

Basque identity and travel accounts in the 19th century: the French Travellers' Gaze¹

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Euskal Herria XIX. mendean bisitatu zuten hiru belaunaldiko frantses bidaiariaren narrazioak direla bide, gure herrialdeaz eta bertako jendeaz beren bidaldi liburuetan proiektatu zuten literatura irudia berreraikitzen da testu honetan. Zenbait kasutan Espainia erromantikoari buruzko estereotipo zurrinak erreproduzitu ziren, baina beste askotan herrialde berezi baten existentzia nabarmendu zuten, garai hartako euskal politikari, erlijio gizon eta intelektuaren eliteek bideraturiko nortasun gogoetabidea islatu eta zabaltzen zutela.

Giltza-Hitzak: Euskal nortasuna. XIX. mendea. Bidaldi liburuak. Frantses literatura.

A través de los relatos de tres generaciones de viajeros franceses que visitaron el País Vasco en el siglo XIX, este texto reconstruye la imagen literaria que del país y sus gentes proyectaron en sus libros de viaje. En algunos casos reprodujeron rígidos estereotipos sobre la España romántica, pero en muchos otros subrayaron la existencia de un pueblo singular, reflejando y divulgando el discurso identitario que las élites políticas, religiosas e intelectuales vascas desplegaban en aquél tiempo.

Palabras Clave: Identidad vasca. Siglo XIX. Libros de viaje. Literatura francesa.

A travers les récits de trois générations de voyageurs français qui visitèrent le Pays Basque au XIX^{ème} siècle, ce texte reconstruit l'image littéraire qu'ils projetèrent du pays et de ses gens dans leurs livres de voyage. Dans certains cas ils reproduisirent de rigides stéréotypes sur l'Espagne romantique, mais dans beaucoup d'autres ils soulignèrent l'existence d'un peuple singulier, reflétant et propageant le discours identitaire que les élites politiques, religieuses et intellectuelles basques déployaient en ce temps là.

Mots Clés: Identité basque. XIX^{ème} siècle. Livres de voyage. Littérature française.

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"A trip to Spain, at the time of departure, is a rather important affair. It is, in brief, uncomfortable for some and dangerous for others", commented Léon de Rosny (1894: first chapter). He was one of those French travellers who in the 19th century dared cross the Pyrenees into that neighbouring but unknown country, a land full of mystery to the romantic imagination. Although that comment was made towards the end of the century, the ideas expressed in it, that of the dangers attending the traveller in a land the literature of the time depicted as full of bandits and brigands and to which the frequent wars of that century had given some credence, and that of the discomfort of travelling through a backward dilapidated country, had both an influence on those travellers who ventured to rove it in search of bulls and mantillas everywhere. And in the search they were indeed. Léon de Rosny recognises it openly: "In Spain I searched. Indeed I had gone out to search. Only I had not realised one does not make findings everyday"; and he confesses to carrying "a plan in our heads, preconceived ideas we wanted to test". These travellers' gaze then was thus guided and conditioned – something we must not forget – even though that does not mean that every one of them deformed the observed reality in order to make it fit into a pre-existing scheme. In fact, many of them did not shy away from breaking prefabricated ideas when necessary. And the Basque Country, sometimes a stage in a longer route through the whole of the peninsula, sometimes a destination in itself, offered an excellent opportunity for doing so.

French travellers had two options when planning his (or her) Spanish journey. They could enter the peninsula through either Catalonia or the Basque Country. The latter was not any more the unsafe path of the Middle Ages, using which Aimeric Picaud had in the 12th century advised against because it was inhabited by "a barbarous people, different from all others in their customs and nature, full of mischief, of black colour and ignoble appearance" (quoted in Martínez Salazar, 2001: 168). For the (mostly French and English) 19th-century traveller the Basque territory had kept the attraction of difference, though that difference was now not the expression of barbarism but that of the picturesqueness of a mountainous corner inhabited by a people endowed with peculiar customs, language and even a physical type which broke away from commonly held ideas about Spain and the Spaniards. In addition, for the French traveller it had the attraction of a bordering land astride the Pyrenees, connecting France and Spain by virtue of being inhabited by one and the same people on both sides of the mountains. It was unknown and, at the same time, tantalizingly near.

The French travellers who visited the Basque Country during the 19th century did so in a variety of ways: alone or in group, for work or for pure pleasure, in times of peace and in times of war, these latter being rather abundant during that century. Their professions too show a considerable diversity: writers, civil servants, soldiers, ethnographers, scholars, journalists... Following the example of all those who had preceded them in time and had left their travel impressions in books written to satisfy the curiosity of literary elites, the 19th-travellers too penned their own travel accounts. But these saw the light with an advantage over their predecessors. The Romantic Movement popularized literature and created a significantly wider reading public with a passionate, enthusiastic and grateful interest in literature. It also created a universal literary language, far from

narrow conventions and strict stylistic rules, favouring the more straightforward and natural expressions of everyday language (Hauser, 1983: II, 342, 366 and 379). As a result, the social impact of their books was far wider and even some of them were real best-sellers, going through several editions.

