ENGLISH TITLE:
Xabier Lete: The Poet-Singer Of The Homeland

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ORIGINAL TITLE:
Xabier Lete - Aberriaren poeta kantaria

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BETRAYAL

He left songwriting in 1978, started working for *Muga*, signed the *Manifesto of the 33* and, in 1981, published *Urrats desbideratuak (Disoriented Steps)*. Looking back at that time, Jon Sarasua said in his lecture *Xabier Lete eta elkarbizitza* (2015; *Xabier Lete and Coexistence)* that Lete knew how behave in a way that made his main fans uncomfortable. I agree. But let me say it even more directly; covering it up would be cynicism: he had the courage to make people uncomfortable. He was a traitor.

When the great enemy died, Lete tried to adapt the discourse, securing for himself the ethical position that had long been his. However, as Zulaika says, there was another option: to try to maintain the antagonism, to persist with the *no*. The result of this, says Zulaika, is that "the identity of the rival remains fixed forever; one does not accept that the 'enemy' could change because this would also require a change in oneself." Zulaika continues:

> In particular, one does not accept the dissolution of the "enemy" because that would require dismantling one's own antagonistic identity. Thus, antagonistic forces can continue to hold their established positions for years upon years as if nothing had changed in the world in the meantime. Something similar happened with ETA and the Spanish State.

During the Transition, as the years marched on, ETA's position and Spain's grew stronger; so much so that, as we know, in the early 1980s, Basque society experienced the worst years of ETA and the dirty war led and financed by the State.

Lete's discourse tries to escape these antagonisms, and therein lies his betrayal. A common struggle was launched between the State and ETA, in which there was no room for other options outside of these positions. According to Zulaika, this tension between antagonistic positions is pointless, in that it fundamentally fractures the plurality of politcal areas. On the other hand, for the opposing sides, any change of position could be nothing but betrayal:

> Just as hegemonic equality leads to the expansion of social spaces, the restrictive logic of antagonism constricts and limits the public space. Just as the character of each position changes in the articulation movements of hegemony, the relational nature of character is forgotten in the oppositional structure of antagonism, in which all differences become refusal.

Lete and a number of others — I remember Mitxelena, for example — thanks to their self-critical ideological development, opened the doors to a new subject. But perhaps, in 1980, Basque society was not yet ready to build bridges over the trench dug by the opposing positions. People, strength, dreams were lost to that trench. But years have passed, cynicism would be offensive and, as Zulaika says, it falls to us to take on the debt we owe to those who dismantled antagonistic discourses. Yes, we owe a debt to those who betrayed us with love.

THE POETRY OF DESPAIR

The phenomenon of disenchantment had a great impact on the language of art in general and on the language of poetry in particular. I found the clearest confirmation of this from professor Juan José Lanz, who is an expert on lyrical poetry, in his book, *La poesía durante la Transición y la generación de la democracia* (2007; *Poetry during the Transition and the Generation of Democracy)*. According to him, the atmosphere of the famous month of May of 1968 pervaded everything, but not for long, because the great dream of the students and young people soon evaporated: "It is clear that the disenchantment that arose from their political failure manifested itself in the ideological (and consequently poetic) disappointment that began in 1978 and continued into the early

1980s." In Lanz's opinion, the poetic reflection of this disillusionment can be seen in many authors: "At the turn of the decade, there were many voices that showed a similar state of absolute disappointment in poetry, as a consequence, undoubtedly, of the political period they were living through."

At the turn of the decade, the forms of expression in use up to that point were no longer sufficient for poets, and they felt the need for new discourses and reinvented ways of saying things. Agrammatical modes of expression were created, ones that broke away, visionary ones, ones that evoked childhood... and all attempted as solutions to a critical sense of rupture and loss — consider, for example, the language of *Etiopia* (1978; *Ethiopia*, by Bernardo Atxaga) and similar books. At the textual level, there may be many formal features that appear in desperate poetic voices: strengthening the presence of the poetic *I*, characters that are not directly identified with the writer (highlighting the fictionality of poetry), dramatic monologue (consider again Atxaga's *Etiopia*), irony, pastiche, apathetic language, etc.

