

# The Convex and the Concave: The Feminine in Jorge Oteiza's Mythological Cosmogony

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*Oteizaren ahurraren inguruko eskultura femeninoei eta kosmogoniari zentzia hartzeko saio bat da txosten hau, generoari buruzko euskal antropologiaren tradizioetik jasoriko ildoak baliatuz. Jorge Oteizaren obran multzo heterogeneoa interpretatzeko erabil daitezkeen ikuspunturik osoena genero ikuspegi delako argudiatzen da. Euskal kultura pentsamoldearekin eta politikarekin loturik, Oteizaren ahurraren eta femeninoaren mitologiaren muturreko irudikatze sinboliko gisa deskribatu da Arantzazuko Amaren Basilikako Pieta delakoa.*

*Giltza-Hitzak: Jorge Oteiza. Generoari buruzko euskal azterlanak. Eskultura. Ahurra-femeninoa. Ganbila-maskulinoa. Euskal estiloa. Euskal matriarkatua.*

*El artículo propone explicar el sentido de las esculturas femeninas de Oteiza y de su cosmogonía de lo cóncavo a partir de la antropología vasca de género. La perspectiva de género constituye el mejor enfoque de interpretación integral del heterogéneo opus oteiziano. La Piedad de Oteiza en la Basílica de Aranzazu es la máxima representación simbólica de esa mitología de lo cóncavo y lo femenino, y es puesta en relación con la mentalidad cultural y la política vascas.*

*Palabras Clave: Jorge Oteiza. Estudios vascos de género. Escultura. Cóncavo-femenino. Convexo-masculino. Estilo vasco. Matriarcado vasco.*

*L'article propose d'expliquer le sens des sculptures féminines de Oteiza et de sa cosmogonie du concave à partir de l'anthropologie basque de genre. La perspective de genre constitue la meilleure approche d'interprétation intégrale de l'opus hétérogène «oteizien». La Piedad de Oteiza à la Basilique d'Aranzazu est la représentation symbolique maximale de cette mythologie du concave et du féminin, et elle est mise en relation avec la mentalité culturelle et avec la politique basques.*

*Mots Clés: Jorge Oteiza. Etudes basques de genre. Sculpture. Concave-féminin. Convexe-masculin. Style basque. Matriarcats basque*

### *El círculo es terrible*<sup>1</sup>

Eduardo Chillida. (Quoted by Juaristi (1999: [20]))

*La muerte, dice Oteiza, es un invento de nuestra cultura. Un descubrimiento tardío. Para los preindoeuropeos la muerte no existía. Morir sólo significaba cambiar de lugar, situarse en el espacio celeste. En la memoria que acompaña al proyecto para un cementerio en Ametzagaña el escultor escribió: "En reciente exploración de nuestro arranque cultural preindoeuropeo parece definirse un mito de metamorfosis de la muerte que hasta lingüísticamente encuentra apoyo. La raíz preindoeuropea ARR, nada utilizada como arro, "hueco", "concavidad", alude en nuestro matriarcalismo original al gran hueco = madre del cielo en el que las estrellas funcionarían religiosamente como los fuegos en la puerta terrenal de los hogares y santuarios y así expresados y convertidos sobre la muerte y llenos para siempre de luz en las noches.*

Comprobamos semánticamente en la familia con el sonema ARRO, y estrella es *izarra, itz* (ser) -ARR, ser en el gran hueco del cielo<sup>2</sup>."

Manterola, 1993

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the time of his death in 2003, Jorge Oteiza Embil left us with an influential and heterogeneous body of works. In the late fifties, after winning the São Paulo Biennale, he became an internationally renowned artist for his sculptural work. Once he considered that the *experimental* path he had chosen for sculpture was completed, he turned to writing as his primary means of artistic communication. His late writings on aesthetics try to create a cosmogony by way of analyzing, interpreting and inventing the Basque symbolic imagery. He sporadically continued to sculpt and wrote poems as well, but after his success in the 1957 São Paulo Biennale he considered that, with his artistic contribution, art had come to its expressive limit and died. Consequently, he dedicated his efforts to theorizing about it. The essays he devoted to the field of aesthetics are the key resources that provide us with clues as how to interpret his previous sculptural work.

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1. The circle is terrible.

2. Death, Oteiza tells us, is an invention of our culture. A late discovery. For the Pre-Indo-Europeans death did not exist. Dying just meant a change of location, to be placed in the celestial space. In the report attached to the project for a cemetery in Ametzagaña, the sculptor wrote: "In a recent exploration of our cultural Pre-Indo-European take off, a myth of the metamorphosis of death seems to be defined, and it even finds linguistic support. The Pre-Indo-European root ARR, nothingness expressed as arro, "hollow", "concavity", refers in our original matriarcalism to the great hollow = mother of the sky, in which the stars would function religiously as fires in the worldly door of homes and sanctuaries, and expressed in this way transformed over death and forever filled with light in the night.

We prove semantically that in the family with the sonema ARRO, and start is *izarra, itz* (to be) and -ARR, to be the inside the great hollow of the sky" (Manterola, 194-195).

Besides those pivotal references, in this paper we will take into consideration some sculptures that belong to the series of *maternidades* (motherhoods) in addition to other explicit and allegoric female representations. In order to try to make sense of them, we will analyze Oteiza's mythological cosmogony in his attempt to revive Basque culture. Oteiza, as well as Chillida and other contemporary Basque artists, believed that Basques had their own cosmological vision in connection with their culture's unwritten past. Here we argue that in this Basque way of understanding Nature, (a spiritual Basque conscience,<sup>3</sup> a newly redefined Basque identity<sup>4</sup> or style) which is determined by an aesthetic disposition towards the world, the symbolic and crucial representation of the feminine was related to the traditional view of Basque matriarchy. Furthermore, we believe that the interpretation of the symbolic value of what is assigned as feminine, in connection with the myth of Basque matriarchy, creates a restricted cultural realm for women.

As it has been pointed out by some intellectuals (Bullen: 125 and subsequent) i.e. Jon Juaristi, Juan Aranzadi or Joan Bamberger, there are three main arguments that challenge the existence of a Basque matriarchy. First, it deals with myths as its main theoretical basis. This means that its conceptual pillars are built upon the interpretation of dubious data. Second, the idea of an ancestral Basque matriarchy is usually an androcentric one, and portrays women as perfect mothers with saintly virtues that awaken men's adventurous nature. Third, nationalist ideology has used the ideal matriarchal past as a political tool, describing an egalitarian Basque tradition in opposition to the more modern patriarchal and chauvinistic foreign influences. Rejection of foreign ideas creates an attitude of melancholic conservatism that strives to maintain the imaginary and longing presence of an eternal better past against any outside influence and change.

Oteiza's portraits of the feminine contain some traits of all of the three aforementioned elements used in the criticism against the Basque matriarchal thesis. Now, it is important to bear in mind that Oteiza, not being a systematic essayist, and with his playfully narrated mythology riveted with poetic resources, never developed anything close to a systematic theory on Basque gender. Nonetheless, his aesthetic perception of reality provided the symbolic feminine with a certain realm in relation to sacramental artistic motifs directly connected with the traditional Basque women as seen in the matriarchal thesis.