We will be focusing here on a number of those books written by French travellers who visited the Basque Country during the 19th century. They can be divided into three different generations. First, there is that of the travellers of the initial decades of the 19th century, the times of Napoleon and the Restoration, who in many instances came accompanying the French armies. Secondly, from the 1830s to the 1860s, we have the romantic generation, in which we find some of the most important names in French romantic literature and who contributed powerfully to shaping a certain image of Spain abroad. And, finally, we find the post-romantic generation of the last third of the century. We have selected a few of them depending on the importance of the writer and on the interest of the account he left us. And the criterion for determining that interest has been a very concrete question: its contribution to the literary construction of an image of the Basques and of their collective identity, which we will relate to that in the making within the Basque Country itself during the same period.²

In fact, during the 19th century the political, the cultural, and even the religious elites of the Basque Provinces (Vascongadas) devised a code of collective identity, according to which all the inhabitants of those territories – and occasionally also those of Navarre and, more marginally, those of the French Basque Country – were members of a singular *country*, a singular *people* or even of a singular *nationality*. In order to affirm the unity of all the Basques they called on the possession of a unique legal and political patrimony represented by the *fueros* – though what was unique about this normative corpus stemming from the Middle Ages was its survival beyond 1714, the year in which the rest of Spanish communities lost the *fueros* they had. They also appealed to a common history of the three Basque provinces, magnifying the points of contact between what really were heterogeneous territories which had nevertheless come together at many moments during their histories; they also insisted on the firm, indeed unsurpassed catholic feeling of the population – which rested upon the strength of the numerous clergy of the Basque country – and on a loyalty to the crown which made the Basques the best of subjects among the Spaniards and, therefore, the best of patriots, though this argument would lose force with the passing of time; and, finally, they underlined the possession of a language their own, the *euskera* or Basque language, whose mysterious origins intrigued and drew the attention of scholars from all over Europe and which helped to highlight the singularity of the people who spoke it. This code drew on pre-existing elements of identity, such as a certain feeling of Basqueness present among some members of the intellectual elite; feelings of local and provincial identity widespread among the population; certain topics, particularly that of the

2. We have already dealt with the question of travel accounts and the making of Basque identity in an article (Rubio, 2000), where we focused on a larger group of travellers and travel accounts. We will concentrate here on French travel accounts, some of which were not discussed in the aforementioned article.

immemorial origin of the Basque communities, which had served since the 16th century to define the provincial communities; and a powerful *Fueros*-related culture (Portillo, 1998: 100) which had given these territories a strong legal and political identity. It also drew on a pre-existing identifying vocabulary – the terms *País Vasco*, *Euskalerría*, *euskaldun*... were not new, and neither was the applying of the concept *nation* to the inhabitants of those territories – but that vocabulary was updated by these elites. This identity code of the 19th century, like any other identity code, was the result of an operation of meaning-construction and discursive mediation which responded to very specific interests. The political elites were trying to offer powerful new arguments in order to defend the maintenance of the legal status of the Basque Provinces within the new liberal Spanish state that defined itself, in theory at least, as centralizing and standardizing. In addition to that, the cultural elites aspired, very much in a romantic mood, to reveal to the world the existence of an original though ignored people, hidden among the mountains, while the religious elites wanted to ensure their power and make of the Basque Country an island of religiousness at a time of growing secularism (Rubio, 1999, 2002 and especially 2003).

We have scarce means at our disposal to ascertain the success or failure of this discursive construction at a time when politics were not yet a mass-phenomenon and cultural products had still a very limited market. Travel accounts are one of those scarce means. In them, “eyes foreign” to the country and to the observed reality reached very interesting conclusions about its singularity and that of its inhabitants, and about the conscience these inhabitants had of their singularity and of their collective identity. This is precisely what we will be studying in the following pages. To do that, we must keep very much in mind that all narrative produces the reality or the fiction it recounts (Zulaika, 1996: 48) and that a human community is not only defined from within but also from without. That is to say that a literary text is not a passive witness and a mere – if always distorting – conveyor of the observed reality but has an active role in the process of identity-making.

