow decides to write a memoir to fulfill a promise she made to her inner voice (Setatsua, or Bothersome). The period of time the memoir deals with is made very specific: Mo is born in 1940, after the Spanish Civil War, and is writing at the end of the twentieth century. Therefore she is about fifty years old. (The author is clearly demanding the reader’s suspension of disbelief.) At the time of her writing, Mo lives in a convent with Pauline Bernardette, a nun who has escaped her home in Altzürükü (in the French Basque Country) to avoid marriage. The linear narration of events is sometimes interrupted by means of anachronisms that refer to anecdotes of Mo’s life. The references made to the Spanish Civil War, which are initially ambiguous, become more and more concrete as Mo unravels the mystery of Balantzategi, the baserri (Basque farmhouse) in which she grew up. The cow, who witnesses several violent encounters (a shooting, the assassination of the character Usandizaga), ends up being at risk of becoming the next victim when the fascists take over Balantzategi and start killing cows.

*Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* has been translated into Spanish, Catalan, Italian, French, Dutch, Albanian, German, Portuguese, Czech, Galician, and Esperanto.
A Basque cow

A glance at the reviews and articles written abroad about Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (Memoirs of a Basque cow) shows that this book has contributed to the breaking of the stiff and sometimes questionable mold of “young people’s literature” by satisfying older generations of readers. The book’s presence on the IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) Honor List since 1994 and the commercial success of its ten translations attest to the book’s excellence.

Cover of Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (hardcover), designed by Pedro Osés. Pamiela (Basque Country), 1993.
Most of the translations were made from the Spanish translation, *Memorias de una vaca*, except for the translations into German and Esperanto, which were done directly from the original Basque.

**THE TITLE**

Atxaga explained the reason behind the slightly odd title in an interview for the magazine *Noticias Bibliográficas* in 1995. He wrote the book one summer in Paris and, at the time, the well-known cheese manufacturer La Vache Qui Rit (The Laughing Cow) had just launched a major advertising campaign. He was also reading *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* by Peter Kropotkin for background research for his novel *The Lone Man*. Thus the title was born: Memoirs of a Basque Cow. But why a cow? Cows are seldom given main parts in stories about animals, but, as some critics have remarked, the choice of a cow for a main character in Atxaga’s book has Pop Art undertones. Ángel Cobo, for example, in *El Mundo* described Sister Pauline Bernardette’s curious mix of Spanish and French (the review referred to the Spanish translation) as “Warholian.” Another relevant aspect of the title is its proximity to *Mémoires d’un âne*, which was a novel for children written by Sophie Rostopchin (1799–1894), also known as the Countess of Ségur, in 1860. This novel could be said to be the main intertext of *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*.

**ANIMALS AS PROTAGONISTS**

As I have established in previous chapters, Mo is not the first animal protagonist in Atxaga’s literary universe. Using animals as main characters seems to fall in with children’s thinking and psychological development. As O. Ryen Seung says in *Psychopédagogie du conte*, egocentrism, realism, and animism are all characteristic of
the world of children. This is why children are not surprised by talking animals or the possibility of animals talking to humans. The differences between tale and reality are not so obvious for children—they can accept stories that suggest animism very easily. Animism is often present in fables or in narratives with a didactic and moralizing intent. Examples abound in traditional fairy tales.

THE MEMOIR
Modernity has identified itself with the written representation of the self. From the sixteenth century onward, as a result of the influence of humanist and rationalist anthropology, Western literature began to be populated by characters who spoke about themselves, who were anchored in the here and now, and had no need for metaphysical elements (such as God) in order to justify their existence. As a consequence, since the publication of Montaigne’s *Essays* (1575) until the publication of Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782), texts were overflowing with intimate experiences that until then had been silenced. Eventually, as the psyche formed by different stages of the personality (see Freud) replaced the absolute unity of Rousseau’s autobiographical “I,” twentieth-century novels such as André Gide’s started to be inhabited by fragmented beings and narratives.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL genre incorporates different typologies in which the author’s “I” can manifest itself. Some of its different subgenres are memoirs, diary novels, epistolary novels, and confessions. The differences between them depend on the aspect on which the author wishes to focus. If the aim is to narrate historical events, for example, a memoir is more appropriate than an autobiography, because the latter deals with the individual “I.”
For this reason, memoirs are a very suitable way of narrating Mo’s life. In *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*, the narrator not only relates the past and a cow’s memories, but also a very recent and recognizable postwar period. The narrator uses two devices to re-create the past: introspection and documentation. The first device enables the main character to delve into her memories, much like Augustine did in his *Confessions*. Augustine (354–430), who is deliberately quoted in Atxaga’s book, placed great importance on memory and considered it the main way into the core of human nature.

The second device is documentation. The narrator makes several references to the Spanish Civil War and concrete dates and places are mentioned: 1940, Balantzategi—a farmhouse in Bidegoian, Gipuzkoa. Apart from these chronotopic references, there are also references to historical characters such as Father Lartzabal, a French-Basque writer who collaborated with the *makis*, Republican guerrillas who fought Franco’s troops in the mountains. Bit by bit, the past remembered by the main character meets the real events of the past, and the novel becomes the personal testimony of a tragic chapter of the Basque Country’s recent history.

**The Bildungsroman**
The sentence “In this world, nothing is more stupid than a stupid cow,” which is continually repeated in *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*, is the novel’s leitmotiv. Mo wants to be the kind of cow who, leaving aside the world of stupidity (comfortableness), chooses the more difficult path of reflection. For this reason, German critics compared the book to Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* (1994) and praised the cow’s philosophical stand. The memoir traces Mo’s past, presenting the biographical journey the cow undertook to reach adulthood, and since
adulthood is reached through learning, it can be said that *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* is a bildungsroman, or novel of formation.

But to reflect, or to ruminate, is in Mo’s case a very ironic undertaking, since it is well known that cows ruminate constantly. However, this irony does not detract from the power of the character’s evolution because, deep down, all readers will see themselves reflected in that journey from youth (ignorance) to adulthood (knowledge). The idea of the journey is very important. The novel portrays a journey of the mind, but also a literal journey, a physical displacement. Mo runs away to the mountain from the Balantzategi farm with her friend La Vache qui Rit, and this escape is the start of the two cows’ adventures. Vladimir Propp, in *Morphology of the Folktale*, considered the hero’s escape one of the main elements of fantastic tales, and it later became one of the characteristics of adventure novels: Jim Hawkins leaves home to go in search of a treasure, Huckleberry Finn escapes from the asphyxiating atmosphere of his home on a wooden raft, and Phileas Fogg goes around the world to win a bet.

The journey is a pervading event in Atxaga’s literary universe. His early collection of poetry, *Etiopía* (1978), reminds us of the journey Rimbaud undertook through Ethiopia, and his later works are full of journeys. In *Obabakoak*, the journey back to Obaba changes the main character’s life forever, because through that journey he learns the story about the lizard that so tragically alters his destiny. In other works, such as *Horas extras* (Overtime, 1997) and *Zeru horiek* (The lone woman, 1995), the journey becomes a narrative pretext for narrating the characters’ internal odysseys.

In the case of *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*, the journey is the perfect way in which to bring about the
The bildungsroman

The sentence “In this world, nothing is more stupid than a stupid cow,” repeated constantly in Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (Memoirs of a Basque cow), is the novel’s leitmotif. Mo wants to be the kind of cow who, leaving aside the world of stupidity (comfortableness), chooses the more difficult path of reflection.

Cover of Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (paperback), designed by Pedro Osés. Pamiela (Basque Country), 1991.
hero’s formation. This is no coincidence: in the Western pedagogical tradition, the two means for carrying out such a formation are the library and the journey. As Javier Larrosa explains in La experiencia de la lectura (The experience of reading), “The journey is probably one of the most common themes in western literature. Homer, Virgil, medieval epic poems, fairy tales, Dante, Cervantes and the Spanish picaresque, Goethe and the Bildungsroman, Melville or Conrad; it could almost be said that all narratives are journey narratives” (169).

Mikhail Bakhtin established the characteristics of the bildungsroman in the essay “The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel).” Bakhtin writes that the bildungsroman appeared during the second half of the eighteenth century and had to confront existing genres such as the pilgrim novel, the test novel, and the autobiographical novel. The main innovation of the bildungsroman is its perspective on the hero.

Since the object of the narration in a bildungsroman is the development and inner evolution of its main character, it rejects the portrayal of characters as if they were unchangeable, as in biographical novels. Thus, it can be said that Behi euskaldun baten memoriak is a bildungsroman. Leaving all irony aside, the fact is that by the end of the novel Mo, has become “a learned cow,” a being that has reached adulthood after overcoming several tests (the desert and the mountain, for example). The positive light in which the search for knowledge is portrayed has a didactic end. One might recall Kant’s definition of enlightenment at this point. The following quote is from his 1784 essay “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”:
Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! [Dare to be wise!] Have courage to use your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.

DIALOGISM: THE POLYPHONIC WEALTH OF BEHI EUSKAL-DUN BATEN MEMORIAK
As Bakhtin wrote, all novels consist of a concert of voices, but Behi euskaldun baten memoriak is particularly rich in polyphony. Let us start with the most startling voice in the novel: that of Setatsua. This voice, which has lived inside the main character since she was born, is much more cultured than she is. The voice always addresses Mo respectfully as “laguna” (my friend), and Mo says that “oso mihi dotore eta leunekoa da nire barruko hori” (my inner voice has a very smooth and elegant way with words, 13). But apart from being cultured, the voice maintains a didactic approach throughout the novel, recommending that Mo eat “elikadura osasunarr-riak” (healthy foodstuffs), defending the value of study, promoting rationality and logic (as in the adventure with the wolves), and so on.

THIS TECHNIQUE, so often deployed in Atxaga’s works, represents an attempt to portray the inner voice that is common to us all and that has been interpreted and named in a variety of ways throughout history (as the Socratic daimonion, the Christian conscience, and so on). As a technical recourse, it is a variant of what Dorrit Cohn refers to as “narrated monologue” in Transparent
Basque intertextuality
One aspect of Behi euskaldun haten memoriak (Memoirs of a Basque cow) is immediately striking: its many references to the Basque Country and Basque texts. The only exceptions to the Basque themes are the references to the Old Testament and the lives of saints, as well as the quotes from French poetry (Rimbaud, Villon).

Another important voice in the novel is Sister Pauline Bernardette’s. Since she was born in the small French-Basque village of Altzürükü, she speaks in Lapurtera, a Basque dialect typical of that region, in the original Basque version of the book. (In the translations, the nun is characterized by interspersing her speech with French expressions. This heterophony reflects the linguistic reality of the Basque Country and is sometimes used to introduce Basque literary references. As will be explained in the following sections of this chapter, the lyrical poems written in Lapurtera and the Basque authors referred to in the novel stretch the transtextual limits of Behi euskaldun baten memoriak.

The Descriptions of the Characters
It cannot be said that the characters in Behi euskaldun baten memoriak are complex and psychologically developed. On the contrary, it is their names and physical descriptions that weigh most heavily in narrative terms. Mo is the only exception: Although we do not have a physical description of the main character, we know her color (black), her place of birth (Balantzategi) and her age (fifty). Her psychological development is rather more complex. This bildungsroman portrays the life history of a cow, and for that reason, the description of her psychology is more important than her external attributes. Mo is not a stable, individual character. She is a rather conflictive character. The narrative counterpoint is provided by her name, an onomatopoeic sound that is easy to remember—which reminds us, again, the book is intended for young readers.

The character of La Vache qui Rit offers an interesting foil. The way in which the narrator describes this
character reflects her behavior and her fighting spirit:
She is ugly, misshapen, too small, with a thick neck
and legs, and as if that wasn’t enough, her head is too
big and her forehead too wide. (This may be why she is
called “Cabezona,” or “Big Head,” in the Spanish trans-
lation). Through this exaggerated way of describing and
ridiculing the character, the author draws the reader’s
attention to La Vache qui Rit’s unique nature.

Sister Pauline Bernardette plays a different role in the
novel. This character, who accompanies Mo in her adult
years, adds humor and stylistic color to the text. Her
name is also relevant because of the many references
made in the book to the miracle of Lourdes: On February
11, 1858 the Virgin Mary appeared to young Bernardette
Soubirous. Apart from the significance of the nun’s
name, her physical descriptions concern only those of
her aspects that are important to the cow: She is a small
nun, chubby, and, above all, an “excellent reaper.” As
a character, she is portrayed as very vulnerable and
voluble. García Lorca’s metaphor from Romancero
gitano describes her perfectly: “Siento mi pecho lleno
de corazoncillos / como de cascabeles” (I feel my chest is
full of little hearts / like tiny bells). The narrator of Behi
euskaldun baten memoriak tells us that Bernardette
Pauline is a very insecure woman who carries “ten tiny
bells” inside her that agitate and unsettle her entire
being (chapter 4).

There are other, secondary characters. Among these,
the only one with a proper name is the old cow
Bidani. This is a clue for the reader, because Bidani
is the name of a hamlet near the village of Bidegoian
(Gipuzkoa), in the foothills of Ernio Mountain, and the
real Balantzategi farm is situated precisely there. This
indicates that the book is making reference to real places
and eras—and this chronotopic realism will characterize the author’s narrative from here on.

