**The world literary system and planetarity in Bernardo Atxaga’s *Obabakoak***

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*Abstract*

The Bascophone reception of Bernardo Atxaga’s *Obabakoak* has claimed its universality as one of its main merits. This can be seen as a symptom of the desire for external recognition commonly found in minoritised cultures. This article analyses the type of relationality that *Obabakoak* envisions between the community of Bascophone culture and the wider world of global culture. I rebut the suggestion that *Obabakoak* is an artifice to achieve international consecration in return for a deliberately self-exoticising image of the Basques. I show instead that *Obabakoak* undoes hierarchies of cultural and literary value and projects both the world literary system and the realm of worldly human relations onto a plane that incorporates the two seemingly incompatible principles of equality and radical alterity. These principles constitute a type of relationality that can be identified as the core of the notion of *planetarity*, which also harbours the undecidable choice between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan.

*Key Words*

Bernardo Atxaga – *Obabakoak*, world literature – circulation, world literature – worlding, minoritised cultures, cosmopolitanism, planetarity

*Article*

*Preliminaries: the unfulfilled desire for external recognition in minoritised cultures*

Bernardo Atxaga’s short story collection *Obabakoak* is the work that first gave international visibility to literature in the Basque language - *Euskara*. Published in 1988, it was awarded the Spanish National Literature Prize for Narrative in 1989, which triggered a series of translations that eventually extended to more than 20 languages across the world. Before the phenomenon of *Obabakoak*, Bascophone culture did not possess significant literary capital: the Basque language had been historically marginalised by both Spanish and French administrations (Torrealdai, 1998); literature in Basque had long been dominated by religious and nationalist utilitarianisms; as a consequence, few pre-20th century texts could be considered to have real literary value (Lasagabaster 2013: 14). In that context, the alleged universality of *Obabakoak* came to stand out among the range of literary virtues pointed out by its reception, as Olaziregi notes in her review of a substantial amount of both local and foreign commentaries (1997: 236-49 *passim*). Thus, Olaziregi declares, ‘the “microcosm” built around Obaba can be convincing as much as appealing to the eyes of any reader’, Atxaga’s texts make us reflect ‘on the most fundamental themes and struggles of human life’, and that is the origin of ‘their value and their endless capacity for suggestion’ (262).[[1]](#endnote-2)

Claiming the universality of one’s own cultural products is arguably a symptom of the desire for external recognition commonly felt among the members of minoritised cultures. Atxaga himself has written sympathetically about this, underlining ‘the universal need to feel worthy, to not have to feel inferior to the citizens of a neighboring country’ (2009: 57). This desire for external approval points to the aspiration to participate with other cultures in a (utopian) exchange of cultural products on the basis of the mutual recognition of each other’s cultural value. Yet, Atxaga testifies, writers in minoritised languages are inescapably asked the question of why they ‘write in a language that few understand, instead of choosing any one of those occupying a central orbit in the solar system of languages’, a query that in the case in point gets shaped as ‘[w]hy Basque and not Castilian?’, betraying the assumption that Castilian is better suited than Basque and superior to it (49). As Atxaga sorrowfully concludes, ‘[a]t times the inquiry is direct, at others subtle. But it never goes away.’ (50)

In spite of its overall warm reception, *Obabakoak* has also been the object of some harsh criticism that has sought to mark it as the product of the author’s alleged eagerness to achieve *at any cost* the aforesaid external recognition. Thus, those critical voices have accused Atxaga of having artfully negotiated his international success in return for a docile image of the Basque Country that submits to various structures of cultural and political domination ― see, for example, Gabilondo (2016: 250) and Apalategi (1998: 80). Contrarily, I am proposing a new reading of *Obabakoak* that first, refutes the accusation above, and second, provides the conceptual grounds to understand how *Obabakoak* rejects relations of domination and subordination between cultures or literatures, projecting instead a level playing field of reciprocal interconnectedness.

*The rejection in* Obabakoak *of hierarchies of cultural value*

Among the critical voices aforementioned, Gabilondo has denounced Atxaga for producing a heteronomous corpus that complies with the requirements of consecration in the Spanish literary system and beyond instead of joining other Basque authors in their attempt to foster a Basque literary system endowed with an autonomous value-regime free from any sort of external tutelage. This *born-translated* nature – to borrow Walkowitz’s term (2015) – is the reason why Gabilondo suggests that Atxaga’s work should be assessed as marginal to the history of Basque literature, overturning the nearly unanimous consensus that has situated that work at the centre of the Basque literary canon (2013: 21–6). This is the core of Gabilondo’s critique:

In *Obabakoak*, the Basque Country presents itself to the Basques and to the rest of the world as a realist “other”, endowed with a magic essence (subalternity) [. …] the essentialism of *Obabakoak* had a global dimension that previous Basque literature did not. It constituted the first successful representation of the Basque Country as a perfect, minority, subaltern culture endowed with all the characteristics—magic essence—that the West sought in minority, subaltern cultures and literatures. (2016: 246)