These modes of expression may not have lasted long, but they are a reflection of a specific period of time: broken mirrors of the Transition and disenchantment. According to expert Germán Labrador (2007), only then were they legitimate, during the state of adaptation and redefinition entailed by that period: "This possibility of redefinition could be expressed satisfactorily during the accelerated period of 1976-1981, but once a social order was re-established and its surveillance and control policies coordinated, these projects lost both their usefulness and their possible return."

In my opinion, there are two great symbols of the Basque poetry of that time. First, one well recognized: Bernardo Atxaga's *Etiopia* (1978). And second, Xabier Lete's *Urrats desbideratuak* (1981).

URRATS DESBIDERATUAK (1981)

"Beginning with my third book, *Urrats desbideratuak*, I started writing more conceptual poetry. Thoughts, reflections, scribblings…" This is how Lete saw his book.

The personal tone that had begun to develop in *Bigarren poema liburua (Second Book of Poems)* came to the forefront in *Urrats desbideratuak* (published by Euskaltzaindia-Gipuzkoako Aurrezki Kutxa Probintziala). The collection of poems won the City of Irun Prize. It consists of 34 poems, and has greater unity than the author's previous books: it is more concise, both thematically and in terms of tone.

With this collection of poems, Lete moved away from experimentalism and crude irony. In the words of Lourdes Otaegi (2011), "he rejected the bitterness of youth, and the use of irony and buffonish humor"; according to Juan Kruz Igerabide (1998), "the youthful revolutionary impulse was over"; Maider Etxaniz (2011) stated that, "in addition to a hardening of the language, the poems showed pessimism and despair"; and Jose Angel Irigarai's interpretation includes this line (2011): "with his presumed hopes shattered, Lete has turned to nihilism."

We are talking about the darkest and most desperate work of Xabier Lete's entire oeuvre. As Otaegi says, "Utopian beliefs were shredded," "the phenomenon of disenchantment took over," and "*Urrats desbideratuak* bore witness to these dramatic breaches." In this sense, it would be close to the approach of Bernardo Atxaga's book of poems, *Etiopia* (1978). On the other hand, the position Lete took in politics appears clearly in the book. In fact, among his manuscripts, there is a poem from this set, which he left unpublished, but which seems to have inspired the title of the book. The poem mentions *disoriented steps*, as well as *disoriented lost paths.*

The dark field of despair is crossed by disoriented steps, and this field takes on many dimensions. On the one hand, there is a vital and existentialist

dimension: the days go on and on and we inevitably join in the struggle that is life. This is the existential dimension of despair, and it can be seen in a number of poems: *Izenik gabeko lurretaruntz (Toward nameless lands), Gauzek ukatu naute (Things have rejected me), Denbora haundi baten apurrak (Fragments of a great time), Esku izoztuak (Frozen hands), Ihesa zilegi balitz (If escape were justifiable).* Igerabide (1998) clearly explained this existential despair: "Lete reflects on existence from an agonizing position and from the most absolute existential solitude."

On the other hand, despair also appears in the politcal and social dimension. In this case, Lete places himself in the Basque Country and in its history, and the poet seems to be driven to despair by the steps his peers are taking, whether violence or enmity. This is the social dimension of despair, and it, too, can be seen in a number of poems: *Eva Duartek paradisua galdu zueneko poema neurotikoa (A neurotic poem in which Eva Duarte loses paradise); Kulpa ezarriak (Guilt established); Bizitza ebatsiko didazue (You will steal my life); Aberria, orain (The homeland, now); Heriotza utopi izendatu dutenei (Death to those who have declared Utopia).*

Finally, there is also the sterility of the poet's work. The distance between words and life is invincible: words cannot solve anything, cannot redeem anything. This is the poetic dimension of despair, and it, too, can be seen in a number of poems: *Epilogoa (Epilogue), Dante Alighieri Ravennan (Dante Alighieri in Ravenna), Poeta ezezagun bati (To an unknown poet).*

A general look at Lete's work makes it clear: *Urrats desbideratuak* is a very important book, a landmark, and things were very different before and after it. If we look at the field of literature with the perspective granted us by time, it can be said that it is one of the most important poetry books to come out of the Transition, together with Atxaga's *Etiopia*. And if this is the case, I believe we need to walk along the black spiral marked out by those steps...