As for the rest of the inhabitants of Balantzategi, the most relevant ones are Genoveva, the farmer who lost her husband during the war, and the Hunchback, the house servant. The succinctness of her physical description is balanced by the emphasis put on her personal characteristics: Again and again, we read that Genoveva is a serious, quiet woman who turned fifty some time ago. This character, who shares her name with the heroine of a well-known medieval legend (Genoveva de Brabante), is portrayed as an energetic, resolute woman with a strong personality compared with Bernardette. The narrator says she has only one heart the size of a cowbell.

The Hunchback, on the other hand, is portrayed through the description of his physical features, as are most of the other characters. But as the novel progresses, we discover that the servant’s real name is Usandizaga, and he is eventually cruelly murdered by the fascists. (This is another clue for the reader, because the cows spend most of their time on the run “mendimendian” (in the heart of the mountain). As the critic Anjel Zelaieta has pointed out, this may be a reference to the Basque composer José Mariá Usandizaga Soraluze [1887–1915], who composed the Basque opera Mendi-mendiyan in 1911.) “The bad ones” are also described through concrete physical attributes. For example, there is the Bucktoothed and the fascist called Green Glasses. This last character is also known as Knives, although it is only at the end of the novel that we find out his real name: Don Gregorio (he became Don Otto in the Spanish translation). The novel stresses the evilness of this character: He is referred to as “the hired assassin of the Spanish General” and “the fascist.” His defining
feature is the incomprehensible (for the cows) nature of his speech, which is transcribed throughout as “karral! karral!”

It can therefore be said that the development of the characters in this novel is not described in depth. The simple dichotomy of good and bad characters, and characters that are sketched out through the description of a few clear features, are the defining characteristics of the book. As is the case in many books for young adults, the development of the action is more important and, for this reason, characters are defined by a couple of easily remembered aspects.

TRANSTEXTUALITY IN BEHI EUSKALDUN BATEN MEMORIAK
One aspect of Behi euskaldun baten memoriak is immediately striking: its many references to the Basque Country and Basque texts. The only exceptions to the Basque themes are the references to the Old Testament and the lives of saints, as well as the quotes from French poetry. These intertextual features of Behi euskaldun baten memoriak appear principally as quotes and summaries, while its intertextual features include the use of transpositions and parodies.

QUOTES
The most important quoted passages from the book are the lyrical poems sung by the character Pierre. This young man, who courted Bernardette, did it the old-fashioned way: He stood under her balcony (for a whole summer, we read) and sang old Basque lyrical poems that spoke of impossible love. One of the better-known among them is Amorosa konbentuan (The beloved in the convent):
Attractive to readers of all ages
Most of the international reviews praised the originality of Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (Memoirs of a Basque cow). Some highlighted the book’s poetry and tenderness and others, such as the two reviews published in the renowned Revue des livres pour les enfants, praised above all the book’s humor and originality and said the book was a gift to all readers. Memories d’une vache. Gallimard jeunesse (France), col. Lecture Junior. Illustration © 1994 Roland Sabatier.
I have seven windmills by the river
And an eighth by my home.
Three doves travel in a carriage
And the middle one in my heart.

This traditional song, of which several versions have been written down—Francisque Michel’s and Jorge de Riezu’s are two examples—dates back to the twelfth century in Michel’s estimation. The story narrated in it is that of a young woman who is sent to a convent by her father because he does not approve of her love for a young man. It is evident that the poem is chosen specifically to suggest Bernardette’s fate.

Other lyrical poems mentioned in the novel are Zü zira zü (You, it is you) and Xarmengarria (Charming). The first was included in the Chants populaires du Pays Basque, a songbook by Jean D. Jules Sallaberry, and the second was written down by Marcel Blanc. The Basque intertextuality is thus firmly established. The songs that appear in the novel are traditional and very familiar to Basque readers. Some of the evocative power of these songs is inevitably lost in the translations, even though they provide literal translations of the verses.

The rest of the quotes that appear in Behi euskaldun baten memoriak are stanzas or lines from different poems. The first one, which introduces Mo’s memoirs, is a line from a well-known poem by the French poet François Villon (1431–63): “But, come to think of it, where did the snow of that winter go? Or, as I learned to say in French, a long time after my adventure with the wolves:
Où sont les neiges d’antan?” (28). The next quote is reminiscent of the oeuvre of another famous French poet, Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91). After her stay in the desert, Mo quotes a line from the book Une saison en enfer (A season in hell, 1873): “Then, remembering what the poet said, he shall declare: Cela c’est passé, it is all over, I have left hell, I see the world with new eyes, with a new heart” (85). Both examples (Villon’s text as well as Rimbaud’s) can be said to have a parodic function, since the quotes are spoken by a cow.

Whereas not all the paraphrased poets mentioned in Behi euskaldun baten memoriak appear in Paul Verlaine’s Les poètes maudits (1884)—Rimbaud is the only exception—they all have in common the sort of biography that portrays them as cursed by society: They are exiled (José María Iparragirre), jailed (Joseba Sarrióndia), homosexual (Rimbaud, Fedrico García Lorca), delinquents (Villon), and so on. To mention those who transgress society’s rules sparks the reader’s interest, but in this particular text, the high literary quality of the selected extracts heightens the text’s attractiveness.

SUMMARIES
Apart from the summaries described in earlier sections, the lives of Saint Paul the Anchorite and Saint Eutrope (chapter 7) and the passage from the Old Testament about the tower of Babel (told by Bernardette) act as intertextual links. These are all examples of résumés or extracts, because they present a synthesized version of the contents of the original text.

TRANSPOSITIONS
Transpositions for Genette are the transformations of basic texts through different procedures (thematic transformation, variations of the narrative voice, and so on).
Charming cow

*Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* (Memoirs of a Basque cow) was best received in Germany. By the end of 1997, two editions of 5,000 copies each were sold out. Both editions were reviewed in newspapers as important as *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and in them, Atxaga’s novel was compared to Jostein Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* (1994) because of its philosophical background.

*Cover of Memoiren einer baskischen Kuh, Altberliner Verlag (Germany), 1995. Illustration by Sabine Wilharm.*
The most prominent thematic transformation in *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* is the turning of the Trojan horse into a Trojan cow (chapter 8). This story of traditional epic and mythic origins is put in the mouth of Brothersome, but the fundamental element is changed: The horse becomes a cow. The narrator later on explains that the story is false, but the ironic and humorous aim of the transposition has already been achieved.

**PARODIES**

Parody is the imitation of a text with humorous intent. In *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*, there are several instances of parody, and most of them are parodies of songs. The first parody, on page 36 of the original version, is one of the verses of the song *Adio Euskalerriari* (Goodbye Basque Country), by the poet and composer José María Iparragirre (1820–81): “Mundu honetan belar ederrak badira / Baina bihotzak dio zoaz Balantzategira” (The world is full of green grass / but the heart says: go to Balantzategi).

In the Spanish translation, *Memorias de una vaca*, the song that is parodied is the last stanza of the well-known “Cuando salí de Cuba”:

*Cuando salí de Balanzategui,*

*cuando salí de aquel caserón,*

*allí dejé enterrado mi corazón.* (36.)

*When I left Balantzategi,*

*When I left my big home,*

*There my heart I buried too.*

There is also the parody of the well-known poem by the Bilbaino poet Gabriel Aresti (1933–75), *Harri eta herri* (Stone and country, 1964):
You must defend your friends, yes. From drunken youths, from the stupid cows in the stable, from the master; you must always defend your friends.

**Orality**

Throughout his works, Atxaga has shown a strong regard for the oral tradition, and in *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*, too, he makes use of narrative strategies inherited from the oral tradition to give the text a particular rhythm. The main structures used in *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* are binary in nature: in other words, repetitions and question-answer structures. The former are predominant in the book. Mostly, the same syntactical structure is repeated, which gives the text a particular rhythm. Also, dialogue is used profusely in the novel, since the narrator often makes use of this device to introduce the explanations offered by Bothersome. The clearest examples are in the dialogue about the palace of Versailles in chapter 2 and the story about the Man Who Handed Out Time. The latter parodies the well-known story by the Grimm brothers, and the narrator uses the metaphor of the Man Who Handed Out Time in the following way:

I have heard that in the beginning of the world someone was in charge of handing out time, and this someone told the serpent:

“*You will live 12 years.*”

And the serpent said:

“*OK.*”
“You will live 15 years,” he said to the dog. And the dog said:
“OK.”
“You, 28,” he said to the donkey. And the donkey said:
“OK.” ...
“And us? How much time for us?” someone said then. Of course, it was a cow. It seems no one had remembered her.
“How many years?” they say the Man Who Handed Out Time grumbled with a tired sigh. “Well, I don’t know. A bunch.”
“Thank you very much,” said the cow gratefully.... And I say: How naive must the cow be, how hare-brained must the cow be, how inept must the cow be to hear the Man Who Hands Out Time say “a bunch” and answer him, “Thank you very much.” (33–34)

Many paragraphs also are organized by means of an accumulation of elements (cumulative structures), paragraphs in which nature is described in a peculiar manner. Just as if it were some sort of naïvist landscape, time stops, and all the elements are presented at the same level: “But there we were, finally, all seven of us. And there they were, too, hidden in the grass, all the bugs and critters spring had brought out: mosquitoes, wasps, bees, worms, ants, snails, caterpillars, spiders, slugs, ladybirds, flies, horseflies, fireflies and another hundred Alfa bugs, really Alfa, all of them” (114–15).

PRETEND refrains and sayings also are quoted in the book. However, they are pretend because through them, the author is not intending to achieve some sort of transtextuality that makes reference to the oral tradition. Rather, they are ironic gestures intended for the reader’s pleasure. Most of these refrains and sayings do not in
fact exist—the author has made them up and their aim is purely humorous.

Lesson ten

LEARNING GOALS
1. To read and study Atxaga’s *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*.
2. To consider the book’s generic characteristics.
3. To understand the narrative strategies used by the author, in particular those that are relevant to his later work: the character’s inner voice and chronotope realism.

REQUIRED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.

1. Would you say that *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* is a literary work for children and young people? Why?
2. Would you describe the text as fantastic or realistic? Why?
3. Write about the themes, characters, and techniques of *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak*.
4. With reference to Alison Lurie’s arguments, would you say that *Behi euskaldun baten memoriak* is a subversive text?
11 · Two Brothers
A modern fable about the sacrifice of the innocent

The novella *Bi anai* (Two Brothers, 1985) has been reprinted in Basque more than fifteen times. Along with *Bi letter jaso nituen oso denpora gutxian* (Two letters all at once, 1984) and *Sugeak txoriari begiratzen dioenean* (When the snake stares at the bird, 1984), which were later published together in one volume in Spanish translation under the title *Historias de Obaba* (Obaba stories, 1996, 1997), it made Atxaga a household name among Basque readers. *Bi anai* has been translated into five languages and belongs to what could be defined as “the Obaba cycle.” This cycle, as I have mentioned in earlier chapters, reached its most mature literary expression in *Obabakoak* (1988).

These three fantastic tales were enthusiastically received before Atxaga was awarded the Premio Nacional de Narrativa for *Obabakoak* in 1989. On average, each title was reprinted four times and sold more than twenty thousand in Euskara, helping to establish Atxaga’s literary name.

One of the most original aspects of *Bi letter jaso nituen oso denpora gutxian* (which was translated into five languages and reprinted more than sixteen times in Basque) is its mix of English and Basque. *Sugeak txoriari begiratzen dioenean* has also been translated into five languages, and was awarded the Lizardi Prize for Children’s Literature in 1983. This story involves a dialogue between humans and animals and introduces the theme of the look of death (cf. Cesare Pavese’s “Death Will Stare at Me Out of Your Eyes”), which Atxaga would later develop in his story “Dayoub, the Rich Merchant’s Servant” in *Obabakoak*. 
The third story included in the volume *Historias de Obaba*, the novella *Two Brothers*, could be defined as a modern fable in which Atxaga returned to the mythical world of Obaba. But just as many national and international critics remarked, the author put special emphasis on the evocative and symbolic aspects of the text, on its polyphonic qualities and its use of the fantastic register.

*Two Brothers* tells the story of Paulo and Daniel, two brothers who live in the ruthless environment of Obaba. A primeval voice, “a voice that comes from deep within ourselves” (3) asks several animals (a robin, some squirrels, a snake) to tell the story of these two brothers. The brothers become orphans, and the story begins when the father on his deathbed makes Paulo promise that he will look after his mentally handicapped brother, Daniel. It is too heavy a burden for sixteen-year-old Paulo, who cannot stop Daniel’s sexual urges and his attraction to and obsession with Teresa, a girl who is in love with Paulo. The inhabitants of Obaba, especially the village priest, begin to find Daniel’s attitude dangerous as they realize twenty-year-old Daniel is intent on spending as much time as possible with Teresa. Through her scheming, Carmen, the brothers’ cousin, satisfies her desire for revenge when Daniel fails to win the ribbon-race that will earn him Teresa’s attention. He becomes aggressive, and the inhabitants of the town turn against him. The novel ends with the two brothers’ escape and their metamorphosis into two geese.

