

## The Canonization of Carmen

By

William A. Douglass



Antonio Sansiñena and his wife Teresa Sarobe (my Basque “sister”) recounted their recent hunts as we munched our sheep’s cheese and tangy *txorizo* made from their son Aitor’s recent wild boar kill. Antonio practiced his rudimentary English as he reminisced about his years as a shepherd near Fresno, California.

It was the autumn of 2017 and my mind wandered to the year (1963-1964) that I lived in this Navarrese Basque village called Etxalar while conducting anthropological field research on the causes and consequences of its rural exodus. It had been more than four decades since my doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago was published.<sup>1</sup> My subsequent academic career orbited exclusively around the founding, and then directing for 33 years, the Center for Basque Studies of the University of Nevada System.

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Douglass, *Opportunity and Rural Exodus in Two Spanish Basque Villages*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975; London: C. Hurst and Co. Publishers, 1975. William A. Douglass, *Oportunidad y éxodo rural en dos aldeas vascas*, 2 volumes. Donostia/San Sebastián: Editorial Auñamendi Argitaletxea, 1977.

The Basque Country, Euskal Herria, has been one of Europe's most pronounced seedbeds of emigrants for the last half millennium. Beginning with their participation in the voyages of Columbus and Magellan, Basques were mariners, merchants, missionaries, and administrators of one of the world's most extensive empires. In each generation, Basque rural social structure provided numerous candidates for emigration. The farmstead, *caserio* (Spanish term) or *baserri* (Basque), was transmitted to a single heir (or heiress) upon his or her marriage--with the expectation that the new *etxejojaun* (lord of the household) and *etxejoandre* (lady of the household) would care for the aging parents, while the disinherited siblings were dowered and left. Among the latter's options were marriage to the heir(ess) of another farm, profession religious vows, military service, and migration to a nearby city or emigration abroad. Consequently, there are Basque immigrants (and their descendants) on all of the inhabited continents and in every country of Latin America. In the Anglo world, Basques became the stereotypic shepherders of the American West and sugarcane cutters in tropical North Queensland.<sup>2</sup>

In 1963, Etxalar was a peasant village of 1,000 inhabitants, divided equally between a village nucleus and its hinterland of about 100 disseminated *baserriak*.<sup>3</sup> For the initial six months of our stay (with my first wife Patricia and our infant son John), we lived in a house owned and recently renovated by Teresa's sister who was working in Paris as a domestic servant.<sup>4</sup> We then moved to Buxungoborda, a *baserri* located about a half hour's walk into the mountains from the nucleus.

In those days, the typical Etxalar farmstead had a hectare or two planted to corn for both livestock and human consumption. The pasturage on another couple of hectares of meadow was hand-scythed and dried for winter livestock feed. The remainder of the approximately ten-

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<sup>2</sup> See William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao, *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1975 and William A. Douglass, *Australianuak: Basques in the Antipodes*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The *-k* is a pluralizing suffix in Basque. *Baserria* means "the farm," and the *-a* suffix article is frequently dropped in speech and writing about the entity.

<sup>4</sup> Her other sister was living in Donostia/San Sebastián married to an Italian mechanic that she had met while a maid in Paris. They had a brother who lived in Chile where he owned bakeries and dabbled in ranching. He had fled Spain to France in 1951 to escape military service and then emigrated onward to South America.

hectare holding was forest that provided firewood, chestnuts, acorns, and the ferns that were used for the animal bedding that, mixed with the dung, became the main source of fertilizer for the arable fields and meadows. Each household had access to adjacent communal forest and grazing that augmented its own resources.

Buxungoborda had no internal plumbing or electricity. Four milk cows and a sow with piglets were stabled in the ground floor of our dwelling. We had a farm flock of about thirty sheep that grazed freely on the adjacent village commons. Our diet consisted of home-grown green and dried beans, eggs, potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes and their sauce, along with the occasional chicken or rabbit, and the sausages and smoked ham from the annual slaughter of a pig or two. Sunday was our special day, when, after attending mass in the village nucleus, Paquita, our *etxeakoandre*, bought a little fresh meat or fish, as well as the several loaves of wheat bread that became progressively harder as the week progressed. Our main income was from the sale of milk that had to be transported daily by donkey to the closest point that the buyer could access with his truck. We also sold our calves, a little wool, and a few piglets and lambs.

Etxalar is smack on the French-Spanish frontier, so there was *gaulana*, or “night work.” Virtually every household in the village was involved in some fashion in the guiding of clandestine horses and/or illegal Portuguese immigrants into France, when not carrying packages as part of smuggling gangs and serving them as vigils of the movements of the thirty or so border guards stationed in the village.

At the time of my study, the agricultural system was in crisis. Rural youth had embraced twentieth-century materialism, and the formerly prestigious roles of male and female household head had lost their appeal. Labor-intensive, near-subsistence level agriculture was anathema to the young, particularly when accompanied with the obligation of caring for the doddering. Such a life-style was clearly incapable of providing the coveted television set, let alone automobile. *All* of the offspring now competed to avoid inheriting the farm, preferring instead to migrate to urban employment in a nearby industrial center or a new life abroad.

Lacking both labor and succession, much of the farmland was being converted to commercial pine plantations. With but a handful of exceptions, the *baserriak* of Etxalar stood empty or inhabited by a lonely, maybe even embittered, elderly couple. Many of the surviving *baserriak*

are more devoted to agro-tourism than to serious farming. Once stately stone farmhouses have either fallen to ruin or been converted into the weekend chalets of urbanites seeking a rural refuge. Former viable barrios of eight or ten *baserriak*, linked together through *auzolana*,<sup>5</sup> were now shredded.

