The return of the tortured ghost in Harkaitz Cano's novel Twist (2011)

THE RETURN OF THE TORTURED GHOST IN HARKAITZ CANO'S NOVEL *TWIST*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the issue of political torture and forced disappearances within the context of the Basque political conflict as represented in the novel *Twist* by Harkaitz Cano. Although all violence is traumatic, the violence implicit in the systematic infliction of pain and humiliation on the state's political 'enemies' by members of its security forces and, in some cases, their enforced disappearance translates into a traumatic memory that afflicts not only the victims, but the society represented by that state. Unresolved traumatic memory installs itself in the collective consciousness and generates ghosts that haunt the living and the future generations. One way they may be exorcised is by the cultural transmission of the events that caused the trauma through literary fiction.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo investiga la cuestión de la tortura política y las desapariciones forzadas dentro del contexto del conflicto político vasco a través de su representación en la novela *Twist* de Harkaitz Cano. Aunque todo tipo de violencia es traumático, la violencia ejercida sobre los 'enemigos' políticos del estado por parte de sus fuerzas de seguridad dirigida a infligir sistemáticamente dolor físico y humillación y, en algunos casos, su desaparición forzada se traduce en un recuerdo traumático que afecta tanto a las víctimas como a la sociedad que representa ese estado. La memoria traumática se instala en la conciencia colectiva y crea fantasmas que persiguen a los vivos y a las generaciones futuras. Una forma de exorcizarlos es a través de la transmisión cultural de los sucesos que han causado el trauma en forma de ficción literaria.

Keywords: Basque literature, ghosts, hauntology, torture, trauma, terrorism, ETA, state violence, historical memory.

In Europe the torture and execution of a prisoner was a public spectacle until the eighteenth century. Foucault warns us against attributing the disappearance of this practice 'too readily and too emphatically to a process of "humanization"' (1991: 7). He sees it rather as a change in the social and political thinking of that time that preferred 'a certain discretion in the art of inflicting pain' (1991: 8). In our era states all over the world resort to torturing their political enemies as a means of fighting political dissent, whether this dissent is expressed violently, i.e. terrorism (mostly in democratic states), or peacefully (mostly in dictatorships). When the body of the victim is not only tortured, but also made to disappear, the state, considered as a sentient entity or person (Wendt 2004: 291), is 'feeling' the guilt and shame that follows from these heinous acts that must be 'hidden' from public knowledge. Once the state has crossed that fine red line deploying its self-given right to 'the *monopoly of the legitimate use*

of physical force within a given territory' (Weber 2013: 78) in the name of national security, it can only reconcile itself to its actions by making the evidence disappear.

One such case is the torture and disappearance of Lasa and Zabala in 1983 within the context of the Basque political conflict and the armed struggle carried out by the Basque separatist organisation ETA between 1968 and 2010. This case was one of the darkest episodes of the 'dirty war' waged by the Spanish state against ETA during the democratic period after Franco's death in 1975. It reached its peak during the 1980s under the government of the Socialist Party with Felipe González as PM. The state operated through the 'phantom' death squads named GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación), which included members of the Spanish police, Guardia Civil (police force with military status) and foreign contract killers. The Minister of the Interior and, allegedly, the PM himself – cryptically referred to as 'Señor X' – were involved in the authorisation and organisation of these killing squads (Hedgecoe 2020).

The late 1970s and early 1980s, part of the era referred to as 'lead years', saw the number of assassinations committed by ETA soar. In 1980 some 90 people were killed by ETA, mostly members of the state security forces. The Spanish government was under severe pressure and needed the cooperation of the French state in its fight against the Basque armed organisation. The French government refused to extradite any of the Basque political refugees who had fled the Spanish Basque Country (Hegoalde) and settled on the other side of the border, in the French Basque Country (Iparralde). ETA members would carry out attacks on the Spanish side and flee to Iparralde where they lived in total freedom and caused no problems. France had started this tradition of welcoming Basque refugees from Spain with the advent of Franco's dictatorship as an act of defiance from a democratic state towards a dictatorship. After all, ETA was born in 1959 as an organisation with the objective of liberating the Basque Country from the Spanish dictatorial state. Sending assassins across the border to kill ETA members on French soil was the Spanish government's way to involve France in the conflict. The GAL were active between 1983 and 1987. They killed an estimated twenty-seven people, many of whom were unrelated to ETA (Whitfield 2014: 59). The fact that the Basque conflict and its violence was now spreading to France made the French government see Basque refugees as a liability. Besides, Spain was now a democratic state and, moreover, ruled by the Socialist Party as was France at the time with François Mitterrand as President. By the end of the GAL period, France was fully cooperating with Spain through arrests, imprisonment in France and extraditions to Spain.