Oteiza's notion of the feminine in relation to Nature, the void and the container or vessel, are pivotal for a clear understanding of the development of

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3. We have to keep in mind that Oteiza's *Quousque tandem...!*, by far his most influential written work, has the subtitle *Ensayo de interpretación estética del alma vasca*; which means: *Essay on the Aesthetic Interpretation of the Basque Soul*.

4. Luxio Ugarte (1994) analyzes this redefinition of Basqueness in the works of Chillida and Oteiza, considering the productive artistic mixture of prehistoric traits and avant-garde aesthetics that both artists chose to create a new Basque identity.

the cultural space in which he creates his aesthetic mythology. Deepening into this idea, we could say that central terms in Oteiza's late essays, such as: *Basque soul* or *Basque style*, are inexplicable if we do not underscore and decipher the abstract concepts of the convex and the concave in association with the notions of masculine and feminine that they encompass, as well as their axial bond with Oteiza's perception of Nature.

His mythological version of Basque history, an oral passing of the Basque *style* from generation to generation that travels through time along a matrilineal path, can relate the Basque traditional view of the feminine in connection to Nature, to the transmission of timeless cultural values. In Oteiza's mythology of history women are the main characters. Theirs is the task of relaying the culture that creates a certain aesthetic appreciation of Nature to their offspring. The role of women as educators and consequently transmitters of a certain set of values (in Oteiza's case the passing of his so-called Basque style) has been studied by several anthropologists and will be further discussed in this paper.

Concerning Oteiza's narrative ways, he uses a practically improvised method of expressing his ideas, almost as if a Basque *bertsolari* had to put his words in print. As a result, we encounter many contradictions and inconsistencies in his texts. At the same time, his gifted way of always seeing beyond the ordinary, his capacity to turn concepts upside down and show us their evocative and aesthetic attributes makes him a strong creator of fantastic images, metaphors and artistic narratives that many Basque creators still use today as a productive artistic inspiration.

It is extremely complicated and unworthy of the effort to explain systematically what is intentionally not systematically expressed. Therefore, our only purpose will be just to shine some light on the interpretation of Oteiza's sculptures. We will mostly focus on his idea of the feminine as vessel, and try to put the concept in relation to his blurry, though extremely suggestive, Basque cosmogony of concavity. We claim that the junction between the aesthetic content of his *motherhoods* and his mythology of the empty space contained in the feminine is powerfully dramatized in his allegorical *Pietà* sculpted for the façade of the Basilica of Aranzazu, one of the most important religious centers of the Basque Country.

## **2. THE FIRST MAN, THE FEMININE PROTECTIVE SPACE AND NATURE**

Jorge Oteiza felt deeply attracted by prehistoric artistic representations, just as many other artists of the avant-garde movements of his time (VV.AA. Txomin Badiola, 1988: 33). In his mythological scheme on the development of the arts, he considered that there was a primordial man, the man of the firmament, a prehistoric figure for whom the manifestations of the unknown powers of Nature were a matter of everyday life. These primitive men, always looking at the sky for clues to understand their own existence and the world they inhabited, were defenseless creatures confronted with incomprehen-

ble phenomena. As a result to their abandonment in an inscrutable world from which they were dependent, they felt an original existential fear, an anguish created by the confrontation with the mysteries of life.

The aesthetic representation of the world view created by this ancient man would worship Nature, and his dependence from it would lead him to the recreation of mythological interpretations to explain his world. In this regard, Oteiza considers cave paintings (i.e. Lascaux, France) and megalithic burials (especially the cromlechs) found in the Basque regions as remnants of this ancient and primordial culture. He explains the marvels of this culture from a quite personal metaphysic and existential perspective, considering them the last stage in art history, and the culmination of a profound philosophical vision of life that finds in him its contemporary conclusion (Oteiza: 1963; 1966; 1996).

The solution to that first man's problematic relation with Nature, that angst Oteiza calls *sentimiento trágico de la vida* (tragic sense of life) taking the term from Unamuno, will be explained later. Here it is only important to bring forth Oteiza's general idea concerning the role of the feminine and matriarchal as a protective space and as part of an existential fear. Oteiza makes an intuitive association of the feminine with Nature and uses the polysemic content of this assemblage to imagine a new way of interpreting his culture. Even though it might sound evident, we feel compelled to point out that the "natural" vision of the feminine Oteiza defends is a *symbolic construction* (Bullen, [27]) and, as consequence, apart from the common notion of what counts as natural. Oteiza takes the anatomic differences between men and women, looks for clues in other cultural manifestations (especially in the etymologies of certain Basque words) mixes them up with what he considers a certain Basque mentality and as a result, he produces a man-made set of images with implications in the social and the political.

The identification of women (in Oteiza's case the feminine and matriarchal) with Nature has been studied by Ortner and her perspective summarized by Bullen (Chapter 2). Ortner starts from the premise of what she calls *universal feminine subordination*, and makes a comparison between the biological differences between men and women and the cultural abstract categories derived from them. She concludes that the reason why women are portrayed closer to Nature is because Nature is universally perceived as devalued. Contrariwise culture is seen as the tool to control Nature. Schopenhauer made a similar distinction between culture and Nature. For the German philosopher the masculine incarnates the *spirit* whereas the feminine was linked to Nature. In his opinion the feminine is Nature's strategy to perpetuate its character. These antithetic dialectics (masculine-feminine, culture-Nature) are patent in Oteiza's sculptures and essays. In this line, Agirre and Gorriarán affirm that in Oteiza's thought the existence of the need of subjugating Nature to culture is his way to find the cure of that existential illness called *sentimiento trágico*. As in Schopenhauer's perspective, the *spirit* or culture and its representations (i.e. art) are directly linked to the masculine.

(...) hay otra lectura política e ideológica no menos importante para entender a Oteiza. De la victoria del arte sobre la naturaleza – metáfora del dominio de la cultura sobre la naturaleza o conquista de la inmortalidad sobre la muerte – nacerá el “hombre nuevo” (...) (Agirre and Gorriarán, 267).<sup>5</sup>

### 3. THE COSMOS AND THE PROTECTIVE CROMLECH

The man of the firmament is represented in his *Quousque tandem...!* as an agoraphobic Basque Neolithic shepherd who has to find his place in the infinite space of Nature as totality. In his dread of the unmanageable space around him he experiences the need to create an area of protection. These spaces of protection are concavities, shelters against the world of harassing convex forms. A paradigmatic expression of this man's first encounter with that threatening cosmos is Oteiza's sculpture *La Tierra y la Luna* (The Earth and the Moon): in this outstanding composition Oteiza reveals the cosmos the man of the firmament had to confront. Through the absence of the motif sculpted, Oteiza unfolds its harmless presence. The moon and the earth are absent, defined by two pillars that create a space within where unmistakably moon and earth should dwell. The literally, true, material and convex representation of both celestial bodies could have been taken (and they have been taken as such in many cultures) as a threatening deity, but the play of empty spaces accompanied by the small holes in the pillars (Kandinsky's synaesthetic musical points) that let light go through to resemble symphonic constellations, create an atmosphere of nightly celestial musicality.