1. TRAVELLERS OF THE CENTURY'S FIRST DECADES

The French travellers of the century's first decades are not – from a literary point of view – as important as those of the next generation, but they left some interesting travel accounts. One such account is Alexandre de Laborde's (1773-1842). A Parisian soldier of Spanish ascent, he was destined to Spain in 1800 as Luciano Bonaparte's attaché and took advantage to travel through the country between that date and 1805 (García-Romeral 1999: 276). In his *Itinéraire descriptif de l'Espagne* (Laborde, 1816)³ he devoted a chapter to the Basque Provinces of Alava, Guipuzcoa and Biscay. He began by talking of the *fueros*, “the ancient laws, customs and tribunals of these provinces, which pay their taxes as a

3. His travel impressions were published under the title *Voyage pittoresque et historique de l'Espagne*, 1806-1820, which was soon translated into German. These impressions were also the source for his *Itinéraire descriptif de l'Espagne* (1808-1809), translated into Spanish in 1816.

gracious gift and are not subjected to military conscription, levies of mariners, paying for stamped paper or crown monopoly of any product" (Laborde, 1816: I, 287-288). During the Succession War the Basque Provinces had supported what would ultimately be the winning side and had thereby been able to keep their laws, their *fueros*, in 1714. The survival of the *fueros* from that date onwards granted them a special status within the Spanish Monarchy and that peculiarity attracted powerfully the attention of most travellers, even though they did not always know very well how to account for it. Some even attempted problematic analogies, like M. Breton, who travelled through Spain between 1809 and 1810 and wrote his travel memoirs in a book entitled *L'Espagne et le Portugal ou mœurs, usage et coutumes des habitants de ces royaumes*, published in Paris in 1815. Breton reduced the complex legal system of the Basque Provinces – or Biscay, as he called all three – to a mere system of provincial administration "similar to that of our French provinces". This interpretation of the *fueros* as administrative system had already been put forward in 1808 by the Napoleonic government in charge of the provinces at that time and would be later accepted by the Basque *fueristas* (defenders of the *fueros*) themselves as a solution allowing the survival – and adaptation – of the *fueros* within the liberal state (Rubio, 1996).

Generally speaking, the travellers' texts presented a simplified idea of the tax exemption implied by the *fueros*. This exemption was not complete, as they would have it be, but relative, for the Basque Provinces did pay taxes to the Spanish state, even though they did it differently from the rest of Spanish provinces. These texts also used disparate terms to explain what the *fueros* were. For some, they were ancient *liberties*, echoing thus a political argument widely deployed in the Basque Country itself during the 19th century to defend them against the irruption of the new constitutional liberties. Others referred to them as ancient *laws*, or even as the Basques' own *constitution*, also an argument widely used in the political discourse of the Basque elites since 1808. But many other travellers would rather use the term *privileges*, simplifying thereby a much more complex reality. Whatever the reasons for choosing any one of these denominations, it was not a trivial matter, since the political debate in the Basque Country during most of the 19th century was fuelled by a real war of concepts. The Spanish crown and government, resolved to cut down on the jurisdictional space of the Basque Provinces in order to increase their own, insisted time and again the *fueros* were mere *privileges* granted by the crown and, therefore, liable to be withdrawn by it, and not rights acquired through time, as the Basque elites wanted. For their part, these elites defended the *fueros* first by presenting them as common law (as opposed to privilege) and later as historical rights (as opposed to constitutional law). But beyond the particular choice of any of these terms, most 19th-century French travellers agreed in underlining the legal and political peculiarity of these territories, highlighting thereby the importance of the *fueros* in any attempt to define them.

The travellers' accounts also echoed some of the most deeply rooted myths about the Basques. These myths had been created some centuries earlier and were being kept alive by the Basque elites in order to fill with some content their discourse about Basque identity. What we can call the myth of the age-old independence of the Basques, according to which these had never been subjected to

any form of foreign domination, was mentioned in many travel accounts, for example in Laborde's. He asserts that the old Cantabrians, among whom he includes the Basques, had never been vanquished by the Romans or by the Arabs. The myth of the age-old independence, from which another myth stemmed, that of the racial purity of the Basques, was repeated ad nauseam in the 19th-century discourse about Basque identity. It had its origins in the 16th century and it was closely related to the so-called Basque-Cantabrian thesis. To put it briefly, that thesis made the Basques part of the group of pre-roman northern tribes known as Cantabrians who fiercely resisted Roman invaders in 1 a. D. until their rebellion was crushed by Emperor Augustus himself.

