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Luisa Etxenike's Trilogy on Terrorism

Agnieszka Gutthy, PhD

ETA, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, was founded in 1959 in Bilbao, the capital city of Bizkaia in Northern Spain. Emerging out of a shared interest in promoting the study of Basque history and culture as well as Sabino Arana's nationalist ideology, it quickly evolved into a paramilitary group.¹ ETA began engaging in armed activities, and in 1968, the group committed its first killings. One of the first victims was Melitón Manzananas, a secret police chief who had worked to repress the opposition to Franco dictatorship. Between 1968 and 1975, ETA assassinated forty-three people, including Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, the sure successor to Franco.² The spectacular nature of such attacks, the identity of its victims, and the harsh response of the regime—including the Burgos process or the executions of ETA members in 1975—gave

¹ The first fractures within ETA emerged in 1965, during the IV Assembly. They derived from the differences between one sector which gave more importance to nationalist issues and another which was more interested in the armed activity. Finally, the Assembly ratified the use of violence as a necessary instrument to achieve ETA's political objectives.

² Roncesvalles Labiano JuanGarcia, "La víctimas de ETA en el cine y la narrative literaria," in *Las narrativas del terrorismo: Cómo contamos, cómo transmitimos, cómo entendemos*, ed. Antonio Rivera and Eduardo Mateo (Kindle ed., Los Libros De La Catarata, 2020).

prominence to ETA in the last years of Francoism.³ However, after decades of assassinations, kidnaping, and bombing in attacks that took the lives of 829 victims, the initial perceptions of the etarras as freedom fighters changed. People began viewing them as terrorists.

In 2011, ETA declared the definitive cessation of its armed operations. The end of ETA terrorism has led to the emergence of a body of literature that reflects on these years of violence, fear, and suffering, such as: Gabriela Ybarra *El comensal* (The Diner, 2015), Estela Baz *Los niños de Lemóniz* (Lemoniz's Children, 2019), Edurne Portela *Mejor la ausencia* (Better the Absence, 2017), Fernando Aramburu *Patria* (Homeland, 2016), Ramon Saizarbitoria *Martutene* (2012), and Luisa Etxenike *Absoluta presencia* (Absolute Presence, 2018).

Luisa Etxenike, writer and journalist was born in San Sebastian in Guipúzcoa province in the Basque Country. She was born during the Franco dictatorship at the time when ETA emerged as a terrorist group within the Basque and Spanish social scene. Etxenike writes in Spanish but as a part of the Basque literary community. Etxenike has published numerous books, including novels *Aves del Paraíso* (Birds of Paradise, 2019), *Absoluta presencia* (Absolute Presence, 2018), *La entrevista* (Interview, 2016), *El detective de sonidos* (The Sound Detective, 2011), *El ángulo ciego* (Blind Spot, 2009), *Los peces negros* (The Black Fish, 2005), *Vino* (Wine, 2000), *El mal más grave* (The Worst Evil, 1997), *Efectos secundarios* (Side Effects, 1996). Etxenike is the author of a collection of short stories, *Ejercicios de duelo* (Grief Exercises, 2001), and *La historia de amor de Margarita Maura* (Love Story of Margarita Maura, 1990) as well as a book of poetry *El arte de la pesca* (The Art of Fishing, 2015). She also wrote a stage play, *La herencia* (The Inheritance) which received the Buero Vallejo Award in 2016. She translates French literature into Spanish and in 2007 the French Government bestowed on her the distinction of Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters. Etxenike's work portraying the victims of gender violence and terrorism has attracted attention in academic and literary circles in the Basque Country and abroad. Interviews, reviews, and articles discussing her writings have been published in the cultural section of *El diario vasco* and *El País*. She has been a visiting scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and in New York at Columbia University.

In an interview, Etxenike said that for her, literature is the art of reply.⁴ To clarify, she further quoted the words of Albert Camus, who said that the writer must stand not on the side of those who make history, but of those who endure it.⁵ Such is Etxenike's viewpoint in her three novels that reflect on ETA terrorist violence and its consequences; in these novels, Etxenike moves

³ Ibid.

⁴ Luisa Etxenike, interview by Pilar Rodriguez, professor of Deusta University, July 26, 2012, Luisa Etxenike's official webpage, www.luisaetxenike.net

⁵ Ibid.

away from the portrayal of terrorists and towards the portrayal of victims.