Nevertheless, the space the moon and the earth the agoraphobic man of the firmament has to face in true life are far from metaphoric. In fact to the eyes of primitive men they definitely might have seemed to govern Nature's phases of creation and death. *La Tierra y la Luna* hence fails to provide the hope for salvation the anguished ancient Basque longs for. Oteiza's experimentation with space and form goes much farther, and imagines the Neolithic shepherd, who had to create shelters for protection against meteorological phenomena, creating an aesthetic space of protection, the Pyrenean cromlech.

In Heideggerian terms this man was *thrown* into an existence he had not chosen and thus, his own being was at stake. In the classical vision of the sublime, from the Pseudo-Longinus to Burke and Kant, this existential threat comes after facing the totality in which he becomes aware of his own contingent insignificance. In Oteiza's words this is *the absolute poverty of man confronting nature* (Oteiza, 195:230) or the consequences of the fact that we are not born but they *make us be born*, as he remembers us borrowing Unamuno's words [no nacemos] *nos nacen* (Pelay Orozco, 40).

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5. There is another, no less important, political and ideological reading to understand Oteiza. From the victory of art over nature – metaphor of the conquest of immortality over death the New Man would be born (...). [My translation]

For this Oteizian primitive man of the firmament there are two menaces with one shared symptom. The menaces are: first, the threat of an incommensurable space that makes us infinitely small and insignificant when compared to it, and second, the need to define who we are inside the world in which we are born, that is, the problem of identity. The symptom has been already underlined: existential angst or the *tragic sense of life*.

The psychological experience of this ancestral Basque is also contained in the mythological representation of a most repeated biographical experience that Oteiza himself had when he was a child. According to his own testimony, it is the experience that pushed him to create closed spaces and empty vessels that symbolize protection against Nature's threats.

In the beach of his natal Basque village, the coastal town of Orio, Oteiza felt the need to find a shelter to be protected from the anxiety caused by the sublime vision of the unfathomable sky. Just as prehistoric graves dug on the ground try to (we guess) represent the return to earth and along with it to the protective maternal womb, closing then the cycle of birth and death, Oteiza found his place in a sheltering hole made in the ground from which he could glimpse the cosmos<sup>6</sup>. In Oteiza's mythical representation of the world, that space of protection finds its equivalent in the protective feminine container (*aska*) with the form of the minimal Basque cromlech; a small circle of stones.

At the time of Oteiza's first interest for these lithic tombstones (when he returned from South America and rediscovered his homeland) he claimed that nothing had been found within the small circular space framed by the heterogeneous rocks. Oteiza interpreted the absence of any rem-

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6. *De muy niño en Orio, donde he nacido, mi abuelo solía llevarnos de paseo a la playa. Yo sentía una enorme atracción por unos grandes hoyos que había en la parte más interior. Solía ocultarme en uno de ellos, acostado, mirando el gran espacio solo del cielo que quedaba sobre mí, mientras desaparecía todo lo que había a mi alrededor. Me sentía profundamente protegido. Pero, ¿de qué quería protegerme? Desde niño, como todos, (sic) sentimos como una pequeña nada nuestra existencia, que se nos define como un círculo negativo de cosas, emociones, limitaciones, en cuyo centro, en nuestro corazón, advertimos el miedo –como negación suprema– de la muerte. Mi experiencia de niño en ese hoyo en la arena era la de un viaje de evasión desde mi pequeña nada a la gran nada del cielo en la que penetraba, para escaparme, con deseo de salvación. En esa incomodidad o angustia del niño despierta ya el sentimiento trágico de la existencia que nos define a todos los hombres (...).* (Oteiza, 1983: 75) Being a child in Orio, where I was born, my grandfather used to take us for walks to the beach. I felt an enormous attraction to some big holes in the innermost part [of the beach]. I used to hide in one of them, lying down; looking towards the great space alone of the sky that was left upon me, meanwhile everything around me disappeared. I felt profoundly protected. But, from what did I want to protect myself? Since I was a child, just like everyone, (sic) we feel our existence as a small nothingness that defines us as a negative circle of things, emotions, limitations, in whose center, in our heart, we notice the dread -as supreme negation- of death. My experience as a child in that hole in the sand was that of a trip of evasion from my small nothingness towards the great nothingness of the sky in which I entered to escape with the desire of salvation. In that discomfort or anguish of the child awakens the tragic sense of existence that defines us all. [My translation]

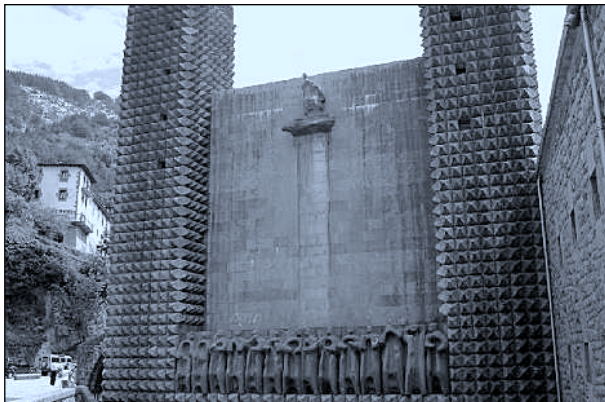


Fig. 1. Arantzazu. Façade  
Fot. Celestino Manso

nants inside the cromlech not as *not finding anything*, but as the unveiling of nothingness (*huts*). He defended that the Basque man of the firmament, the Neolithic shepherd, had created an aesthetic, spiritual and transcendental solution to the tragic anxiety brought by the confrontation with Nature as wholeness. Within the nothingness framed inside the circle of stones, the Neolithic Basque shepherd would create his safe world, an aesthetic solution to the problem of existence and, at the same time, a feminine space of maternal protection. The first menace had been overcome, the second one, the problem of *who we are*, the issue of identity, is not the subject of this paper. We will only say that Oteiza solves the problem affirming that the tree of Gernika (symbol of the ancient Basque traditions) is born inside the Basque cromlech; another aesthetic solution for an existential question.

#### 4. HUTS, ARRA AND ASKA

As mentioned above, *huts* was the Basque word Oteiza used to name the space contained inside the circle of stones, whereas the cromlech itself was an *aska* or vessel. The linguistic implications of the attributions of these terms to his description of the cromlech are very important to appreciate his creation of a new Basque mythology, and to understand the symbolic role of women in his pseudo-religious scheme. In other paper, using one of the terms Barandiaran uses to name the Basque cromlech, along with Oteiza's opinion concerning this matter and recollected in his *Ejercicios espirituales en un túnel*, I wrote:

