Writing the self into the nation. Autobiography and national identity in Mario Onaindia (1948-2003)

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I

Two years ago, a colleague from the University of Santiago de Compostela and I organised a conference on "Unorthodox patriots". In contrast with canonical nationalist discourse, our purpose was to show how the individual adopts the nation as an identity narrative, and how this "subjective fact" can change over a lifetime, as does the individual.

This seemed to me a highly instructive approach to understanding societies such as that of the Basques, where the national theme is conditioned by murderous elements. Until a few months ago over 10% of my fellow Basque citizens still supported the terrorist organization ETA, which was willing to kill anyone in the name of the *Basque nation*. Almost 200,000 citizens consider this so honourable that even today they refer to imprisoned terrorists as 'political prisoners'.

So, I am sure you can appreciate my personal and intellectual investment in the "Unorthodox patriots" conference, which was held in Vitoria, capital of the Basque Autonomous Community. This led to an edited volume and my contribution focused on someone who, in his 55 year sojourn on earth accumulated a long list of patriotic dissident moments. His name is Mario Onaindia (Molina 2011). He was born into a middle-class, conservative family in 1948, when the Franco dictatorship was in full swing. His parents were sympathetic to the outlawed Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). At age 19 he joined ETA, which was then a Basque

nationalist organization with revolutionary, Marxist ideology, something characteristic of those times represented by the May 1968 movement. ETA was composed of a youth uncomfortable with the nationalism of their parents and the fact that it was channelled through the PNV - a Catholic, anti-communist and conservative party perfectly adapted to the Franco dictatorship.

Having established a theoretical base for the revolutionary and nationalizing function of violence, in 1968 ETA began to kill. Mario Onaindia was a passionate Frantz Fanon reader, a convinced anticolonialist and Marxist-Leninist who, like the others, approved the ‘armed struggle’ and its revolutionary, anti-Francoist goals. In 1970 he was captured by the police, tortured, and condemned to death in the Burgos military trial that generated great international reaction.

Inspired by the precedent of Scottish nationalists in Great Britain some months before, who were on trial for a symbolic attack on NATO headquarters in Scotland, Mario stood up during his trial and began singing the Basque patriotic anthem. This act would become one of the most significant myths of Basque nationalism and inspired many generations of nationalists. Onaindia was in prison for 8 years and then released thanks to an amnesty decreed by the transition government as the dictatorship gave way to democracy. By then he had left Marxism-Leninism and proceded to form a small, nationalist, left-wing worker’s party, Euskadiko Ezkerra.

Mario began to defend a model of the nation built upon civility and tolerance, in response to the regional autonomy offered by the 1978 Constitution and the recently stablished democracy. In the early 1980s, he criticized the romantic dogmas of Basque nationalism, its ethnic-racial claims and romantic reading of history, including the legitimacy of violence. At the end of that decade he gave up his identification with Basque nationalism and spearheaded the integration of his party into the

Spanish Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español), a party Basque nationalists considered to be Spanish nationalist and the main political 'enemy' of the Basque nation.

Although Mario died of cancer in 2003, his final years were spent under police protection, as his life was threatened by ETA. He had become one of the most hated politicians and intellectuals by the Basque nationalist movement; both moderates and radicals accused him of being a *traitor* who had *sold out* to the enemy.

His reflections on the nation were always linked to his analysis of violence. In a deeply auto-biographical essay from the late 1990s on the Basque situation, he stated that "long ago I quit thinking of the difference between Basque and Spanish as identities that exclude and instead began to think of them in complementary terms" (Onaindia 2000: 18). He had begun defining himself as both Basque and Spanish a full decade before. In fact, Spain had always been a point of reference for him through the Marxist working class ideology that he defended, a tradition that was no longer recognisable in Basque nationalism and that he had adopted in Eibar, the working class village where he had been brought up, located on the border between the Basque provinces of Biscay and Gipuzkoa. The same could be said of his transition to social democracy, a liberal tradition that he was only able to find in Spanish political thought, not in Basque nationalist thinking.

