

REVIEW

BERNARDO ATXAGA, OBABAKOAK*by Harriet Hulme*

In 1992, Bernardo Atxaga's *Obabakoak*, a collection of short stories about a mythical village in the Basque Country, was translated into English, to great acclaim. Nearly twenty years later, in January 2011, the announcement of a ceasefire by Basque Separatist group ETA has led to a number of articles, each accompanied by a picture of three masked figures, fists raised, in front of a poster emblazoned with ETA's motto, *Bietan Jarrai* ("Keep up on both"). While the 'mythology' of this image concentrates and accentuates elements of violence and hostility, *Obabakoak* offers a different perspective, one which encourages us, as readers, to look beyond the masks.

Atxaga begins *Obabakoak* by discussing the Basque dialect which has 'no sisters anywhere on Earth' and each story he tells reflects the similarly unique elements of the Basque culture. *Obabakoak* translates as 'People from Obaba', and it is the rich, varied characters who bring this text to life. From the self-hating dwarf trapped by his own intellect, to the schoolteacher lying awake every night listening for the whistle of the train driven by her lover, these are individual portraits which are idiosyncratic, but never reductive. His characters are themselves writers and storytellers – the text abounds with diary extracts and letters – each offering a different set of words to reveal their own perspective on the community they inhabit.

Obabakoak is a text precisely about the central role language, and literature, play in the preservation of cultural autonomy. Atxaga 'resurrects' the 17th Century Basque writer Axular, who calls for his modern compatriots to engage in 'plagiarism' – the rewriting of stories from other languages into Basque – in order to breathe new life into an increasingly isolated literary culture. Metatextually, Atxaga is responding to this call. Taking a leaf from *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, he intersperses the tale of a journey back to Obaba with pastiches and parodies of stories by authors as diverse as Dante and Théophile Gautier. In this wonderful, affirmative, intertextual game, the literary boundaries which separate Basque culture from its European neighbours are dissolved without being destroyed.

Given his focus on the Basque language, Atxaga's decision to allow his text to be widely translated may appear paradoxical. Yet it is this which enables *Obabakoak* to disrupt the mythology of the newspaper image. Lawrence Venuti suggests that a 'translated text should be the site where a different culture emerges, where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other'.¹ Both linguistically and semantically, *Obabakoak* achieves precisely this; in translation, place names – *Zumargain*, *Etxeberi*, *Ostatu* – remain in Basque, leaping out of the text because of their linguistic singularity. *Obabakoak* is thus a powerful text not only because of what it says but also because of what it does not say: the words which remain untranslated, and which hint at the gaps between what we may think we know about a culture, and the distinctive details which can never be reduced to a soundbite beneath a photo of three masked men.

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Ph.D, Department of French

¹ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) p.306