One of the most attractive aspects of *Two Brothers* is its use of different narrators. These narrators, which in the original version were a robin, some squirrels, a snake, and a goose, gain another narrator in the Spanish translation (and the translations that followed it), namely, a star. Atxaga altered the text to quite a large extent in the Spanish version. Apart from the addition
A modern fable about the sacrifice of the innocent
As in Obahakoak, in Bi anai (Two brothers), the reader encounters a series of events—such as the transformation of the two brothers into geese—that are acceptable to the reader only in a fantastic context. Transgressing the moral code results in punishment: The main characters are first marginalized and separated from the rest, and later they are transformed into geese and escape.

Cover of Bi anai. Erein (Basque Country), 1985.
of a new narrator, the twelve original chapters shrink to ten, titles are added to the chapters to clarify content and the narrator’s identity, and new sequences are added to delineate better the evilness of characters such as Carmen. In his epilogue to the Spanish translation Atxaga wrote:

I see the book now as a kind of second starting point in a literary career that had begun some time before, in 1972 to be precise: on the one hand, it condensed everything I had been trying out up until then—the use of imaginary places like Obaba, for example—and on the other, it forced me to invent some of the narrative methods which, like the Inner Voice, have become regular features in my fictional writing.... And so, despite the apparent similarities, this *Two Brothers* is not *Bi anai*. In vaguely arithmetical terms, I would say that *Two Brothers* equals *Bi anai* plus/minus eleven years of the author’s life. (117)

**A Modern Fable**

*A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* defines the fable as: “A short moral tale, in verse or prose, in which human situations and behavior are depicted through (chiefly) beasts and birds, or gods or inanimate objects. Human qualities are projected onto animals, according to certain conventions (e.g. malicious craftiness for the fox). Fables are ironic and realistic in tone, often satirical, their themes usually reflecting the commonsense ethics of ordinary life” (87).

**The Origins** of this genre date back to antiquity. It is thought that the first examples appeared in Babylon (modern Iraq). The form was later used in Greece, from which it was transplanted to the rest of Europe through Aesop’s fables (6 B.C.). Aesop’s collection of
brief fables illustrated general truths and had critical, satirical, and didactic aims. Later, the publication of Jean La Fontaine’s *Fables* (1668) had a great influence, particularly on the various collections of fables with didactic and moralizing aims that were published during the eighteenth century.

The British author John Gay (1685–1732) followed on the footsteps of La Fontaine’s sophisticated style of verse fables. In Germany, Gotthold Lessing (1729–95) adopted Aesop’s simpler, less refined style. More recently, the influence of the fable can be seen in works such as George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), in which a fable serves to satirize a totalitarian regime. In the United States, James Thurber published *Fables for Our Time* in 1940.

In the Basque Country, this tradition was popular in the Basque literary tradition until the twentieth century, with Félix de Samaniego’s *Fábulas morales* (1781) and Tomás de Iriarte’s *Fábulas literarias* (1782). It included the first children’s book to be published in Basque, Vicenta Moguel’s *Ipuin onac* (Moral tales, 1804), which is a translation of Aesop’s *Fables* and which was enthusiastically received in its time. The tradition was further revived with the publication of *Alegiak* (Fables) by Jules Moulier, “Oxobi,” in 1926.

As I have mentioned, the use of different narrators is one of the defining aspects of *Two Brothers*. This gives the text a polyphonic tone and is particularly appropriate in stylistic terms if we consider the fantastic aspects of the events that take place in the novel. As in *Obabakoak*, the reader encounters a series of events, such as the transformation of the two brothers into geese, that are acceptable to the reader only in the fantastic context of the fable form. Once again, transgressing the moral code results in punishment: The main characters are first
A modern fable
Atxaga masterfully illustrates each narrator’s perspective by using different voices, introducing the reader to the world of Obaba. In this world, although it is fantastic, animals still obey the laws of nature, and the strongest eat the weakest. Thus, the bird dies between the snake’s fangs, and the snake is eaten by the goose.

marginalized and separated from the rest, only later to be transformed into geese and escape.

The descriptions of Daniel exaggerate and underline his difference. From the beginning, we read that he is “really ugly” (11) and that, even though he is only twenty years old, “his chest was already as big as the chests of two grown men” (11). The narrator also says that “Daniel’s thighs were pudgy and white as milk” (13), and he is described as living “with almost nothing in his head” except “a little tune” (29) that the playful squirrels like. Like some characters in Obabakoak (e.g. Javier in “An Exposition of Canon Lizardi’s Letter”), Daniel is described as an irrepressible “monster” by several characters in the novel (his father, the priest) whose sexual appetites become more and more difficult to control every day. As his desire for Teresa becomes more and more uncontrollable, his behavior becomes similar to that of an “animal on heat” (80), and his gestures are described as those of “an ox trying to shoo away flies” (85). In contrast to Daniel, Paulo, his sixteen-year-old brother, is the personification of beauty: blonde, blue-eyed, and with a timid expression (61). Only the constant references to the black rings under Paulo’s eyes (10, 44, 90) remind us of the true dimension of the drama and the pain that slowly destroys this character from the inside.

Although sexual desire is present throughout the novel (in Teresa’s erotic dreams, for example, and in the sexual images that besiege the village priest), in Daniel’s case, this is an uncensored desire, an animal drive that results in repeated masturbation (22, 47) and in his “fondling” of Teresa (58). Thus we encounter what Michel Foucault would describe as the opposition/mutual exclusion of reason and unreason.
Through historical analysis, the French philosopher demonstrated that the modern world since Descartes is organized around this opposition and that it eventually developed into a new form of cruelty: the oppression of those who would not submit to the new authority of reason. Among the oppressed and the excluded from the modern world were, in Foucault’s opinion, women, artists, the insane, and criminals ... in other words, everyone who could be included in the category of the “other.” The forms of oppression and exclusion have varied throughout the centuries, and as Foucault demonstrated in *Madness and Civilization*, whereas in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, madness was presented as a new object, something tragic and fascinating that materialized into the Ship of Fools, during the Classical period (from the mid-seventeenth century to end of the eighteenth), perspectives changed, and the mad were locked away (the creation of the Paris General Hospital in 1656 was symptomatic of this trend). However, the separation between different groups of mental patients did not take place until the nineteenth century. As for sexuality, in his *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, Foucault remarks that a sexually repressive discourse took precedence from the seventeenth century onward, after many years of freedom of expression. It was not until the nineteenth century that two technologies of power started to overlap: one that revolved around the issue of sexuality and the one that marginalized madness. As Foucault says in “The History of Sexuality”:

The technology of madness moved from the negative to the positive, from being binary to being complex and multiform. There came into being a vast technology of the psyche, which became a characteristic feature of the nineteenth and twentieth; it at once
turned sex into the reality hidden behind rational consciousness and the sense to be decoded from madness, their common content, and hence that which made it possible to adopt the same modalities for dealing with both.

In *Two Brothers*, it is the inhabitants of Obaba and their moral safeguard, the village priest, who threaten Paulo with locking Daniel up unless he gives up his reprehensible sexual behavior. The binomial excessive madness/excessive sexuality is established, and its punishment—imprisonment and exclusion—is suggested in the following extract from the novel:

“Well, make him obey you. Otherwise, I dread to think what will happen. Do you know what people have said to me? That he should be locked up in some institution.”

“Locked up? Away from Obaba?” said Paulo, getting up. His eyes were very wide.

“Better that than roaming around getting up to all kinds of disgusting things,” said the priest bluntly. As before, however, he immediately changed his tone of voice. “But we haven’t reached that point yet. If you can get your brother to behave normally, nothing will happen.”

“All right. I’ll do my best,” said Paulo. He seemed tired.

“You’re the only one who can do it. If he had a spark of intelligence, then I would talk to him myself. But he doesn’t; he can only be reached through his feelings.”

(81)
THE NARRATORS AND INNER VOICES OF *TWO BROTHERS*
As Atxaga wrote in his epilogue to the Spanish translation of 1995, apart from the use of the imaginary geography of Obaba, the use of the inner voice is one of the most important formal aspects of *Two Brothers*. The opening of the novel is highly significant in this regard: “There is a voice that comes from deep within ourselves, and just as summer was beginning, when I was still an inexperienced bird and had never strayed far from the tree where I lived, that voice gave me an order.... There is a voice that comes from deep within ourselves, the other birds told me. A voice unlike any other, a voice that has power over us” (3).

This inner voice that orders and has absolute power over the animals that narrate the story of Paulo and Daniel has little to do with the inner voices Atxaga has used to narrate the inner thoughts of other characters in his novels, such as the voices that besiege Carlos, the protagonist of *The Lone Man*. The voice that orders the animals to follow the two boys from Obaba and talk about their ups and downs is a kind of voice of nature, of the old law that rules the destinies of all irrational beings. Atxaga chooses a series of irrational narrators in order to tell a story that is far removed from all logic and belongs to the realm of the fantastic.

Each narrator contributes his own narrative style and vision of the world. The bird, who is the symbol of spirituality and the celestial messenger of the literary tradition, communicates a point of view that reflects its empathy with the tragic destiny of the two brothers—especially the younger brother, Paulo. The bird’s narrative is permeated with words like “monster” and “animal” when it refers to Daniel and with pitying commentaries when it refers to Paulo: “I would see him walking like a man, working like a man, talking to his
A visionary poet, the Count of Lautréamont, to begin the book

Among the intertextual links in *Two Brothers*, the first and most obvious is the paratext that first appeared in the Spanish translation, acting both as a quote and a subtitle of the book and associating it with *Les chants de Maldoror* (1868), by the Count of Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse’s nom de plume). Although the style of *Two Brothers* lacks the exuberance of the images and evocations in *Les chants de Maldoror*, both books share the same aim: They want to denounce man, the cruelest animal.

*Cover of Two Brothers (hardcover). The Harvill Press (U.K.), 2001.*
monstrous brother like a man, but suffering with a heart
that was not yet a man’s heart and which could barely
cope with the burden his father’s death had bequeathed
to him” (42). Also, during its narration, the bird does
not hesitate to offer its opinion about the wickedness
of some of the characters, such as Carmen, whom it
describes as “a snake” (51).

The style and tone of the snake’s mode of narration are
diametrically opposed to the bird’s. It uses an arrogant
style, a style that reflects the stealth and evil nature
traditionally associated with this animal in literature:
“Not much longer and it would be all over. Stupid fiesta.
Stupid mission. Then I would be able to go back to the
river in search of my beloved trout” (104–5).

The equivalence established between the character of
Carmen and the discourse of the snake is made apparent
when the snake, after focusing on Carmen’s scheming
and murderous impulses, does not hesitate to praise
her plan to take revenge on Paulo or to celebrate this
evil character’s behavior, whose heart is as dark as the
birthmark that stains her face. As the village priest says,
Carmen has two faces (63), a double personality (like Dr.
Jekyll).

In contrast to the snake’s narrative, the squirrel shows
its playful spirit and its limited understanding of the
behavior of its twin character: Daniel. Like him—whose
head they say is empty—it thinks only about playing and
satisfying its elemental instincts.

The group of animal narrators is completed by the
fourth animal, the goose, whose narrative takes place
in the final chapter. This character often appears in
traditional tales, It is associated with the notion of fate
and has a benign influence—it is also associated with
the Great Mother (think of Mother Goose). Its wisdom is
reflected in its description of Carmen as “wicked” (114).
The wild goose becomes the two brothers’ guide when they have metamorphosed into two geese. In contrast to all the others, the narration of the star—the only narrative voice that is not an animal’s—tells a more objective tale befitting the external perception of an extradiegetic narrator.

As is common in fables, the different narrators of Two Brothers symbolize the different attitudes and personalities of the characters in the novel (Paulo-bird, Daniel-squirrel, Carmen-snake). Their narratives, their fears, act as prolepses (flash-forwards, anticipations), and their focalizations act as analepses (flashbacks, dreams that characters have, etc.) in this tragic tale about the sacrifice of the innocent. The idea of innocence is underlined in the Spanish translation though the use of a paratext: The cover bears a reproduction of Otto Venio’s La inocencia por todo anda segura (Innocence is certain about everything).

Atxaga masterfully illustrates each narrator’s perspective by using different voices, introducing the reader to the world of Obaba. In this world, although it is fantastic, animals still obey the laws of nature, and the strongest eat up the weakest. Thus, the bird dies between the snake’s fangs, and the snake is eaten by the goose.