Although Gabilondo correctly underlines the supernatural beliefs held by some characters in *Obabakoak* – what he calls *magic* – I argue that his assessment of that element is flawed. Gabilondo perceives in Atxaga’s work an essentialization – a *magic essence* – that sets out a clear-cut division between worldviews infused with superstition – *magic* – and worldviews informed only by reason.[[2]](#endnote-3) Gabilondo then maps this binary opposition between superstition and reason onto another opposition between the Basque Country and the West. Thus, according to Gabilondo, in *Obabakoak* Atxaga represents the Basque Country as a culture *essentially* marked by its irrationality and clearly separated from the West and its rationality. Gabilondo’s conclusion is therefore that *Obabakoak* represents the Basque Country as a subaltern culture. Here, I refute the idea that in *Obabakoak* the Basque Country is represented in opposition to Western culture, proving instead that Atxaga makes no distinction between those entities regarding the grade of rationality or irrationality with which each might be endowed. In order to do so I will first refute the clear-cut separation that Gabilondo sees in *Obabakoak* between superstition and reason. My contention is that Atxaga’s main goal in *Obabakoak* is precisely to blur the dividing line between rationality and irrationality to suggest that there are no vantage points from which a culture may claim its superiority over others. Thus, *all* the worlds represented in *Obabakoak* are infused with both superstition and reason, which are depicted as inextricably merged into each other. This is a key theme that runs across the whole of the book and constitutes the explanatory core of the reading I am proposing here.

The short story “An exposition of Canon Lizardi’s letter”, set at the turn of the 20th century, is a focal point here. The belief has spread among the villagers of Obaba that a white wild boar that has recently been harming their livestock is no other than the little orphan boy Javier, who disappeared from the village into the forest a few months earlier fleeing the brutality with which he used to be treated, and has now returned transfigured into the white beast. Canon Lizardi, the only educated person in the village, refutes initially his parishioners’ story as pure fantasy. Yet the villagers keep finding striking similarities in appearance and behaviour between the wild animal and the lost boy, and Canon Lizardi’s convictions begin to falter. The story reaches its climax when after hearing a gunshot Canon Lizardi reaches the wild boar, which lies fatally injured, and hears the animal utter ‘[t]he word that any boy would have cried out at such a moment: “Mother!”’ As he recalls the scene, Canon Lizardi strives to think of it as ‘pure illusion’, and summons up ‘all [he has] read in science books’ or ‘what faith requires us to believe’, but he remains incapable of forgetting ‘what [he] saw and heard in that cave’ (47)[[3]](#endnote-4). The dividing line between superstition and reason has completely blurred in Canon Lizardi’s mind. Yet Atxaga retrieves the separation between superstition and reason by introducing the figure of a researcher who, in the modern Obaba of the 1980s, finds and examines the letter where Canon Lizardi tells the story. The researcher notes that among the residents of present-day Obaba the word still goes around that Canon Lizardi was Javier’s real father. The researcher considers the hypothesis plausible, thus giving a rational explanation to Canon Lizardi’s vision: the remorse of having given his little son Javier a cruel and solitary life made him hallucinate.

We can then confirm the story of Javier’s transfiguration as pure fantasy. However, Atxaga does not present the separation between superstition and reason as a clear-cut division that makes the opposed elements distinct beyond doubt. In *Obabakoak* there is no essentialization of those opposed elements – fantasy, superstition or *magic* on the one hand, reality, science or reason on the other – which would be a necessary condition to attribute a ‘magic essence’ to the Basques, as Gabilondo suggests regarding the alleged othering effects of *Obabakoak*. My contention, on the contrary, is that throughout *Obabakoak* Atxaga persistently pursues the moment where the two sides of the binary opposition infiltrate each other without fully merging together, thus removing the possibility of conceiving them as essences. For example, in Canon Lizardi’s mind, superstition and reason have linked together inseparably even though both remain recognisable categories. The choice between a rational and an irrational explanation for the events he witnessed has become for him an *undecidable* dilemma. By contrast, Gabilondo chooses to overlook the rational side of the binary and identify the worldview of Obaba only with its irrational side – the ‘magic essence’, as he puts it – suggesting an interpretation that clearly does not reflect Atxaga’s intention.

Regarding the other half of Gabilondo’s argument, there is no reason either to identify the world of *Obabakoak* exclusively with the Basque Country. The short story “Esteban Werfell” illustrates this point. Esteban was born in Obaba, where his father, Engineer Werfell, had moved from the German city of Hamburg to run the local mines. In his early adolescence, Esteban gets trapped in a harsh conflict between, on the one hand, his father’s liberal, atheist, and rationalist convictions, and on the other, the ‘crude minds’ of the pious and conservative community of Obaba, whose members have no difficulty in accepting even the strangest and most irrational things (22–3). The key episode in the story is Esteban’s first visit to the local church. Overwhelmed by the tension growing inside him, Esteban faints and has a vision, in which a blonde girl of his age approaches him and mentions her name and address in Hamburg. Following his father’s suggestion, Esteban sends a letter to the girl, who, astonishingly, turns out to be flesh and blood. The two teenagers start an epistolary relationship that helps Esteban perfect his German and makes him become culturally and emotionally detached from his local friends. Although a few years later the girl breaks the relationship off, Esteban eventually leaves and spends his adulthood away from Obaba.