Victor Joseph Étienne Jouy, who travelled in the French Basque Country in 1817 and left his impressions in a book entitled *L'hermite en province ou observations sur les mœurs et les usages français au commencement du XIX^e siècle* (Jouy, 1818), mentions too the Basque-Cantabrian thesis. And although he recognised that "under the name of Cantabrians, the Basques entered the subjection of Rome", he assured that they did so "later and more reluctantly than the other tribes of the peninsula" and that they "had kept their language, their usages and their administrative and legal customs". Jouy stopped his narrative to talk about the *fueros*, which identified with natural law, "received from nature itself"; the *fueros* were "laws nobody had done [and] which were passionately loved". He underlined the allegedly immemorial origin of the *fueros* – in point of fact, normative corpora plunging their roots in the Middle Ages – thus echoing a widespread commonplace of 19th-century Basque political literature whose aim was to place the *fueros* out of the reach of the state's legal power. But Jouy's account has the added interest of talking about the Basques of both sides of the Pyrenees. He affirms emphatically that they were parts of the same race and of the same *nation*, a singular nation, "unlike any other", and "subjected" – his word – to two great powers. Applying the concept of *nation* – or even more that of *nationality* –, as documented in a range of 19th-century political and literary texts, took during that century a renewed political importance, but it was not something new. In fact, the first examples go back to the 16th century, though the terms was then used in a different sense – referring mainly to a linguistic community – from that it acquired in the 19th century, when liberalism gave it its political content.⁴ Jouy's usage of the terms seems to be closer to the older meaning than to the later, liberal one, but it equally serves him to underline the unity and singularity of the Basque people. This singularity found also expression, according to his account, in the Basque language, "a language without analogy with any living tongue", and the language, he went on to affirm, the primitive inhabitants of the peninsula, the Iberians, had spoken. He was echoing there another theory, namely the so-called Basque-Iberian theory, also widespread among Basque intellectual circles and also of 16th-century origins. This theory made the Basques the descendants of the primitive inhabitants of Spain while the rest of Spaniards would be the offspring of the successive invaders who arrived at later dates and pushed the Basques/Iberians to the North. Jouy resorted to the myth of isolation and age-old independence in order to explain the

4. On the evolution of the liberal concept of nation in Spain see Portillo 2002: 468 and ff.

survival of the Basque language in a corner of the Pyrenees while it had disappeared in the rest of Spain, though he attributed that independence not to the Basques' heroic resistance but to the invaders' lack of interest in them (Jouy, 1818: I, 100 and 101).

2. ROMANTIC TRAVELLERS

During the height of Romanticism Spain became a fashionable destination and, as a consequence, the number of travellers passing through the Basque Country increased notably. Among them we find some of the most important names in French literature of the time, like Alexandre Dumas, Prosper Mérimée, Théophile Gautier and Victor Hugo, whose travel accounts had a wide diffusion and contributed decisively to shape the image of our country abroad. But there were also other, lesser-known visitors, writers, journalists, scholars, whose accounts may be of less value from a literary point of view but which are of more interest from the point of view of identity-making. There is another point we must bear in mind when dealing with the major literary figures: owing to their romantic vision and the literary concerns which characterized them, the commonplaces of the time about Spain and the Spaniards weighed heavily upon their works. That is very much the case of Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), pioneer of romantic theatre in France and author of some major novels of universal literature such as *The three musketeers* or *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and who travelled in Spain in the autumn of 1846⁵ and left his impressions in the book *Impressions de voyage: de Paris à Cadix*.⁶ He took the Basque Country route to go into Spain, into "a Spain desired but already placed by me among the range of fantastic countries which only a Giraud or a Gulliver, a Desbarolles or a Haroun-al-Raschid can visit", into that literary Spain which he immediately recognised once he put a foot across the border. For Dumas's book, half literary fiction and half travel account, dwelt on the most popular commonplaces about Spain and the Spaniards – the country of honour, the country of laziness...⁷ – which he made

5. The journey was funded by the French Ministry of Education for him to attend Queen Elizabeth II's older sister Luisa Fernanda's wedding (García-Romeral, 1999: 181). Dumas came accompanied by his son, an assistant and two friends and, if we are to believe him, without a previously established route, very much in tune with the idea of romantic freedom: "a journey like the one I have started, without a traced route, without a plan, subjected in Spain to the demands of the roads and in Algeria to the fancy of the winds".

6. It was published in 1847-1848 and went through several editions in the following years. We have used the Spanish translation published by Espasa-Calpe in four volumes in 1929 under the title *De París a Cádiz. Viaje por España*.

7. That Spain is the country of honour is confirmed at the very border, when the Customs officer declines searching his luggage after realising who he was, and that despite carrying weapons in it which might lead one to suspect "we were coming to Spain to make it burn, if not to make it explode into pieces". "We were definitely in the country of honour, the country that has seen the birth of Lope de Vega, Miguel de Cervantes and Velasquez. But if Velasquez, Lope de Vega o Miguel de Cervantes had come to France and given their names, they would have been searched even under their skin". He confirms the cliché about laziness in Tolosa, where immediately after getting off the coach they asked the postilion for a place to have breakfast and he replied: "First things first, in Spain everything is done *little by little*, as the Spaniards say. It took him five minutes before he answered us".

extensive to the inhabitants of the Basque Country. For him that territory was a mere stage in his journey and he showed no particular interest for it; his visit limited itself to a brief stop at Hernani and Tolosa. He did not single out the country or its inhabitants in any particular way, although he commented, when passing through Guipuscoa, that "the road showed an infinite diversity" and that there still remained the difference in clothing between Castilians, Andalusians, Catalans "and all the other children of the twelve Spains, who have consented to form one kingdom but will never consent to being one people".