An important theme in this novella is the animosity between the bird and the snake. In Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, Heinrich Robert Zimmer established that this animosity has a moral dimension in Western culture. The theme is already present in Atxaga’s earlier work Sugeak txoriari begiratzen dioenean (When the snake stares at the bird, 1984), and it is reflected in the serpent’s use of its “deadly stare” to catch the bird. “If ever you are dazzled by a bright light and cannot move, then resign yourself to dying. That bright light is the sign of the snake” (86).
Metamorphosed into two geese

“The two brothers were standing between the rails, holding hands and with their backs to the mountain. Realising that was about to happen, I tried to reach them, but in vain. The train just coming out of the tunnel beat me to it. I wasn’t used to the noise of an engine like that and, for a while, I was stunned, flying around above the station, disoriented. When I finally found the track again, I saw two geese there.” (Two Brothers, translated by Margaret Jull Costa [Harvill Press, 2001], 114–15).
In terms of narrative time, the story begins in summer (in the first chapter the bird informs us that Paulo’s father dies in July) and ends in the beginning of autumn, when the geese fly over Obaba in their migration to the Southern Hemisphere. Approximately a year has passed in between, a year that is suggested through the transformations that occur in nature as the seasons change. Descriptions such as the following are presented from a subjective perspective in the novel with a view to portraying the unstoppable passage of time:

“Why is it raining so heavily?” the man asked suddenly. “It’s July, isn’t it?”

It was July, and the sky I had just left behind me was certainly not a rainy sky. On the contrary, it had been a sunny day, and the light filtering in through the slats of the blinds was still bright enough to make the mirror on the wardrobe door glitter. (8)

The apples in the river were green at first, small apples that had been torn from the branches as soon as they appeared amongst the leaves and hurled into the water. Later, others appeared, yellow or reddish, that got bruised on the rocks and dissolved in the water. Yes, time was passing, the summer was reaching its peak. Around the river, the fields of corn were building walls of an even intenser green than the grass. In the gardens beside the houses in Obaba, the tomatoes had grown fat and red. (43)

That summer the heat was suffocating, and the squirrels who had so often played with Daniel eventually died of thirst…. During that time, that is, during the time it took for the squirrels to die, Daniel was never at home. (77)
Intertextuality

Intertextual links also characterize *Two Brothers*. The first and most obvious one is the paratext that appeared for the first time in the Spanish translation, acting both as quote and subtitle to the book and connecting it to *Les chants de Maldoror* (1868), by the Count of Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse’s nom de plume): “A man or a stone or a tree will begin / the fourth song.”

Lautréamont, an author with a mysterious and haunting biography, was rediscovered and appropriated fifty years after his death by the French Surrealists. He was one of the Romantic and visionary poets that tried to see beyond reality, and his aim with *Les chants de Maldoror* was to portray “the deliciousness of cruelty” (canto 1). As Maurice Blanchot wrote in *Lautréamont and Sade*, *Les chants de Maldoror* is a difficult work to explain. The book is made up of stanzas grouped into six cantos, and the language lashes out in all directions with a rhythmic expression that contains numerous dimensions of human cruelty and horror and transgresses all the moral codes of the era. The provocation lies in the motto that underlies these “somber pages full of poison” in canto 1. Although the style of *Two Brothers* lacks the exuberance of images and evocations of *Les chants de Maldoror*, both books share the same aim: They want to denounce man, the cruelest animal.

The next example of intertextuality is another quote. This quote is put in the bird’s mouth. When it knows its end is coming, the bird starts telling the story of the two brothers:

> into my head came a story I once heard about a girl who had fallen ill. Apparently, the doctor went over to the bed where she was lying and said:
“A torn skirt can be mended, but not this young girl’s health. There’s nothing to be done.”

Her relatives did not tell her the truth, but decided to take her to a folk healer. After examining her, he said:

“There’s nothing I can do. Her legs are swollen and her breathing is weak. She’ll be dead within a couple of months.”

They said nothing to the girl then either, because they did not want to cause her needless suffering. They put her on a horse and carried her back home. But time passed, and she eventually realized there was no hope for her. One evening, her brother found her in the garden crying.

“What’s wrong, sister?” he said. And she replied:

“Nothing’s wrong. I was just thinking that I’m still only nineteen and that soon I’ll be buried under the earth.” (4–5)

As the Basque critic Pello Esnal has established, this is one of the anecdotes told by Mikela Elizegi in her book Pello Errotaren bizitza, bere alabak kontatua (The life of Pello Errota, as told by his daughter, 1963). Here, as in Obabakoak, Atxaga uses a traditional Basque story to begin the narration of some of the fantastic events that take place in the imaginary world of Obaba. Basque oral literature and popular literature are very appropriate intertexts for the modern fable that is Two Brothers.

Two Brothers also refers to William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury (1929), which tells the story of the Compson family. One of the members of this family is Benjy, a mentally disabled boy. Although there are, of course, great differences in style and register between the two novels, it is evident that the inhabitants of Obaba share some experiences with the characters in
the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County (marginalization, repression of drives, fear and loneliness). This brings the two literary works close and makes them universal.

Lesson eleven

LEARNING GOALS
1. To read and analyze *Two Brothers*.
2. To understand the different textual strategies the author uses in the novel.
3. To consider the novel in relation to the other texts of the “Obaba cycle.”
4. To consider the themes of marginalization, madness, and sexuality.

REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING
WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.

1. What would you say are the main themes of *Two Brothers*? Discuss them in relation to the narrative strategies used by the author.
2. Read “The Mystery of the Four Birds” and consider how it relates to the narrators of *Two Brothers*.
3. Compare *Two Brothers, When a Snake Stares at a Bird*, and *Two Letters All at Once*.
4. In this chapter, we have established that *Two Brothers* tells the story of a sacrifice of an innocent. Compare the way this novel deals with the theme of marginalization with that theme’s treatment in “A List of the Mad” and “School Memory.”
In the realm of fear: The Lone Man

In the 1990s, Atxaga abandoned the imaginary realm of Obaba and published two realist novels: *Gizona bere bakardadean* (1993), published in English as *The Lone Man*, and *Zeru horiek* (1995), published in English as *The Lone Woman*. Chronotopic realism is present in these novels, and they both deal with ETA’s violence and the personal and social fragmentation the terrorist band leaves in its trail. The author employs subjective realism with a view to giving a voice to characters and situations that are rarely given space in the never-ending media bombardment about the “Basque troubles.” The loss of revolutionary ideals (*The Lone Man*), the political reinsertion of ETA prisoners (*The Lone Woman*), and even the betrayal of the armed group by one of its members (in *Soinujolearen semea*, The accordion player’s son) are examples of a literary evolution that clearly intends to destabilize the monological discourse (be it nationalist or nonnationalist) and create an oeuvre that demonstrates the author’s rejection of violence and his love of life. As well as the novels mentioned above, the publication of the hybrid text *Nueva Etiopía* (1996), a collaborative effort between Atxaga and his artist friends, also asserted their ideological opposition to the violence the Basque Country has experienced since the 1970s (see Martin 2000). But this turn toward realism could be intuited in some of his earlier works: in *Henry Bengoa inventarium* (1988), for example (which was included in the collection *Poemas & híbridos*), or in works for younger readers such as *Behi euskaldun baten memoria* (Memoirs of a Basque cow).
THE INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION OF THE LONE MAN
Gizona bere bakardadean has been translated into fifteen languages and received several important prizes, including the Spanish Critics’ Prize in 1993, and it was shortlisted for the Aristerion and the IMPAC prizes in 1996. The book was also very well received abroad. In Italy, France, and Germany, the critics saw it as an interesting novel, but British critics in particular took very enthusiastically to the translation of The Lone Man, and the reviews published in the Times Literary Supplement (September 8, 1996) and The New Statesman (August 2, 1996), underlined that Atxaga’s novel was not a conventional thriller, but that place and action are developed symbolically through the use of evocative imagery in a way that enriches the plot. In the meantime, Richard Gott in The Guardian (July 29, 1996) highlighted the originality of the theme and the rhythm of the novel, and Peter Millar in the London Times (August 3, 1996) said the novel was a captivating odyssey into the mind of the protagonist.

As for Spain, the tone of the critics was equally praiseful when the Spanish translation was made available. Jordi Gracia wrote in El Periódico de Cataluña (May 4, 1999) that it was an “essential novel,” and Bernardino M. Hernando in Tribuna (June 11, 1994) that this was a novel by a great writer, risky, ironic, and full of details. In general, critics highlighted the sparseness of the narrative, the seductiveness of the language, and the author’s subtle sensitivity and ability to create images (Ramón Sánchez Lizarralde, El Urogallo, September–October 1994) They also noted the intensity of its structure, which they saw as similar to a puzzle (Mercedes Monmany in Diario 16, April 3, 1994, and Elvira Huelbes in El Mundo, March 19, 1994). Basque critics praised the novel’s narrative pace and its author’s ability
to create suspense Iñaki Aldekoa in *Bitarte 9*, 1996), the powerful dialogues and plot structure Felipe Juaristi in *El Diario Vasco*, April 1, 1994), the techniques borrowed from fantastic literature, and the deliberately erroneous information given to the reader Jon Kortazar in *Insula* 580 (1995).

**A Psychological Thriller**

The first paratext of the book, its title, *The Lone Man*, highlights the two core elements of the story: man and loneliness. The importance of these two elements is corroborated by the second paratextual element, the quote from Ecclesiastes that precedes the novel. Then the first paragraph of the novel introduces a few key elements of the story (the main character and the time and place in which the events take place), the main character’s inner thoughts, as well as a series of images and dreams that will recur throughout the novel.

The man known to everyone as Carlos realized that the icy sea he was contemplating was merely an image in a slowly fading dream, and he realized too ... that he ought to get up from the sofa where he was lying, that he ought to go down to the hotel lounge as soon as possible in order to watch the football match between Poland and Belgium being played at nine o’ clock that night, 28th June 1982.... In the end, though, there was no contact with the sea. He did get close enough to glimpse a few vaporous fish through the cracks in the ice, but immediately afterwards, the images in his dream changed and the rock became a huge bat flying over that sea which now, from higher up, looked like a white plain. (3)
A realist turn
In the 1990s, Atxaga abandoned the imaginary realm of Obaba and published two realist novels: *The Lone Man* (1996) and *The Lone Woman* (1999). Chronotopic realism is present in these novels, and they both deal with ETA’s violence and the personal and social fragmentation that the terrorist group leaves in its trail. The loss of revolutionary ideals (*The Lone Man*), the return of ETA prisoners to society (*The Lone Woman*), and even the betrayal of the armed group by one of its members in his last novel *Soinujolearen semea* (The accordion player’s son) are examples of a literary evolution that clearly intends to destabilize monological discourse (be it nationalist or nonnationalist) and create an oeuvre that demonstrates the author’s rejection of violence.

*Cover of The Lone Man. The Harvill Press (U.K.) 1996.*
The Kafkaesque image of the frozen inner sea (3, 145), the recurring image of the bat that flutters around the streetlamp next to the hotel (11, 18, 35), and the references to the clouds that take the shapes of different kinds of bread (83) create an atmosphere that heightens the sense of foreboding in Carlos’s ruminations and inner fears. It could be said that in this sense, Atxaga is following authors such as Chekhov in creating an atmosphere of disquiet around Carlos through narrative strategies such as the repetition of scenes, dreams, and suggestive metaphors.

The story of *The Lone Man* starts at nine o’clock on June 28, 1982 and unfolds over the next five days, during the World Cup that is taking place in Barcelona. The novel is chronologically explicit, and the places in which the action takes place are few: the hotel run by former members of the group, fifty kilometers from Barcelona (15), and the places surrounding the hotel—the bread storage room, the Banyera, the swimming pool, the gas station, and so on. The time/space coordinates in this novel are therefore very limited (very few days, very few places), and this adds power to the real story being told: the main character’s inner struggle with himself. These sites are well suited to host (isolate) a group of former terrorists—a group that is, by definition, formed by political (self-)exiles who have decided to start a new life by removing themselves, hiding themselves from the past that they hope to leave behind.

As we will see is also the case in *The Lone Woman*, the spaces in *The Lone Man* are heterotopian counterspaces, in Michel Foucualt’s formulation in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”: “something like countersites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously repre-
sented, contested, and inverted.” Heterotopias are the spaces that power institutionally sets apart, the places denominated as “other.” Foucault believed that these places can be found in all cultures in the form of, for example, mental institutions, prisons, homes for the elderly, cemeteries, gardens, museums, libraries, hotels, fun fairs, brothels, and ships. Many of these (e.g. prisons, mental institutions) are used to put away people with “deviant” inclinations. Most heterotopias have controlled entrances and exits, and normal time parameters do not apply to them. (In museums and theme parks, for example, you “lose track of time.”) Foucault believed that from the sixteenth century on, the ships sailing the seas from port to port became the ultimate heterotopias (think of all the books that have been inspired by the figure of a mysterious ship or the medieval Ship of Fools).

All we know about the main character is his pseudonym (Carlos), his approximate age, and a few physical details (e.g. his baldness). Behind his companions’ backs, he decides to give shelter, in the basement under the bread storage room, to two active ETA terrorists who have just perpetrated a terrorist attack in the Basque Country. He plans their escape, trying all the time to elude the police at the hotel—which is full of policemen camouflaged as journalists intent on reporting on the Polish soccer team staying at the hotel.