Lasa and Zabala's case was the first known attack by the GAL, at a time when the terrorist organisation funded by the Spanish state was still unknown to the general public. In 1983 the young ETA activists Joxean Lasa and Joxi Zabala were abducted by members of the Guardia Civil in Baiona-Bayonne (French Basque Country-Iparralde), taken to a secret location in Donostia-San Sebastián (Spanish Basque Country-Hegoalde), and brutally tortured for days. Then, they were driven 750 kilometres to a deserted spot near the Mediterranean coast to be executed and buried in quicklime. Their anonymous remains were discovered two years later, in 1985, by a curious hunting dog. The bones were analysed by a local forensic doctor who concluded that their fingernails and toenails had been pulled out, and they had suffered severe trauma to their heads (Esquembre Lon 1995). The identity of these two corpses could not be established and authorities did not show much interest in pursuing any investigation. The bones were stored in a morgue,

which was eventually abandoned, and forgotten. 'Yet the living dead will always return' (Schwab 2010: 177) and in 1995, ten years after the remains had been discovered, a local police inspector, Jesús García, was reviewing some cold cases and made the connection. By then the name 'GAL' was already in the public domain and he remembered some declarations made by a GAL member who was being investigated that made a reference to quicklime. García knew that the remains found years earlier were covered in quicklime, a fact that baffled the police at the time. This comment made him realise that it was likely that the GAL were behind the killing of the two individuals whose remains had been found back in 1985. He remembered the case of the two young ETA members who had disappeared in France in 1983 and had never been found since. He contacted a High Court magistrate with his suspicions, the investigation was opened, and the remains were finally identified (Woodworth 2002: 282-83).

The memory of this horrific episode has haunted Spanish politics since then. Never had the 'unfathomable power' (Aretxaga 2005: 216) of the state made its 'ghostly presence' (2005: 224) so 'real' since the end of Franco's dictatorship. Lasa and Zabala's gruesome fate at the hands of the state has inspired poems such as Pere Gimferrer's 'Inscripció' in *El diamant dins l'aigua* (2001) and 'Van los hombres azules por el mar' in *Alma Venus* (2012), and 'Sin título' in *El estado de la nación* by José Ovejero (2002), a film (*Lasa eta Zabala*, Pablo Malo, 2014) and a novel (*Twist*, Harkaitz Cano, 2011).

The novel *Twist* (2011), written in Basque by Harkaitz Cano and published in Spanish in 2013 and in English in 2018, brings Lasa and Zabala back from the dead in their fictional doppelgängers Soto and Zeberio. Their haunting memory lives on in Diego Lazkano, the protagonist, whose guilty conscience for having betrayed his friends under torture leads him to 'incorporate' the spirit of Soto in the Derridean sense (Derrida 2006), which will be explored further in this article. Lazkano takes on the promising writing career his friend was unable to pursue, but at the same time, he betrays him again by appropriating Soto's unpublished writings, making him disappear for a second time. He will betray his friends again by not turning up in court the day he is scheduled to testify at the trial of the case of their disappearance a few years later. Then we'll learn that Soto's manuscripts had been stolen on the orders of an important politician involved in the Soto and Zeberio case and that he had been threatened with his plagiarism being made public if he testified. This article – that will include quotations from the English translation of *Twist* – examines how this novel ponders on the spectral role of memory, the ghosts that haunt the living, and the living who turn into ghosts, after traumatic events such as disappearance, torture and betrayal.

TRAUMATIC MEMORIES: THE LIVING DEAD WILL ALWAYS RETURN

The novel starts with the introductory chapter 'Cambalache, 1983' (Cano 2018: loc. 41-405 of 6,134), which could constitute a gothic ghost short story in its own right. The skeletal remains of a body come to life in the middle of a desertic Mediterranean landscape as if awakening from a long deep slumber. At first, he cannot remember anything, but gradually he starts to reassemble the different bones and parts of his dismembered body together with the memories of his fractured mind. Language and

memory are intrinsically connected. In the case of traumatic memories, which the subject may have repressed and now inhabit the ghostly unconscious, language can be the only pathway to remembering. Lacan believed that the unconscious, which he saw as the discourse of the Other, is structured like language and that only through language – the big Other – can the unconscious be reached (Homer 2004: 68-70). When the fragmented body of Xabier Soto begins to stir into action the link between language and remembering is made evident: 'You remember a little something, yes: you are capable of building sentences, linking words. You are syntax. Pure grammar. An amalgam of words without identity. You will soon recover your memory' (Cano 2018, loc. 56 of 6,134). The awakening of Soto's body can be interpreted as the moment when his remains are found. This is the moment his remains 'become' again, are 'ontologized' through a process of 'semanticization' (Derrida 2006: loc. 359 of 5,910).