ETA terrorism, and the still fresh wounds it inflicted on the society, stamp all the novels of the trilogy. The first novel, *El ángulo ciego*, was awarded the Basque Literature Prize in 2009. It deals directly with a terrorist attack and its consequences by confronting the immediate damage caused by the death of a loved one. The three stories that comprise *Absoluta presencia* (Absolute Presence, 2018) investigate the effect of terrorism on the people who suffered as a reflection on exile and memory. *Aves del Paraíso* (Birds of Paradise 2019) is Etxenike's latest novel and the one which completes her trilogy on Basque conflict. If the first two novels can be said to portray the victims and their striving to come to terms with their trauma, the last one concentrates on the offender and his tribulations with the broader lens of individual responsibility for violence. The themes of fear, shame, and guilt permeate the entire trilogy. If one were to summarize the major themes around which each novel of the trilogy is organized in just one word, it would be "fear" in *El ángulo ciego*, "watching, seeing" in *Absoluta presencia*, and "shame" in *Aves del Paraíso*.

El ángulo ciego tells the story of Martín, whose father, a bodyguard protecting a Basque politician, was assassinated by ETA. The focus of the novel is not on the victim of the violent attack but on the survivors of this violence and their processes of reconciliation with themselves. These are Martín and his mother Miren who suffer emotional distress from the death of the father and husband. It is Martín who tries to assimilate the news of his father's death, by navigating between the feelings of anger, guilt, and fear, by inventing fictions that will help him accept his situation.⁶ The story is told in two parts: "La novela" (The Novel) and "Versión original" (Original Version). By structuring the story this way, Etxenike combines two narrative plans: that of desire (The novel) and that of reality (Original version). The first part narrates the reactions of the adolescent Martín after the assassination of his father, including his desire to avenge his father's death and inflict on the offenders the same feeling of fear that he suffered. The second part focuses on the meeting between Martín and his mother two days after the burial of his father. The first part is a fiction created by Martín, the result of which is an artistic alteration of facts. Only in the second part is the true story told of how ten years prior, an adolescent Martín had seen two men approaching him and his father on the street. Convinced that they were two terrorists, Martín, fearful for his life, escaped to a local store, leaving his father at the mercy of the presumed assassins. Not being able to cope with his feelings of fear, guilt and shame, Martín eventually left San Sebastian and moved to Paris. He comes back only when his father is actually gunned down and killed on the streets of San

⁶ Vicente Carrión Arregui, "Literatura y violencia política," in *Las narrativas del terrorismo: Cómo contamos, cómo transmitimos, cómo entendemos*. ed. Antonio Rivera and Eduardo Mateo (Kindle ed., Los Libros De La Catarata, 2020).

Sebastian. Martín turns to fiction in order to retell the story and exorcise his feelings of guilt, shame, and hatred towards himself for what he thinks was an act of his unforgivable cowardice: “Because it is not fear for my father that I feel but fear for myself. Fear of dying too or in his place, from that day when I entered through one door and ran out the other. Two doors. Feeling fear for myself and facing my cowardice.”⁷ It is Martín’s mother Miren who asks him to reflect and find the strength to return to normality. She doesn’t want to let his father’s killers win by taking away his happiness.

Fear is the most prominent motif around which the entire novel is organized. It is fear with which Miren must live - even before the assassination of her husband. She will not look through the window to see her husband leaving for work because she is afraid that one day, they will kill him and the last image she will have of him would be his back. Martín is afraid to walk on the street with his father, and thus become a collateral victim of an attack. It is fear that breaks the protagonist in two: Martín in “The novel,” the first part of the story, is different from Martín in the second part, or the “Original Version.” Etxenike wrote about this difference in her article “Escribir con el terrorismo” (Writing with terrorism): “Fear invites many situations, many impersonations, also because it casts an image of ourselves that we do not want to see.”⁸ It is not only the protagonist who is broken but also the structure of the story. “There is not one story, but two, because the character is split, split in two by the fear caused by the terrorist threat on his father.”⁹ The victimization exists on multiple levels: of the assassinated bodyguard, of Martín, his son and of Miren, his wife.

Absoluta presencia, the second novel, takes up the issue of ETA terrorist violence and tells three intertwined stories. The first story is that of Luc, who battles with the memories of his childhood and his constant fears though the motives of his trauma are unclear. While walking along the streets of Paris, Luc comes across a photo exhibition and is captivated by the blue color and the content of the photographs. It is this exhibition that connects Luc to the second story, that of Ada, the artist behind the photographs. Many of the photographs portray a man in pajamas who is looking but it is unknown at what or at whom his gaze is directed. Ada is not Parisian but a Basque who arrived in Paris years ago. The third story is that of Andrés, Ada’s

⁷ “Porque no es miedo por mi padre lo que siento sino miedo por mí. Miedo a morir yo también en su lugar, desde aquel día en que entré por una puerta y salí corriendo por la otra. Dos puertas. Miedo por mí y la comprensión de mi cobardía.” Etxenique, *El ángulo ciego* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 2008), 136.