My personal odyssey in 1963 was to visit every household in the village to reconstruct three generations of its occupants' migration history. Each house in the nucleus and farmstead has its name and legacy within the collective memory. Its occupants take their identity from it (Jesus, our *etxekojaun*, was known within local parlance as "Buxun" rather than by his surname Damboriena). Consequently, it might be argued that rural Basque society is more populated by households than people.

It proved possible to reconstruct the emigration experience of former inhabitants of abandoned farms by interviewing neighbors and relocated descendants. It was thus that I became aware of Errotxainborda, located on the Tximist River in the mountains above Buxungoborda and below Paquita's more remote natal Babolekoborda. By my time, it was a telltale pile of rubble revealing the former existence of a former *baserri*.

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<sup>5</sup> "Neighborhood work" refers to the collective work projects such a road and stream-bed repairs held annually, and/or as needed. Each household sent a worker, or, if unable to, a monetary contribution toward the costs of particular projects.



Fast forward to the autumn of 2019. I was again in Teresa's kitchen for a morbid visit. She was recently widowed. Antonio had ascended a ladder and then stepped onto an ancient rock wall to prune a tree. The perch crumbled beneath him and he fell to his death. As is the Basque custom, Teresa recounted the event in painful detail while I contemplated Antonio's smiling face on the inside of the double-paneled memorial card. Its cover was a photo of him standing on the rock wall and pruning away moments before his death. The rear cover was an image of

Antonio and Teresa holding hands and walking into the distance. The bilingual message (Spanish and Basque) was haunting,

How wonderful it would be to bring someone back from heaven

Can you imagine? To spend one day with that person

Just one last day....one last time...

To give him one last hug, one last kiss

To hear his voice anew

To have one last opportunity to tell him:

I love you, I miss you!

I love you with all my heart!

Mercifully, our guest of honor arrived, and his effusive presence filled the room as he kissed Teresa and her family and greeted me. I had asked my Basque sister to invite the local representative of last year's local performance of a *pastorale*, or play, titled *Karmen Etxalarkoa Pastoral* ("Carmen of Etxalar's *Pastorale*"), and she now introduced me instead to its instigator, author, and producer. He is a poet living in Pamplona and is known by the literary moniker of "Pintxe." Gerardo Mungia is committed to preservation of the Basque language, which is particularly endangered in his native Navarra, and consequently publishes poems and essays in Basque.



*Karmen Etxalarkoa tee shirt and program*

Gerardo had become fascinated by the figure of Carmen in Bizet's famed opera (1875) that was based upon a novel of the same title (1845) by Prosper Mérimée, a successful nineteenth-century French Romanticist author who spent considerable time in Greece and southern Spain (particularly intrigued by the prehistory of both). Pintxe sought to underscore the Basque component of the Andalusian story of the ill-fated love affair of the alluring Carmen and José Lizarrabengoa. His main purpose, however, was to use the *pastorale* as a vehicle with which to comment on moral dilemmas in contemporary Basque culture and society.

While set in Andalusia, in both the Mérimée novel and Bizet opera, upon their first meeting, Carmen declares that she is from Etxalar and José replies that he is from Elizondo, chief town in

the adjacent Navarrese Valley of Baztan. Their common bond is further underscored at the outset by her recognition of José's Basque accent in his spoken Spanish. They then exchange a few words in Basque (somewhat flawed in Mérimée's rendering). Both are outlaws in their fashion—she being a famed coquette leading many a man astray, and he a fugitive from their Navarra after murdering an Arabese man (native of the Basque province of Araba) with a *makila* (a Basque walking stick and traditional weapon).

There are anomalies and ironies in the foregoing. Carmen has become the quintessential gypsy within world culture, whereas gypsies are denigrated strongly within Basque culture (and most of Europe as well). If Carmen, then, is not the iconic Basque woman, she is arguably the most famous one.<sup>6</sup> In the novel and opera, she is kidnapped by gypsies and taken to Seville where she is raised to be one of them.

Then there is Gerardo's decision to opt for the *pastorale* form.

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<sup>6</sup> The story has been retold countless times in song, film, and literary permutations. The most famous of the latter is no less than Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) (London: Penguin Books, 1995), easily among the most influential works in the western literary canon. "Lolita" is one of the several variations on her given name that her lascivious stepfather Humbert Humbert confers upon his nymphet Dolores Haze. Yet he also refers to her as "my little Carmen" (p. 61), and his "Carmencita" (pp. 242, 280) and "gitanilla" (little gypsy) (p. 244). She disappears in the fictive Arizona town of Elphinstone, thereby concluding their second lengthy perambulation across the United States. For the next two years, the embittered Humbert is obsessed with tracking her down. She finally writes to him, now seventeen and pregnant by her young husband, requesting financial help from her "father" so the young couple can move to Alaska. When Humbert shows up on her doorstep, 32-caliber pistol in pocket, it seems probable that he will kill his Carmen's husband or, a la Mérimée's version, Carmen herself. In the event, this is not the case and "dad" gives her money, but not without first asking her (in French) for one last time: *Changeons de vie, ma Carmen, allons vivre quelque part où nous ne serons séparés*—paraphrasing Mérimée's text.