Only an unspeakable and unresolved traumatic event at the end of his earthly life could have brought Soto back since 'the fantastic specter of the zombie articulates issues of loss and mourning' (Randell 2011: 67). As the gradual 'corporalization of the corpse' (2011: 69) progresses, backwards and forwards his story is pieced together. We learn that he was tortured, murdered, and buried hundreds of miles away from the Basque Country in a secret spot, together with his friend Kepa Zeberio, who, unlike Soto, 'prefers' to remain broken '[i]n the bowels of the earth' (Cano 2018: loc. 42 of 6,134). From the very beginning of the novel readers can make the connection with the Lasa and Zabala case, whose names are never mentioned. Apart from the obvious similitude between the real and fictional names, the clues abound. The first chapter rememorates events in 1983, the year they disappeared. A few pages into the text we encounter the word 'quicklime', which appears several times subsequently. One of the most gruesome details involving the discovery of the remains of Lasa and Zabala was the fact that their bodies had been covered in fifty kilos of quicklime when buried, probably to prevent their identification[1].

In this first chapter the omniscient narrator addresses Soto directly describing what happened. This narrator is likely to be his friend Diego Lazkano if we, as readers, heed the warning: 'This narrator is looking for himself […] I've been such a bastard to you. I wasn't always good to you; you would hate me if you were alive. Reader, pay attention to even the most random details my mind leaves for you' (Cano 2018: loc. 71 of 6,134). Past and present intermingle. The past – the year 1983 – is narrated using the present tense, present perfect and even the future tense. Chronology has lost its meaning, it is distorted. We are transported to a different dimension that follows its own rules 'in a dis-located time of the present' (Derrida 2016: loc. 541 of 6,134). The living dead Soto – 'you are dead and awake' (Cano 2018: loc. 382 of 6,134) – is outside time, like all disappeared, his 'liminal status is neither fully alive neither fully dead' (Randell 2011: 68). What is more, like Derrida's Marxist spectre, Soto's ghost is bound to come back – 'the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back' (Derrida 2006: loc. 1,010 of 5,910). It will come back demanding some form of justice and reparation which, in reality, is very rarely achieved. A just resolution is highly unlikely because the torturers, and sometimes murderers, are on the state's payroll and, therefore, they are protected by it. Since closure, in the form of recognition and justice, is

[1] The references to quicklime have haunted Felipe González and, by association, the Socialist Party since then. Decades after the event, in 2016 during a parliamentary sitting in the Congreso de los Diputados, the then leader of the political party Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, advised the Socialist leader at the time, Pedro Sánchez, not to be influenced by former PM González, who had a past stained with quicklime (Riveiro 2016).

unlikely to happen because the state's interests and reputation are at stake, the ghosts will continue to haunt the living and thus may never be exorcised.

> This has nothing to do with what you deserve, *but with what they want to hide*. A good airtight alibi, the certainty that no one can be touched, that they're safe, even twenty years down the line, their hands and their records clean. Safe. While they prescribe law and punishment and memory. *We went too far*. They went too far and they still haven't come back. (Cano 2018: loc.104 of 6,134)

In the real case, the members of the Guardia Civil involved went too far indeed. Francisco Etxeberria, the highly reputed forensic expert in charge of examining the remains of Lasa and Zabala after they were re-discovered in 1995, recalled the case in an interview for the public Basque television channel ETB 2 in 2013. He said that they had been subjected to a very bloody form of torture, extremely painful and brutal, and that, in his opinion, seeing the seriousness of the injuries inflicted the torturers had decided to get rid of them. He reminded the public that cases of torture for political reasons happened on a regular basis at the time. In most cases, the victims were kidnapped and appeared a few days later with bruises, burns or other injuries (N.V. 2013). Gordon refers to this systematic violation of human rights as 'normalization of excess' (2008: 76). But this time 'they went too far'. The legacy of a state where torture and disappearance are common practice is shrouded in a ghostly silence that speaks 'the truth it hides, the immunity it flaunts' (Gordon 2008: 74) – it will be up to the next generation 'to fight the silence and the ghosts' (Cano 2018: loc. 282 of 6,134). The sentence '(S)he thinks it, but (s)he doesn't say it' makes its appearance several times throughout the novel evoking the silence of what is left unsaid and haunts the relationships between the different characters in the novel. It also represents the political zeitgeist of the 1980s in Spain, the tacit pact of silence that facilitated the transition to democracy by granting the crimes of the dictatorship impunity and, in doing so, allowing the spectre of Franco to perpetuate its political repression in a 'sort of non-contemporaneity of present time with itself' (Derrida 2006: loc. 706 of 5,910).