The changes in nationalist violence in the 1990s affected Onaindia's identity. At that time ETA had begun to kill not only police and military personnel, but also non-nationalist politicians, intellectuals and academics. The latter called themselves *constitutionalists*, as they defended the Spanish Constitution in the Basque Country. Mario joined the constitutionalism current, which in my opinion and, thinking of a British audience, I would say was more akin to Scottish than to Irish *unionism*.

Onaindia was moved by the personal drama of the politicians, academics and civilians who were coerced or murdered in the name of the Basque nation. One of the murders that most moved Mario was that of Fernando Buesa, a close friend and leader in the Spanish Socialist Party, like himself. Buesa had been involved in the coalition governments of socialists and moderate nationalists that helped establish the Basque Autonomous Community in the 1980s and early 1990s, giving shape to that "Basque civic nation" within Spain that Onaindia so firmly upheld.

This murder led him to a more radical position against Basque nationalism, and to defend Spain as the civic political framework for the Basques. In his later years Mario wrote on the patriotic symbolism of the victims of terrorism, the function of mercy in the notion of the homeland and the need of politicians and public intellectuals to accept death as a consequence of the public defence of a model of nation distant from ethnic myths that feed totalitarian nationalist projects lodged in Basque society and political violence.

In order to further my biographical work, I tapped into the international academic network on biographical writing, chaired by Isabel. I was invited to its second gathering, in Paris, some months before we held the conference on "Unorthodox patriots". In my presentation there, I sought to respond to a few questions that have guided my theoretical reflections: 1) how do individuals become intimately identified with the nation, 2) how -and how much- do other public forces interfere in that identification, and 3) what autonomy do individuals have for introducing personal points of reference?

I began by unearthing some readings from my predoctoral period at the University of Edinburgh library in 1998 and 1999. Back then, I spent much more time reading the works of anthropologists such as Anthony Cohen, historians such as Geof Eley, sociologists like David McCrone and

social psychologists like Michael Billig than listening to *Loch Lomond* or *Flower of Scotland* in the local pubs, though I would have preferred the latter. Now, I can see that the work of Cohen helped me avoid excessive enthusiasm regarding Billig, who in recent years has been the darling of historians and social theorists in Spain. In my view, his thesis on *banal nationalism* has always seemed too close to the classical reading of nationalization *from above*, which turns individuals into passive subjects of the nation. In fact, this vertical perspective on nationalization has gradually been abandoned by historiographers, as seen in a recent volume titled *Nationhood from Below* (Palgrave, 2012) edited by two Belgian professors Beyen and Van Ginderachter, in which I've collaborated.

I realize now that the readings of my first summer at Edimburgh university allowed me to be more receptive to the new horizontal and intimate perspective of nationalization that has arisen in recent years, which I have applied to my study of Mario Onaindia. I learnt from Cohen (1996) that there is a "mutual involvement" between nation and individual that is always autonomous from the discourse of nationalists. The latter seek to "collectivize" this experience, transforming it into a general phenomenon and taking away the specific components of each biographical trajectory. Anthony P. Cohen labelled this thesis as "personal nationalism", and I have applied it using the term *homeland biography* (biografía patria). It might also be labelled a "patriotic biography" in English, though in Spanish this does not express things exactly. With this concept I allude to a biography centred on explaining: 1) how an individual converts the nation into the subject of his or her life, 2) how he or she identifies with it, 3) by what symbols, myths, emotions, political ideas and social practices, and 4) how this changes over time. I have incorporated all these elements into my final study on Mario Onaindia (Molina 2012).

II

One important problem that I had to face was that of autobiographical testimonies as sources of a *patriotic biography*. These are very important in the case of Mario, who can be considered a "nation producer", in Cohen's terminology, an intellectual who wrote extensively both of the nation and its biographical meaning.

Personal memories are always partial due to the accumulation of experiences, the fact that one can never retain everything one has lived, and the weight of present circumstances on the selection of events to record. The memory as a register of past experiences and acts functions as a narrative, and this narrative dimension makes memories -all memories- the result of a creative process in constant recomposition.