Writer, literary critic and journalist Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), who loved and visited the Mediterranean countries like Spain, Italy, Greece or Turkey, and wrote about them, came too to the Basque Country full of literary clichés about "the Spain of the *romancero*, that of Victor Hugo's ballads, of Mérimée's novels, and of Alfred Musset's tales", which avidly wished to confirm. Together with a friend who was a specialist in art and antiquities (García-Romeral, 1999: 224), he started on his journey in 1840, entering Spain through the Basque Country. His stay there was brief and did not really correspond to his preconceptions about Spanish life. The Guipuscoan inn where he spent a night was cleaner and the food better than he had expected, and the servants were not sluts out of *Don Quixote*; and whereas he had been expecting to discover the "Spanish feminine type" in the ladies he saw in the theatre boxes in Vitoria, the only thing Spanish about them was their "fan and mantilla". But even if his stay dispelled some of his preconceptions, it still did not lead him to conclude anything about the heterogeneity of Spain or the singularity of the Basques (Gautier, 1845).

But if neither Dumas nor Gautier found any element separating the Basque from the rest of Spaniards worthy of mention and if both are clear examples of a romantic gaze full of hackneyed clichés about Spain, Victor Hugo (1802-1885) represents the opposite pole. His is too a romantic gaze, but a freer and more political one. Greatest exponent of French romanticism and the most famous writer in France, Hugo was not only a revolutionary in literature but had also a strong political engagement, something common in the French Romantic Movement from 1830 onwards, when Romanticism jumped into politics and allied itself with liberalism.⁸ Victor Hugo made a brief journey to the Basque Country about which he wrote pages brimming with romantic passion and which were first published after his death under the title *Pyrénées* (Hugo, 1985). In his account he described the Basque Provinces as "the country of rights, the nation of the *fueros*" and discovered in them the old republican spirit and the ancient liberties entirely alive:

They lived here by a charter when France was under a very Christian absolute monarchy and Spain under a very catholic absolute monarchy. Here, from time immemorial, the people elect the mayor, and the mayor governs the people.

8. Hauser 1983: II, 377. In Victor Hugo's way can be seen the political evolution of the French bourgeoisie; he was successively loyal to the Bourbons, supporter of the constitutional monarchy born out of the July Revolution, partisan of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte and finally radical republican, what forced him into exile in Belgium and Normandy during the French Second Empire.

Hugo reflected also about the encounter occurred in 1812 between the old Basque liberties and the new liberties of revolutionary liberalism and judged them incompatible because “the ancient liberties are afraid of the new liberties”. That, he concluded, had ended up pushing the Basques into the armies of Don Carlos to fight “the war of the North against the South”. This romantic interpretation of Basque Carlism was widespread among French political and intellectual circles of the time (Juaristi, 1987: 77). Explaining the reaction of the Basque Provinces against the threat to their *fueros* represented by the Spanish constitutional unity, Hugo talked of the “Basque unity” and insisted on this idea time and again in his narrative, repeatedly affirming the unity of the different members of the “great Basque family”:

A deep secret bond, which nothing has been able to break, ties, in spite of treaties, those *diplomatic* borders, and in spite of the Pyrenees, those natural borders, all the members of the mysterious Basque family;

“neither France nor Spain have been able to split up the Basque group”, he wrote. However, Hugo was not very confident that the unity of all Basques could be maintained much longer:

Undoubtedly this Basque unity tends to diminish and will end up disappearing. Big States must absorb small ones; it is the law of history and of nature.

Victor Hugo's text contains some comments on the strength of the feeling of Basque identity, something not very frequent in other travel accounts. There are comments as eloquent as this: “You are born Basque, you speak Basque, you live Basque and you die Basque”. For Hugo, that identity had one of its main reference points in the language:

The Basque language is a homeland, I say almost a religion. Speak a Basque word to a mountain dweller in the mountain; before uttering that word, you were hardly a man for him; now you are his brother. Spanish is here a foreign language, as it is French.

However, the diglossia existing in the country since the 16th century made Spanish the language of written culture and power, while Basque was a popular language – spoken, in fact, by the majority of the Basque population until the 19th century – restricted to family and oral culture (Martínez Gorriarán, 1993: 15).