The narrator asks what Basque ghosts are like (Cano 2018: loc. 205 of 6,134). The answer comes later when he predicts that Soto/Lasa and Zeberio/Zabala will become martyrs for the Basque people. According to Fierke, a martyr is an actor embedded 'in a social world in which the death is a witness to injustice on behalf of a community' (2012: loc. 112 of 7,059) – the word 'martyr' comes from a Greek term meaning 'witness'. In the case of the armed Basque conflict, the separatist organisation ETA took from its very inception in 1959 the role of being a witness to the injustice and oppression meted out on the Basque Country and an actor on behalf of the Basque people to secure the survival of its language and identity. At the time the country had been immersed in a Spanish nationalist dictatorship – '*Hispania Una, Grande y Libre*' (Cano 2018: loc. 259 of 6,134) – since Franco's victory in 1939. ETA considered themselves the descendants of the 'gudaris', soldiers attached to the Basque Government, who fought on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. A 'gudari' would give his life for the liberation of the Basque Country, the ultimate self-sacrifice[2]. This philosophy was inherited by ETA, together with the anti-colonial and pro-independence ideologies active in the 1950s and 60s. One might

[2] The first verse of the Euzko Gudarostea's (the Basque Army during the Spanish Civil War) hymn is 'Euzko gudariak gera/Euzkadi askatzeko/Gerturik daukagu odola/bere aldez emateko.' [We are Basque soldiers fighting to free the Basque Country. We are ready to spill our blood for its sake] (my translation).

choose to die for their country or an idea, but that does not necessarily make them a martyr-hero. It is the community to which their sacrifice is dedicated that raises them to the status of martyr-hero. The spectral link between the martyr and their ideological community (the people) exists because the martyr 'becomes the embodiment of the suffering nation' (Fierke 2012: loc. 1,099 of 7,059). 'Initially and like all martyrs you'll become adrenaline for the people. And later, like all martyrs, you'll become anesthesia for the people' (Cano 2018: loc. 296 of 6,134). Soto's ghost will become the adrenaline that fuels the escalation of violence as revenge for the unjust torture and death of the martyr and, also, the anaesthesia that numbs reasoning and justifies further unjustifiable violence in his name. As Paddy Woodworth (2002: 412) concludes: 'ETA emerged from the GAL period stronger as a terrorist force, and probably much stronger politically, than before'.

Soto and Zeberio became martyrs for the Basque nation, but they were terrorists for the Spanish state. Fierke (2012: loc. 1,067 of 7,059) makes a distinction between 'structure' and 'anti-structure'. 'Structure' refers to the state, the sovereign power, and 'anti-structure' to those who challenge the state and refuse to play by its rules. In this asymmetry of power, rebellion against the state carries the charge of 'terrorism' and categorises the agent as a 'terrorist'. Soto and Zeberio are part of that 'anti-structure' and, therefore, become 'homines sacri'. According to Agamben (1998: 82), '[*l*]*ife that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life*'. Here the term 'sacred' is not to be understood as 'holy', but, quite counter-intuitively, 'detestable, criminal, accursed', which are also meanings of the Latin term 'sacer'. Soto and Zeberio fall into this category: '"[…] *These aren't people, they're scum; diligence, execution, a job like any other, a clean fight against the riffraff*"' (Cano 2018: loc. 334 of 6,134), says one of the guardias civiles involved in their torture and execution. Later in the novel, the same character will reminisce about why his father joined the Guardia Civil: '"So that everything is in its right place."' (Cano 2018: 2,781 of 6,134). But for the 'anti-structure', the 'structure' is not considered 'sovereign' power, but 'illegitimate' power that must be fought. This is what will make Soto and Zeberio martyrs, truly 'homines sacri' in the sense most of us would understand: 'holy men', 'consecrated men'; life that can be sacrificed (to an idea or a people) but cannot be killed – martyrs become ghosts that haunt us for ever.

After the first chapter, the novel focuses mainly on the protagonist, Diego Lazkano, who together with his friends Soto and Zeberio was a member of ETA in the years of the Transition (late 1970s and early 1980s). The story moves backwards and forwards between the present and the past, and towards the end, projecting into a probable future. The only survivor is Lazkano, trying unsuccessfully to lead a normal life as a writer whilst haunted by the memories of his two friends. He carries a heavy burden on his shoulders: he betrayed his friends' whereabouts under torture and, as a result, they were abducted, tortured and murdered. Since then, his life has become a guilt-ridden existence. His betrayal is written on his skin where his torturers carved the mis-spelled word for snitch in Spanish 'chibato' (instead of 'chivato'). He has also become a ghost, another one of the '(t)ransparent souls', '(i)ntermittent beings' (Cano 2018: loc. 5,369 of 6,134) that carry the burden of their traumatic memories. The pain and suffering caused by torture, which transcends the physical, and his betrayal have killed his soul. As Schwab would argue, he has become a simulacrum of his normal or real self (2010: 169). This traumatic experience has brought about the 'birth' of a 'new' ego. Freud (2007: 51) writes about the