Yet in “Esteban Werfell” as well, Atxaga provides us with a natural explanation to the seemingly supernatural phenomenon that sustains the story. One of Engineer Werfell’s old friends lives in the address that Esteban picked from his vision. The two men brewed a plot to answer Esteban’s letters playing the role of the young girl. The girl has never existed except in Esteban’s fantasy. Thus, Atxaga’s intention is clearly not to sweep away the difference between fantasy and reality, and after being immersed in certain confusion, both categories are eventually restored each to their separate natures. Yet again, as in the case of Canon Lizardi’s story, in “Esteban Werfell” Atxaga introduces a moment in which fantasy and reality become so entangled, it becomes impossible to draw a clear-cut line splitting them. In this case, Esteban has believed throughout his adult life that he did have a real experience of telepathy back when he was a teenager, embracing naturally both rationality and irrationality as part of his self. Furthermore, Engineer Werfell, who deplored so strongly the irrational beliefs of the people of Obaba, resorted precisely to irrationality to keep his son on the side of rationality. And he succeeded. But crossing over that border, unexpectedly and simultaneously, brought about the opposite effect. By holding throughout his whole life his belief about that remote afternoon, Esteban behaved in the same way as the most credulous and irrational of the people of Obaba. Against what his father would have desired, Esteban never really stopped being one of them.

This reading of “Esteban Werfell” confirms Atxaga’s attempt to deconstruct the binary opposition between superstition and reason, and reaffirms the unsuitability of associating *Obabakoak* with what Gabilondo calls ‘magic essence’. It also allows me to reject Gabilondo’s suggestion that the book represents exclusively the Basque Country. Regarding how superstition contaminates reason, in *Obabakoak* the phenomenon affects equally Basque and German cultures – and by extension, the whole of Western culture, represented by the Enlightenment values that Engineer Werfell embodies: rationality, scientific knowledge, and individual freedom. Thus, *Obabakoak* undermines the drive to other and exoticise cultures on the grounds of their alleged primitiveness. I thereby refute Gabilondo’s claim that *Obabakoak* presents the Basque Country ‘as exotic “other”’ (2016: 245). On the contrary, Atxaga dismantles the very hierarchy that Gabilondo suggests *Obabakoak* contributes to reinforce.

Gabilondo’s critique of *Obabakoak* is framed in the currently widespread notion that the international circulation of literary works is mediated by uneven structures of literary power where the dominant literary systems act as gatekeepers – what Moretti calls the *world literary system* (2000: 56). Yet, whilst in Gabilondo’s reading Atxaga’s submission to that power reaches the point of sheer capitulation, theoretical models of such structures usually endow disadvantaged writers with irreducible levels of agency. I suggest that Huggan’s notion of *the postcolonial exotic*, for example, is relevant here inasmuch as the Bascophone literary system and the postcolonial share the peripherality of their positions. Huggan sees the peripheral space of postcolonial production split into two competing value-regimes, *postcoloniality* and *postcolonialism* (2001: 5). The former is the system of global reception of postcolonial cultural products that exoticises and commodifies them whilst keeping the unbalance between the centre and the periphery. The latter is the drive of peripheral cultural agents who seek the recognition and valorisation of their cultural and political difference. In spite of the impossibility of getting around the mechanisms of postcoloniality, Huggan stresses that ‘[t]o accuse postcolonial writers/thinkers of being lackeys to this system is … to underestimate their power to exercise agency over their work’ (30).

My contention here is that, similarly operating within a duality of value-regimes, the agency of *Obabakoak* lies in its rejection of an understanding of reason that has historically underpinned the belief in the supremacy of Western culture over its others. Thus, as Atxaga himself has explained, in *Obabakoak* he wanted to honour the pre-Enlightenment worldview that he witnessed disappear during his childhood in the rural environment of Asteasu, in the Basque Country (2005: 14–5). However, his gaze is not nostalgic at all. Atxaga clearly establishes the separation between that world and ours, between ‘forest’ and ‘culture’, as he puts it (1990: 14–5). The key point is that Atxaga does not draw that dividing line to highlight its solidity but its porosity. Atxaga wants to suggest that our modern worldview is inextricably infused with the attributes of its alleged opposite, namely fantasy, superstition, and irrationality. Obviously, the blurring of the dividing line between ‘forest’ and ‘culture’ is not meant to imply that we should now return to believe in supernatural phenomena, like telepathy or transfigurations. What is crucial here is Atxaga’s implied suggestion that both ‘forest’ and ‘culture’ are, and can only be, *interpretations* of the world. That is where ‘forest’ and ‘culture’, pre-Enlightenment and modern worldviews get levelled. That is the agency of Atxaga’s work and what Gabilondo simply dismisses.