En euskera cromlech es “harrespil” o “arrizpil”, es decir: círculo de piedras. Para Oteiza, sin embargo, la palabra originaria es “arripil”, hueco redondo. Según él este nombre es más coherente con la cultura matriarcal vasca del hueco (*huts*) y el recipiente (*aska*) que se contraponen a lo convexo y corporal (*arra*) del patriarcalismo indoeuropeo. Un antecedente de esta idea podría encontrarse en Agustín Chaho, que analiza etimológicamente la palabra “senarra”, marido en



euskera como “zu ene arra”, es decir: tú mi macho. Según Agirre y Gorriarán (1998: 275) “En general la intelectualidad rechazó las osadías oteizianas; particularmente embarazosas resultaron sus interpretaciones del cromlech microlítico pirenaico (...) así como sus lecturas hermenéuticas del euskara, prolongación de las disparatadas etimologías provenientes de Poza, Larramendi y Astarloa, que Humboldt ya rechazó por su falta de rigor.” [In Basque cromlech is harrespil or arrizpil, that is: circle of stones. For Oteiza, contrariwise, the original word is arrizpil, which means circular hollow. In his view, this name is more coherent with the Basque culture of the void (huts) and the container (aska) that sets up against the convex and corporeal (arra) of Indo-European patriarchalism. An antecedent of this idea could be found in Agustín Chaho, who etymologically analyzes the word *senarra*, husband in Basque, as *zu ene arra*, that is: you my male. In Agirre's and Gorriarán's opinion, (1998: 275) “In general the Basque intelligentsia rejected Oteiza's audacities: particularly embarrassing were his interpretations of the microlithic cromlech of the Pyrenees (...) as well as his hermeneutic readings of the Basque language, a prolongation of the absurd etymologies that came from Poza, Larramendi and Astarloa, that Humboldt already rejected because of their lack of rigor (Arana, 119)].

The linguistic and antagonistic pair *aska* and *arra* is central in the making of Oteiza's Basque qualitative space. The duality between the cosmogony of the concave (Basque, Pre-Indo-European and matriarchal) and that of the convex (Arian, Indo-European and patriarchal) is recurrent in Oteiza's late essays.

In his esoteric etymology he proposes two meanings contained in the morpheme *arr*: first and most importantly, the meaning of *arr* as empty concavity that he finds in Basque words such as *barrun* (interior) and even in romance terms such as the Spanish *arroyo* (stream), the Greek *arka* (sky) and yet in the even more controversial Basque *ama* (mother) (Oteiza, 1966: 448). How could the sculptor explain that the same semantic particle is included in the words *adarra* (horn) or *arra* (male)? Very easily: *la piedra, lo lleno, lo saliente, lo convexo y corporal exterior al hueco, acepción semántica posterior, patriarcalismo indoeuropeo, AR como masculinidad* [(...) the stone, full, salient, the convex and corporeal exterior to the hollow, [comes as a] later semantic sense, [with the] Indo-European patriarchalism, [only then can] AR [be seen] as masculinity.] (Oteiza, 1966: 450). The masculine meaning of *arra* comes only second in time and importance in the spiritual vocabulary of Basques.

The analysis of the term *aska* is emphasized by Zulaika (1988). The symbolic meaning of the term seems rooted in common speech:

In traditional mythology, supernatural power was captured by many footprints and vestigial signs that populate Basque geography. These mythical containers are called *aska*, which in daily life is the prime “container,” for it means trough, manger, furrow, ditch, trace, cup; it is also part of compounds such as *seaska* (cradle), *arraska* (sink) and *aberaska* (honeycomb). In her function of divine containment the *Amabirgina* [the Virgin Mary] is also called ‘aska’, a faceless empty vessel (Zulaika, 1988: 282).

The association of these words with the concrete feminine concave beyond the mere symbol of the Virgin Mary can also be found in words like

*neska* (girl), which Zulaika, borrowing the etymology from Bähr (Oteiza, 1966: 497) reads as *nere-aska* (my vessel). *Neska* is opposed to the masculine *nerabe* (lad) read as *nere-nabe*, being *abe* the trunk of a tree (Zulaika, 1988: 282). Other feminine words not related to the concept of *aska* might refer to the maternal, i.e. *emakume* interpreted as a compound word of *eman* (to give) and *kume* (young) as in *katakume* (kitten). The same logic of *eman* could apply to *emaztea* (wife).

It was Zulaika who pointed out to Oteiza the existence of a logic of the *aska* in his sculptures and singular thought. The dyadic opposition Oteiza used before Zulaika's contribution was the pair *arra* and *huts*. In the index to his *Ejercicios espirituales en un túnel* (Oteiza, 1966: 497-498) it is Zulaika who relates Oteiza's notion of the concave with traditional ways of spiritual and physical healing and with metaphoric organization of basic categories such as the culturally constructed differences between boys and girls (*neraska* and *nerabe*) but also with basic political concepts such as freedom.

The result of what Oteiza describes as a *dialectic and imaginative provocative game* between anthropologist and artist (Oteiza, 1966:497), is a diagram to visually explain the relation between *aska*, *huts* and *arra*. With Zulaika's contribution *arra* becomes the vaulted sky above, *aska* the concave part of a circular space (i.e. a cromlech) and *huts* the space contained in the cromlech. In later works Zulaika would develop this idea and put it in relation with the concept of *qualitative cultural space* inherited from his anthropological tradition (Zulaika, 1988).

The authenticity of these etymologies continues to be very much uncertain. Oteiza knew their soft scientific basis, but considered that it was better to make mistakes than to remain in obscurity. In his magic-rationalistic approach to reality he identified himself with Levi-Strauss' *undomesticated thought* of the primitive hunter (Oteiza, 1966: 448) and this self-proclamation earned him the title of a book *Oteiza: Un pensamiento sin domesticar* (Martínez Gorriarán, 1989). What must remain clear is that whether true or false, all terms are created by poetic minds for specific cultural contexts, and that there is nothing natural in their creation. It is the job of the anthropologist to research the actual implications of such words in rituals and performances, but it is also the job of the poet to create new meanings and applications if they do not suit the actual beliefs and prospects. In this regard, Oteiza took the role of the poet and myth-maker, and used these concepts (*huts*, *aska*, *arra*) to illustrate his sculptures and articulate his Basque vision of the world. Now they surely are part of Basque imagery, and Basques are the ones who should decide if the symbolic role they attribute women is acceptable in our times or if they should discard them and create new ones.



Fig. 2. Arantza. The Apostles  
Fot. Celestino Manso

## 5. NIGHT AND MOON AGAINST DAY AND SUN

The process that transfigures the concavity of space into a place of protection, to finally arrive at a definition of the feminine, is (in Oteiza's written and sculpted work) a historic-mythical process. The explanation to these changes in mentality is at least as old as the Basque matriarchal theory, and has an Oteizian aesthetic version. We can summarize it as follows: Basques are the last survivors of the original European tribes. Their mentality and culture were opposed to those of the invaders. In the words of Oteiza: *El pueblo vasco como único sobreviviente directo de los pueblos preindoeuropeos, se mantiene todavía en la estructura existencial de esta cultura nuestra del pequeño cromlech-estatua* [The Basque people, as the last direct survivors of the Pre-Indo-European, are still maintained in the existential structure of our culture of the small cromlech-statue.] (Oteiza, 1983: 103). The Arian conquerors of Europe had a militaristic and patriarchal social structure, which, in Oteiza's vision, is clearly represented in two fundamental megalithic works of the Celts, one of the descendent tribes of the original Indo-Europeans. The aligned rows of vertical menhirs in Carnac, France, and the megalithic structure of Stonehenge, England, are (always sticking to Oteiza's viewpoint) manifestations of military power and incomplete aesthetic answers to the *tragic sense of life*. The Celtic artistic and sacramental dedication to the convex is a clear example of the Indo-European metaphysical preference for the masculine form in conflict with feminine contained spaces.<sup>7</sup>