psychological process that leads to melancholia which goes beyond the usual process of mourning after the loss of a loved object/person. Lazkano fits into this description. His libido, expressed in the object-cathexis for his friends has attached itself to his ego, thus diminishing his 'original' ego. Lazkano has made his name as a writer by publishing Soto's manuscripts, passing them off as his own. He always admired Soto, older than him, an intellectual who would have had a brilliant future as a writer if his political activism had not led to his untimely death. He also decides to have sex with Inés, a woman Zeberio was attracted to, as a proxy for his friend. These are some of the ways Lazkano tries to live with his burden. He wants to make his friends live through him and, in the process, he has lost part of himself. In Derridean terms, the 'idea' or 'spirit' of Soto becomes a ghost by incorporating Lazkano's body, who, in turn, becomes a '"second" ghost' (Derrida 2006: loc. 2,741 of 5,910) or 'a ghost of the ghost' (2006: loc. 2,740 of 5,910). Although Derrida is talking about ideology, his thoughts are relevant when trying to explain Lazkano's process of spectralization – being alive, but not fully in the world – caused by the trauma of his torture and betrayal, and the mourning for the loss of his friends, especially Soto. Since Soto's body has disappeared, his spirit – the 'idea' of him – needs a '*prosthetic body*' (2006: loc. 2,740 of 5,910) – Lazkano's – in order to pursue some form of justice. But this 'incarnation' produces a spectre, a liminal space between spirit and body. Lazkano is not complete anymore, his identity is fragmented, he cannot recognise 'himself' in the mirror of his mind[3]. The motif of the mirror image/copy/simulacrum/repetition/imitation/ plagiarism permeates the novel. Nothing seems real or original. Both characters and objects become an ad infinitum replica that becomes 'a worn-out photocopy, more of a caricature' (Cano 2018: loc. 3,967 of 6,134) like the eighty grandmothers that separate present-time humans from their Neolithic ancestors (Cano 2018: loc. 3,972 of 6,134). In this hall of mirrors '[h]umanity is but a collection or series of ghosts' (Derrida 2006: loc. 2,989 of 5,910).

INSTITUTIONAL TORTURE IN THE BASQUE CONFLICT

The act of torturing and its indelible consequences is at the heart of Cano's novel, and it is reflected in its title. As Richardson (2018: 102) indicates, the English term 'torture', 'tortura' in both Basque and Spanish, has its origin in the Latin noun *tortura*, from the verb *torquere* meaning 'to twist'. Towards the end of the novel the threads of past, present and projected future become interlaced in a happy memory of a past summer when the young and carefree Soto, Zeberio and Lazkano helped a foreign female tourist to change a punctured tyre. The music coming from the radio of the vehicle is Chubby Checker's *Let's twist again*, an iconic American dance song from the early 1960s, which retrospectively forbodes the torture ('twisting') the three friends will endure in a not-too-distant future, that sinister 'dance' performed by the tortured body in its contortions when dangling from its dislocated arms (Améry, 1980: 32). This analogy has not been missed by torturers in dictatorial regimes well known for their torture practices as is the case with Argentina (1976-1983), where the euphemism 'dances' was used when

[3] 'The "proper" feature of specters, like vampires, is that they are deprived of a specular image, *of the true, right specular image*'. (Derrida 2006: loc. 3,362 of 5,910, my italics)

referring to the strenuous physical exercises and brutal beatings political prisoners underwent in the Penitentiary in Córdoba (Amnesty International, 1977: 23-24).

Torture distorts the sense of self. The lines between memory and reality, between fiction and fact become blurred. Both the torturer and the victim are condemned to play their roles and become actors in a macabre drama. Theatre is a recurrent motif throughout the novel: the three friends were members of an amateur theatre group in their youth, Soto aspired to become a playwright and Lazkano is asked to translate a play by Chekhov for his theatre director friend. But the real drama is played out in the torture chamber. Lazkano is tortured by two hooded police officers who call themselves Fabian and Fabian and make up a sadistic comic duo, performing one of the 'comedies played by fools' that Sartre (2006: 33) writes about in his preface to *The Question*, Henri Alleg's account of his experience of torture during the Algerian war of independence. The main torture scene in *Twist* (Cano 2018: loc. 1,015-1,084 of 6,134) is a performance where both the torturers and the tortured know the roles they have to play. There is always a stage where the 'play' takes place: an isolated house, a hidden cell, a secret site that will make the act untraceable, what Coetzee called the 'dark chamber' (1986) and Améry, the 'business room' (1980: 22). In *Twist*, the scene takes place in a basement in an abandoned mansion called El Cerro (reminiscent of the real place where Lasa and Zabala were tortured, La Cumbre). The stage props are everyday objects that become instruments of pain in the hands of the torturer. A simple chair can be used to make the victim feel helpless and disorientated: 'They've tied him to a chair and, with each question, give the legs of the chair a kick, making it stumble but not badly enough to fall over. It's enough, however, to make the person on the chair feel dizzier and dizzier' (Cano 2018: loc. 1,020 of 6,134).