The violent political reality of the Basque Country is reflected in the background of the novel, not just because real events are mentioned (such as the death of Xabier Zabaleta Jatorra in July 1982), but also because the distance between the hotel inhabitants’ strategies and the strategies of ETA in the 1980s is mentioned (304). There are even ironic references to the multiplicity of *commandos* at the time: “It could have been the Autónomos, Iraultza, the 8th Assembly, the Basque-
A psychological thriller

*Gizona bere bakardadean* (The lone man) has been translated into fifteen languages and received several important prizes, such as the Spanish Critics’ Prize in 1993. (It was also shortlisted for the Aristerion and the IMPAC Prizes in 1996.) The book was very well received abroad. In Italy, France, and Germany, the critics viewed it as an attractive, interesting novel. British critics, in particular, took very enthusiastically to *The Lone Man.*

*Cover of Gizona bere bakardadean. Pamiela (Basque Country), 1993.*
Spanish Battalion… The Basque Country is crawling with armed groups. We have a very varied menu,” said Mikel, laughing at his own joke” (91).

In Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction, Patricia Highsmith wrote that a suspense narrative contains a threat of violence and danger and that sometimes the threat is realized. In this sense, The Lone Man could be said to be a good suspense novel. The threat closing in around Carlos gives the text a narrative rhythm that teases the reader’s curiosity, slowing down by means of the analepsis of the first four days and speeding up during the countdown of the last day. The questions Carlos repeatedly asks himself act as signals for the implied reader, a strategy often used in suspense novels to capture the reader’s attention. The complications that arise during these days (the discovery made by the son of one of Carlos’ companions’ near the bakery, the suspicions Carlos awakens in Ugarte, the police cordon tightening around Carlos) thicken the plot, as Highsmith might say, by compounding the main character’s difficulties.

Although it is Carlos’ point of view that guides the narrative, we know little about him, apart from the fact that he is alone, and a lone man, as Paul Valéry said, is always in bad company. He is continually persecuted by his inner voices (the Rat, Sabino) and his memories (his brother Kropotky, locked up in a mental institution to launder the commando’s money, the terrorist attack he perpetrated), and the reader becomes the uneasy audience of his inner struggle. This struggle will take Carlos further and further into the Realm of Fear, the realm inhabited by Mr. Fear (138), a reflection of the twelfth-century mystic Gonzalo de Berceo’s Don Beldur in Los milagros de nuestra señora (Miracles of Our Lady), who is significantly described as “the other side of the frontier” (164). The feeling of asphyxiation the main
character feels is reflected in descriptions that emphasize the smallness of the place and in the metaphors that describe Carlos as a swimmer gasping for air:

It was about ten yards from the lounge to the hotel reception desk and another ten yards from the desk to the main door; but to Carlos, because of the noisy crowd of people milling around after the end of the TV programme, and because of his desire to get out of there as quickly as possible, the distance seemed endless and, as he traversed those twenty yards, he felt as if he were walking through dense undergrowth out of which ghosts kept popping up.... When he finally managed to get through the undergrowth and out of the building, he walked over to the lamp round which the tiny bat was fluttering and he paused to take a breath. He felt like a swimmer who had stayed too long under water. However, neither the air, nor the silence reigning outside, helped him to calm. He was furious. (47)

THE LOSS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY IDEAL

HANS ROBERT JAUSS, in Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, writes that aesthetic depth stems from the recovery of lost time, from the recognition of buried experiences. These experiences, in Carlos’s case, are the revolutionary ideals and slogans that marked his youth. The intertextuality that the novel plays with, the references to the anarchist ideologue Kropotkin and to the revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai, speaks of a revolutionary ideal, an ideal that, for these people, marked a clear separation from the predominant revolutionary ideology of their times. The real theme of The Lone Man is the loss of revolutionary ideals and slogans. We are confronted by a character, Carlos, who has managed to more than cover
his basic needs: He is a baker—therefore, to paraphrase Kropotkin, he has “conquered the bread.” But Carlos feels that the revolutionary ideals leave out something that is essential for human beings: useless things, whims. And this feeling is heightened by his reading, throughout the novel, of Rosa Luxemburg’s Cartas a Karl y Luise Kautsky (Letters to Karl and Luise Kautsky, 1923). In these letters, the lively revolutionary is not ashamed to confess her whims to her friends, her “vanities,” as she calls them.

“Dearest, everything here is going very well.” He read, after climbing into the hammock and covering himself with a towel. It was a letter that Rosa Luxemburg had written in Warsaw during the General Strike in 1906. “Every day, two or three citizens get their throats slit by soldiers and there are constant arrests; apart form that though, it’s quite jolly.” …

“I can’t stop dreaming—I’ve become terribly vain, I think!—of having a pretty new suit decorated with braid” (196)

To illustrate this, apart from the insistent reading of the above-mentioned letters (29, 50), Atxaga writes that during the Paleolithic period, men crossed great distances of land just to collect the variety of shellfish Nassa reticulata, which they found particularly delectable. Like our ancestors forty thousand years ago, who risked their lives to satisfy a desire, Danuta, the Polish interpreter, betrays her revolutionary ideals to gain the reward that will allow her to buy her much-desired emeralds. Carlos categorically asserts that the revolutionary ideals have failed and that their failure is linked in his case to his departure from radical nationalist ideology,
as his brother Kropotky had foretold: “Socialism, or any revolutionary movement for that matter, achieves nothing if it only provides what is really important. It has to provide the things that aren’t important, as well, the capricious and the trivial. If it doesn’t, it’s lost, it can’t survive” (205). And, from a letter from his brother:

And one day, that man gets out of bed and he feels an odd pain: one of his spiritual organs has begun to protest, because it no longer believes in those ideas, it no longer finds his plans exciting, it’s bored with that song that used to move him ten or fifteen years ago. You will say: I’m thirty years old and nothing like that has ever happened to me. It will. A few days ago I saw a pamphlet bearing a photo of the day of your trial. You’re all standing there with your fists raised and—according to the caption—singing the song of the Basque soldier: “Eusko gudariak gara Euskadi askatzeko, gerturik daukagu odola bere alde emateko .... We are Basque soldiers fighting for the freedom of our country and ready to spill our blood for it.” Well, the day will come when that song will hold no charm for you whatsoever. That will seem unbelievable to you now, Carlos, but you need think only of Christmas trees. You see them tricked out with lights and decorations and it seems impossible that in only two weeks’ time, they’ll be relegated to the rubbish bin. (236)

The consequences of Carlos’ dissidence are evident: Condemned to living in a place that is a nonplace, as we have established, he is a man exiled from his country and his people, a man whose identity has been denied (remember that Carlos is his pseudonym, and as we read on page 78, his nom de guerre) and who is in a perpetual state of melancholy that is heightened by his
Suspense
Patricia Highsmith has written that a suspense narrative contains a threat of violence and danger and that sometimes the threat is realized. In this sense, *The Lone Man* could be said to be a good suspense novel. The threat closing in around Carlos gives the text a narrative rhythm that teases the reader’s curiosity. The novel slows down by means of the analepsis of the first four days and speeds up during the countdown of the last day.

*Cover of Yksinäinen (The lone man). Tammi Publishers (Finland), 1995.*
recollection of songs and poems by authors such as José María Iparagirre (“There are my mountains, there are my valleys, the white houses, the fountains, the rivers. Now I am standing on the frontier at Hendaye with my eyes wide open. Oh, my Basque homeland,” 7), William Wordsworth (“Oak of Guernica! How canst thou flourish at his blighting hour? What hope, what joy can sunshine bring to thee, or the soft breezes from the Atlantic sea, the dews of morn, or April’s tender shower?” 9), and Friedrich Hölderlin (the poem is “Menon’s Lament for Diotima,”: “My soul wanders up and down, longing for rest, just as the wounded stag flees to the woods where it was his custom at midday to rest quietly in the shade,” 19) or by popular songs that inevitably take him back to his dear and remote Obaba. However, the Obaba of those poems and popular songs has nothing to do with the Obaba of 1982, and Carlos confesses to feeling far removed from and “disgusted” by the present reality of his hometown.

LIKE IRENE, the main character of The Lone Woman, Carlos feels he is an exile from his own town and that he is condemned to suffering, to knowing that he will never be able to return, much as he desires to: “My country, I cannot love you, but where will I live if I leave you?” (238). Like an obsessive neurotic who screams the impossibility of fulfilling his desire, his inability to approach the object of his love, Carlos tries to get close his “beloved motherland” by collaborating with the terrorist group, but this drives him to self-destruction. The popular Basque song on page 187—“The lovely white boat is in the harbor, the lovely white boat is on the sea”—becomes, in Carlos’s tortured mind, a white, disquieting memory, cold and distant, like the frozen sea of which he continuously dreams. For this reason, Carlos feels like a fish floating in the current or a swimmer that
waves have pulled this way and the other, a being with no clear direction or objectives, but who is nevertheless able to commit acts with tragic consequences.

They were gentle thoughts, white clouds that floated very slowly through his mind—too slowly to awaken the Rat—and they were sometimes imbued with a certain sadness. On one of those clouds, Carlos rediscovered the thoughts of the Polish poet and it seemed to him that comparing life with a swimmer lost at sea was absolutely right, that was precisely what had happened to him: twenty years before, a wave had swept him up and dropped him where he would get arrested, and later, that same wave had carried him to the organization. Another wave had caused the kidnapping of a businessman to go wrong and had made him the man chosen by the organization to kill the businessman. Another wave had carried his brother far away and the latest wave had brought Jon and Jone to the hotel. What could his will do to change the direction of that itinerary? Very little. (75–76)

The fire Carlos starts brings about his own death and the death of Pascal, Laura’s son, whom they call “the heir” and who thus becomes a little Peter Pan (322), forever remaining in Neverland, frozen in the midst of his tragically interrupted childhood.

Lesson twelve

Learning Goals
1. To read and analyze The Lone Man.
2. To undertake a comparative reading of the novel and understand it in the context of the author’s literary evolution.
3. To consider themes such as the loss of revolutionary ideals, nationalism, feminism, and suspense-enhancing techniques in *The Lone Man*.

**REQUIRED READING**

**SUGGESTED READING**

**WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION**
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. Read the two brief articles by Atxaga listed under “Suggested Reading” and consider their relationship to the plot of *The Lone Man*.
2. Do you agree with Isolina Ballesteros’s interpretation of the death of the child (“the heir”) in *The Lone Man*? She claims that “the death of these peripheral characters in both texts [*The Lone Man* and *Counted Days*] serves to condemn terrorist action and to provide the protagonists with a space of redemption,
which is based on two simultaneous premises: victimization (the inevitable martyrdom of their condition as heroes of the nationalist cause) and punishment for the individual renunciation of their ideological convictions” (309)? Discuss.

3. Compare the endings of *The Lone Man* and *The Lone Woman*. 
Bernardo Atxaga’s novel *The Lone Woman* (*Zerur horiek*) is a diasporic text that narrates the experience of displacement of its main character, Irene, a former member of ETA. After locating the author within the current Basque literary system and making reference to the national and international reception of the novel, I will deal with the textual strategies the author uses in his attempt to narrate Irene’s distancing from and questioning of nationalist ideology and the ensuing identity crisis she experiences. The various displacements explored in the novel (Irene’s inner and outer displacements, displacements of narrative voice and of genre) underscore the fact that Irene’s return home will make her an exile in her own country. The analysis will conclude with a study of the novel’s heterotopias and the symbolism of its mirroring elements (e.g. the sky).

*The Lone Woman* possesses all the characteristics of diasporic texts, texts that that explore, through different narrative strategies, the experience of displacement, the experience of constructing homes away from home. In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late 20th Century*, James Clifford states that diasporas are characterized by “a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship” (247). But recent Basque exiles are different from previous exiles. The many Basque migrations to North and South America and European countries such as the United States, Russia, and Great Britain, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, took place for economic or political reasons, especially
after the Spanish Civil War. This Basque diaspora found expression in the 142 euskal etxek or Basque centers today scattered all over the world and is the theme of North American author Robert Laxalt’s 1957 novel Sweet Promised Land. The new Basque diaspora includes people who have gone into exile as a result of threats received not from organizations or political associations outside the Basque Country, but from nationalist groups within the country itself: people in exile as a result of threats received from ETA—Basque citizens who are forming a new diaspora that feels alienated not just from the country that has given them asylum, but also from their own country. It is in this particularly Basque context of diasporization that Atxaga reclaims a new identity, a new ideological map for the protagonist of The Lone Woman.

ZERU HORIEK was originally published in Basque in 1995 and in Spanish, in the author’s own translation, a year later. The Spanish edition was excellently received, and the first print run of 20,000 copies sold out very quickly.

The Lone Woman caused great controversy from the start because of the characteristics of its main character, Irene, who is an ETA prisoner who volunteers for the Social Rehabilitation Plan, and in doing so leaves both the organization and jail. For this reason the novel was harshly criticized by radical nationalist leftists. The word “traitor” appears repeatedly in the novel (22, 24, 81, 92), issued not only from the protagonist’s own mouth, but also from the mouths of the policemen who are following her and even from a character having an argument in one of the movies they are showing on the bus in which she travels. (Atxaga himself explained in El Dominical, April 21, 1996, that he once saw graffiti on a wall in the Basque Country that read “[female] traitor,”
To return home is to become an exile

*The Lone Woman* is structured around a single character. The novel caused great controversy from the start, because its main character, Irene, is an ETA prisoner who volunteers for the Social Rehabilitation Plan, and, in doing so, leaves behind both the organization and jail. For this reason, the novel was harshly criticized in the Basque Country by the radical nationalist left wing.