A *pastorale* is written to be performed. It is a popular medieval morality play, somewhat in the spirit of Oberammergau in that villagers, rather than professionals, are the actors. No one is paid to participate. Unlike the German celebration, the Basque spectacle is not necessarily repeated. Within the Basque Country, this art form is characteristic only of Iparralde, or the French Basque Country, and particularly the region of Xiberoa (or Soule) within it.<sup>7</sup>

A *pastorale* has its own traditional formulaic rules that Gerardo had to learn and practice to become capable of composing in them. It is sung in verses similar to Gregorian chant. It is a populist exercise, so great singing voices are not a requirement. Each verse consists of four lines, of which each has eight vowels. The last word of the second line usually rhymes with that of the fourth. If a line ends in a vowel and the next begins with another, elision is permissible.

A *pastorale* typically depicts the clash between good and evil (the former personified by Christians and the latter by Turks). The performance is open-air with a stage measuring about ten meters by twelve. There is a white curtain across the rear that segregates back-staging from the audience. Three doors in this barrier facilitate the performers' ingress and egress. The one to the right is for the so-called "blues," or good guys—the Christians. The one to the left is for the evil "reds" (Turks). The opening in the middle is for certain actors and actresses, as well as the children. The little ones represent innocence and hope for the future in this Manichean drama. At times, the protagonists access the stage by ascending from the audience.

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent overview of the history and nature of the phenomenon see Jean-Louis Davant, *La Pastorale Basque de Soule*. Baiona/Bayonne: Elkar, 2019. It includes (on page 222) a color photograph of the entire cast of *Karmen Etxalarakoa Pastoral*.

There is a paucity of set design. There are a few branches of boxwood and bouquets of flowers adorning the white curtain. Between its openings on the right and in the middle, there is a table and chair from which the *errejenta* or *errejentsa*, the director, supervises the action. Conversely, there tends to be considerable effort and variety in costume design meant to convey the performers' differing characters. There is never physical contact between them. They communicate with one another, and the audience, through bodily gesture, dance, dialogue, song, and *makila* fights. The two traditional instruments of the musical accompaniment are the *txirula* (flute) and the *atabal* (drum). Over time, other instrumentation has been added.

There is usually epic battle between the Christians and Turks in which they brandish *makilak* against one another—the forces of good prevailing. In a central scene, named for the Turks, the female “reds” are shameless seductresses, dressing provocatively almost as if they were barmaids. They engage in wild and challenging movement, whether dancing or wielding their clubs. They thoroughly enliven the action.



*Satanak dancing*

Then there are the demons, the *satanak*, sent by Satan to sow hatred, war, envy, etc. among humans. There are at least two *satanak* and they often appear to be somewhat stupefied and out-of-place. Their interventions constitute interludes in the action, and possibly ludicrous comment upon it. They are also given to performing daring and elegant dances. To be sure, they are “reds.”

All *pastorales* have shepherds, in keeping with the name of this rural artistic genre. In a special scene, they ascend from the audience to the stage in the company of their dogs and burro. The intimate song of the shepherds is followed by them passing through the audience handing out pieces of traditional *taloo* (cornbread)--a highpoint of the spectacle.

The performance begins with the Introduction--a greeting to the audience in which it is told what it is about to witness. There then follow between seventeen and twenty-four scenes, each set to its own music. Sprinkled throughout there are individual songs. They might be sung by an individual or a couple, man or woman, the boy children or just the girls, the entire cast. The *pastorale* ends with an Epilogue summing up the work and its moral lessons. That is then followed by an Azken Kantorea, or “Last Song” in which the entire cast comes on stage to comment on aspects of the town in which the work has been performed (and possibly even details regarding its preparation) before wishing the audience adieu.

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*Garardo Mungia and William Douglass*

To understand the genesis and content of *Karmen Etxalarkoa Pastoral*, a consideration of Gerardo's biography is in order. He shared it with me in our face-to-face interview and by email in answers to my follow-up questions.

Gerardo was born in Pamplona in 1957, in the midst of "full-fledged Francoism." Consequently, as a child, he learned from his urban-born parents and grandparents only a few words in *Euskara* (the Basque language) and the lyrics to some folk songs. His father, Francisco Mungia Isaba, was a Pamplona-born employee of a power company. Francisco's father, Gerardo Mungia Artola, was born in 1896 in the old part of Donostia/San Sebastián and was a bookbinder by trade. He met his wife, Inocenzia Isaba Goikoetxea, born in 1899 in the old part of Pamplona. They met when he went to work for the city's Editorial Aranzadi, one of Spain's leading publishing houses. The firm had been founded and was supervised by Estanislao Aranzadi, a man who was very active in Basque Nationalist Party politics. During Gerardo's childhood, the household consisted of both paternal grandparents, his parents, a spinster aunt, and his two siblings.

Both his grandparents and parents were urban Basques and therefore lacked fluency in *Euskara* (the Basque language). Francisco was fascinated by the Basque toponyms in and around Pamplona. He was an inveterate naturalist and learned many Basque terms for flora and fauna—even the insects. He was also given to playing Basque folk songs and teaching them to his children. But, to his chagrin, he was not able to converse in *Euskara*. Consequently, as a child, Gerardo picked up only the odd Basque word. They spoke Spanish at home.

Francisco met his wife, Domitila Gómez Hernández, a Castilian from Segovia, while doing his military service in Madrid. She was an avowed anticlerical anti-fascist. Francisco was a practicing Catholic, but he did not demand that either his wife or children become practicers.

"I mention these facts to underscore that in our home there were always books, free-thinking, and strong pro-Basque sentiment. In school we were taught that Basque was a language used when speaking to animals and conserved in a few backward *baserriak*. It was spoken only by rustics, idiots, and separatist Communists. When I was seven or eight, I witnessed how one of my classmates was punished by a teacher for saying *intxaurrak* for walnuts because he didn't know the Spanish term *nueces*. He went home with a bloody mouth

from the blow. Given such an experience, how was one not to sympathize with the activists of those days?”