Among the lesser known, though not less perceptive, French travellers of the century's middle decades we find Léopold Alfred Gabriel Germond de Lavigne (1814-1896), translator into French of the great Spanish classics and author of a famous guide to Spain and Portugal first published in 1863 and reissued several times during the 19th and the early 20th centuries (García-Romeral, 1999: 227). He travelled in the French Basque Country in three occasions and lived there for four years. He left his impressions about the Basques written in a book called *Autour de Biarritz. Promenades à Bayonne, à la frontière et dans le Pays Basque* (Lavigne, 1858), which included a small French, Gascon, Spanish and Basque vocabulary. He did not conceal his admiration for the Basques, whom he considered a reliable, strong and hospitable people, the possessors of a language “as rich as it was original”, of ancient and mysterious origin. That language, he said, had

remained through the ups and downs of history “pure, untouched and always original; it was the undeniable proof of the ancient origin of its speakers”. And he lamented that, from a literary point of view, its productivity was so scarce, there being only some pastorals (pieces of popular theatre) and some poems. Comments on the antiquity, originality and difficulty of the Basque language such as his turn up in practically every travel account, because most travellers found it extremely intriguing. Germond de Lavigne's text, like many others, takes up the Basque-Cantabrian myth and also refers to the unity of Basques on both sides of the Pyrenees: “These men, brothers in origin and language, have, due to politics, become foreigners and very often enemies to each other”. And he went on to comment on the loss of differentiating identity marks in the territories subject to the French state: “the Basques from France have become citizens, just like his Gascon neighbours”, while those in the Spanish side “had kept, in the middle of young Spain's miseries, shadows of their privileges and of their democratic organization”. And, what is not so frequent in travel accounts, he mentions those Basques who “dream of the future reunion of the seven provinces forming a small republic under two great powers' protectorate”. The union of the seven Basque provinces was advocated from Basque literary and intellectual circles in the last third of the century and it was promoted by organizers of the so-called *Fiestas Euskaras* (Basque Festivals) – a mixture of folkloric, sport and literary contests which took place all over the Basque Country from the end of the 1870s onwards. But, as Germond de Lavigne suggests, that idea was free from secessionist elements, which would first appear at the end of the century with Sabino Arana's nationalism.

3. POST-ROMANTIC TRAVELLERS

We have selected two names among those who visited the Basque Country in the last third of the century, profiting from the improvement of communications brought about by the railway. Auguste Meylan and Léon de Rosny, a journalist and a philologist, whose sharp travel accounts have a particular interest for the question of Basque identity Auguste Meylan travelled through Spain in 1873, that is, in the middle of the second Carlist war, as *Le Siècle* newspaper's correspondent. He had to inform readers in France about the course of the conflict and he passed through the Basque Country on his way to Madrid. In the preface to his book *À travers les Espagnes*, published in Paris in 1876, he explained that travelling in Spain in those times of war was more dangerous than it might seem, but that it offered in exchange a vast field for study and observation. “Everything is so strange in this country, so near and at the same time so far from us”, he commented, though he made clear that his book “is not a study but a simple travel account, together with a faithful narrative of the events I have witnessed”. He began his narrative by appealing to the romantic myths about Spain, the Spain of civil war, intrepid guerrillas, boleros, fandangos, bullfighters and smugglers. And he devoted some space to talking about the Basques. His notes refer to two different stays. The first, in 1873, was brief and the account limits itself to a minute description of his adventures among liberals and Carlists and to repeated comments on the dangers of the journey. He did not seem to have enjoyed himself very much, since this was his comment once he left behind the Basque lands: “I was at last outside that horrible country, happy to have escaped

unhurt". He made his second journey a year later, when the war was at its peak and no way out of it could be seen in the near future. "The character of the rebel provinces and the carelessness with which the war has been waged so far make me certain that it is going to last for a long time yet", he observed. He came to the Basque Country by train and once he reached Bayonne he was conscious of having entered a different land:

The Basque beret can be seen everywhere, in the fields, in the stations, in the towns; the local people's dialect becomes more and more incomprehensible. Bayonne is a picturesque town [...] its interior is of Spanish and French mixture, one feels there at hand's reach of a new country.

From there he continued to San Sebastian and travelled through the Basque provinces, "the Carlist countries", as he called them.

In this second journey's narrative he stopped to explain the causes of the war. According to him, the key lay in the *fueros* – "if the Carlists invoke them and fight in their name, it is to keep them intact", he said – and in the Basques' political and cultural singularity. This singularity and the *fueros* made it possible to explain many things which are usually little understood; they offer the key to the mystery of the protracted resistance to the so-called *regular government*, which for the Basques is no more than an unjust authority willing to deprive them of their most precious possession.