*Cover of The Lone Woman (hardcover). The Harvill Press (U.K.) 1999.*
and that this gave him the idea to write the novel.) The movie acts as a mirroring element, as a *mise en abîme* that exemplifies the character’s conflictive situation. Following the controversy surrounding the novel’s publication, Atxaga gave interviews in which he spoke about the excessive romanticization of politics, which, in his opinion, tainted the attitudes of nationalist politicians in the Basque Country (*Diario 16* [May 31, 1996], *ABC* [May 29, 1996], *Tiempo* [May 13, 1996], *El País* [May 10, 1996], *El Correo* [April 17, 1996]).

Among the many reviews published abroad, James Hopkin’s in *The New Statesman* (June 28, 1999) praises the text’s achievements: “In taut, elegant sentences which generate a sense of restlessness and foreboding, Atxaga reveals the uncertain mind of a fugitive fleeing the past and, by identifying only the salient details in each scene, he creates a disturbing, transitory world in which all proportion and compassion have been lost.” Hopkin is referring to the sparseness of the prose, which invites the perception that what is being suggested, what is left “outside” the text, becomes more important than what is left in.

The reading intensity demanded by *The Lone Woman* is superior to that demanded by the author’s previous novel, *The Lone Man*. As in a poem, images and emotions are densely packed in this lyrical novel, and it is not just chance that the origin of this novel is in Zeruak, one of the “lectures” or “poetic sessions” that Atxaga, in a homage to his beloved Dylan Thomas, had often performed with actors and singers during those years.

*The novel* narrates the journey that Irene undertakes from the moment she leaves jail in Barcelona to the moment she arrives in Bilbao in the bus. This becomes an internal journey that visits the memories haunting Irene (such as her failed relationship with Larrea, a
member of another military group) and her wish to escape from a hostile reality (which is reflected on the second and third dreams she has on the bus). In this respect, the second dream is particularly interesting: In it, Irene dreams she is in “a kind of Arcadia” (91), surrounded by sheep and her friend Margarita. (Arcadia, the “locus amoenus” inhabited by shepherds, which Virgil described so well in his Eclogues, is the ideal image of the world that was prevalent in the European literatures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Atxaga has revisited it in his latest novel, Soinujolearen semea (The accordion player’s son), which was published in Basque in November 2003.)

But any attempt at escape is made impossible by the reality closing in around Irene during her journey, which is exemplified in the two policemen who are traveling incognito and attempting to persuade her to collaborate with them. The help she receives from three traveling companions—two nuns and a sick woman—will provide Irene with some hope for salvation when she reaches Bilbao.

It is clear that in The Lone Woman, the chronotopical elements have been reduced to the bare minimum: The bus in which the protagonist travels is the predominant space in the novel, and the events take place in the two days following her release from jail. In this sense, Atxaga’s use of the spaces in the novel is extremely important. If we apply Michel Foucault’s diverging concepts of utopias and heterotopias to the novel, we discover that the spatial characterization in The Lone Woman is used to underline Irene’s sense of distance and alienation. The spaces included in the novel become, significantly, heterotopias of deviation (the prison, for example), or heterotopias of crisis (the scene in the hotel that Irene
visits in her first night out of jail, which fulfils the function of restoring the sexuality denied to her in prison).

But apart from that, we have another truly meaningful heterotopia: the bus—an enclosed, isolated space in perpetual motion. As the narrative progresses the novel becomes a sort of “flying” spaceship (49, 57) from which Irene can see “spaceship clouds” (70) and “flying saucers” (66). This bus in “orbit” could be thought to be a variation in the theme of the ship, which, as we have noted, according to Foucault has for centuries been the heterotopia par excellence. All these heterotopias, and in particular the prison and the bus, introduce “a sort of absolute break with their traditional time,” as Foucault would say, a heterochronia, in other words.

The distance between Barcelona and Bilbao (about 725 kilometers) is expanded and made strange by the dreams Irene has, which transport her to “another” space, the only one in which she can live. Just as her traveling companions, a sick woman condemned to live within the confines of a hospital and the two nuns who are recluses in their convent, Irene has no place, or topos, in the reality that surrounds her: “After all, did not those marked by sickness and by prison belong to the same province? Both carried a mark that set them apart form the other people on the bus” (97). The only spaces available to her are heterotopical (prison, hospital) or utopian (dreams). We could think of these spaces as marginal or unreal, as metaphors for her fragmented identity.

The presence of these heterotopical and utopian spaces is a constant theme in Atxaga’s work, as we have seen. In *The Lone Man*, Carlos, the main character, lives within the confines of his hotel and is tormented by the interior voices that continually threaten him. Paradise, on the other hand, is the predominant utopian
place in the author’s latest novel, *Soinujolearen semea*. Here Atxaga once again talks about exiles, about people who try to build a home away from home. From his California ranch, the protagonist, David, remembers his idyllic childhood in Obaba and the painful awakening to the horrifying events that took place during and after the Spanish Civil War.

*We do not* learn the protagonist’s name until page 74 of *The Lone Woman*, but she is described in the first paragraph as a woman with hard features. We read about the protagonist’s physiognomy and discover what she did on the night of her release. We learn that Irene is thirty-seven years old (3, 75), that she is “slight and serious looking,” that her voice is “husky,” and that her eyes are disquieting: “when she looked, her eyes seemed hard—two brown spheres that time had polished to a somber gleam” (3).

We are faced by a female protagonist whose very corporeity has been denied in jail. The lack of mirrors within the prison walls means that Irene is surprised when she sees her body in its entirety for the first time: “After all those years inside, it was odd to see herself full-length. The mirrors in prison were rarely more than two feet high” (3). It often happens in novels, especially in those written by women, that the mirror helps a female character recognize herself, see herself, not just as essence, but also as existence and action. In this instance, I am using Lorna Sage’s ideas regarding the short story in *Flesh and The Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (8–9).

In Irene’s case, “her recovery of herself” (8) starts not only with her identification of her “self” in front of the mirror, but with the recovery of objects “that had surrounded her in her previous life” (8). This thoroughly denied and denigrated woman needs “to be looked at, spoken to, desired, as if she were a normal woman, not a
Trying to touch the sky with poetry

The reading intensity demanded by *The Lone Woman* is superior to that demanded by the author’s previous novel, *The Lone Man*. As in a poem, images and emotions are densely packed in this lyrical novel, and it is not just chance that the origin of this novel is in *Zeruak* (Skies, 1994), one of the “lectures” or “poetic sessions” that Atxaga, in an homage to his beloved Dylan Thomas, had often performed together with actors and singers during the nineties.

*Cover of Zeruak, Erein (Basque Country), 1994.*
whore—the role she had passively undertaken on her first night out of prison” (6–7). This is the reason why she so desperately seeks a sexual relationship as soon as she is free. As Foucault writes, sexuality is not something natural or biological, but rather a discourse that creates identities. That is why Irene tries to escape from the reality that uses sex violently to degrade her. The insults she continually receives from the policemen in the bus, the scorn with which the man she had sex with after coming out of prison treated her, the violent scenes of sadomasochistic practices shown in the movie on the bus—they all refer to the sexual abuse to which women are subjected in order to marginalize, objectify, and annihilate them.

There is another element that has an important mirroring function: the sky. From the very first few sentences, the descriptions of the sky symbolically reflect Irene’s moods. This is why at the beginning the reader finds that the sky “seemed to be made out of grey marble, like the top of a tomb” (3). Later on, when Irene’s thoughts turn negative and claustrophobic, the sky changes, as “if it really were a sheet and someone had been slashing at it with a knife” (28), or turns heavy, as if “made of quartz” (42), or becomes radiant blue during her nice dreams (49, 85, 90). It could be said, therefore, that The Lone Woman is a novel that contains a series of mirroring elements, such as mirrors, the sky, and even the movies shown during the bus journey, which reflect on the creation of the self, the struggle to reestablish the identity that has been denied to Irene.

Having decided to exist outside the parameters dictated by conventional life (she lived with a man outside marriage, never had children, separated, joined a military organization, and finally abandoned the organization to rehabilitate herself), Irene shares with her
traveling companions, the two nuns and the sick woman, the boundless solitude that her circumstances have determined. Hence the significance of the title, *The Lone Woman*. Irene is a lone woman, and as Paul Valéry said, a lone person is always in bad company.

That is why literature is so important for her: The books that she carries in her suitcase, that excellent collection of texts, help her survive life and jail (36) and seek closeness to the sky. This is precisely what Emile Michel Cioran said was the purpose of art, an attempt to reach the skies. And the sky is impossible to reach, as the reproduction of Michelangelo’s painting she carries in her suitcase signals. In the fresco that the Italian artist painted in the Sistine Chapel, God and Adam try to touch each other, but “despite all the efforts of both God and Adam, their fingers never touched” (11). It is a good metaphor for Irene’s past and present reality. (For example, in the first dream, we learn of what happened with Larrea.)

The anthology of texts that Atxaga includes in *The Lone Woman* stretches the limits of the novel, introducing voices that speak of solitude, prison, and reclusion. This “displacement” from the novelistic margins, this subversion of the limits of genre, takes place through the inclusion of texts by authors whose biographical circumstances (Emily Dickinson, Joseba Sarrionandia, the Basque writer and former member of ETA imprisoned in 1980 who escaped and has been in hiding ever since) or themes (i.e. a Carl Sandburg poem) somehow magnify the protagonist’s loneliness. As Irene moves physically farther away from jail, the poems seem to become more and more optimistic, life-enhancing, and in this way, reflective of the evolution of the main character, of the movement from her initial fear to the
The intertextuality that *The Lone Man* plays with, the references to the anarchist ideologue Kropotkin and to the revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai, speak of a revolutionary ideal, an ideal that, for these people, marked a clear separation from the predominant revolutionary ideology of their times. The real theme of *The Lone Man* is the loss of revolutionary ideals and slogans.

*Cover of Yalnız Adam (The lone man). Dost Kitabevi (Turkey), 2002.*
hopeful expectations she begins to harbor by the time she reaches Bilbao.

Another interesting displacement, one that adds weight to the proposition that *The Lone Woman* is a diasporic text, is the mingling of the narrator’s and the main character’s voices, the difficulty of establishing who is actually talking in some instances:

The thoughts that had just gone through her head had made her furious: her family, her friends, society itself—which was no more than an extension of the family—had been a refuge during her childhood, a kind of a carpet she could safely cross, without touching the city floor, without hurting herself, as the poem said, on the sharp stones of the labyrinth; but then, as a person grew and matured, that carpet began to wear thin, to unravel, or worse still, to become viscous, a sticky coating that stuck to your feet and stopped you moving. And woe to anyone who rebelled against that viscous substance! (Translated by Margaret Jull Costa, 21–22)

For Irene, to return home is to become an exile, to feel like tourist in her own country (17). And in that country, people live “with their flags and their noise” (24), and they will not forgive Irene her betrayal.

What awaited you in Bilbao? I’ll tell you, Irene. First, a cement wall with the words “informer” and “traitor” scrawled on it; second, the baleful looks and the hatred of your former friends; third, the pity of people of good conscience; fourth, insidious persecution by the police, trying in a thousand and one different ways to get information out of you; fifth, the indifference of that
family of yours who scarcely ever visited you while you were in prison. In a word, Irene, hell. (92)

Such people, such ideologies, as her friend Margarita states, belong “to the stagnant world of your former colleagues” (92). For this reason, Irene feels alienated from the nation, or “imagined political community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s term from *Imagined Communities*, the community of which she had felt a part of before. Her statement leaves no room for doubt: “my previous world doesn’t interest me at all,” she says. For a long time she has not read any newspapers or shown any interest in the news that reach her from the Basque Country: “they bored me” she states (92). What Irene is saying, in other words, is that she renounces an excluding, obsolete form of nationalism and all cultural manifestations that give it support—which is in line with what Anderson writes: “nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind.” (6)

CAMERON WATSON in his interesting article “Imagining E.T.A.” (in Douglass et al. 1999) writes: “There is no ‘eternal terrorist’ but rather terrorism is imagined, that is, formed and transformed within and in relation to representation…. I argue that terrorism, like the nation, is imagined and I explore ... some of the ways in which E.T.A. lives in the minds of people”. After analyzing aspects such as Hollywood and E.T.A., the representations of ETA in the media, and even the representations that the group itself encourages, Watson concludes that “it would seem that the terrain of imagining Basque political violence is shifting and that, with a wealth of future possibilities before it, Basque nationalism has actually begun the process of critically unmasking the eternal terrorist.”
The journey from Barcelona to Bilbao becomes, in the end, the protagonist’s internal journey. She has decided to free herself from the past that drove her to solitude. Even in what relates to love relationships, such as hers with Andoni, she feels she has been forgotten, that her wishes and hopes have been forgotten. That is why her luggage is so light. She took to jail the only thing that really helped her move forward: literature. Her journey through hell ends when, on reaching her destination, Irene feels she has the strength to assert herself and decides to take the risk and live. The sky that until then looked so threatening shows some clearing, and “despite the drizzle, she could just see the moon between two clouds” (120). It is a suggestive ending for a novel, a diasporic text that narrates a forgotten, invisible woman’s recovery of her “self.”