Gerardo never joined ETA:

“I didn’t identify with it ideologically. I believe that it would never have thrived had it not been for police torture in the Basque Country both during and after Franco’s dictatorship. The Spanish Inquisition actually lasted until the end of the nineteenth century, and was strongest here in Navarra. I have some friends who were in ETA and are now either in prison or exiled. I was a militant in *Herri Batasuna* and in the syndicalist movement. I am pro-independence for the Basque Country and sympathetic to anarchism—probably to an overly romanticized degree. Although a non-Basque, my mother respected her childrens’ desire to learn *Euskara*. She instilled her anti-fascism in us. She would hide in our house the ‘illegal’ propaganda that we were disseminating. In my view, she was both very brave and open-minded for those times.”

Franco had died in 1975 and Gerardo began studying Basque in order to “recuperate the language of my ancestors.” He attended two lectures given by university professor Txillardegi, a co-founder of ETA. He then devoted his spare time to anti-fascist militancy. He began reading books in Basque, and his favorite authors were Itxaro Borda and Joseba Sarrionandia. “I have read almost everything that the latter has written.”<sup>8</sup>

Gerardo’s formal schooling in Pamplona had ended when he was fourteen and he became an *albañil* (bricklayer). Jobs were hard to find in Spain, so he emigrated with a friend to Toulouse in search of employment. He lived there for eighteen months during 1977/1978. He recounts:

“After hours I attended classes in the University L’Arsenal to learn French and I joined the CNT, or anarcho-syndicalist movement. In its centers there were roundtables and debates, film showings, and poetry recitations. It was there that I became familiar with real ‘freedom’ after growing up in the darkness of Franco’s Spain. It was during a CNT event that a companion gave

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<sup>8</sup> When I told him that I had a close personal and professional relationship with Joseba Sarrionandia, having just edited and published an anthology of his Basque poetry translated into English (see Joseba Sarrionandia, *Prisons and Exiles*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2019), Gerardo requested that I send his work to Joseba (living then in Havana). I did so.

me a copy of Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen*. I fumbled through it as best I could, and set it aside-- as we do in life with so many things."

From an early age, Gerardo loved music in many forms: rock and roll, Broadway musicals, Spanish *zarzuelas*. His paternal grandfather was a second cousin of the famed Basque tenor, Carlos Mungia. In addition to being a bricklayer, in his spare time during the 1980s, Gerardo became the manager of two rock bands—La Polla Records and Kortatu.<sup>9</sup>

In 1982, at age twenty-five, Gerardo attended a *pastorale* in Pagola (Xiberoa). He was totally enamored by such theater performed by the simple people of a little village and without compensation. "I didn't understand the Souletin dialect, but a little booklet allowed me to follow the plot."

The years went by and Gerardo continued his study of Basque. He became a big fan of *bertsolariak*, or Basque-language versifiers, as well as *pastorales* (attending more than thirty to date). "I was never fluent in Souletin, but became capable of understanding it."

Gerardo has channeled his energies into his writing—exclusively in Basque. At first, he wrote poetry, and then penned a book of verse entitled *Harat honat, jonki baten trajeria* ("Always To and Fro, the Tragedy of the Junkie"). It ranges widely from political conflict during the Franco years to social issues such as poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse. He had many friends in the drug scene; at least forty of them died from overdosing, AIDS, and other diseases. He has never used drugs. He is a light drinker—beer and wine—and does not consume hard liquor. In Gerardo's words:

"When Franco died, all that was until then unknown, all that was prohibited under the dictatorship—music, books, movies—entered our lives with great force. The same with drugs. The end of the 1970s and decade of the eighties was particularly noteworthy in this regard. Drugs entered our lives almost without our noticing or being aware of the consequences. Many of my friends of both sexes became heroin users, so I experienced this problem up close. The

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<sup>9</sup> Kortatu composed the song "Sarri Sarri," an homage to the legendary prison escape of the two ETA activists Joseba Sarrionandia and Piti, hidden as they were in the boom boxes of the Imanol Larzabal band as it exited Martutene prison in Donostia. The song remains one of the most popular in the Basque Country to the present day.

drug addict always flits from here to there—searching, arranging drug buys, reselling, stealing—in a crazy cycle leading to premature death. In my book, I tried to capture what I lived through.”

Gerardo also wrote his own first *pastorale*, called *Bilurkoren Malurrak* (“The Misfortunes of Bilurko”).<sup>10</sup> He penned it in his rudimentary knowledge of Souletin as “a personal challenge.” He wrote a second in *Batua*, entitled *Eta Maita Herria Pastoral* (“And My Beloved Town Pastoral”). It regards the move of a young man, Patxi, from an unviable *baserri* in a depopulating Navarrese village to urban employment in Pamplona where he meets his future companion, Idoia. She is a Basque language teacher. Her brother is an imprisoned ETA activist and the couple undergo the pains of family separation imposed by the so-called “dispersion.”<sup>11</sup> They have a son and daughter. Patxi works in a factory and Idoia as a store clerk. Patxi is overworked and underpaid, but he soldiers on to care for his family. The *pastorale* concludes with Idoia’s lament on receiving the tragic news of his death in an industrial accident, caused by his insufficient rest the night before:

Where are you going now, my love?  
Don’t you see gathered here your sisters?  
Your friends awash in tears?  
What future will your daughter have? Your son?  
In this cruel world, alone.