*The rejection in* Obabakoak *of single standards of literary value*

The reflexion that *Obabakoak* substantiates on the issue of the relative values attributed to different cultures and worldviews extends, as I will address now, to the question of the relative values attributed to different literary systems, thus connecting with debates on the field of *world literature*. The re-emergence of world literature studies since the turn of this century has initially revolved around the *circulation* of literature across national, cultural, and linguistic borders. At times, circulation has served as the criterion to define world literature as an exclusive category, as in Damrosch’s suggestion to identify the concept with ‘all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language’ (2013: 199). But circulation has been heavily problematised for being allowed or hindered by a gatekeeping system that relies on privilege and opinion rather than on equality and science. Casanova, for example, focuses on the concept of *literary value* as the allegedly objective measure that determines which works are worthy of international circulation (2004: 13-7). As Casanova convincingly explains, literary value is a matter of subjective belief rather than objective knowledge, and, applied by the centres of literary power, brings about ‘the unequal status of the players in the literary game and the specific mechanisms of domination that are manifested in it’ (352). Thus, Casanova dismisses ‘the idea of a pure literature, freed from history, [a]s a historical invention’, and firmly condemns the fact that ‘literary universality is manufactured’ (352, 354). In that respect, Casanova calls for the transformation of the system into a level playing field, where dominated literatures will have equal opportunities for the international recognition of their appeal.

Nevertheless, the solution she proposes seems to be doomed to commit the same kind of injustice. Casanova suggests perfecting the assessment of literary value by applying a new interpretive frame that will set out to understand the ‘extreme particularism’ of literary projects and thus be able to state the ‘true principle’ of their ‘literary universality’ (354). By envisioning a true principle of literary universality, Casanova is boldly alleging the scientific nature of literary value, which will no longer be a matter of subjective belief but of objective knowledge. In other words, Casanova achieves the levelling of the playing field of relations among literatures of the world – what she calls the *world literary space* – by stating that literature is an essence, a universal category endowed with a core of exclusive and unchanging properties equally discernible all across the world. Yet, poststructuralist thought, for example, has argued that literature is a loosely defined category associated to different notions in different historical contexts and has therefore signalled as a misconception the premise that literature is an essence. Such essentialism would unavoidably lead again to biased assessments of literary value and, consequently, to arbitrary definitions of world literature – both under the illusion of having achieved true impartiality. As I show below, *Obabakoak* also embodies a dismissal of the idea of literature as essence. Crucially, the acknowledgement of the non-essential nature of literature – of its incapacity to reveal itself as an exclusive, atemporal, and, consequently, transcendental category – operates significant effects on the world literary space: it levels it down to a plane of *equality* – all literatures are equally (un)accomplished in terms of transcendentality – and, simultaneously, it opens it up to a plane of *alterity* – each literature is potentially a radically different instance of the same notion.

*Obabakoak* engages with the issue of the nature of literature throughout its third and last section, *In Search of the Last Word*. The protagonist-narrator, a literary author, reveals early on his obsession with the popular Obaban belief that lizards can sneak into the ears of humans and eat up their brains. The plot displays the persuasive reasons why the narrator, who is in search of truth and beauty through literature, feels so compelled to embrace that belief. Once again in *Obabakoak*, a rational subject cannot avoid the disturbing intrusion of the irrational in their worldview. The last chapter of the book deploys a structure of *mise en abyme* in which the narrator is finishing the writing of the book we are reading whilst showing symptoms of the unstoppable mental decay that the popular belief links with the workings of lizards. Yet early in the chapter, he seems still in full possession of his faculties, and utters the brief manifesto of his literary ambitions:

I wanted to find a word to finish the book with. I mean I wanted to find one word, but it couldn’t be just any word, it had to be a word that was both definitive and all-encompassing. I mean, to put it another way, that I wanted to be another Joubert, that he and I shared the same goal: ‘s’il est un homme tourmenté par la maudite ambition de mettre tout un livre dans une page, toute une page dans une phrase, cette phrase dans un mot, c’est moi.’ Yes, that man was Joubert and, as I have just said, I wanted to be another Joubert. (2007: 317)

Unable to find that last word, which was his only true project, the narrator instead has been transcribing the particulars of the book club weekend he spent in Obaba, weaving together the pursuit of a solution to his obsession with lizards and the series of short stories that were narrated throughout those two days. In other words, what is left from the narrator’s metaphysical project is just *literature*, exactly the same that has won Atxaga international acclaim for his artful engagement with various literary traditions around the globe, his suggestive use of elements of fantasy, or his meta-literary reflections, among others. Yet, unable to become *all-encompassing*, literature is doomed to differ from itself by perpetually creating new stories and forms of telling, and in consequence, it is doomed as well to defer perpetually the achievement of a *definitive* formulation of its own meaning. In other words, literature remains within the immanence of the limits delineated by the differing and the deferring of meaning, without ever achieving transcendence. The last word does not exist; it is myth, fantasy, superstition.