These actions are a choreographed game whose goal is to exercise total control over the body and the mind of the victim, break their spirit and undermine their self-worth until they are 'driven beyond the border of death into Nothingness' (Améry, 1980: 35). The comments and language exchanges between Fabian and Fabian are jocose and ironic, meant to humiliate, confuse and, ultimately, annihilate their victim. As Byun-Chul Han (2018: loc. 2,288 of 2,493) puts it, the language used by the torturer 'is often emptied of all communicative function and used as a truncheon'. The victim does not know what exactly they want from them, where the next punch or kick is going to come from, what form of torture they will use next, when it will stop. Lazkano is beaten, needles are inserted under his nails, they burn the soles of his feet, and when they crush one of his toes with a pair of pliers, he cannot take any more and reveals Soto and Zeberio's hiding place located in a town in the French Basque Country. Even after giving them the information that they were after, his humiliation is not over. The torturers take him out of the torture room and make sure they all walk past an open window: 'Yes, it's an invitation, he won't be a rag doll anymore, he won't be a traitor anymore, one leap and he'll never have to look at himself in the mirror again' (Cano 2018: loc. 1,060 of 6,134). Lazkano jumps through the window, which is just a meter and a half above the ground whilst Fabian and Fabian laugh and mock him. After this, they cover his head and lock him in the boot of a car for hours. When they take him out and back to the cell, he can hear his friends howling while they are being tortured. The Diego Lazkano who leaves El

Cerro has become a ghost. As Améry explains after his own experience as a victim of torture, 'whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world' (1980: 40).

Coetzee (1986) wrote about the dilemmas faced by novelists in South Africa writing stories, some of them based on real cases, which require describing acts of torture carried out by the South African security forces in the period of apartheid. He argues that the writer is facing a 'moral' dilemma in which any of the choices will inevitably play into the state's hands: either ignoring torture completely or representing it in a pornographic way. Cano has avoided falling into this trap by doing neither in the case of the two characters who are based on real people. Unlike in the case of Lazkano (a purely fictional character), there is no explicit description of the torture suffered by Soto and Zeberio (fictional representations of the real Lasa and Zabala). As pointed out above, the forensic analysis carried out on their remains appear to indicate they underwent brutal violence. Dressings and bandages (Makazaga 2009: 165) were found with the remains indicating the torturers tried to treat some of the injuries. However, the specific details of their suffering cannot be ascertained given the state of the remains. The torturers, determined to extract information on the whereabouts of higher-ups in ETA, probably miscalculated the physical endurance of their victims and injured them so severely they decided to kill them and make their bodies disappear rather than release them mortally injured, thus provoking a media and political upheaval. This is exactly what happened with the case of Joxe Arregi two years earlier, in 1981. Arregi was a member of ETA who was arrested by the police in Madrid, kept incommunicado for nine days, as allowed by the Spanish anti-terrorist law, and tortured. He did not survive his injuries. Photographs of his badly bruised and swollen body were leaked to the press. The news shocked Basque public opinion and was followed by protests including a general strike in the Basque Country. The two policemen accused of torturing him received a four-month sentence but were later pardoned by the government led by Felipe González. Arregi was able to relate his ordeal to a prison mate before he was taken to hospital describing it in Basque as 'oso latza izan da' ['it has been very hard'] (Alberdi Etxaniz, 2021). Cano pays homage to these poignant words, that have become iconic in the historic memory of the Basque conflict, by making Lazkano think them. Lazkano does not speak the words. As Scarry points out, torture—and surely the memory of it—destroys language (1985: loc. 114 of 10,353). The use of three different verb tenses makes the torture experience perpetuate itself in time, ever-present:

> "Soto and Zeberio—that was so hard."
>
> "It has been hard, it's still hard," he corrects himself in his mind. He thinks it, but he doesn't say it. (Cano 2018: loc. 1,122 of 6,134)