The Celtic relation to Nature was dedicated to the cult of the sun as masculine, whereas Oteiza sees in the moon the feminine divinity that most influences Basque pagan religion. Basque culture was moon oriented from a religious perspective, and all nightly creatures were symbolic figures that

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7. Alineamientos de menhires (Carnac, Francia), de la familia cultural del cromlech megalítico. Grandes pistas mágicas del aterrizaje para la divinidad solar. Aparcamientos mágicos para el carro ario. Donde el hombre puede aprender a marchar, a obedecer, a desfilar (Oteiza, 1963: Índice Epilodal, 40-44).

take spiritual significance. A further representation of the same concept can be seen in Oteiza's version of the meaning of *gau* (night in Basque) which he puts in relation with its meaning in Greek as hollow, coherent with his theory of *huts* and *aska*. He calls the moon *billargi* although the word in Basque is *hilargi* (it literally means the light of the dead) and defines his neologism as *the moving and revolving light* (Oteiza, 1966: 453). Along with the symbolic meaning of the moon as the night's main character and a feminine deity, Oteiza is also interested in the space the moon creates with her movement.<sup>8</sup>

The feminine clearly appears when he identifies the pagan cult of the moon with the mythological figure of the Lady of Amboto, Mari. The moon and Mari become one, and Oteiza regards the product of this figurative juxtaposition as the *supreme goddess of our cultural [Basque] inheritance* (Oteiza, 1966: 454).

## 6. MOON, MARI AND MOTHERHOOD AS ORIGIN

We believe that Oteiza's pagan inclinations towards Nature and religious observance of the moon have their source in his romantic approach to reality. The moon seen from a romantic viewpoint was paradigmatically represented in Friedrich's landscapes. Probably *Zwei Männer in Betrachtung des Mondes* (Two Men Contemplating the Moon), a painting in which two men dressed for political action observe the moon in the horizon in what seems a meditative and longing fashion, is one of the most relevant of these landscapes. For some (Rewald) this painting constitutes a representation of the lunar period in German romantic poetry, literature and philosophy. The moon is an object of yearning and contemplation. But, what is the melancholic content it has that makes Oteiza observe it for a whole night and create his visual poem *Plenilunio en Fitero?* (Full Moon in Fitero) (Oteiza, 2004: back cover and 2006: 323). His contemplation of the moon has the same motivation the two romantic men had. In both pictures man is looking for an origin to things; a proof of the existence of some sense for our being and for the world around us. In the mind of prehistoric Basques, the moon guided seasons. Still today, some people think certain tasks should be performed at given stages of the moon, such as planting, harvesting, pruning or cutting someone's hair.

The moon and the moonlight have been associated with folktales and myths, with the *night side of things*, magic, emotions, the semiconscious, the feminine and the fertile, yet also with the sick, the ghostly and the realm of the dead (Rewald). The moon for Oteiza is not, as an Enlightened mind would say, an object of cold and measurable properties subject to

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8. We can find an example of the space created by the moon in motion in his sculpture *La luna como luz movediza*, "The Moon as Revolving Light".

scientific scrutiny. It is the reminder of a pre-literary time in which men lived in harmony with Nature and, most important of all, felt that the moon, the protective *aska* offered them shelter and guided the cycles of life and death. Their blissful knowledge kept them always in communion with Nature's transcendence through their astonished and direct perception of reality characterized in Friedrich's landscapes.

The recovery of the original found in a preterit form of knowledge and its artistic representation with social, political and sacramental intentions was Oteiza's main project after he abandoned sculpture. Oteiza found in the neo-pagan contemplation of the moon a deity that reminded him that there was a time in which man believed without doubt, filled with transcendent emotions and in harmonic relation with Nature. It seems that in a romantic fashion, Oteiza longs for those times while, at the same time, he rebels against the rational and scientific creations of egotistic modern men.

However, it is important to underscore that Oteiza's symbolic approach to Nature has relevant differences with the merely romantic appreciation of landscape. Oteiza's artistic representations, though probably originated in a romantic feeling, have a degree of abstraction and a relation with the avant-garde movements of the time that make them contemporary and never old fashion pastoral clichés. In fact, the generation of young Basque artists of the 1930s to which Oteiza belonged, aesthetically opposed the ruling style that dealt with traditional customs, traditions and attitudes in relation with Nature. Not only his style, even the message contained in Oteiza's work as a whole is closer to the philosophical and artistic currents of his time than to the romantic period.

The angst felt in his childhood experience at the beach in Orío when he was exposed to the infinity of the sublime has its charming continuation in adult life when Oteiza contemplates the feminine world the moon creates around herself. In the aforementioned visual poem *Plenilunio en Fitero* the feminine is transformed from the spatial concave to the nocturne sounds of the "U". Almost everything in his poem revolves around what he calls *the Spatial "U" of Astarloa*. The shape of the moon is a circular set formed with that letter. The "U" is commonly onomatopoeically associated with nightly creatures, among them: ghosts, wolves and owls,<sup>9</sup> and the whisper of the wind. In Oteiza's poetic composition, scattered stars make up the letters of the words *luna llena* (full moon in Spanish). The *Spatial "u"* that defines his nightly experience is, in his own words *lo cóncavo* (the concave) (Oteiza, 1966: 395), and thus its feminine being is again assumed. Later he emphasizes: (...) *la O y la U son dos fonemas que aluden a zonas míticas del espacio, sonemas que hacen con lo cóncavo, con el círculo, con el cielo, con la noche, una lista sagra-*

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9. Hooting and wailing in Spanish (Oteiza's mother tongue) is *ulular*, directly related to the English *ululate*. By the same token, howling is *ullar*. Ghosts use the letter "u" to wail for their burden and the wind blow uses it as it travels through the night. The letter "u" encompasses all the sounds of the night in which *owl* and *wolf* add to the symphony.

*da de palabras en euskera (...)*<sup>10</sup> (Oteiza, 1966: 435). The concave becomes now not only feminine, but also a nocturne deity related to the sacramental represented by Mari, the traditional matriarchal goddess of the Basques.

## 7. CANONICAL AND VANGUARDIST MOTHERHOOD

The first sculpture Oteiza made was the representation of a mother with her child. Similarly to those Byzantine paintings of embracing Ladies of the XIII century, Oteiza's solid and archaic sculpture depicts the Virgin Mary tenderly holding the child against her chick. This was the first in a series of many and manifold representations of motherhood. From the first *Motherhood* (1928-1929) (VV.AA. 1988: 67) to his last ones there is a lapse in time in which Oteiza did not pay attention to that artistic theme. In that time his sculptural approach to motherhood changed stylistically and also in treatment of the motif.