We all know that autobiographical writing tends to emphasize a linear narration that seeks to establish coherence between present and past by looking for symptoms (or sources) of the present ideological, intellectual or emotional preferences of the author in that past. When a person writes their own biography, that person interprets their life as a path towards the point at which they find themselves when writing. Thus, they give their narrative a logical order that is an 'illusion' both reader and narrator agree to accept, since "reality is discontinuous" and "composed of elements that are juxtaposed without reason" (Bourdieu 1997). This agreement is established as an "autobiographical pact", according to Lejeune (1994).

In his first memoires, published in 2001, Mario formalized this pact by converting his life into a linear narrative centred on the search for freedom in the face of collectivist programmes such as religion (he attended a Catholic seminary in his youth), Marxism (he was a Marxist-Leninist until his thirties), and nationalism (he always recognized this as an important reference point from his earliest youth, though he modified this perspective in his later years).

In fact, following Bourdieu's canon of "biographical illusion", he transformed his adolescence into a mythical time in which his love for freedom took root precisely when he decided to leave the seminary. At the same time he recognized that it was in vain that one looks to find absolute truth in the past, given the narrative and therefore subjective basis of memories. He defined his autobiography as a "synthesis (…) of life, literature and theory" built by "narrative structures (…) that are at the service of the creation of a coherent world, simply because only this is capable of awakening feelings in the reader (…) [in order to] 'move and impact'' (Onaindia 2001: 633). This reflection fits what was said by Hunsaker (1999: 4): every autobiographical writer writes with the mind of the reader that will access that life.

This aspiring to a linear framework fits perfectly with Bourdieu's warning, since at that time Mario was in mortal danger, as he had been labelled a "traitor" and an "enemy of the Basque nation" by nationalist media, and even appeared on an ETA commando list of possible targets. In his autobiography he selected a specific value that I believe was more characteristic of his mature years than his youth. Inspired by the German playwright Schiller, from whom he took the title of his memoirs (*The Price of Freedom*), he sought to allude to "the series of obstacles that a man must face throughout life in order to conquer personal freedom" (2001: 632).

He also conceived these memoirs as a succession of "stories" with the central thread being the struggle for individual freedom against absolute identities such as the nation, class or religion. This narrative had a didactic end: to liberate fellow citizens from "the prejudices that lead [them] (…) to horror" (2001: 633). Of course the *horror* he referred to was terrorist violence. He felt this *horror* to be induced by a Basque nationalism that had been capable of generating a *murderous identity* (Maalouf 2000). That identity paralyzed Basques and impeded them from defending the

cherished freedom that he and other *constitutionalists* were protecting under the threat of death. For that reason he then wrote that he sought to "move and impact the reader", who was invited on a journey through "the [biographical] experiences narrated' in order to have a chance to 'relive (…) his religious, political and sentimental experiences in hopes of communicating the price that had been paid to attain freedom" (2001: 633-634).

So this biographical narrative had a *didactic* purpose, it sought to awaken the emotions of the reader and induce him or her to purge their conscience in a Catholic sense, a notion probably derived from his youth as a priest's apprentice. Yet scarcely two years afterwards, in the next and unfinished volume of memoirs, he questioned this linear explanation and with it the biographical *illusion* that he had formalized: "In my prior volume of memoirs I wrote that during my whole life, from when I joined ETA until now, I have been guided by the idea of seeking freedom. I would like it to have been so, but (…) often it is the present and future that give sense to the past" (Onaindia 2003: 400). These honest words remained unedited as chemotherapy weakened his body.

In this second volume he examined the tortuous seventies, which were very violent years in Europe and especially in the Basque Country. It appears he felt that the linear design he had given to his prior memoirs was not only *illusory* but of little worth for describing his own complex reality defined by his contemporary idea of (Basque) nation and the violence it had spawned. In his latter memoirs he recognized that only late in his life did he feel remorse at the violence of terrorism and the nationalist narratives that fed it.