There ensues the Epilogue sung by the entire cast:

The Valleys of Vasconia  
at a fast pace

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<sup>10</sup> Bilurko has no translation in Basque. Bilur means handcuffs or slavery in the language, and Gerardo turned the word into a proper name to underscore the addict’s slavery through dependency on drugs.

<sup>11</sup> Reference is to Spain’s policy to disperse convicted ETA activists to prisons outside the Basque Country, an additional punishment in itself, since it makes visits by family members more expensive and infrequent. There is a years-long and continuing campaign in the Basque homeland employing the slogan *Presoak etxera!* (“[Bring] the Prisoners home!”).

are bleeding to death.  
It is the fault of the young.

From the little towns  
to the urban neighborhoods.  
From the rich countryside  
to arid asphalt.

In the workshops and factories  
the conditions are hard.  
The class struggle cast its  
shadow over freedom.

We all struggle together and  
proclaim with pride  
that the workers abolished  
slavery firmly.

The world of the wealthy,  
or more accurately, the bastards.  
Their legacy is:  
Poor people and misery.

In favor of Euskal Herria  
all men and women come together.  
“That they may not steal  
the bread from our bag.”

Euskal Herria, *Euskara*,

I want to ask all of you  
that we defend them together.  
If we love this Land.

Those who attack *Euskara*,  
Our culture, Listen:  
You have lost the struggle,  
You are surrounded!

The truth, all of us together  
have made a good work  
So, this is the *Pastorale*:  
A creation and task in common.

The hour to leave  
has come.  
Please forgive us our faults  
we ask as a favor.

People remember that  
*Euskara* is the base and source  
of our culture.  
And the Country of all Basques.

The last song, *Eta Maita Herria* ("And Beloved Town"), is eerie:

There was a town...I have forgotten its name.  
When I remember it, I despair.

What was once tilled was now a critters' Eden.  
Almost all the wheat fields were uncultivated.

The walls and roofs of the houses seemed in good repair.  
Iron gates, windows and doors covered with moss.  
Neither the smell of smoke nor dung. "Is there anything alive?"  
What happened here? It was now making me uneasy.

I carefully pushed open a door and what a surprise!  
That which I saw at that minute was truly absurd.  
Clothes on their hanger; in a corner a culinary sieve.  
Everything in its place, albeit covered with spiders' webs.

The kitchen gadgets, jackets and shirts.  
The table, the cupboard, in the sink a scouring pad.  
On the walls of the rooms riveting photos.  
Parked with pride on the ground floor the old tractor.

In the drawing room I saw a note. It explained concisely  
the reason behind such abandon: "Now that it is no longer  
possible to make a living off the land or the livestock, we have  
decided to march from our town to the city. Hunger mandates  
and so we must accept it. We shall never return and our soul is  
broken. It has not been easy. It has destroyed us."

Neither of Gerardo's first two *pastorales* has ever been performed.

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*Carmen centerstage observed by Mérimée*

It was then that Gerardo's companion, Ixabel, brought home a copy of Mérimée's *Carmen*. It made him was awashed in memories of Toulouse. That day he decided to write his third *pastorale* based on the novel. He did so in *Euskara Batua*, or the unified Basque that has replaced the individual dialects spoken in the various regions of Euskal Herria. It is the Basque being taught in the schools, but would not be typical of the speech of Etxalar's middle-aged and elderly adults.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, all Basques are now exposed to *Batua* through Basque media, so Gerardo's *pastorale* would not have been incomprehensible to any Basque speaker in the audience, many of whom travelled from other parts of the Basque Country to attend. Indeed, some of the performers themselves came from other areas, including Iparralde. In Gerardo's words:

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<sup>12</sup> I once offered Teresa Sarobe a copy of my book of short stories (*Death After Life: Tales of Nevada*. Reno: Black Rock Institute Press, 2015). They had been translated into Spanish and *Euskara Batua*. She requested the Spanish edition, since it would have been a painful exercise (with a dictionary) for her to wade through the *Batua* one.

“I believe that *Batua* is the only tool we Basques have for maintaining and promoting our language: one that can be understood from Bizkaia to Xiberoa, from the sea to the mountains. It is the Basque that I learned and use in my daily life and writing. I therefore wrote *Karmen* in *Batua*, including only a smattering of words from the local dialect of Etxalar to lend a little color to the work. Today, almost all the dialects of Basque have disappeared. I would say that there are only three left: Bizkaian, Gipuzkoan, and Pyrenean. There remain a few fragments and phrases of others. I think it is fine for Xiberoans to write their *pastorales* in Souletin. I wrote my *Bilurkoren Malurrak* in that dialect as a personal challenge. I doubt that it will ever be performed.”

When Gerardo finished *Karmen*, he visited Etxalar (for the first time) to determine if there would be interest in performing it there? He knew no one in the town, but was aware that the local parish priest, Pello Apezetxea Zubiri, was a member of the prestigious Euskaltzaindia (Basque Language Academy).

“I was extremely nervous as I knocked on the door of such an illustrious person. He turned out to be both humble and charming, as well as a great lover of freedom and our Basque culture. I described my project and he immediately offered his unconditional support. Thus, there began a beautiful adventure: *Karmen Etxalarkoa Pastoral*.

Every orchestra needs its conductor and I wasn't one. So, I contacted my dear friend, Pantxika Urruty, in the village of Barkoxe in Xiberoa. She read *Karmen* and fell in love with the project. She was experienced, having directed another *pastorale*, *Catalina de Erauso*.<sup>13</sup> She went to work immediately, even travelling to Seville and Cordoba to experience Mérimée's settings first hand. It was Pantxika who deserves all the credit for transforming my text into a performance.”