Oteiza was an innovator in almost all of his approximations to traditional artistic topics, and the theme of motherhood was not an exception. His first *motherhood* might take us to wrongly interpret it as a mere portrait of the gift of life coming to existence through the miracle of birth. And although this is something that is later represented in his sculpture *Visitación de la Virgen a su prima Santa Isabel* (1949) (VV.AA. 1988: 84) (The Visitation of Mary to her Cousin Saint Elisabeth), Oteiza had already in mind an iconoclastic idea of motherhood, attached to his particular idea of cultural space and to the solution to his existential anxiety. Opposed to this more sophisticated approximation to the theme of motherhood, his *Visitación* is a clear example of the motif sculpted from a canonical design.

The biblical account narrates the encounter between the two women: Mary and Elisabeth (Luke 1, 39-56). The Virgin Mary pays a visit to her cousin, and at the very moment she greets her, Elisabeth feels her unborn child alive inside her and that fills her with the Holy Spirit. Reciprocally Elisabeth recognizes that the baby the Virgin Mary carries is her Lord. This passage from the Bible has been commonly used to underline the significance of life before birth and, therefore, also as a reason to oppose abortion.

Oteiza's sculpture is a composition of shared volumes and empty spaces between Mary and Elisabeth, which clearly and in a quite traditional way depicts their mutual affinity and empathy due to their shared pregnancy. From the mere technical exegesis of Oteiza's work, the first maternity is the beginning of an investigation on the properties of form and volume, whereas the *Visitación* uses one of the figures Oteiza had chosen to play and to deconstruct volumes. The *Visitación* shows a game of hollows and protuberances that is recurrent in his figurative experimentation with space.

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10. (...) "O" and "U" are two phonemes that refer to mythical zones of space, [sounds with meaning] that make a list of sacred words in Basque with the concave, the circle, the sky and the night.

To clearly understand Oteiza's transit from the traditional mode of representing motherhood in his *Visitación* to the idea of motherhood as origin and protective metaphysical entity, there are two fundamental clues. The first one is contained in the most revolutionary and disruptive sculpture *San Adán* (1933-34) (VV.AA. 1988: 73) (Saint Adam) in which an anticlerical Oteiza models a pregnant Adam with apelike features. With this work Oteiza shows his disbelief and opposition to the Christian vision of motherhood as divine gift. That is not to mean that he was a complete atheist, simply that his relations with Christian thought and liturgy were troublesome and unorthodox. The second and conceptually primordial in Oteiza's imagination is not a sculpture but an excerpt of one of his late essays in which he describes motherhood not as an act or as a divine given gift, but as the pagan cultural reflection of the mother as space of creation.

Percibo un prematriarcalismo vasco de huecos, espacialismo topológico sagrado del sitio como protección y productividad que considero fase anterior a la vinculación con la madre, como vinculación a un Espacio-Madre (Hueco-madre, celeste, nocturno), cultura física y metafísica de huecos en el cazador-recolector de nuestros santuarios (...) [I perceive a Basque pre-matriarchalism of hollows, sacred topological spatiality of the place as protection and productivity that I consider a phase prior to the link with the mother, [I perceive it] in relation with the Space-Mother (hollow-mother, celestial, nightly), physics and metaphysics of the hollow in the [mind of the] hunter-gatherer of our sanctuaries.] (Oteiza 1983: Nota a la cuarta edición).

We have to remember that the Basque hunter-gatherer is what Oteiza calls the man of the firmament, in constant affiliation with Nature, a Nature that, Oteiza seems to argue, is feminine. Thus, the evolution in the treatment of the motif of *motherhood* can be, generally speaking, described as a transit between an archaic approach that plays with the joined forms between the Virgin Mary and the child in the first motherhood, followed by the *Visitación* in which the space left from the removed form starts to have some importance, and finally, the pagan idea of mother as protective receptacle and supreme Basque goddess. *San Adán* would be the brilliant counterpoint to this lineal development, and it is coherent with the mind of a controversialist such as Oteiza's. The history of his *motherhoods* is that of the vanishing form and the presence of space; that developmental process can also be applied to explain his experimental process in sculpture as a whole.

In a book of conversations between architects, Juan Daniel Fullaondo Errazu affirms that the idea of the mother as origin in Oteiza's work can be the most comprehensive one to cope not only with his heterogeneous body of work, but also with his personal traumas. On the other hand he seems to disagree with such an analysis of reality. Its poetic depth and metaphoric content can also be a complete absurdity, he maintains.

J.D.F. *Y tengo que citar de nuevo a Joyce: "Amor matris, genitivo, subjetivo y objetivo, puede ser lo único cierto en la vida"*.

A.T. *La idea es preciosa.*

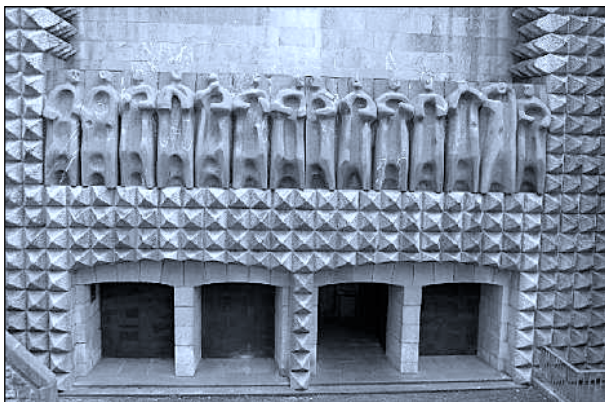


Fig. 3. Arantzazu. The portal  
Fot. Celestino Manso

J.D.F. *Aunque también puede resultar un disparate. Me gusta por lo unitaria que resulta, su dimensión meta-psicológica, el número de manifestaciones diversas que abarca... Oteiza, el mariólatra constante, eterno adolescente, desde el infantil hueco en la playa, hasta el minimal, signado nostálgicamente de "amor matris, genitivo, subjetivo y objetivo" Creo que debiera dejarlo así, tan teatralmente* [J.D.F. And I have to quote Joyce again: "Amor matris, genitive, subjective and objective, it could be the only truth in life".

A.T. The idea is beautiful.

J.D.F. And yet it could also be nonsense. I like it because of its unifying results, its meta-psychological dimension, and the number of different manifestations it encompasses... Oteiza, the devoted Marian, everlasting adolescent, from the childish hollow in the beach to minimalism, longingly signified with "amor matris, genitive, subjective and objective". I believe I should leave it this way, so dramatically.] (Juan Daniel Fullaondo: 161).

We can use the figure of the mother, not only as a synchronic means to understand Oteiza in a given moment of time or to create a general theory to interpret his psychological sufferings and work, it is also part of his new mythology of history; a magic tale of the evolution of Basque culture in which the mother and women in general play, again, the main symbolic role.