So by recognizing in the first volume the subjective nature of his autobiographical narrative, and in the second volume the illusion that the first linear construction rested upon, I feel that the *pact* that Onaindia

formulated with me as a biographical reader and writer is honest enough, since he ultimately recognized his narrative as partial. So I refer to his memoirs not as the essential source, but as an honest source to contrast with others when reconstructing the segment of his life that had to do with the nation.

III

After his death, many accused Mario of “incoherence”, of having “erred”, an accusation that requires judging a person’s entire life. As we are all nationalists in the minds of nationalists, especially prominent was the accusation of having turned from being a Basque nationalist to becoming a *Spanish nationalist*. Eugen Weber stated in a clearly autobiographical book that history is a *land of paradoxes* upon which historians are shipwrecked when they try to infuse excessive logic. The main enemy of the historian is one’s own self, driven to give linear sense to that festival of life and chance that is the human existence, whatever the verb tense we use to express it (Weber 1991).

Many biographers of nationalists have done the opposite of what Weber suggested. They have presented *coherent* and therefore *orthodox* biographical trajectories that follow the nationalist canon, making the nation into an identity that is set at one point in time, and then becomes immovable. This is similar to how canonical biographies of priests deal with the issue of faith. In fact, I find the canonical biographies of priests and nationalists to be, in the main, identical.

A case study could be the recent biographies published on leading nationalists in the Basque Country. They are a particularly good example of this interpretation of individual life according to the paradigm of biographical-patriotic illusion. Their titles are, indeed, an outstanding expression of this collusion of canons (the biographical one and the nationalist one) in the same historical research: “The Loyalty of the Old

Oak Tree" [*La lealtad del viejo roble*], for the life of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) leader Jesús María Leizaola (1896-); another one refers to the brother of the founder of the PNV, Luis Arana Goiri (1862-1951) with the subtitle "A History of Basque Nationalism" [*Historia del nacionalismo vasco*] (VV.AA. 1989; Larronde 2011). And there was even another leader, Manuel de Irujo (1891-1981) that the biographer considered paradigmatic not only of Basque nationalism but of *everything Basque*, as the subtitle states: "A *Basque* Man" [*Un hombre vasco*] (Amezaga 2000).

Moving on from biographies to autobiographies, we find that the protagonist of a life will also tend to transform it into an imaginary narrative that fits the nationalist canon. This sort of literature always contains a past period in which certain early incidents or traumatic discoveries act as a key that *reveals* the nation to the self. Such a revelation is even more sacred when the individual comes from a family that has not been devoted to the nation with which he or she is now identified. This is a common occurrence in Basque nationalism which, contrary to popular belief, was sociologically very narrow in its appeal until thirty or forty years ago. In this case we are dealing with a *narrative of conversion*, reminiscent of Saint Paul: the individual experiences the nation in a way akin to a religious revelation.

The other type of (auto)biographical narrative of nation is that of *transmission*, in which the family induces an individual to consider the nation as a central part of the inherited identity, adapting it to the family narrative. This is the approach adopted by Mario in his youth, when he was a fairly orthodox nationalist. During his military trial in 1970, he stated that "I have considered myself Basque and not Spanish since I was five or six". According to the transcript of his statements during the trial, his realization of "the linguistic, cultural and national oppression that the entire Basque people suffer" had taken place at the early age of *five*. This illustrates a

spontaneous assimilation of the classical nationalist narrative: the nation has been there forever, and a child can discover it from the dawn of reason. The nation is discovered by means of the metaphorical figure of "oppression", with all its colonial reminiscences in the time of his speech (1970). It seems to me that the child of five was a symbol of the young patriot, who at 22 felt inspired by Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara, and wanted to declare his natural patriotism since it was on trial.