THE DANTESQUE BASQUE COUNTRY

Reference to the great Tuscan poet is a key aspect of *Urrats desbideratuak*. First of all, there is a poem called *Dante Alighieri Ravennan*, the longest poem in the book. I would not say that it is an especially good poem, but it is crucial to understanding the overal meaning of the book.

Dante spent his last years in exile, until his death in 1321. He was involved in the political tensions between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in Florence and had to suffer the consequences of those confused actions. In short, Dante was a White Guelph, while Pope Boniface VIII sided with the Black Guelphs. Once the Pope took over the city, Dante's problems multiplied until his death in exile in Ravenna.

Lete's poem paints the picture of the poet in Ravenna. We do not know —says the poetic *I*— "whether strange memories filled the mind of the poet [Dante] at sunset, or whether his spirit was immersed in the blackest nothingness of despair." In Dante, whom Lete portrays in the city of Ravenna, we see the burden of memories on the poet's consciousness on the one hand: "anxieties of youth," "fires of longing," "spring nights," "his homeland," etc. And on the other hand, there is the lonliness and despair of the poet, who once was great but now is shunned by society: "In his final years on the streets of Ravenna his dreams were dust and his fatigue pronounced. All was nothingness, world and sky equally shrouded in a dense mist."

The elements themselves —loneliness, despair, burdensome memories of a sweet past, anger toward the homeland— drive our reading forward: Lete is projecting his own situation in the figure of Dante.

Lete frequently expresses his admiration for Dante. For example, in his essay *Poesiaz gogoeta bat* (2008; *A Reflection on Poetry*), he explains that Dante produced the most important theogony ever written:

He wrote the highest, most enlightened and most complete poetic theogony ever created in Western culture, *The Divine Comedy*. Dante gave poetic expression to the eschatological imagery common in Catholic Christian culture, including the most human characters and passions in this world, in the three other worlds beyond the world (Hell, Purgatory and Paradise).

The same idea appears in the poem *Urrats desbideratuak:*

He captured
so much theogony
unequaled in measure
in measured poems,
he knew
the earthly misery
that afflicts
human hearts:
power and authority
possessive desires
twisted jealousies
patriotic wars.

In a parallel reading, just as the reference to villainous Florence correlates closely with the Basque Country, so too do twisted jealousies and patriotic wars correlate with the situation in the Basque homeland, which Lete looks at, not so much closely as fully, with great bitterness. Furthermore, we must not forget that the poet's stance is clear at that time, and that he specifically points out the behaviors he considers reprehensible. Dante does the same, as the poem says: "Popes and kings, princes and clergy, sons of the grandfathers of ungracious Florence, all were named and judged with a strict rule in *The Divine Comedy*."

Dante's shadow stretches further, however. Consider the cover of *Urrats desbideratuak*: the figure of Dante stands amid the leaves, seemingly hiding something in his hands, looking back over his shoulder. The character's serious gaze leaps off the page, meeting the viewer's eye directly. There is also a certain

mistrust in that melancholy gaze. The origin of the image is an illustration by Gustave Doré (1832-1883) that depicts a particular moment from the first canto of the *Comedy*, just before Dante meets Virgil. If we look at the whole picture, we see Dante in the middle of a dark forest, an impenetrable forest with mighty trees and twisting roots that evokes a dark and ruinous path. As Bernardo Atxaga wrote in *Obabakoak*, Dante walks in an "unprotected, grim and dense forest."

Bringing out the figure of Dante highlights the importance of the theme, and the poem *Dante Alighieri Ravennan* takes on a higher level, full of implications. Thus, the reader is shown the way to apply the meaning of the poem to the entirety of the book.