## 8. THE PASSING OF EUSKARA, CULTURE AND STYLE

Who is in charge of passing on the cultural specificity from generation to generation? How do we understand the history of the *Basque style* or the *history of Basque ideas*? Oteiza answers these questions in his *Quousque tandem...!*

Si nuestro pueblo no ha tenido ni literatura ni legislación escritas, nadie puede negarnos una tradición literaria oral (cuya importancia intentamos describir en este trabajo) y una personalidad humana y una tradición espiritual y política igualmente singulares. Pienso en la secreta tenacidad de transmisiones como esta (de abuela a nieta) entre nosotros. En el proceso formador de nuestro carácter como pueblo





Fig. 4. Arantzazu. The Pietà  
Fot. Celestino Manso

que arranca ya con precisión histórica y estética a la vez, desde el cromlech neolítico (una de las hipótesis que centralmente desarrollamos aquí) hasta nosotros, no nos separa nada más que (debemos decir más exactamente que nos une) una sucesión de 80 relaciones (como esta) de abuela a nieta, 80 abuelas desde el neolítico vasco hasta Pascuala Iruarrizaga [Although our people have not have a literature or a written legislation of its own, no one can negate [the existence] of a tradition in oral literature (whose importance we will try to unveil in this work) and a human personality and a spiritual and political tradition equally unique. I reflect on the tenacious secrecy of these types of transmissions (from grandmother to granddaughter) that [take part] in our community. In the formative process of our character as people that starts with historical and aesthetic accuracy at the same time, from the Neolithic cromlech (a hypothesis that we clearly develop here) to our times, there is just the gap (we would have to say more clearly the union) of 80 successive relationships (like this one) from grandmother to granddaughter, 80 grandmothers from the Basque Neolithic to Pascuala Iruarrizaga.] (Oteiza, 1963: 2).

The importance of the gender approach in the analysis of language and cultural transmission has been ethnographically studied, taking as object of inquiry the annual demonstration in favor of the maintenance of the Basque language that the language school AEK (Alfabetatze Euskalduntze Koordinakundea) organizes under the name of *Korrika* (Bullen: 184). *Korrika* is a run that takes place along the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, Navarre and the French Basque Country to raise money in order to promote Euskara. As if it were the Olympic torch, a baton (*testigo*) is passed from runner to runner to symbolize the involvement of a unified people in their struggle to keep Basque alive.

In del Valle's opinion, the passing of the *testigo* from mother to daughter symbolizes the importance of women in the maintenance of language and culture. It could be said that women's participation in *Korrika* is still constrained under the influence of their traditional domestic role, related to the transmission of culture and childcare.

In Oteiza's mythology of history, the passing of the Basque style comes along the matrilineal path, from prehistoric times to our modern days, in only

a succession of 80 *grandmothers*, which implies that only 80 communications from grandmother to granddaughter had to take place from the Basque Neolithic mentality to our time. In other words, the conceptual tools the Neolithic people used in their time must be somehow present in the nowadays Basque current mentality. An introspective exercise of Platonic reminiscence would suffice to recover that Neolithic vision; the Basque style based on the culture of the *aska*.

In one of the passages of the *Quousque tandem...!* Oteiza writes: *Es un estilo vasco que viene con todas nuestras tradiciones, que ha alcanzado a llegar hasta nosotros en el testimonio (que olvidamos) más viviente y dramático (...)* [It is a Basque style that comes along all our traditions that has reached our times in the testimonies (that we forget) most vivid and dramatic (...).] (Oteiza, 1963: 7).

Pascuala Iruarrizaga, Oteiza's example of the Basque grandmother used to pinpoint the last link in his tale of culture transmission, was not his grandmother, but his wife's. This might illustrate the classical vision Oteiza has in assigning significance to the matrilineal passing of cultural values.

The implications of the assignment of a clear traditional role for women have a transcendental importance. For Oteiza, the utmost Basque quality is the discovery of the void space contained in the *aska* (as we have already mentioned, later he will define that space as the cultural realm in which the tree of Gernika is born). This discovery of nothingness as support of all things, even of truth, underlines the difficulties the Neolithic Basque had to find solid reasons to philosophical questions. The discovery of *huts* is the ultimate recognition of the contingency of all things, that is: coming to understand the fact that nothing is more primordial in significance than anything else. This is the existential conclusion the Basque shepherd strangely accomplished millennia before contemporary philosophy. Only later, in what seems an exercise of will, Oteiza decides that nothingness should be artistically encircle, framed to create a cultural arena. This arena is founded upon the will of mankind to protect itself from the fears of an unfriendly and unintelligible world. Of course, that exercise of will remains elusive if we provide inborn qualities to individuals.

Maybe, when French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre understood the value of being a priori undefined as necessary condition to act freely, he wanted to liberate us from the limiting consequence of essential qualities assigned to individuals. To be more specific, he paradoxically said that we were *condemned to freedom*. We can find a predecessor of this idea in the figure of philosopher of de Renaissance Giovanni Picco della Mirandola: *Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have we created thee, so that thou mightest be free according to thy own will and honor, to be thy own creator and builder. To thee alone we gave growth and development depending on thy own free will. Thou bearest in thee the germs of a universal life.* This type of humanist thought would clash with the definition of any type of human essence. Oteiza does not talk about any feminine essence, but in his

attempt to avoid past efforts that tried to create a fixed Basque mentality around old fashion pastoral ideas, and, at the same time, in his effort to rediscover a lost Basque style, he ends up creating the same problems the essentialists did: a fixed way of being; a determined feminine Basque nature that restricts the infinite possibilities of being condemned to absolute freedom.

The attribution of fixed qualities to a certain group, in this case Basque women, although it might be seen as positive within Basque society, turns to be a constraint to become what one's will might desire. Such attribution of qualities defines a cultural space for women reduced to a more limited sphere than that of men. This phenomenon has been analyzed by feminist anthropology using a very clarifying distinction between *symbolic* and *real* power (Bullen: 199). Whereas it is conspicuous that Oteiza's mythology confers women an aesthetic and *symbolic* power greater than that of man, if put in any arena (e.g. the political) where *real* power has to be exercised, it remains obvious that the innate qualities of women as mother or transmitter of culture wouldn't be as appreciated as those of a man who has built himself through the power of his own will.

The example of motherhood is attached to that of the transmission of cultural values. If we assign women with the positive quality of being intrinsically predisposed to motherhood and to the tasks involved in child raising, we are consigning them to the domestic or the field of education. Consequently, a property that seems positive turns to be a burden to influence and participate in a more comprehensive realm (Bullen: 183). It is most likely that Oteiza's *San Adán* tried to end with the classic stereotype of motherhood as women's divine gift, but he still makes a Manichean division between the feminine (Nature, concavity, hollow, night, cultural transmission, Basque, moon, Pre-Indo-European, motherhood as metaphysical creation and protection) and the masculine (cultural representation, convexity, Arian, sun, form, Indo-European). The single figure that represents the powerful polysemy contained in the feminine term *aska* is Oteiza's *Pietà*, designed for the Basilica of our Lady of Aranzazu in Oñate, Basque Country. It represents both sides of what Fullaondo expresses: the beautiful, profound and revolutionary artistic piece and the absurd and grotesque politics involved.