Ten years later and still a *Basque patriot*, Mario reiterated this same reasoning in an interview. He stated that his paternal grandfather had been a Basque nationalist, and his father had taken on this nationalism. His mother had also been a nationalist. So 'nationalism was something that could hardly be separated' from his family and his memories. The nation appeared as an objective fact that a child received as an inheritance, like the family heritage. In fact, the nation was received as a sort of religious faith with the added beauty of being hidden, as it was prohibited outside the family context due to the military dictatorship in Spain.

Yet by 1990 Mario had abandoned Basque nationalism as a political identity. He rejected its discourse that subjected individual freedom to supposed collective rights. He was horrified by the understanding attitude it demonstrated towards terrorist violence. So he offered an especially interesting burlesque revision of the natural consideration that nationalists show towards *their* nationalism, and for this purpose he reverted to his biographical experiences: "For nationalists the possession of a homeland or membership in a nation is something which is actually of the same nature as being a member of a family, and therefore, it is experienced with the same intensity and emotion. *Nobody knows this better than I*."

As an ex-*believer* that has now *lost the faith*, he went beyond the typical arguments of patriots: "it is logical that many may think this spontaneous sentiment towards the homeland is not something 'artificial or

historical' motivated by 'dirty' politics, but something "natural and everlasting" like the love for one's parents (…) [or] a religious experience (…) [with which] one can feel that the mountains and sea surrounding the homeland are the source of those sentiments" (Onaindia 1995: 17, 19, 21).

Having formalized this naturalist argument that he had made his own in the past, he proceeded to strike it down, reducing it to its irrational base: "Yet you should ask yourself: if patriotism is as spontaneous as love for your parents or children, then why have we Basques taken so long to feel it? And how is it possible that we have existed for over sixteen thousand years (...) without awakening these patriotic fires (...)? (...) Even if we think a sentiment is natural, it still may have arisen from a certain historical period and due to specific causes and conditioning factors (...) It is the fruit of certain historical conditions, like any feeling, of course" (Onaindia, 1995: 21-13).

These thoughts were expressed in 1995 in a highly autobiographical essay, entitled "An Open Letter on the Harm that Nationalist Prejudices Produce" [*Carta abierta sobre los perjuicios que acarrean los prejuicios nacionalistas*]. Defending the importance of biographical analysis in the study of nationalism, this letter to a nationalist fit the (historical) times, when nationalism was causing wars in Yugoslavia, ethno-nationalist conflicts in Eastern Europe, increased conflict in Ulster and the rise of the secessionism in northern Italy. It also fit his own (biographical) times, for in some way it's a letter that a man in his forties had decided to send to himself in his twenties, to an abstract (Basque) nationalist representative of himself in his youth…

Mario sought to show that under an objective and emotive façade the nation was a subjective and cultural experience. For this reason he based his essay on "experiences and reflections" that might encourage "whoever reading this to see themselves in someone else's mistakes, and be more

sceptical in the face of those who defend patriotic passion as a means of marginalizing others" (Onaindia 1993, 9-10).

This biographical approach to warning about the evils of the nation fit a public life characterized by constant pedagogical thinking. As he stated in the prologue, the only thing he could do to inform others of the dangers of nationalism was to present his heterodox experience. Other colleagues that were critical of Basque nationalism like Jon Juaristi also followed this biographic path, in which the changing self is used as a weapon against the canonical discourse on nation and personal identity. Juaristi, an award-winning historian and philologist, found his own way under the tutelage of Connor Cruise O'Brien's "ancestral voices" (Juaristi 1997: 27-28). Juaristi later emulated Mario by writing a deconstructing essay on Basque nationalism in the form of a letter to his father, a passionated member of the Basque Nationalist Party (Juaristi 2002).

Mario's case reflects how leaving aside the canonical narrative of the nation induces one to offer a new biographical narrative. By abandoning a pattern that no longer works, such as the nation as it's dealt by the nationalist discourse, a person can restructure their life narrative. This permits the transmission of very important experiences of nation which are dismissed when they are understood under nationalistic patterns.