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<sup>13</sup> See Eva Mendieta, *In Search of Catalina de Erauso: The National and Sexual Identity of the Lieutenant Nun*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, 2009.



*Miren Olaetxea as Karmen and Miguel Jose Ariztia as Don José*

She organized tryouts in Etxalar and assigned many roles there. The key one of Karmen was given to Miren Olaetxea, daughter of the household Arretxea-Basatea in the town center. She has a nice voice and a fine stage presence. In her real life, she is (like Carmen) very independent—living alone while employed as the supervisor of the factory LORPEN.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Gerardo searched the several communities of the Valley of Baztan for the ideal José Lizarrabengoa. He attended many performances of *bertsolariak*, and local choirs and vocalists, before settling upon Miguel Jose Ariztia, from the household Iruin in the village nucleus of Amaiur.

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<sup>14</sup> This sock manufacturer employs migrants from other parts of the European Union and has thereby created a Bulgarian community within the confines of this small Basque community. Ironically, then, the protagonist of the “Basque gypsy” who was kidnapped and transposed to Seville where she is working in a cigar factory, supervises a factory herself that transposes alien eastern Europeans into the heartland of the Basque homeland. Gerardo Mungia’s Karmen, in her real life therefore personifies the “New Basque Country” that he decries.

“I explained the project to Migel Jose and he asked ‘why me?’ I told him that I wanted to provide a touch a realism to a work in which Karmen’s lover and assassin is from Baztan. His response was that he would have to see if he could organize his affairs in order to attend rehearsals (he was the owner of 200 cows that needed care). A few days later he accepted. Migel Jose has an innate, if untrained, pleasant voice. While not a true *bertsolari*, he is a *plaza-gizona* (“plaza man”) in the sense that he has self-confidence to stand up in public and express himself—even in verse. The villagers of Etxalar were amenable to his participation, thereby unifying the two valleys.”

It was Gerardo’s purpose to write a *pastorale* that underscored recent (rather than medieval) and contemporary issues. So, he eschewed employing Christians and Turks, opting instead simply for “blues” and “reds.” Carmen, José, Mérimée and the shepherds are all blues. He did retain *satanak* as reds.

In the event, there were three performances of the work in the fall of 2017: two in Etxalar and one in Elizondo. They were sold out (about 3,000 spectators in all). The souvenirs included an extensive program (120 pages) with tri-lingual (Basque, Spanish, and French) text of the entire work so that the listener could follow the action presented entirely in Basque. There are Carmen tee shirts, replete with images of the performers of the muleteer, Don José, and Carmen with Andalusian palms in the background, Carmen alone with the panorama of Etxalar behind her, and Mérimée standing before the Eiffel Tower.

In his text, Pintxe editorializes frequently upon the contemporary challenges to Basque culture, and, in particular, the language. Between the second and third scenes, Don José addresses the audience with a melancholy song titled *Ama Euskalherria* (“Mother Basque Country”):

It is such a delicate topic  
that brings me here today,  
that gives me pause  
before beginning,  
and after listening

to many voices amongst us  
conscious of what it means  
to be Basque.

Well I know that it would be better  
to not reveal my sufferings to anyone,  
to silence what my blood proclaims;  
I would wish, but am unable.

I am disconsolate for our  
Mother Basque Country,  
because she is on the path  
of definitively disappearing from this world,  
abandoned by her sons and daughters.  
Who will forgive us  
such a sin?

Because we have ceased loving you,  
our union has been broken forever.  
The drums of war echo within us,  
and it is this that has snatched life from you.

The song was authored by the famed bertsolari Xalbador and was selected for inclusion by its performer—Miguel Jose Ariztia.



*Dominicans ready to sing*

Before we meet Carmen, Mérimée is a protagonist travelling through his beloved Andalusia. He overnights in a Dominican monastery. Between scenes four and five, Gerardo provides a song, *Domingotarren Kantorea* ("Song of the Dominicans"), in which the friars establish the suffocating moral backdrop against which Carmen rebels:

Flesh and Sin

How many lost souls  
in this disgraceful world!  
Since Adam fled surreptitiously  
from Paradise.  
Satan gave to Eve that apple  
that was so captivating.  
Thereby revealing the pride

of women.

The devil disguises as a serpent or a woman,  
elegant, svelte, pretty, beautiful.

Men! Beware of women!

If you are likely to fall for those pleasures, fast.

The woman needs to be punished  
from time to time.

So that she learns and at the same time understands,  
that a man knows very well what is best for her,  
to whom she should pray, when she should speak,  
to whom she should obey.

From the flesh, friends, come so many goads!  
God willing that we die before succumbing to temptation!  
The murderer, the thief has no place in heaven.  
The effeminate, the prostitutes  
will be condemned.  
So be it. Amen.<sup>15</sup>

There ensues a comment to the effect:

Remember that in the Middle Ages Gregory IX  
delegated to the Dominicans the task of organizing

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<sup>15</sup> "I based the friars' song on my many visits the Monastery of Leyre, that is precisely quite near the village of Irunberri where I was consulting. The monarchs of Navarra are buried in that monastery. I became friendly with one of the monks, who by chance spoke Basque. He translated for me their Latin Gregorian chants. With that knowledge, I composed this song with a Gregorian tone--and a satirical component as well."

the Inquisition. Thus, the renowned inquisitor  
Torquemada belonged to this religious order.