## **9. THE PIETÀ: FROM SYMBOL TO SYMBOLIC POLITICS**

Zulaika, in his attempt to explain the change of values in the transformation of ETA from a cultural left-wing movement to a paramilitary group, wrote:

The former religious rhetoric and pedagogical goals had to be dismissed for youth to plainly assume the politico-military goals of a group seeking national liberation. (1988: 60)

For his part, ex-ETA member, poet and essayist Jon Juaristi analyzed the transformation of the Christian religious beliefs of the first ETA into the reli-

gion of the motherland in his book *Sacra Nemesis*, the Latin form for *Sacred Transformation* and assigned a fundamental role in that replacement of values to the first ETA member to kill and to be killed, Txabi Etxebarrieta:

(...) sabemos que esa religión nacionalista surgirá (o resurgirá) en torno al cadáver de Javier Etxebarrieta Ortiz, transustanciado en Txabi Etxebarrieta, proto-mártir [We know that the nationalist religion arose (or will arise again) around the corpse of Txabi Etxebarrieta Ortiz, transubstantiated in Txabi Etxebarrieta the proto-martyr.] (Juaristi, 108).

This transformation was exceptionally exemplified in Oteiza's *Pietà* for the Basilica of Aranzazu, in which Etxebarrieta represents the dead Christ, and the Virgin Mary is embodied in the image of the mother of the dead activist.

The death of Etxebarrieta has been told from many viewpoints. The so-called *abertzale* movement (pro-independentist and often violent Basque nationalism) has always described the event from the questionable discourse of the tragic hero. From this perspective, Etxebarrieta was unfortunately placed in the difficult predicament of having to kill the enemy, although he had a strong internal conflict. Thirty years later, Etxebarrieta's friend Iñaki Sarasketa explained the events of Jun 7, 1968 in Aduna, and Benta-aundi, Basque Country. His account, published in *El Mundo* was also gathered in Juaristi's book *Sacra Nemesis*. This is not the place to explain the details of the assassination of Guardia Civil José Antonio Pardines and posterior killing of his assassin in the hands of the same police corps. We think the truth of the matter has been clearly shown in Sarasketa's report, the only witness of the whole story. The single issue of importance for this paper in relation to those events is Etxebarrieta's elevation to the range of martyr of the struggle to free the Basque Country, and the consequent symbolic implications of Oteiza's sculpture in relation to the mother's role.

In his *Basque Violence* Joseba Zulaika borrows Redfield's differentiation between art and icon to understand the importance of the Marian cult in the Basque Country. Here we borrow the concept from the borrower, which can be summed up as follows:

(...) whereas an artistic framework indicates aesthetic qualities, in (...) iconic frameworks (...) what are denoted are cosmological relations. (Zulaika, 1988: 276)

For an Oteizian mind it would be quite easy to put this concept in relation with his notion of sacramental art in opposition to mere ornament. It might also be noteworthy to mention that Zulaika uses this concept to address the religious significance of the Virgin Mary in the Basque Country, and we try to put it in connection with the symbolic transfiguration of the Virgin into the mother of Txabi Etxebarrieta.

In Oteiza's vision art should consider the sacramental condition of the void space, or else it would just be void art. His *Pietà* matches this definition. Its powerful symbolism has a gender based reading. The significance of the oeuvre is linked with the return of the patriot, the political activist, to the

inculpable mother, who becomes a more powerful representation of the victim than the victim itself. The mother gave him his life and the militant gave it back to the mother. Mother as creating *aska*, as original *huts* expressed in the Basque style and contained in the meaning of the term *Ama Lur* (mother earth, but also motherland). The feminine Nature completes her ultimate task that closes the cycle of creation and destruction; she is again the protective womb for the son and the reason for existence.

The adventurous militant had a symbolic cause, a modern version of the medieval maid for whom to sacrifice his life. The woman of the *Pietà* is the Virgin, the mother, land and Nature. The Christian vision of the original biblical scene becomes shadowed and changed into a hybrid neo-pagan construct with the same sacramental powers. Etxebarrieta's death is not a mere killing, not even a murder; it is a sacrificial and, hence, religious death. He died for a new coined religion of the oppressed motherland. Following the New Testament, Christ died for our sins; Etxebarrieta takes his place in Aranzazu. The analogy is clear for the *abertzale* mentality: Etxebarrieta died for everyone's sins against the motherland.

In Oteiza's magic rationalism, the notion of sacramental art incorporates politics and aesthetics, and an act like Etxebarrieta's death cannot be framed within the aseptic words of legal or political language; it was a sacrificial killing it belonged to the realm of religion. The history of the conception of Aranzazu's *Pietà* supports this Oteizian position. When Oteiza first planned to add a religious symbolic figure to the façade, he thought of a representation of the Virgin Mary alone, probably influenced by the meaning of her cult that Zulaika highlights. Only after Etxebarrieta's death Oteiza takes under consideration the *Pietà*. In Pelay Orozco's biographical book Oteiza himself adds a caption under a portrait picture of Etxebarrieta that we consider most revealing:

7 de junio, sacrificado en Benta-aundi, el primero de nuestra resistencia última (...) cuando subo el 1 de noviembre a Aranzazu, ya he decidido que pondré en el alto del Muro, el Hijo muerto, a los pies de la Madre, que estará mirando al cielo, clamando, hablando, no sé... [Jun 7, sacrificed at Benta-aundi, the first of our ultimate Resistance (...) when I go back to Aranzazu, I have already decided that I will place the dead son at the feet of the Mother, and she will be looking towards the sky, demanding, talking, I don't know...] (Pelay Orozco [516]).

The transubstantiation between mother, homeland and Nature has been commonly used by nationalism. Bullen (199) brings up an article by Ugalde in which the symbolic unification of the terms is considered a reason to validate the importance of the collective and national over the individual. This collective national space gains strength with its association with the feminine natural.

(...) the linking of woman-nation strengthens itself through the association of homeland with mother goddess in both a divine and a natural way (Bullen, 199).

Moreover, Bullen also addresses the issue in reference to Aretxaga's study on the role of women in funeral rituals. Their presence symbolizes per-

taining to a community. The image of a woman, mother or partner of the deceased, manifests her feminine quality as a source of creation. Fertility is suggested along with its outcome, namely the promise of continuity of new warriors. The allegory enclosed in the *Pietà* is much stronger: the Virgin is not just a mother, she is the motherland, and the death of her son is the death of He who had the mission of liberating the whole of the group. She represents the mother of all ETA members, but at the same time the reason for which they die and to whom they return; she is a mother, a grave and the reason for existence. She is the beginning, the end and the transit between both. But while the fighter is away, the concrete mother, not the hyperbolic symbolic one, will remain ascribed to her role of mother or educator.

It comes to my mind Joseba Sarrionandia's poem popularized by singer Mikel Laboa:

Oroitzen zaitudanean, ama  
sukaldean egoten zara  
mahaia bostentzat iminita,  
aulkian eseri eta,  
leihotik begira  
kristalak lausotzen duen  
lurrina kendu gabe  
eta ni –badakit–  
zeure begien hondoan  
nagoela

[When I remember you, mother / you are in the kitchen / with the table set for five / the fog that misted up windows not wiped / and me – I know – I am in the depth of your eyes.]

The mother is not only origin and death, not only the one who opens and closes the cycles of life; the one that gives birth and to whom the warriors return, she is also the motive to keep fighting during the journey of life. And being her symbolic role so powerful, her real power is still reduced to the sphere of motherhood and culture transmission.

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