For this reason Mario's biography is (in my personal view) more enriching than those that follow a linear and primordial pattern such as the "old oak tree", the "Basque man" or the "paulist redemption". The latter leads to a feeling of "illusion" in (auto)biographical writing, showing a life that is continuous, as symbolized in the nation. In these biographies and autobiographies, the nation becomes a narrative resource by which to adopt the two illusory models theorized by François Dosse, who was mindful of Bourdieu's warning about continuity: the *genetic model*, "which presupposes a continuous fitting of things analogous to the growth of

humans', and the *essentialist model*, in which 'the coherence of an existence is (...) organized in a linear fashion centring on an essence, as done in hagiography" (Dosse 2007: 210).

In contrast, Mario Onaindia knew how to move outside the box of biographical and national illusion, breaking out of the linear narrative that fed both and transformed the narrative of life and nation into two experiences that can be modified in tandem with the self. This led him to convert the nation into a metonym of the self, which is inherent to the biographical narratives of the nation and gives meaning to the title of my presentation.

IV

According to Anthony P. Cohen the effectiveness of the nation as an identity lies not in the homogenizing abstraction that nationalists confer to it, but in the exercise of subjective appropriation by the individual, who associates the nation with his or her own affective world. So, "when «I see» the nation I am looking at *myself*' (Cohen 1995: 805). This observation fits with that of a friend of Mario's, who said "Mario is the main object of study of Mario Onaindia in his books. [The subject] is his own philosophical persona. (…) Everything Mario wrote had to do with his own life" (Laborda 2010: 120). Since much of what he wrote dealt with Basque politics, and a good portion was on the nation, I think it is logical to admit that when he wrote on the nation he was writing about himself, or as Cohen says, when he *saw* the nation he was seeing *himself*.

In fact, he ended up intertwining the two narratives, the nation and himself, so much so that it was hard to see where one ended and the other began. One example can be found in his biographical treatment of ETA. During a good portion of his life he defended the (positive) importance of this organization and the beneficial nature of its goals in the context of the Franco dictatorship. The importance of ETA in the remaking of the Basque

Country during the dictatorship has been highlighted by most of the academics that have researched those historical times. But in the Mario's case his evaluation of ETA also has a highly significant and complementary personal sense. From 1966 to 1977 he was inside the organization, seduced by its nationalizing and revolutionary principles, which he had internalized ideologically and culturally. If ETA had meant something to him, it was logical to think that it would also have meant something to other Basques. So in his first volume of memoirs he interpreted his membership in the *good* ETA of the dictatorship years as being within the linear trajectory he imposed on his life, centred on the fight for freedom, which at that time of youth was embodied in the struggle against the Franco dictatorship.

Mario's friend Jon Juaristi criticized this idealized reading of his time in ETA: "I had expected him to publicly discredit ETA, from its very origins. No one else could carry this out with such moral authority in the field of Basque anti-Francoism. (…) But Mario, like most ex-ETA members, wanted to save his soul. For each of them, ETA had been an honest, revolutionary, democratic and anti-Francoist organization, until the very moment in which [each of them] decided to leave the organization. The memory of ETA in the Franco era was totally distorted so as to sooth the consciences of its former members" (Juaristi 2006: 363).

In addressing the autobiographical aspect of Mario's fiction writings (including stories, film scripts, theatre pieces, comics, novels and more), intellectual Andoni Unzalu said that "All narrative efforts to approach the terrorist world of ETA impose on the author a series of problems that are especially difficult to resolve. The author is clearly tempted to offer a neutral narrative, (…) with the danger that this neutral narrative easily becomes a sort of self-justification or explanation. In reality, who can state outright that we were murderers? (…) The main problem that we Basques

now have is not the disappearance of ETA (…). The problem we face is how to tell that story. It is a question of how to define our collective responsibility, as the physical, material murderer was only the main character in a theatre performance where many of us participated as secondary characters" (Unzalu 2006).