On the other hand, Lasa and Zabala's torturers may have never intended to release them at all, but that would go against their usual modus operandi in this kind of case. There are plenty of testimonials of Basque citizens tortured around the same period for being members of ETA or believed to be linked to the organisation in some way. Nearly all of them lived to tell the tale, although political authorities have always denied that such practices exist in Spain and magistrates simply ignored any allegations brought

forward. Indeed, they accused the torture victims of following ETA leadership's instructions and inventing these accusations in order to discredit the state security forces (Makazaga 2009: 43). The 'Proyecto de investigación de la tortura en el País Vasco (1960-2013)', commissioned by the Basque government, has registered 1184 cases of torture in the 1980s (Etxeberria, Martín Beristain and Pego 2016: 17). Their testimonies are unnervingly similar. Practices such as the use of electrodes, near-asphyxiation with a plastic bag ('la bolsa'), near-drowning ('la bañera'), keeping the victim standing up for hours or days with no food, drink or toilet facilities ('el plantón') and causing physical exhaustion through extended periods of push-ups, pull-ups and/or crouching were standard techniques used by the police and Guardia Civil in their interrogations at the time (Etxeberria, Martín Beristain and Pego 2016: 19). We can sadly assume that most or all of these techniques were used on Lasa and Zabala, as does Pablo Malo in his film *Lasa eta Zabala* (2014), where these methods are unflinchingly depicted when showing the scenes where the two young ETA members are tortured.

In the novel, Lazkano is yet to confront more ghosts in his life. Years later, when he is involved in the translation of Chekhov's play *Platonov* for his friend's amateur theatre group, he will recognise the voice of one of his torturers. One of the 'Fabians' reappears as Roberto, playing the role of Vengerovich, whose words in the play are reminiscent of his 'role' as a torturer: 'Injure him, hit him and beat him up enough so he'll remember for the rest of his life' (Cano 2018: loc. 5,259 of 6,134). The drama played during his torture reappears. Given the magnitude of his trauma, his encounter with his torturer turns out to be civil and undramatic. When he has the chance to talk to Roberto, he finds that he 'seemed quite sensible' (Cano 2018: loc. 5,451 of 6,134). When confronting him about the past 'Roberto-Fabian-Vengerovich swallowed saliva' (Cano 2018: loc. 5,465 of 6,134) and averted his eyes away from his former victim's inquisitive stare. There is nothing to be said. As mentioned above, torture kills language. Silence becomes the only answer. Although Lazkano feels some form of relief after confronting his torturer, he knows that nothing can close his wound; in Améry's words, '[w]hoever was tortured, stays tortured' (1980: 34).

The 'sensible' Roberto/Fabian appears to lead a normal life after his past as torturer. He seems to be able to move from one 'role' to 'another' with the ease of the actor he is. 'Political torturers' are usually civil servants working for the state security forces or secret services who personify Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' (2022: loc. 5,035 of 6,177) or as Coetzee (1986) puts it: 'They are human beings who find it possible to leave the breakfast table in the morning, kiss their children goodbye and drive off to the office to commit obscenities'.

As long as they assume this role wholeheartedly and believe without a doubt that they are fighting 'beastly terrorists' who are hiding vital information that they must extract from them for the common good of the nation – the 'ticking time bomb scenario'[4] –, they do not need to dwell on ethical dilemmas. Someone else is doing the thinking for

[4] The 'ticking time bomb' scenario is often linked to Jean Lartéguy's character Boisfeuras in his novel *Les Centurions* (1960). Boisfeuras is a soldier in Algeria fighting the pro-independence rebels. He ends up torturing one of them who has planted fifteen bombs in different stores, until he confesses the location of each one of them (Rejali 2009: 545-6).

them, their higher-ranking superiors. They are just doing their job. The narrator in *Twist* describes how Soto and Zeberio's torturers react after killing and burying their bodies. They want to wash their hands, and their thoughts wander to alcohol, sex and family concerns – 'they are human, of course they are human, too human' (Cano 2018: loc. 317 of 6,134). On the other hand, Améry (1980: 40) refers to the torturer as the 'antiman', someone who cannot be considered 'human', but evidence seems to refute this idea in most cases. Although it is likely that sociopaths and psychopaths – whom we find in any profession – might relish the opportunity to torture and kill with the impunity that the state grants, the more terrifying reality is that torturers are one of us. Anyone could be put in a situation in which we are ordered by a higher authority to torture a fellow human being as the infamous Milgram experiment[5] attests – 'We all carry inside an obedient being, willing to work for the Devil' (Cano 2018: loc. 4,060 of 6,134).