⁸ “El miedo invita a muchas situaciones, a muchas suplantaciones, también porque nos arroja una imagen de nosotros mismos que no queremos ver.” Etxenike, “Escribir con el terrorismo” in *Las narrativas del terrorismo: Cómo contamos, cómo transmitimos, cómo entendemos*. ed. Antonio Rivera and Eduardo Mateo (Kindle ed., Los Libros De La Catarata, 2020).

⁹ “No hay una historia, sino dos, porque el personaje está escindido, Partido en dos por el miedo que le produce la amenaza de los terroristas sobre su padre.” Ibid.

father, a PSE (Socialist Party of the Basque Country) militant lawyer. Andrés fled with his family to Paris to escape the ETA terrorist threat. Ada was still a small child when her parents moved to Paris. Little has been said at home about it and it is only when she is faced with the incomprehensible illness of her mother that her father decides to tell her the reasons for leaving San Sebastian. The tragic past is that of Ada's parents, and not hers. However, this past is her inheritance, and it inspires her new form of artistic expression against indifference and oblivion.

Aves del Paraíso, the third and final novel, continues the themes of guilt and shame felt by those who reflect on their own passivity in the face of ETA violence. Miguel, the protagonist of the novel, does exactly that. Such reflection and the sudden realization of his own responsibility and shame for what he had done, and even more for what he had not done, makes him experience brutal dissent from himself.

All three novels use “visual metaphors”¹⁰ or some kind of reference to visibility, looking, or seeing. The title of the first novel, *El ángulo ciego*, or “the blind spot,” indicates the point outside of a car that rearview mirrors cannot reflect. This refers to a safe space of refuge that Martín's father creates, a space that ETA cannot access. It is during his secret excursions to France that he plays pelota, which makes him feel alive and safe, away from ETA violence. It is also the intimate space of Martín's mother Miren's memories of her husband, which make her smile and which ETA cannot control. The other metaphor refers to “los ojos,” or the eyes. As Martín says, “Someone shoots and all the landscapes in your eyes disappear, father [...] all the landscapes stolen from your eyes, forever.”¹¹ Martín attempts to bring his father's eyes back to life. He buys postcards of all the beautiful places in San Sebastian, enters a bar full of ETA sympathizers, and posts the images there.

Absoluta presencia, in the words of Etxenike, is “a novel about visibility, gaze, attention; and that as a society has taken us the longest to give victims.”¹² The title of the novel suggests the key concept of the story: being and seeing in the moment. It is Ada, the photographer, who

¹⁰ Annabel Martín, “Vulnerability and the literary imagination in the Basque context: Julia Otxoa, Bernardo Atxaga, and Luisa Etxenike,” in *Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*. vol. II. (John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2016), 64-73.

¹¹ “Alguien dispara y se van todos los paisajes de tus ojos, aítá [...] todos los paisajes robados de tus ojos, para siempre.” Etxenike, *El ángulo ciego*, 26.

¹² “[...] es una novela sobre la visibilidad, la mirada, la atención; eso que más hemos tardado, como sociedad, en dar a las víctimas;” Luisa Etxenike “Escribir con el terrorismo” in *Las narrativas del terrorismo: Cómo contamos, cómo transmitimos, cómo entendemos*. ed. Antonio Rivera and Eduardo Mateo (Kindle ed., Los Libros De La Catarata, 2020).

gives a sense of visibility to the memory of her parents' tragic past through her camera lens. The memory of the ETA victims is in the center of the novel, and it is the need to recover and preserve this memory that makes Ada take her photographs. Thus, *Absoluta presencia* is a novel about making evident, giving back attention, and seeing once again. It is also a reflection on art and artistic statement. While *Absoluta presencia* is of course a novel about terrorism, it is also about how art can give visibility to the victims. It also touches on the problem of homelessness. Thus, it is a novel that tries to awaken our consciousness via what Etchenike refers to as "an absolute awakening" that allows us to really see what is around us. *Aves del Paraíso*, the third and final novel, adds to these themes one of personal responsibility—the responsibility of a parent, a teacher, and anyone who kept silent.