Between scenes five and six there is the song that is now Gerardo's pride and joy—*Zigar Egileen Kantorea* ("Song of the Cigar-makers"). In it, he expounds his beliefs in the plight of women, the poor, and the underclass:

Hours, days, weeks,  
years, shift after shift.  
Rolling tobacco leaves,  
rolling and more rolling.  
Beads of sweat on cheeks,  
down the breast cleft.  
The children at home hungry,  
husband in the tavern.  
"Work will make you free,"  
for a miserly wage.

Hours, days, weeks,  
hands calloused.  
Years, shift after shift,  
heart pounding.  
Hours, days, weeks,  
while we are workers,  
years, shift after shift,  
we should not be foolish!  
Hours, days, weeks.  
We should be women!

Beads of sweat on cheeks.  
Who looks after the children?  
Down the breast cleft.  
Who is the vehicle of future generations?  
Beads of sweat on cheeks.  
Who endures menstruation?  
Down the breast cleft.  
Who is the transmitter of traditions?  
Awaiting freedom...<sup>16</sup>

There is a magico-realist moment, when, after scene ten, the two demons, Mingulin and Onil, are commenting upon José's blind love for Carmen. Mingulin takes his leave by stating that a witch filled with desire awaits him on Otsondo (a mountain pass at the head of the Valley of Baztan) and Onil replies that he is off to Etxalar where he is godfather of a sorcerer anxious to see him, adding that some lascivious doves summoned him there yesterday (Etxalar is famed for a traditional form of autumnal dove-hunting as the birds migrate through the area heading south to winter in Africa).

This invocation of the Basque homeland is further underscored when the narrator tells us that Carmen's frivolity is as changeable as "the weather in Euskalherria." The singers of the smugglers' song, *Etxalarko Kontrabandisten Kantorea* (Song of the Etxalar Smugglers"), muse about their preferred route through the town's mountains in which their local knowledge makes them immune from detection by *gendarmes* and *guardias* alike.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the shepherds' song, *Kantorea Barde-tik Bordarat* ("From the Bardenas to the Borda"), evokes Navarra. The Bardenas is a desertified region in its extreme south to which Pyrenean herders

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<sup>16</sup> "Pantxika made me write it. I protested that I was incapable of writing a women's song, one expressing the views of nineteenth-century cigar-makers. I couldn't relate to their world. But Pantxika insisted, and I composed the work in about three hours. I will always be grateful to her because it was very well-received. It was sung by all of the actresses; not only sung but performed by them with great emotion."

<sup>17</sup> "For the background of this song, I interviewed many participants in the smuggling, as well as the mayor, parish priest, and Asun (the proprietress of the local inn)."

trail their sheep for winter grazing. On their return journey to Etxalar, the shepherds lament what they observe:

So many young people unemployed!  
The world is certainly hard, miserable.  
We see the farms shuttered.  
The towns are empty, they were never like this.

We should never forget that  
you cannot live from technology alone.  
We should reclaim the land. Out with the bums!  
Let us separate the grain from the chaff.<sup>18</sup>

As the drama reaches its climax, with the couple on the run from the law and José attempting to salvage their relationship before killing the truculent Carmen out of despair, he begs of her:

We could leave  
for America tomorrow.  
Change our lives.  
It would be wonderful.

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<sup>18</sup> “It was not difficult for me to appreciate the shepherds’ world. With some companions, I had been involved for some years in trying to improve the agrarian prospects of the central Navarrese town of Irunberri. So, I was acquainted first-hand shepherds and their concerns.”



Carmen retorts:

We were not born  
to plant cabbages.  
To live at the expense of others  
is our fate.

Mérimée makes no such reference to possible emigration to America (he has José pleading only that they “move far from here, beneath other skies.”).<sup>19</sup> It would, however, have seemed quite plausible to any nineteenth-century Basque—a well-trod pathway out of Old-World-life’s dilemmas.

Then there is the Epilogue in which the narrator addresses the audience:

Every day we hear  
that a man has killed  
his woman. In cold blood.  
What a beast! What a lunatic!

Even though this is a novel

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<sup>19</sup> Nabokov makes the same error in *Lolita* (*Op. cit.*, page 239).

it is very relevant today.  
Since it is common to hear such stories,  
if we are not deaf.

This bestiality  
seems taken from the Bible.  
Where it is necessary to crush  
either the woman or the serpent.

At times it is the weak  
who fears the weaker.  
Fear brings hatred  
and hate leads to death.

You have been shown  
the bandit's life.  
And a little of  
the nineteenth century as well.

Smugglers  
from here...some of them.  
How their load weighs on their backs!  
and their moments of danger.

To favor *Euskara*  
the Valleys of Baztan and  
Bortziri [wage] a battle  
of children and adults.

I would leave you with  
a thought: that we speak  
in Basque with our children  
from the moment of their birth.

It has been a lengthy tragedy.  
If events happened so or not, we do not know.  
But were they not recounted,  
there would be no history.

Goodbye, dear friends.  
Remember that there is  
much danger on the highway.  
So, drive carefully.

There is then the final song sung by all—*Eta Asken Kantorea: Gotor Lekua* (“And the Last Song: Fortified Place”):

Baztan and Bortziriak<sup>20</sup> reinforce  
the indignant border between Spain and France.  
That is unfortunately accepted at times.  
Wars of other epochs, global and civil,  
have passed through here  
spreading their gloom in forests and canyons.

I wish to live in Basque.

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<sup>20</sup> The Basque term for the entity of adjacent “Five Towns” to which Etxalar belongs—the others being, Igantzi, Aranatz, Lesaka, and Bera. The French-Spanish border coincides with part of the confines of Etxalar and Bera, as well as the upper reaches of the Valley of Baztan. Teresa’s father, Angel Sarobe, was from Lesaka.