The Basques' cultural singularity found expression, according to Meylan, in the Basque language, a language of African origin – this was one of many theories about its mysterious origin – with "no analogy with Spanish". That language, he said, had survived in spite of the introduction of trade and of the railway, and it was loved and valued by the population, "who keep it with the same eagerness with which they defend their *fueros*".

Meyland did not particularly like the Basques:

They have in general a hard, dry physiognomy; their character is painted in their faces; they are hard and selfish, and the war experience has shown they are cruel, though extremely brave,

he commented. But we can deduce from his expressions that he somehow admired their special political regime as well as that of Navarre. This latter, he explained, was an old kingdom which was annexed to Spain but kept its *fueros* "or granted privileges". The provinces of Alava, Guipuscoa and Biscay also "enjoy those same *fueros*". They "allied themselves to the Crown of Castile in the 13th century under the condition of retaining absolutely their administrative independence; in return, they agreed to help the King of Spain in his wars against any foreign enemy". And he added: "For these four provinces there is no King; he is no more than *the Lord*" and must take oath of fidelity to the *fueros*; similarly,

governments in Madrid can change absolutely nothing in these acquired rights and, if they have an order to give, they must send it first to the *Diputación foral*, who will examine and evaluate the case before granting or denying its approval.

And this was the conclusion Meylan drew from all that:

They are provinces with a life of their own, independent and federative and though governments in Madrid have always more or less respected this independent life, it will necessarily have to disappear in that mixture, in that fusion the new times carry with them.

Meylan considered then that so singular a political regime was doomed to disappear. Those fighting in the Carlist armies, aware of this grim fate, had taken up the arms to avoid it, pushed by the clergy and moved "by love of their country and by hatred of Castilians, Andalusians and other Spaniards, whom they abhor with all their hearts". In his perceptive analysis he already noticed the anti-Spanish sentiment which was beginning to spring up among some Basques, when Spanish public opinion was pointing towards the *fueros* as the cause of war and was consequently demanding their suppression. That sentiment would develop after the actual abolition of the *fueros* in 1876.

Another perspicacious traveller, Léon de Rosny (1837-1914), a Loos-born expert in Oriental languages and translator of Japanese at the French Foreign Office (García-Romeral, 1999: 401), also remarked on that anti-Spanish sentiment when he visited the Basque Country in the 1890s. In his book he recounts that when he addressed a Basque girl and told her "inadvertently that she was Spanish", she retorted: "I thought I had already told you I was Basque, that there are no Spaniards in my family. A Spaniard was for her a foreigner", commented Rosny, "the Castiles are not her country". And he looked for a relation between that anti-Spanish sentiment and what he called "the sentiment of autonomy", that is, the will for independence.

I tried the following days to find out up to what degree the Basques had the sentiment of their autonomy. That sentiment has seemed to me weak; it does exist, however. It exists in a latent state, I agree, but in such a way as to make one think very little would be needed to give it strength and endurance.

And he asked rhetorically whether one day we might see "the Basque nationality establish itself on both sides of the Pyrenees", adding that education was the key for the "regeneration of both states and peoples".

Rosny made these reflections in a book about his journey to Spain published in Paris in 1894 under the title *Taureaux et mantilles: souvenirs d'un voyage en Espagne et en Portugal*. It is an entertaining, intelligent work, written with a fine sense of humour and containing most interesting comments about the Basques and their collective identity. Rosny admitted to travelling in order to "make studies of customs" and was fully aware he was loaded with clichés about Spain that he wanted to confirm. In other words, he was eager to find bulls and mantillas everywhere. However, the Basque Country did not fit into any of those topics, not even into that of inns being dirty and food of poor quality. Its population appeared before his eyes with an originality untouched by time and manifested in clothes and games, particularly in the "national game of *pelota*". Rosny also echoed the then fashionable theories about the racial and linguistic singularity of the Basques, although he did so

from a critical perspective, because he recognised that “as far as types go, here as everywhere else, we have seen all kinds of them”, despite “naturalists’ pretension that miscegenation has been relatively rare among the Basques and that they are one of the most purely preserved races in Europe”; and he added with fine irony: “we have not seen more hooked noses in San Sebastian than in Florence or Dunkerque”. Like many other travellers, he talked about the origin of the Basques and said it was a mystery which had “caused a wide range of theories and of most singular, sometimes even most baroque, systems to be put forward to explain it”; but while no evidence to the contrary was produced, he believed “it was necessary to think of the Basques as the region’s autochthonous population”.