The last rational sentences the narrator of *In Search of the Last Word* is able to put together reveal for the first time his project of finding a last word through his writing. Immediately after, the narrator begins to fall into madness. This sequence of events suggests that it is not the belief in lizards that eat up the brains of people that makes the narrator lose his senses but rather the belief in the existence of a last, definitive, all-encompassing word. The idea of the last word is the real lizard inside the narrator’s brain. Making use of the metaphor, I suggest that the hypothesis of a universal instance of literary value is also one of those lizards. Such idea is a myth, a fantasy, a superstition that has to be overcome and discarded inasmuch as it is an attempt to give a definitive answer to the question: ‘what is literature?’ The differing and deferring of meaning within which literature takes shape implies that there is no definitive definition of literature. Literature does not have an essence. As Derrida puts it:

[O]ne would thus claim […] that there is no such a thing as a literary essence or a specifically literary domain strictly identifiable as such; or, indeed, that this name of literature perhaps is destined to remain improper, with no criteria, or assured concept or reference, so that “literature” has something to do with the drama of naming, the law of name and the name of law. (1992: 187)

If literature does not have an essence, Casanova’s idea of a true principle of literary value does not hold up. What needs to be emphasised then is that ‘literature is an *institution*: it is not given in nature or the brain but brought into being by processes that are social, legal, and political, and that can be mapped historically and geographically’ (Attridge 1992: 23). This is precisely one of Casanova’s main contributions: a thorough explanation of the mechanisms that created and institutionalized the criterion of literary value, denouncing the concomitant notion of universality as ‘one of the most diabolical inventions of the center, for in denying the antagonistic and hierarchical structure of […] the republic of letters, the monopolists of universality command others to submit to their law’ (2004: 154). Her claim for a levelling of the playing field shows the ethical drive that prompted her research. Yet her final understanding of literary justice implies the unicity of a world literary space where alterity has been reduced to sameness by means of assuming that all of the literary production across the globe can be appropriately assessed according to one single standard of literary value.

Casanova’s ultimate stance exemplifies the tendency to overlook the alterity of the literatures and cultures of the world and distil from it instead a vision of unicity. On the contrary, *Obabakoak* unfolds a relationality among the literatures of the world that brings them all together under the shared impossibility to identify *the* essence of literature but, at the same time and consequently, opens up the irreducible possibility of developing multiple and radically different instances of both literature and literary value, entailing the illegitimacy of arranging those literatures in hierarchies. Crucially, this relationality among the literatures of the world implies the acknowledgement that *literature* will always remain a contingent and provisional category, and therefore, should never be assumed to be universal.

In the next section, I engage with the recent shift of focus in literary studies from the analysis of the dynamics of the world literary system – circulation of works, relations of domination and subordination – to the analysis of worlding or world-making, i.e. how the world itself is envisioned in contemporary works of literature. The world literary system and the relations within it can be seen as a subset of the whole of worldly human relations. In that sense, as Peter Hitchcock points out, ‘the possibility of an ethics of world literature is primarily short-circuited by what concept of world is operative in that formulation’ (2011: 366). For example, if sensitivity to diversity is synthesised in Casanova’s fashion, the world is ultimately reduced to a series of superficial variations of one single principle, and ethics degenerates into a narcissistic recognition of the other as essentially the same as oneself. As I point out below, such a narcissistic tendency seems disappointingly ingrained in the visions of the world adopted by several recent studies on world-making, especially through their adhesion to an idea of cosmopolitanism that, although clearly well-intentioned, does not manage to integrate into its vision of the world the notion of radical alterity as an indispensable component.

*World-making and the undecidability between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan*

As seen above, *Obabakoak* undoes hierarchies of cultural and literary value on the grounds that all cultures and literatures are *equally* unable to determine a core of exclusive and unchanging attributes – i.e. an essence – for the categories of culture and literature. Yet, the lack of such essences opens up simultaneously the potentiality for *radically different* instances of those categories. Thus, *Obabakoak* embodies a type of relationality that makes room not only for the *connexion* but also for the *separation* between cultures or literatures.