Lesson thirteen

LEARNING GOALS
1. To read and interpret Atxaga’s *The Lone Woman*.
2. To analyze the different textual strategies the author employs.
3. To be able interpret the novel as a diasporic text, using Foucault’s concept of heterotopia.
4. To consider the theme of ETA’s violence.

REQUIRED READING AND VIEWING

**SUGGESTED READING**

**WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION**
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you could choose another relevant topic.

1. Compare *The Lone Woman* with *The Lone Man*: Could both books be said to be diasporic texts? Why?
2. Watch Julio Medem’s movie and pay close attention to Bernardo Atxaga’s intervention. What is the relationship between his proposal for a “Basque city” (*Euskal hiria*) and the use of spatial heterotopias?
3. Can you see a connection between Medem’s movie and *The Lone Woman*? Discuss.
4. Is there a relationship in terms of the portrayal of space between the texts by Atxaga we have read for this course? Are there any coincidences? Discuss.
They say there is no better company than a good book. Kafka believed that, too, and he gave the following excuse to his friend Pollak when he forgot about him for a time: He had been engrossed with the reading of a good book, and he had not been able to put it down to answer his friend’s letters. Many Basque readers felt the same and avoided their friends when *Soinujolearen semea* (The accordion player’s son) came out in November 2003. One could say that Atxaga’s latest novel has the quality that Kafka demanded of good books: It is like an axe that cracks open the frozen sea we carry within.

The book received an overwhelming critical reception. Soon after its publication and translation into Spanish, a great number of reviews and articles appeared in the national and international media. *Soinujolearen semea* received the Spanish Critics’ prize. There is no doubt that the book was eagerly awaited. Atxaga had been keeping his readers waiting since *Groenlandiako lezioa* (The Greenland lecture). Although the novel is almost five hundred pages long, it is one of those fast-paced books that one reads without noticing its length. The lines from the Bertolt Brecht poem “Do not Let Them Fool You!”—“Life’s all earth has to offer / There’s no life after this”—introduce the novel’s element of duality. There are two narrative planes, two realities.

**NARRATIVE DUALITY**

Like its predecessor *Obabakoak*, *Soinujolearen semea* is a fragmentary text. However, although, like the former book, it combines different narrative threads, it has greater narrative unity. It reads more like a traditional novel. Fragmentation, which Theodor W. Adorno saw as
a feature of the avant-garde and which Barthes saw as a characteristic of the modern world, is a distinguishing feature of Atxaga’s work. The fragmentary nature of his writing turns *Soinujolearen semea* into what Barthes called a “scriptible text”: a text that readers must make their own, organizing the plot as they read. And mimicking the story in *Obabakoak* that begins “A long time ago, when we were young and green” (151), the novel opens with an anecdote that takes place in the school in the village of Obaba and introduces the main characters: David, the narrator, and his friend Joseba. From that scene, which takes place in 1957, we are transported to 1999, to the Stoneham Ranch in Tulare County, California. (The name “Stoneham” is highly significant: In 1937, four thousand Basque children took up residence in refugee camp in a field in North Stoneham, near Southampton, UK.) David has just died, and his friend Joseba has been there for the last month. A year later, he decides to rewrite and expand his friend’s memoir, entitled *Soinujolearen semea*. The resulting text is the novel that readers hold in their hands, in which the words of the book written by David mix with those of his many friends.

The mingling of voices, the difficulty in identifying the speaker, are characteristics of postmodern literature. Already in *Etiopia* (1978), the author had said that it was no longer possible to write in the first person, because the “I” in the text has become an domineering literary voice and point of reference in modern Western literature. By fragmenting the narrative voice and introducing many different narrative levels from the beginning, this novel can be seen to illustrate what Jean Baudrillard called “the death of the subject.”

The book is divided into five sections. The first is entitled “Hasiera” (Beginning), the second, “Izenak”
(Names). In “Izenak,” David introduces his life at the Stoneham Ranch and his family (his daughters, Sara and Liz, his uncle, Juan, and his wife and muse, Mary Ann), as well as his childhood friends (Lubis and others). This section mainly deals with his wife, Mary Ann, and concisely tells the story of the nine days in the spring of 1983 when they met in San Francisco. The passages about Lubis and his friends mostly concern their childhood experiences in Obaba and relate an anecdote that revisits the atmosphere in “Post Tenebras Spero Lucem,” one of the stories in Obabakoak.

The third section, entitled “Ikatz-koxkorra” (The lump of coal), is split into seventeen subsections and contains two other separate narratives: “Obabako lehen amerikanoa” (The First American in Obaba) and “Pirpo et Txanberlain, hiltzaileak” (Pirpo and Txanberlain, murderers). These sections deal mainly with the land of David’s youth, Obaba. They tell of the things that happened in his adolescent years at school, in the 1960s. The main character, David, remembers when he was thirteen and lived surrounded by “happy farmers” in the green “bucolic” valley of Iruain, in Obaba (75). As the narrator says, he lived in a dreamlike state in the youthful paradise of Obaba, akin to the ones that enter our heads through “the ivory door” (see The Aeneid), until he found out about the firing-squad executions that took place during the Spanish Civil War. The Hotson hat he finds in the hiding place in his house and the list of those executed by firing squad that Teresa gives him aid David’s awakening and turn his dreams into ashes. That is why the different sections have such meaningful titles—for example. “Ikatz-koxkorra” (The lump of coal) or “Egur pusketa kiskalia” (A chunk of scorched wood). What is told in them burns like the fires of hell, reducing David’s dreams to ashes. He achieves awakening,
therefore, by denouncing the “deficiencies” (castration) of his father——the self-styled source of reason——. These deficiencies turn the father into a coward and a snitch. The sections “Obabako lehen amerikanoa” and “Pirpo eta Txanberlain, hiltzaile” complete this chronicle of the cruelty of the Spanish Civil War. In the first, we learn how Don Pedro, the original owner of the Alaska Hotel, who made his fortune in the mines of Vancouver, escaped from the fascists with the help of Uncle Juan. In the second narrative, we are introduced to the macabre doings of two characters who in the years from 1936 to 1940 killed with impunity. During one of their missions, Pirpo and Txanberlain kill a couple in the snow after giving them hope for survival. This section will bring to many readers’ minds the story “The Crevasse” in Obabakoak, which Atxaga “plagiarized” from the French author Auguste Villiers d’Isle-Adam’s “Torture par espérance.”

The fourth section, “Egur pusketa kiskalia” (A chunk of scorched wood) could be defined as the novel’s second hell. Many events of the 1970s are mentioned, and there are references to other features of that era, such as the song “Susie Q,” by Creedence Clearwater Revival (285). These form the background of David’s university years. The discovery of love happens at the same time as the discovery of the death of a friend, Lubis. This fictional event echoes the death of Mikel Zabaltza, a member of ETA detained by the Guardia Civil, which hours later released a note to two newspapers saying that Zabaltza had been tortured to death, only to announce the next day that he had escaped. A few weeks later, his body was found in a stretch of the Bidasoa River that had been carefully searched on four occasions on the previous days. When David hears the news, he hides an ETA commando in the hiding place in Iruain.
Bernardo Atxaga  

Soinujolearen semea

Touching paradise with your fingertips  

“Soinujolearen semea [The accordion player’s son] is a memoir, a social-realist novel, a Virgilian invocation of paradise, a love story, an invented autobiography, a lament, and more. It is a long novel, but its narrative pull is such that you want it never to end, and its beauty, scope, and magisterial craft destine it for the ranks of the Western canon. It is the first great Basque novel.” (From a review by Amaia Gabantxo, *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 13, 2004.)

Cover of Soinujolearen semea, *designed by Jose Ordoñika. Pamiela (Basque Country) 2003.*
The narrative “Bigarren barne eskaintza: Tximeleta” (Second private offering: A butterfly) completes the fourth section. Using the “Basque Butterflies” deck of cards made by one of the ETA commandoes, the narrator makes the second private offering of the novel. The presence of butterflies is very important in this novel and, as Atxaga remarked in an interview in *El Diario Vasco* (January 18, 2004), in ancient Greek, the word butterfly (*psyche*) refers both to the insect and the mind. Surely, the intention of this novel, lithe and fast as a butterfly’s flight, is to encourage readers to make use of their minds.

The last section of the book is called “Abuztuko egunak” (Days of August). It starts at the Stoneham Ranch, in the days that precede David’s death. His last memories concern his days as a terrorist with his brothers-in-arms Triku (Agustin) and Etzebarria (Joseba) during the time when they lived in the French Basque Country. The amnesties and exiles of the following years were a direct result of the betrayals and the imprisonments of 1976–77. “Euskadi askatzearen aldeko mugimendua eta Toshiro” (The movement for the freedom of the Basque Country and Toshiro) completes the section and is followed by Joseba’s “Hiru aitorpen” (Three confessions). The novel ends with the narrative “Don Pedro Galarretak 1936ko abuztuaren 15ean gertatutako esku berezko mugimendua kontatzen du” (Don Pedro Galarreta tells what happened on August 15, 1936), which invites the reader to think about the relationship between fiction and reality.

**Obaba: The Lost Arcadia of the Past**
One of the keys to Atxaga’s literary universe is the concept of the frontier. The word “frontier” appears in the title of one of poems in Atxaga’s well-known poetry collection, *Etiopía*, “37 galdera mugaz bestalde dudan
kontaktu bakarrari” (37 questions for my only contact on the other side of the frontier), and in the collection *Frontera permeable* (Permeable frontier, 2003). It could be said that meditating about different types of frontiers has spurred his literary creativity. The frontiers between genres, for example, were the inspiration for hybrid texts such as *Henry Bengoa inventarium* (1996) and *Groenlandiako lezioa* (1998), and the frontiers between fantasy and realism served to reaffirm the Borgesian definition of fantastic literature (see Bernardo Atxaga, “Abecedarium haur literaturari buruz,” [An alphabet about children’s literature], *Jakin* 41, 1986). In his later poems, too, such as those collected in *Poemas & híbridos* (1990), Atxaga dealt with the tensions between frontiers:

*Bizitzak ez du etsitzen*
*ezpada muga latzetan;*
*ezpadu Oihanarekin egiten amets,*
*egiten du Desertuarekin.*

*Life knows only*
*of thorny extremes.*
*When not Jungle*
*Desert. It dreams no more.*

Spatial frontiers are also important, because of the symbolic significance of the use of space in Atxaga’s work, especially as regards the “other spaces” that continually appear in his books. Among those “other” spaces are both utopian spaces, and Foucaultian heterotopian spaces.

I believe that the investigation of heterotopias in contemporary Basque narratives, especially novels written since the 1990s, multiplies the interpretive possibilities of them in interesting ways. It could be said that
Obaba: The lost Arcadia of the past
Obaba looks like paradise in *Soinujolearen semea* (The accordion player’s son). And this Obaba is not merely the scenario of incredible events of the earlier fantastic narratives, but rather the premodern world that the “I” has not yet invaded. The inhabitants of Obaba have different values, and the novel addresses their world in the only possible way: by expressing each character and each world with a distinctive voice.

*An Illustration by Bernardo Atxaga. Pamiela (Spain), 2004.*

there has been a leap from the imaginary non-urban geographies of the 1980s (Atxaga’s Obaba, Aristi’s Belandia) to literary spaces organized apart from the nucleus of power—heterotopias—in some of the more meaningful novels of the last few years. Some examples are Anjel Lertxundi’s mental institution in *Argizariaren egunak* (Days of wax, 1998), Koldo Izagirre’s and Hasier Etxeberria’s jails in *Agrre zaharraren kartzelaldi berriak*
(The reimprisonment of old Agirre, 1999) and Arrainak ura baino (Like fish to water, 1999), the old couple’s home in Unai Elorriaga’s Sp-rako tranbia (A streetcar to SP, 2001), and, as we’ve seen, Atxaga’s Gizonak bere bakardadean (The Lone Man, 1993) and Zeru horiek (The Lone Woman, 1995). We should complete this list with Joseba Sarrionandia’s Lagun izoztua (The frozen friend, 2001), where the word “heterotopia” appears explicitly.

But utopias have also had their place in Atxaga’s work. The critics understood immediately what the title of his first collection of poetry, Etiopia (1978), meant: utopia. Another utopia stands out in Soinujolearen semea: paradise. The landscape surrounding the Stoneham Ranch is fertile and welcoming. As in the Garden of Eden, three rivers run through it, and the lush vegetation is dominated by sequoias. Since its discovery around the time of the Renaissance, America became the New World that the Europeans had been dreaming about, and it was precisely in this way that the idea of America was sold to the travelers, adventurers, and even colonizers of the era, through dreams and anecdotes that spread like fire. Centuries later, this was still the case (see, for example, Kafka’s novel America).