Aves del Paraíso begins by presenting the protagonist, Miguel, in a moment of maximum "derailment,"¹³ he is a beggar or appears so to his neighbors. But, in reality, he experiences a total moral and mental decline, which is the effect of a series of unexpected emotions that manage to expel him from his own life. Completely abandoned he just eats jam because he needs sugar to take off the unpleasant aftertaste caused by the emotions that haunt him and do not leave him during the first half of the novel. It is his sense of guilt and of shame that does not kill him but puts him in a limbo. He has not yet had the courage to face his own legacy, that of a silent accomplice. Finding an encyclopedia of birds provides him with the words for what torments him: even birds are capable of teaching their offspring to face life, so why was he unable to teach his son.

The moment that has the most significant impact on the protagonist is when he watches a fully dressed woman entering the sea and thinks that she is about to commit suicide. Seeing this scene makes him feel the urge to come to her aid, and this is this instinct that helps him to get out of his own state of "derailment." This moment therefore brings him to reflect not only on his sense of guilt for his own passivity in the face of ETA assassinations, but also on his feeling of shame: "Guilt is not reliable. It is always surrounded by people who make excuses. The most imaginable alibis. Guilt is a collective work and does not serve you. Only shame can tell you something. Because there is none else in shame."¹⁴ Shame is individual and non-transferable, and it burns internally. Miguel feels guilt and shame for collaborating with violence not only through his inaction but also through his failure as a parent. Miguel remembers how his son, as a child, had once picked up a chestnut and cut his hand. Miguel had not warned him that the

¹³ Berta Ares, "Luisa Etchenike: 'Somos las palabras que usamos,'" *Revista de Letras*, December 13, 2019.

¹⁴ "La culpa no es fiable. Está siempre rodeada de gente que quita o pone excusas, refugios. Las coartadas más imaginables. La culpa es una obra colectiva y no le sirve. Sólo la vergüenza puede decirle algo. Porque en la vergüenza no hay nadie más." Luisa Etchenike, *Aves del Paraíso* (Madrid: Nocturna, 2019), 31.

spikes on the chestnut shell were sharp. The image of blood on his child's hand still haunts him. Now, his adult son, a terrorist, has someone else's blood on his hands. This shame that burns through him is like a self-imposed punishment that parallels his son's punishment in prison. *Aves del Paraíso* is a novel about fatherhood and the responsibility of parents for the acts of their children.

The metaphor of birds is imbedded in the storyline and on the individual pages of the book through James Ellsworth's illustrations. Miguel observes the birds and learns about their immutable but practical rituals: the care of their young, migration, and molting. His long journey through guilt, shame, and moral reconstruction resembles the long flight of birds crossing continents and oceans. His need to flee and to change analogs to that of birds reflects Etxenike's belief that anyone can transform. Indeed, her strong belief in non-determinism is present in all her work.¹⁵ What Etxenike wrote about her books can summarize her view on life, human nature, and literature. Etxenike has exhibited a firm belief in the resilient quality of human nature, and that is why she has always refused to create defeated characters, instead insisting on keeping in them this ability to replicate. In *El ángulo ciego* and *Absoluta presencia*, she gave that capacity to the victims, but she also offered it to the oppressors. That is why the protagonist of *Aves del Paraíso* is given the opportunity for rectification.¹⁶ Miguel decides to see his son in prison and tell him how much he is against terrorist violence and how much ashamed he feels for his son's actions.

Etxenike centers her novels around the moral questioning about the responsibility of those who participated in Basque terrorism, of those who kept silent, and of those who turned away from the victims and their families. ETA terrorism contaminates Basque society with deadly atmosphere of fear and complicity.¹⁷ All three novels present protagonists who are either direct or indirect victims of violence. They project the portrait of a Basque society in which violence serves as a link to silence, pain, shame, and fear but also to forgiveness to all its members.

¹⁵ Etxenike expressed this belief in several interviews, including the interview with Pilar Rodriguez.

¹⁶ Luisa Etxenike, "Escribir con el terrorismo" in *Las narrativas del terrorismo: Cómo contamos, cómo transmitimos, cómo entendemos*. ed. Antonio Rivera and Eduardo Mateo (Kindle ed., Los Libros De La Catarata, 2020).

¹⁷ Annabel Martín uses the word "contagion" to refer to ETA violence as presented in Etxenike's novels, "Vulnerability and the literary imagination in the Basque context: Julia Otxoa, Bernardo Atxaga, and Luisa Etxenike, 70.