Rosny rejected the sombre fate for the Basque people foretold by scholars such as Humboldt early in the century and later accepted in French intellectual circles. The anarchist geographer Elisée Reclus (1830-1905), for example, published an article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1867 arguing the Basques would disappear as a people in the near future.⁹ In spite of affirming that the Basques were a weak *nation*, Rosny did not believe they were going to be diluted within stronger nations, and he did not believe it because the Basque people had still a vigorous sentiment of *nationality*, “the most powerful of the essential qualities required to save a people or, at least, to make its resurgence possible”. Rosny understood nationality as “the result of an always reflective, continuous and progressive intellectual labour” and he said it was “the inheritance of nations which are the masters of their own acts”. He considered this sentiment higher than that of patriotism, “[this latter] being the result of the instinct to protect home and family” and heritage “of peoples or populations accustomed to obedience and abnegation”. He did not deny that, spurred by the clergy, a “certain sentiment of patriotism” – of Spanish patriotism, that is – was present among the Basques. He assimilated it somehow to a monarchical sentiment, though, and assured that it was weak:

and that for the very good reason that they know very well they are neither Spanish nor French, and it is taught to some of them that their homeland is Spain and to others that it is France.

Rosny’s sharp gaze was right to detect a sentiment of Spanish patriotism among the inhabitants of the Basque Provinces. The so-called double patriotism, Basque and Spanish, was one of the ingredients of 19th-century Basque identity. But as Rosny also perceptively observed, that Spanish patriotism, which the Basques displayed during the wars of Morocco (1859) and Cuba (1868), was but the updating of the sentiment of loyalty to the Crown. Therefore, the identity

9. Reclus 1867. He, like Humboldt or Victor Hugo before him, predicted in this article the disappearance of the Basque language and nationality: “Customs are lost as the same time as language, and the Euskarians are becoming either Spanish or French, according to the country to which they belong politically”. Contrary to Humboldt, however, he did not think of it as something negative: “We must not regret that union; however pitiful the disappearance of what is noble in ancient national customs may be, we could not deplore the gradual fusion under way between the descendants of the Iberians and those of the Celts, Romans and Visigoths, for it is thanks to these mixtures that progress can come about in peoples and in humanity as a whole”.

ties thereby expressed were not horizontal, in the way characteristic of modern national feeling, but vertical, in the way characteristic of the Ancien Regime.

Now, although Rosny detected a vivid sentiment of nationality among the Basques when he visited the country, he considered that it was not supported as it should be by the country's intellectual elites, who did not worry about searching the archives

to establish their rights to autonomy, if not to independence. Their careless attitude towards all that which might help prepare a free place under the sun for their country-fellows signals they are unwittingly signing their own act of capitulation.

And he concluded his analysis by affirming that the Basques in a crucial moment in their history, at a crossroad where their identity and their existence itself were at stake. To prove his thesis he made a comparison with other peoples living a similar situation, Magyars, Finnish, Greeks, Romanians, Armenians, Serbs and Bulgarians, listed in a decreasing order of identity conscience and autonomy/independence conquests. According to him, the Basques were living a "ethnic period" halfway between the Armenians,

who, tired of an already too long slavery, aspire only to change their master but among whom a certain will to survive, however, is still perceptible, at least in their literary productions,

and the Bulgarians "who understand nothing of their future as a nation and are unable to tell, in the wars they fight, their allies from their enemies". In his opinion then the Basques were about to lose their existence as a different nation but they still had an identity sentiment strong enough to make them escape that fate if goaded by the right, by a saving messiah:

One man, one of their nation, would be enough to save them. That man, will he appear some day? It can hardly be hoped for in their case.

Rosny's pessimism in this question is best understood in the light of the situation of the Basque Country at the time when he made his visit. Spanish Prime Minister Cánovas del Castillo's government had already abolished the *fueros* in 1876; the fiery *pro-fueros* atmosphere which sprung in 1876-1877 as a reaction to that abolition had faded away; the Basque political establishment was quite happy with the regime of *Conciertos Económicos* (Economic Agreements) set up in 1878 and would only recall the memory of the *fueros* at certain critical moments as a weapon to exert pressure on the Spanish government; and Sabino Arana's nationalism was not yet born. Rosny was measuring the rhythm of times with great precision.

4. CONCLUSION

There were many other French travellers who like Rosny and Meylan visited the Basque Country during the last third of the century – M. L. Capistou, Lucien Louis Lande, Ernest Mérimée... – and during the previous decades – Bourgoing, Davillier,

Daussault, Poitou... – and who also wrote about the Basques and their collective identity. The brief selection we have studied here offers, however, a sufficiently illustrative range of the opinions arisen from the encounter with the Basques. They, the Basques, lived in the 19th century a crucial phase of their history. Their political, cultural and even religious elites built up, with the help of foreign literature and historiography, a collective identity in which elements such as the *fueros*, history, religion and language were filled with political content and were combined to define a singular nationality within the Spanish, French and European context.

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