David will try to start anew on the Stoneham Ranch, as an exile from the Basque Country—or rather, the paradi siacal Californian setting will give him a chance to start anew. (This is how Atxaga interpreted paradise in his interview with Estibaliz Ezkerra in “Paradisuaz,” Garag-Mugalari, January 31, 2004) Mary Ann will enable David to create and write about that paradise. He names her as the muse of his song, and his descriptions of her leave no room for doubt. Mary Ann has “North Cape eyes” and “Thule lips” (33). In other words, she contains within her the frontiers of the world. The references
here are to Thule, which was for a time thought to be the world’s last frontier, and to the North Cape, the northernmost point in Europe, in northern Norway.

The second main space in this novel also looks like paradise: Obaba. And this Obaba is not merely the scene of incredible events of the earlier fantastic narratives, but rather the premodern world the “I” has not yet invaded. Repeating what he wrote in his 1998 essay “Obaba monde secret,” Atxaga’s narrator in Soinujolearen semea states that the inhabitants of Obaba had never heard words such as “depressed,” “paranoid,” “neurotic,” or “obsessive” (64), but that they were able to name each apple and butterfly by their proper names. These people have different values, and the novel addresses their world in the only possible way: by expressing each character and each world with a distinctive voice. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that the novel is a polyphonic genre and that it is precisely this abundance of voices that allows each text to portray the different ideologies of its time.

That is why the protagonist, David, paraphrases L. P. Hartley’s The Go-Between (1953) on several occasions: “The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.” In the end, he does not belong to the group of “happy farmers” that Virgil praised so highly. As a matter of fact, there are many references to this poet in this lost Arcadia of the past, this Obaba of our imagination. Just as Dante was guided by him on his descent into hell, David is guided by Virgil in his passage through the hell that is Obaba. Many aspects of Virgil are mentioned in the novel: his vanity (15), his belief in voices that announce premonitions (32), his admiration for the almost too happy farmers (64), and, as we have noted, the dreams that enter our heads through the “ivory doors” mentioned in The Aeneid (76). And if this weren’t enough, there is also the description of
the bucolic valley of Iruain on page 75 (see. Virgil’s *Eclogues*), in which the narrator goes as far as to say that nymphs and other beings can be found in its forests. But the spell this paradise puts on the novel is broken when Bruna, the daughter of the forest keeper, is “found” by the “happy farmers” Ubanbe, Sebastian, and Pantxo. The nouns and adjectives used in the scene announce what is about to happen in the forest:

The forest grew darker and darker. The branches of the trees linked forming a cupola of leaves that drew the brightness of the day into its core. And the earth was damp, muddy under the musk and the grass, and it seemed from its softness that it was so because of some inner stream in the earth itself; that it was living, organic matter, perhaps some sort of flesh, and that the slugs we kept on finding along the tracks were fragments of that same matter…. “Bruna, the forest keeper’s daughter… . No girl around here can match her athletic body.” From my perspective Joseba’s description didn’t seem very accurate. She had long, strong legs, but was quite fat from the waist up; she looked more like a nymph from an old painting than an athlete from the late twentieth century. But despite everything, she was a twentieth-century girl and she was lathering some cream on. (340, 342)

As Claudio Magris wrote in *Utopia e disincanto*, at the turn of the millennium, all utopias carry disenchantment within them, because utopias do not last forever:

The end and the beginning of the millennium need utopia hand in hand with disenchantment…. Utopia means not to forget all those anonymous victims, the
millions of people who died throughout the centuries as a result of unspeakable violence, who have been condemned to oblivion and whose names have not been registered in the annals of history... Utopia and disenchantment have to sustain and correct each other before challenging each other. (Translated by Amaia Gabantxo, 11, 12.)

As we will see in the following sections, the victims who transform utopia into disenchantment in *Soinujolearen semea* are the people who suffered the consequences of the Spanish Civil War.

REALITY VERSUS FICTION
There are many scenes in *Soinujolearen semea* in which the boundaries between reality and fiction are put into question. Thus, the behavior of the boxer Ubanbe brings to mind that of the real-life boxer Urtain, and Lubis’s death of the real-life death of Mikel Zabaltza. Many of the events we read about really took place, such as the famous boxing match between Cassius Clay and Sonny Liston (71) and the one that took place in Reno between Paulino Uzkudun and Max Baer (16) in 1931.

The use of historical memory, revisiting the past, often has an ethical objective in *Soinujolearen semea*. The narrative suspense is organized around people and events that determine our present history (the lies behind the bombing of Gernika, the political and cultural repression after the Spanish Civil War, the clandestine groups), with a view to doing away with all epic notions and destroying overinflated heroic narratives. There are examples of this intention in many of the novel’s narratives, in particular in the two brilliant stories about the first American in Obaba.
The critic Inaxio-Lopez de Arana wrote an interesting article in *Berria* (February 1, 2004) about the real person on whom the character Don Pedro is based. He was the Republican representative in the Arabako Foru Aldundia, the regional government of the province of Araba (Álava in Spanish), Pedro Salinas Arregi (1887–1962). In the novel, Don Pedro finds a silver seam in a mine in the

Gernika: a massacre of unarmed civilians

“George Steer, correspondent for the *Times* of London, filed a story that ran two days later in both his paper and the *New York Times*. The world was horrified—outraged at the ruthless massacre of unarmed civilians but also terrified at its first glimpse of the warfare of the future.


Gernika, *by Pablo Picasso*. 
little village of Alice Arm, next to the Alaskan border. Other aspects of the life of this character coincide with the historical character, though: Pedro Salinas Arregi returned to Galarreta because of his father’s ill health, and by the time he got there, his brother Baldomero had died in an accident—he then married in Galarreta and never returned to Canada.

The events of August 6, 1936 related in Soinujolearen semea are fictitious. Although the scene and the development of the events have been altered, however, the names of the teachers the fascists captured has not: Bernardino, Miguel, and Mauricio. Their fate coincides with the event narrated in the last section of the novel, “Don Pedro Galarreta Tells What Happened on 15 August 1936”: The Francoist militiamen took the three teachers to the forest and killed them by firing squad. The American managed to escape. He hid in the house of some relatives of the Bakaikun family and gained the protection of two men who were very important at that time in Araba.

Soinujolearen semea offers us two versions of the same event in order to bring about a metaliterary meditation on the relationship between literature and reality: “reality is sad and literature improves it” (464). The idea is to encourage the realization that literature and history are but narrative discourses that offer an interpretation of events—particularly with regard to the interpretations imposed by those in power, as Foucault demonstrated. This is why the references to Gernika and the events that took place there are key elements in the narration: The narrator wants to establish that for the first time in history, in Gernika, a civilian population was targeted and massacred with a military aim and that many of the assertions and discourses surrounding this cruel event
were based on lies. The novel’s moral dimension is undoubtedly a result of this stand.

ATXAGA VERSUS IRAZU
As Barthes wrote in his 1968 essay “The Death of the Author,” in literature, the birth of the reader must come at the cost of the death of the author. *Soinujolearen semea* marks a new direction in Atxaga’s literary development along these lines. It is related to the disappearance of the author himself, to the undoing of the author as a literary strategy, and not to the debate that occurred in the Basque media when Atxaga announced in an interview that he wished to renounce his nom de plume, Bernardo Atxaga, and start writing under his real name, Joseba Irazu. (He has not yet started doing so.) As Keats said, poets live only in their texts, and if we accept that, then all literary texts become a number of never-ending references that make homage to other texts. These references take us to other texts by Atxaga in this novel, and almost without realizing it, we encounter tales, characters, and events that are explicit references to and echoes from his earlier works.

Here are some examples. Readers will recognize Old Martin from *Bi letter jaso nituen oso denpora gutxian* (Two letters all at once) in the reference, early in the novel (44) to the shepherd who went to the United States. They will also see Daniel and Paulo from *Two Brothers* reflected in the characters of Lubis and Pantxo, and even kind-hearted Teresa from the same book, who has turned quite evil in this incarnation (the Teresa of *Soinujolearen semea* is more similar to the sinister Carmen of *Two Brothers*). Readers will also be reminded of Carlos and his hotel from the *Lone Man* by the members of David’s commando and recall the main narrative motif from *The Lone Woman*—“his fingers touched
Thousands of Basques in Exile

“In July of 1937, the President of the Basque Government went into exile after the bombings of Durango, Gernika, and the fall of Bilbao, just one year into the Spanish Civil War.... With the military fall of Catalonia, the Basque Government-in-exile moved its operation to Paris, where between 1936 and 1939 Rafael Picavea had created an information network in favor of the Basques and the republican cause, including the publication of the newspaper *Euzko Deya* beginning in November 1936.... The *Lehendakari*, or President, Dr. José Antonio de Aguirre, escaped to Barcelona and eventually to Paris, while he and his officers organized the exile of over 150,000 Basques, including approximately 30,000 orphans and children traveling.
mine." Other recognizable references are the character of Sergeant Amiani from Ipuin hau italieraz ikasi izenekoa (The tale I learned in Italian), and the echoes of Tres declaraciones (Three declarations) in the section entitled Hiru aitorpen (Three confessions).

Thus, in this complex web of references, readers repeatedly visualize Atxaga’s literary universe. And as soon as they realize these transtextual links, readers note that apart from plagiarizing others’ characters and titles, Atxaga is plagiarizing himself, and that he has no problem replagiarizing his own plagiarism of the French author Villiers d’Isle-Adam’s short story “Torture par espérance,” which in Obabakoak became “The Crevasse,” and converting it into “Pirpo eta Txanberlain, hiltzaileak” (Pirpo and Txanberlain, murderers). Also, many anecdotes that take place in the small classroom in Obaba are familiar to us from “Post Tenebras Spero Lucem.” The reference to the wheel of time from Behi euskaldun baten memoriak (Memoirs of a Basque cow) can be read between the lines, and the naïf passages that describe Obaba and the Stoneham Ranch can be said to relate to that book, too.

As the author has said, Soinujolearen semea contains all of his books. He undoes Atxaga the writer so that readers can encounter the Atxaga that lives in his texts and, with him, the literary accomplices that he invokes without their parents. None were ever admitted into the United States.” (Gloria Totoricagüena, “The Delegation of the Basque Government-in-exile in the United States,” www.euskonews.com/0252zbk/kosmo25201.html)

again and again: Bertolt Brecht, Dylan Thomas, Cesare Pavese, Leonard Cohen, and many others. Andrew Marvell’s couplet from “To His Coy Mistress,” “The grave’s a fine and private place, / But none I think do there embrace,” too, is invoked: “She knew, even though she hadn’t read it anywhere, that time hurts: that the embraces not given in this world do not take place in the grave” (343). It is very well suited to David’s desire to confess his love to Virginia. The relationship between love and death is important in the novel, because the confirmation of Virginia’s love arrives at the same time as Lubis’s death, and meeting Mary Ann coincides with the death of Helen’s father.

There are also references to the Basque poet Xabier Lizardi. The clandestine pamphlet “Miss Obaba eta bere damak: Obabako neska politenak” (Miss Obaba and her ladies: The most beautiful girls in Obaba, 304), which David and his friends spread around town, does not have the same aim as the text “Andereño Izardi” (Miss Izardi), which the Basque poet published in 1930, but I believe they are related.

Intertextual references also include the “Basque Butterflies” card game that is mentioned in the chapter “Bigarren barne ezkaintza: Tximeleta (Second private offering: A butterfly). The character known as Papi in the novel is based on Eujenio Etxebeste, an entomologist and ETA member who published a card game with the same name in 1973: Euskalerriko tximeletak (Basque butterflies). Soinujolearen semea is a chant to love and death and gives voice to lost characters and worlds. For these and many other reasons, it will break the ice in many readers’ hearts.
Lesson fourteen

LEARNING GOALS
1. To read and analyze Bernardo Atxaga’s Soinujolearen semea.
2. To consider the novel as the end of one of Atxaga’s literary cycles.
3. To undertake a comparative reading of the novel and place it in the context of the author’s literary development.
4. To consider the ways in which the novel explores dichotomies such as history/fiction, reality/fiction and paradise/hell.

REQUIRED READING

SUGGESTED READING

WRITTEN LESSON FOR SUBMISSION
Write a two-to-three-page essay on one of the topics below. Alternatively, you can choose another relevant topic.
1. Read Atxaga’s poem “Egun finlandiar bat / Un día finlandés” and compare its portrayal of paradise with that of Soinujolearen semea. Would you say that paradise for the poem’s narrator means the possibility of starting again? Would you say that the lines
“Parabisuan fru itu eder asko daude / baina infernua ere hantxe egon daiteke” (There are many delectable fruits in Paradise / but Hell may be there too) are applicable to the literary universe of *Soinujolearen semea*?

2. In what sense can it be said that *Soinujolearen semea* concludes a phase in the author’s oeuvre?

3. The novel makes many references to the bombing of Gernika. Consider what the author’s objective may be and discuss it in the light of the following assertion: “New historicism ... may be defined as a recognition of the extent to which history is textual and as a rejection of the autonomy of the literary text and of the objectivity of Interpretation in general” Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, 112.

4. Boxing is often mentioned in the novel. Referring to Muhammad Ali’s phrase, “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” Atxaga has stated that the novel reads like a butterfly’s flight, but that, at times, it can also knock the reader out. Do you agree? What has been your experience as a reader of Atxaga’s work?
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