We will live in Basque.

Farmers, and shepherds and woodsmen and  
athletes have enlivened these lands  
for the entire world;  
and our richest treasure of all, yes, *Euskara*  
will endure here, it will be our  
inexpungible fortress.

I wish to live in Basque.

We will live in Basque.

In weekly practices, in groups,  
in pairs, or alone.  
Obeying the summons  
right up to (this) our most recent manifestation.  
Dancers, musicians, shepherds,  
seamstresses, little children.  
And why not mention our actors,  
stagehands, and technicians?

I wish to live in Basque.

We will live in Basque.

In central Euskal Herria, to the south of the Pyrenees  
Those of Etxalar have come together in *auzolan*.  
The *pastorale* of Soule  
has bonded us together.  
Prosper Mérimée's Carmen

has been performed.

I wish to live in Basque.

We will live in Basque.

With final verbalization of this last sentiment, by now its mantra, *Karmen Etxalarkoa Pastorala* is over.

\* \* \* \*



*Juan Mari Irigoien, mayor of Etxalar, Panxtika Urruty, errejentsa, and Gerardo Mungia*

I would conclude these comments on the *pastorale* itself by considering two interpretations of it. First, there is the reaction of officialdom. J. M. Irigoien, mayor of Etxalar, has his page in the program/publication in which he welcomes the audience and underscores how the project met with initial local skepticism. Few in Etxalar had ever heard of Carmen, or, for that matter, knew much about the *pastorale* art form. However, during the many months of preparation and rehearsals, the special bonds and growing confidence among the many players and the

stagehands resulted in genuine collective enthusiasm and local pride. Instead of speaking of *auzolan*, the mayor was in fact underscoring what had become *herrilan* (“town work”).<sup>21</sup>

Then there is Gerardo Mungia’s own take on Mérimée’s novel. The author stated that the work was based upon a story told to him by Maria Manuela Kirkpatrick (the Marquise of Montijo) of Seville, who was to become his lifelong friend and patron.

Gerardo doubts that the Basque Carmen and José actually ever existed. Mérimée made many trips from Paris to Andalusia, following the natural corridor through the Basque Country. This entailed ascending the Bidassoa River drainage, crossing of the Pass of Velate, and descending to Pamplona (Hemingway’s preferred route from France to his beloved *San Fermín* festival a century later). Mérimée obviously tarried long enough in the Basque Country to gain familiarity with its culture and geography, not to mention a smattering of the language.

Gerardo believes that the Frenchman likely visited Etxalar and Elizondo (both of which are within the drainage of the Bidassoa), and decided to make them the birthplaces of the two Basque protagonists of his literary creation. He cites the negative evidence that José’s surname, Lizarrabengoa, does not occur in the Valley of Baztan. In our discussion, Gerardo equated Carmen to Melville’s Captain Ahab, a plausible literary creation rather than portrait of an actual person. In his words: “Had Mérimée travelled to Spain through Catalunya, I suspect that Carmen and José would have been Catalonians instead of Basques.”

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Back to the present of 1963. During my ethnographic rambles, I raised my questions about the history of Errotxainborda with several informants, and received vague and quizzical replies. The demise of *that baserri* was sufficiently remote so as to test the collective memory. But one ninety-year-old woman contended in our interview that, in the early nineteenth-century, the gypsies stole an infant girl from there! That evening, I asked the then twenty-three-year-old

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<sup>21</sup> There was also the grant provided by the Department of Cultural, Sport, and Youth Affairs of the Government of Navarra. Within the Navarrese Autonomous Region, fomenting Basque culture is controversial, and particularly support for the Basque language. But that is a whole other discussion.

Teresa Sarobe<sup>22</sup> if she knew anything about Errotxainborda? “Not much,” she replied. “But it was famous for something—probably for being the birthplace of a Catholic saint.”



*Teresa and Antonio seeking their own distant shores beneath other skies*

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<sup>22</sup> Like Carmen and José, Teresa was an exile of sorts. Her parents sympathized with the Spanish Republic and fled to relatives in Iparralde when the Franquist forces were about to take possession of Etxalar during the Spanish Civil War. Her mother returned in 1940, pregnant with Teresa, who was born in the village that year. Between ages five and twelve she attended public school in Etxalar. The teacher roomed with her family and gave Teresa and her siblings private lessons in return. At about age seventeen, Teresa attended additional classes in the village for a few months. Then, when forty-three-years-old, she spent the winter in a course in Etxalar that resulted in her only formal *graduado escolar* degree (just shy of the equivalent of an American high school diploma).

From 1974 to 1976, Antonio served as mayor of Etxalar, appointed by the dictatorship (although he was apolitical). Between 1983 and 1987, Teresa, a localist in her politics, was Etxalar’s mayor. She headed a coalition of four independents on the municipal council who were opposed by the minority of three firebrand *Herri Batasuna* adherents. The latter questioned the majority’s allocation of municipal funds, even initiating a lawsuit that was then dropped after the plaintiffs won control of the council in the 1987 municipal election. Teresa regards her most significant accomplishment as mayor to have been securing social benefits (*asistencia social*) for her constituents. It seems that a quirk in Navarrese law stipulated that only communities of ten thousand inhabitants or more qualified. In the northern part of the province there were no such concentrations. Teresa was instrumental in obtaining recognition of the Bortziriak as a whole (the five communities) for application purposes. By then, she was well aware of Mérimée’s *Carmen*—and, as mayor, she regularly gave out copies (Spanish version) of it to visiting dignitaries.