However, in the same way as torture haunts the tortured for the rest of their lives, it can also traumatise the torturer. Richardson mentions 'the affective binding of tortured and torturer' (2018: 116). Not every individual who finds themselves in the situation of having to inflict physical and psychological pain on somebody else reacts in the same way. Later in life, some torturers may find themselves haunted by the experience and start to question the morality of their actions or they may feel some form of guilt. There is no evidence of this in the case of Lasa and Zabala. None of the perpetrators or their superiors has shown any form of remorse or self-criticism at any time, quite the opposite. In *Twist* Cano explores the feeling of guilt in one of the characters, the member of the Guardia Civil Pedro Vargas involved in the torture, execution and disappearance of Soto and Zeberio. Vargas, son of a guardia civil and a very religious man, visits his village in Palencia years after the event, when he is terminally ill with lung cancer. A part of him interprets his illness as a divine punishment for his sin: 'God's punishment, Soto and Zeberio rotting his entrails, two tiny young men, two skeletons spreading poison around his intestines and lungs' (Cano 2018: loc. 2,813 of 6,134).

Once again Cano plays with the idea of mirror images. Vargas, the torturer, is now the victim. His 'torture' is the cancer that is making him suffer pain – he takes morphine to bear it – and helplessness – he needs to carry an oxygen cylinder with him in order to breathe. He feels compelled to confess everything to the local priest, betraying himself, as a tortured person usually ends up doing – 'We give ourselves away, after all' (Cano 2018: loc. 2,850 of 6,134) – and the priest's response will make it possible to recover Soto and Zeberio's remains.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN DENOUNCING TORTURE AND TRANSMITTING HISTORICAL MEMORY

In the case of institutional torture, literary fiction can act as testimony of a too-human experience which often goes unrecognised and unpunished because of its very intimate nature and the all-powerful *raison d'etat*. Literature can be one of the ways to give the victims a voice, the words with which to speak their pain and resist 'the desire of the state

[5] For details on the Milgram experiment go to https://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html

to penetrate the body' (Richardson 2018: 164). Literature fulfils both the moral duty of denouncing torture due to its 'capacity to relate horror' (Olaziregi 2017: 10) and the historical duty of recording its systematic occurrence and becoming an 'archivo melancólico' (García de la Sienra 2020: 89) for future generations. In this sense, writers and artists who deal with this topic in their work can be considered archivists who 'excavan y exhuman voces' (2020: 91-92). But their work is more than just a register, it becomes 'una práctica que aspira a lograr una (re)organización ético-política de la memoria' (García de la Sienra 2020: 92). Re-reading Latin American novels as 'the Archive', González Echevarría (1990: 183) extends this idea to 'old, dying or dead characters' in fiction who act as 'links with the past and repositories of knowledge, like living archives.'

Returning to Coetzee, one of the most controversial aspects surrounding fiction that deals with torture is the accusation that by representing scenes of torture the writer is an 'accomplice' of the state: '[…] there is something tawdry about following the state in this way, making its vile mysteries the occasion of fantasy' (Coetzee 1986). He considers that '[t]he true challenge is how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms.' One of the possible ways in which this could be achieved is by resorting to what Richardson (2018: 127) calls the 'archaeologies of trauma', that is, the 'excavation' of the trauma caused by torture by using 'metaphorical layers' (2018: 128). In *Twist* we find Lazkano trying to make sense of his trauma caused by torture and betrayal. However, everything he tries is tainted. Searching Soto's bedroom after he has disappeared, Lazkano finds a hidden folder with his typewritten manuscripts. He decides to publish Soto's manuscripts to give his friend a life after death, but he does so under his own name, betraying him a second time. He hires a solicitor and contacts his friends' families to open the investigation into their disappearance but fails to turn up in court at a key moment due to his cowardly fear that his blackmailer may make his plagiarism public, betraying his friend for a third time.

All throughout the novel Lazkano struggles to overcome his trauma, to exorcise his ghosts – the painful haunting of his betrayal – in order to achieve justice for his friends. Exorcising does not imply making the ghosts vanish, but 'making them come back alive', not as spectres anymore, but as welcome revenants 'who would no longer be *revenants*' (Derrida 2006: loc. 3,767 of 5,910), that is, who will not continue to haunt – in the sense of 'to spook' – the living, but who have achieved some form of calm existence in the memory of the living. Even if Lazkano is a writer and a translator, a professional whose tools are words (Richardson, 2018: 129), he is unable to find the words that can express his immense emptiness. In the end, he realises that the only way to find those words that can liberate him is to be true to himself by letting the ghosts of his friends speak (Derrida 2006: loc. 3,786 of 5,910). His only hope comes from literature because 'telling is necessary in order to redeem, in order to heal' (Olaziregi 2017: 9), but only if he writes 'from his own skin' (Cano 2018: loc. 4,932 of 6,134), hiding nothing. He finally decides to write a book about his friends: '[e]xhume their bodies with a fountain pen' (Cano 2018: loc. 4,933 of 6,134); that is, to bear witness not only to their deaths, but most importantly

to their lives. In writing *Twist*, Harkaitz Cano has given a voice—a literary voice—to the real victims of the state's darkest form of repression, Joxean Lasa and Joxi Zabala.

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