Alternatively, recent studies on how contemporary literature envisions the world tend to emphasise just the opening – and consequently expected connexion – commonly linked to the notion of cosmopolitanism as both the backbone of those depictions and the essential gesture that should inform world-making in present times. Schoene, for example, even after stating early on in his work that ‘what cosmopolitanism is, or might be, remains as yet to be clearly defined’, draws heavily on Beck to stress the need that communities across the world stop identifying themselves within the reductive limits of the nation and ‘start contributing to global culture instead’ (2009: 1-2). At times, the boldness with which Schoene phrases the call to overcome local boundaries and embrace humanity as a whole raises doubts over the rigour and viability of the proposal, as when he affirms that ‘[t]here is nothing that ought to prevent us imagining the world as one community or capturing it inside the vision of a single narrative’ (13). Yet, at other times, he balances out this drive for oneness by reminding us that cosmopolitanism also underlines the importance of local cultures, languages, and symbols (1). All in all, Schoene favours the vision of unity over that of multiplicity, and considers that in the twenty-first century it is our task to venture beyond the nation into the world at large, and ‘[to] understand the domestic and the global as weaving one mutually pervasive pattern of contemporary human circumstance and experience, containing both dark and light’ (15-6).

Moraru’s proposal is very similar to Schoene’s, even though he prefers to refer to the contemporary condition that pushes us together as *planetarity* rather than cosmopolitanism.[[4]](#endnote-5) Like Schoene, Moraru also sees the whole planet as a single unit that, in his definition, constitutes the frame that presides over the production and reception of meaning in the present time, which is thus labelled as planetary (2015: 8). Yet, like Schoene, Moraru mentions the importance of singularity in such configuration, as what characterises planetarity is the intense degree of relationality among all local units of production and reception of meaning, which would not really be significant if the singularities of those units of production were not preserved (38). But like Schoene, Moraru also singles out as most characteristic of the contemporary global condition the movement to overcome local boundaries and reach out to the others, as becomes clear when he chooses to examine novels that, among other features, are ‘intertextually and interculturally saturated’ and present themselves ‘as ethical “world containers” subtended not only by a geoaesthetics but also by a *geoethics*’ (13).

As this point, I retrieve Atxaga’s testimony on the query *why Basque and not Castilian?* – which, as he remarks, *never goes away*. The disdain for the Basque language carried along more or less overtly by the query is obviously in complete opposition to the appreciation of either the importance of local cultures and languages – an alleged component of Schoene’s cosmopolitanism – or the intense degree of relationality among all local units of production – a claimed feature of Moraru’s *netosphere* (37). Yet, the intensity with which both Schoene and Moraru underline the importance for all cultures of opening themselves into the world does raise the question of whether in their cosmopolitan/planetary depictions of the world there is still room for Atxaga’s vernacular gesture of choosing Basque rather than Spanish. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the members of a minoritised community like that of the speakers of Basque can identify themselves as cosmopolitans if, on the one hand, they need to emphasise their singularity to preserve it from external disdain *and* if, on the other, as Schoene quoting Beck suggests, ‘the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival’ (2009: 15). Following on his testimony, Atxaga too addresses the issue of *survival* – that of Basque literature, but in very different terms to Beck’s. After reservedly celebrating the relatively healthy situation of the Basque literary institution, Atxaga points at ‘the great weakness’ of the Basque literary system, namely ‘the very bilingualism of its readers’. The fact that the vast majority of those Basque readers are bilingual in Spanish, French and/or English makes them able to ‘reach out a hand and, instantly [start] reading a book in one of the sun languages.’[[5]](#endnote-6) As Atxaga concludes, ‘[i]f the readers, the foundation of the [Basque] literary institution, leave, it is doomed’ (2009: 56).

Those who advocate that cosmopolitan gestures of opening and connexion should be the foundation for world‑making seem to overlook that self-protective vernacular gestures like that of Basque readers choosing to read in Basque should be considered equally indispensable for the same purpose. In fact, such cosmopolitan gestures risk creating precisely the opposite to the intended effect, that is a world of exclusion instead of an inclusive world. The opening promoted by Schoene and Moraru projects cultures and literatures into a final stage of maturity, or *telos*, where they reach ‘the vision of a single narrative’ of the world (Schoene) and become ‘ethical “world containers”’ (Moraru). Having thus become properly *cosmopolitan*, those cultures and literatures stand in clear-cut opposition to those unable to reach that telos – which I call here the *vernaculars*. Therefore, such teleology inevitably implies a hierarchy whereby the cosmopolitans become the universal norm whereas the vernaculars are dismissed for their alleged parochialism. I argue that what is needed, instead, is the understanding that the cosmopolitan and the vernacular are not clear-cut categories, but the virtual poles of a continuum that all cultures and literatures inhabit, each displaying inextricable combinations of both cosmopolitan and vernacular traits.