Since ETA has apparently abandoned all violence (declaration of terminal cease of fire, November 2011), a debate has arisen in the Basque public and academic spheres on this matter. As a Mario biographer I would suggest that to give an adequate account of the past it is necessary for a person to have changed, and to admit the possibility of error: that violence had no place, even in a dictatorship. When there is no admission of error, violence will always enter a dynamic that inevitably leads to someone saying that violence is still necessary and that democracy is just an undercover dictatorship, as the radical Basque nationalists have argued even up until today.

This is what Mario did in his final years. Due to the hostility of ETA towards non-nationalist Basques and the instrumental management of this violence by the PNV, Mario's critique of Basque nationalism became more radical and fostered cultural and symbolic separation from the nationalism that he had formerly embraced. The autobiographical expression of this change in his discourse on the nation was evident when he abandoned the last patriotic myth of his youth: that of the *good ETA* of the Franco period in contrast with the *bad ETA* in the democracy. This myth had connected him to the Basque nationalism of his youth, which is the same as saying to his family and the sweet days of infancy.

In the final volume of his memoirs he fully faced his own responsibility in the genesis of a phenomenon of sectarian (nationalist) violence which until then had been absent from his biographical writings. He did this as the civic patriot that he had become, referring to the (Basque)

patriotism that had led him to join ETA in the past as being devoid of mercy towards others and far from the true ideal of “freedom” (that he had adopted in his current Spanish-Basque patriotism). So he questioned the one-way argument that two years before had still been active in explaining his life.

According to Jose Carlos Mainer, “an essay on the problems of the Basque Country, written by a forty to fifty year-old Basque intellectual, [includes] many fascinating aspects of cleaning out the autobiographical closet, offering historical reflection that is not self complacent on a past that is filled with myths and ignorance, and, ultimately, unmasking that which the mental routine of the left (...) held until recently as their revolutionary progressive positions” (Mainer 2002).

At the mature state of forty-something, according to this historian of Spanish literature, Mario also begun to “clean out his own autobiographical closet”. He and many others of his generation recognized the terrorism that they had embraced or justified in the sixties and seventies as a biographical stigma. They felt impelled to transform the narration of their lives and at times their understanding of the homeland. Mario did theoretically explain his patriotic change on the basis that only in Spain did he find a liberal and democratic tradition with which to balance the reactionary and fundamentalist thinking that historically permeated the idea of Basque nation.

In his final years he turned this closet cleaning into autobiographical writing. In his last memoirs of 2003, he wrote that “we owed the Basque people a debt that would only be repaid when we found a solution to the problems of the Basque Country and violence disappeared” (2003: 216). In another essay that was re-published that year, he emphasized that “For our generation, who walked close to ETA during the sixties, peace and political normalization became our obsession, a personal matter, as if we had some

direct responsibility for what ETA has become during the democracy" (2000/2003: 245).

The life of Mario Onaindia is a reflection of that weight of autobiographical matters in patriotic reflections, to the extent that to speak of the nation induced him to speak always of himself. This is not a circumstantial phenomenon characteristic of narcissists or vain persons. Perhaps this can be found in persons who, like him, became free of the weight of what was national, of that false modesty that keeps full-time nationalists, part-time nationalists or ex-nationalists from placing themselves in the centre of the narrative. Nationalists think the nation is an eternal and transcendent force of nature that subsumes the individual. People like Mario Onaindia discover themselves underneath that force and so from their own biographical narratives they manage to criticize the nationalist discourse.

I think Mario Onaindia confirms the Cohen thesis that *writing about the nation is writing about one's self*. No matter what the nationalists say, the nation as a narrative will ever be connected to ourselves, "and our circumstances", as the philosopher Ortega y Gasset expressed. It will speak to our most intimate self; it will appeal to our experiences of family and local life, our emotions, our past and present ideologies, our transcendent beliefs and our understanding of society and politics.

Mario Onaindia turned the nation into a tool for learning about democracy and discovered that its cultural base could only be individual freedom and mercy towards others, never a coercive or communitarian ethnicity indulgent with political violence. And it seems to me that this is not one of the weakest lessons we can draw from a biographical experience.

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