That is precisely the understanding of the relationship between the cosmopolitan and the vernacular, between the universal and the particular that *Obabakoak* substantiates, particularly in ‘How to plagiarise’, one of the most significant short stories of the last section of the book, *In Search of the Last Word*. The protagonist-narrator – who, as mentioned earlier on, is also a literary author – recounts a dream in which he finds himself in a desert and barren island in the company of Axular, the author of *Gero* (1643), one of the foundational texts of Bascophone literature. As they converse, the narrator becomes aware that the desert and barren island is an allegory for the Basque language, its genetic isolation, and its scant literary tradition. Axular and the narrator deplore the scarce historical interest of the Basques in elaborating a Bascophone literary corpus. The lack of a solid tradition from which to draw inspiration means that contemporary writers struggle enormously to create the works that will help the advancement of the Basque language and its literature. Axular suggests the solution: to resort to the plagiarism of canonical works from established literatures into Basque as a way to provide the island with the creativity it previously never enjoyed. The narrator is initially reluctant to the suggestion. In his perception, the product of plagiarism would be a text devoid of originality and value. The use of plagiarism could just confirm the superiority and universality of the plagiarised literatures and the incapacity and parochialism of the Bascophone literary tradition.

Yet, the use that Atxaga makes of plagiarism in *Obabakoak* undoes that hierarchy and unveils a symbiotic relationship whereby the original and the copy, the universal and the particular, the cosmopolitan and the vernacular infuse each other creating inextricable patterns. Hulme’s analysis of this symbiosis (2018) is particularly relevant here. She crucially incorporates from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Mille plateaux* the central idea that repetition always already involves difference. *Obabakoak* grows out of a rich layer of intertextuality whereby Atxaga incorporates motifs, sequences, and even entire plots from various pieces of other literatures transposing them into fully new contexts. Thus, the plagiarized text is not simply reproduced, but ‘becomes part of a new assemblage, incorporated into *Obabakoak* in a way which transforms the plagiarized text’s own shape, narrative and interpretative possibilities’ (66). Such a symbiotic relationship generates an a‑parallel becoming that makes the plagiarising and the plagiarised texts simultaneously diverge and converge in asymmetric patterns. Works of literature are neither universal, nor particular, they are both simultaneously. Unlike Schoene’s or Moraru’s, Atxaga’s opening does not imply a *teleology*, but a *becoming* that unfolds within the double-bind between the original and the copy, the universal and the particular, the cosmopolitan and the vernacular, heteronomy and autonomy, connexion and separation, without ever favouring one over the other. All those are *undecidable* choices. Thus, even from a cosmopolitan perspective, the gesture of engaging with a vernacular tradition – like the Basque, for example – becomes just as significant as the alleged opposite gesture of engaging with the cosmopolitan dimension.

In that sense, I endorse Brydon’s call to incorporate the concept of *autonomy* into the theoretical attempts to framework fairer forms of world-making. Brydon puts forward an autonomy of the social that underscores its capacity to set its own laws, ‘while also seeing the need to open ideas of what constitutes sociality’ in a cosmopolitan spirit that she also opts to call *planetarity* (2013: 5). For Brydon, one of the pillars of planetarity is the respect for the autonomy of the others, namely ‘for their right to make their own kinds of sense of how the world operates and to make their own choices about how to run their lives’ (20). Although Brydon, in her attempt to redefine postcolonial studies, seems to consider *autonomy*, *transnational literacies* and *planetarity* as three self-standing foundations, I suggest to single out *planetarity* as the general framework for the relations between self and other that we should pursue in the global culture and to situate as the foundational principle of such framework the undecidable double-bind between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan that must preside over those relations. That double-bind provides the context of planetarity in which Basque readers decide whether to choose a book in Basque or a book in one of the hegemonic languages they also speak. Such decision is an undecidable one. Those readers find each time that there are no sufficient reasons to choose one way or the other. We can call this *the planetary dilemma* at the core of the predicament that characterises present global culture and the attempts within it to set out an ethically interconnected world. As Liu-Palumbo compellingly puts it:

... once we admit ‘‘others’’ into ‘‘our’’ world and place value in the difference they bring into our lives, where do we set the limit of *how much* otherness is required, as opposed to how much is excessive, disruptive, disturbing, in ways that damage us, rather than enhance our lives? This forces us into taking an ethical position, and calls on us to address another kind of ‘‘selfishness’’: we take so much and then leave the rest, but at what cost? How have we learned anything more about ‘‘us’’ and the situation in which we find ourselves? (2012: 2)

The question does not have a clear answer. As Liu-Palumbo points out, the amount of otherness that the self can cope with and benefit from before finding it confusing or unintelligible is just incalculable. We are left with a balancing act that never quite reaches an equilibrium, an endless process of ‘identifying and de-identifying, weighing what we can, and cannot, learn from’ (12-3). With regard to our exposure to literatures of the world, what Liu-Palumbo underlines is that, through this endless process, reading becomes ‘a self-reflective act that puts the question of ethics before that of epistemology’ by pushing back and forth the boundary between self and other that marks the planetary dilemma, and thus helping us identify the ‘assumptions, beliefs, values, and politics’ that govern our understanding of otherness (196). This open-endedness is also the main feature of the world that Cheah suggests world literature, following its normative nature, should attempt to represent. For Cheah, that normative world should be informed, firstly, by a rather classic cosmopolitanism; yet secondly, and more fundamentally, by the constant opening effected by the force of time (2016: 9). Thus, Cheah defines the world as ‘a nontotalizable whole constituted by a movement of overflowing’ (161). Or, as he concludes, ‘the world is always to come’ (186). Thus, as noted above regarding *literature*, the category of *world* as well will always remain contingent and provisional, and therefore, should never be assumed to be universal.

*Conclusion: a summary of planetarity*

The acceptance of the self’s limitations to fully comprehend both itself and the other is the necessary condition that allows simultaneously for the two main principles that inform the concept of world deployed in *Obabakoak*: equality and radical alterity. The shared incapacity to reach absolute knowledge, first, puts both the self and the other on a plane of equality, and second, reveals the radical alterity of the other inasmuch as it ineluctably overflows the self’s cognitive capacities.

My perception is that the type of relationality produced by the combination of the seemingly incompatible principles of equality and radical alterity constitutes the core of the discourses that in the last two decades have been shaping up the polysemic notion of *planetarity*. For example, on the one hand, Gilroy has envisioned a ‘planetary consciousness’ whose ultimate goal is to overcome racist and nationalist supremacies and thus achieve the old ideal of equality (2005: 290-1); on the other, Spivak has encapsulated her unbreakable commitment to respecting radical alterity in the notion that ‘the planet is in the species of alterity’ (2003: 72). Engaging on a plane of equality with radical alterity requires a change in the self’s structures of comprehension, a restructuring of the self’s worldview, the interweaving of the self’s rationality with the other’s. This shift from ethics just as the levelling of the playing field – as for example Casanova intends – to ethics also as the mingling with radical alterity echoes what Moraru, in his discussion of planetarity, has called the rethinking of ‘the rationalization of relationality into its contrary, that is, into, or as, a relationalization of rationality’ (2015: 51). The dilemma of *how much otherness* the self should embrace presides over this encounter and sets out an endless process of worlding that renders the categories of *world* and *literature* perpetually contingent and provisional.

The planetary self apprehends the other – yet not absolutely. That process also entails the apprehension by the self of previously unknown forms of itself – the change in its structures of comprehension. That is, the planetary self assumes that there is always something else to itself in itself, that it is itself and another at the same time, that otherness is a constitutive part of itself. In other words, the planetary self knows that otherness is inherent in being, that being is never monologic but polyphonic, that being is always already *being-with*. Planetary being is being-with – both *with* the inner other and *with* the external others. Thus, the well-being of the self requires its continuous transformation through the encounter with otherness. Similarly, the well-being of literature requires its continuous reinterpretation through the incorporation of forms previously unidentified as such. As Moraru puts it: ‘being-with comes before—and comes to afford and sustain—being to the point that *it renders* *ontological and aesthetic well-being a function of ethical with-being*. This is, in fact, a planetary principle, a (or perhaps *the*) planetary *nomos*’ (2015: 153). Planetary being-with avoids totalization because it assumes that neither the self nor the other is fully apprehensible – there always remains some excess of them that cannot be reduced to a single principle. For planetary being-with to emerge, the totalizing rationality that reduces the other to the self has to give way to an understanding of the self as always already inhabited by otherness, which should help undermine structures of domination and make room for a non-assimilative relationality.

This, as I have shown above, is precisely the ethos embodied by *Obabakoak*,encapsulated in some of its key events: Canon Lizardi’s remorse prompting in him the obsession that his disappeared son Javier had transfigured into a wild boar; Esteban Werfell realizing that his self was, and had always been, informed by both reason and its other, superstition; the narrator of *In Search of the Last Word* flirting with superstition and thus hinting at the irrationality of the idea that literature can achieve transcendence. Those events project a realm of worldly human relations, both literary and extraliterary, with no vantage points or criteria for supremacy, where the notions of *world* and *literature* are endlessly open to redefinition. This is the ground on which planetary relationality can grow. The planetary stance embodied by *Obabakoak* shows us that relationality should always set off from humility, the humility of assuming the impossibility of fully comprehending the reality that surrounds us.

Notes

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1. The translation is mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Gabilondo talks of ‘magic’ with regard to *Obabakoak*, not of ‘magical realism’. In that way, Gabilondo avoids the terms of the debate around magical realism, which would not benefit his argument: against his point that *Obabakoak* essentialises, theorists of magical realism argue that it is a ‘mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries’ (Zamora and Faris 1995: 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. I quote the 2007 edition of Margaret Jull Costa's translation, listed within the entry for the original (Atxaga 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. First coined by Spivak (2003) with acknowledged ambiguity, the term *planetarity* has since further diversified its meaning. Yet, I believe in its explanatory potential and attempt here to contribute to a more workable definition. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. In Atxaga’s allegory, the *sun languages* are the global languages – such as English, Spanish, or French – that occupy the same centrality in the world as the sun in the solar system, whilst minoritised languages are compared with satellites. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)