DISORIENTED STEPS IN THE LABYRINTH

The reader who picks up the book sees Dante's image first: a premonition of the dark path he will tread in the future strikes his subconscious. Then he will read the title: it seems the path will not be a pleasant one. But our reader is brave, he will press on, he will dive into the book like a teenager into the foamy summer sea.

From the first poem, however, he will be caught in the whirlpool of the pages, which will pull him down...

Toward nameless lands (1981)

You will never return
from nameless lands.

You will find no friends
that bind you to the land of your birth.

You will hear
footsteps of hours
the neighing of sleeping horses
in the heart of loneliness.

You will dream
of distant palaces
in that new peregrination.

Though you set off
every dawn,
you will never arrive.

At signalless
crossroads
no message from the gods
will reach you.

A familiar wind
will dry
your tears.

And in a sunset
your surprised eyes
will glimpse
the coastline of a mysterious island.

You will set off for it
once and for all.

The poem *Izenik gabeko lurretaruntz* portrays a desperate pilgrim. The poet speaks to himself, speaking through a *you*, but the reader feels that in that *you* he is also speaking to himself. The poem takes on a social dimension and reflection on that nameless land opens the poem: we see a future land, without identity; the poet heads for it and, inevitably, so does the reader. It is a poem of great scepticism that opens the doors of disenchantment and despair to the reader. It is not difficult to interpret this first poem in connection with Dante's state of exile. The poet says that, during his pilgrimage, he will dream of distant

palaces but he will not find them. On the path to come, there are no signs at the crossroads, no messages from the gods, no hope of having Virgil as a guide.

The reader will keep going and, in addition to the first poem, many of the poems in the book point out the mistakes of the Basque people, their disoriented steps. Lete has composed a particular Basque theogony, with Dante's poetic reference between the lines. Poem after poem, line after line, he specifies the levels of Basque hell in a suffocating spiral: lack of mercy, possessiveness, mutual envy, wars among relatives... The following are some excerpts from the poems, taken out of context, as an example:

I notice your sadness as a particular gesture, how you would like to be so sad with dignity. Because we destroy history, destroy it senselessly, in the hope that something better awaits us in the realm of ideas, ending up finally in subtle words. I dreamed of nights that will never be. Now I know what it is to be helpless, to die burdened with guilt, to walk down paths that lead nowhere. Name and being, actions and dreams, all dissipate in the wind of fatigue, shouts and applause, bright moments, optimistic praise, promises of love, nothing lasts. Our history, so cursed from the very beginning, falls to pieces because fear was law in the heart of time, and we are its children in the worst way. Once you have to live in this harsh area in this crazy land of ardent murderers, seeing hatred spark in their eyes when their axes are sharp for their brothers. If tears were rain... Our hands murdered the child. Why still talk about hope? Why modernize outmoded conversations and what for? Could we have forgotten so quickly the echoes of the murders of the day before yesterday? If full escape were justifiable... You will take my life with the cowardly weapon of cruel denial. And the homeland, now, is the picture of all shame and decline...

In the area described by Lete, the daily rat race is composed of miserable human beings, dark and envious men and women who live by the boredom of mutual understanding. The "earthly misery that afflicts human hearts" is pointed out mercilessly by Lete, as Dante did in hell.

There is no escape from that hell. In the preface, the poet says, "This is where I leave you these prized verses, and I'm going to be exhaused because it's long past midnight." And in the epilogue, after all the journeys, we have not escaped the labyrinth, and the tone has not changed, not in the least: "With the boredom of understanding each other in ordinary liturgies, wet shoes piled up in the hallway, when the night is black and red like the chimneys of blast furnaces, when most poems evoke no emotion in us." It is one of the raw images of nihilism that permeate the book: wet shoes piled up in the hallway...

Atxaga's *Etiopia*k, in 1978, was somewhat Dantesque. But Lete's collection of poems, three years later, is even more macabre: the landscape is more Dantesque, dark and hellish. Atxaga created a dystopia in *Etiopia*, but at the end, there was some kind of exit, a desired city, a dream, an opportunity. In 1981, Lete took the situation to the limit. Or perhaps I should say that the "situation" took Lete's poetic concept to the limit. Inevitably, his relationship with his homeland is vulnerable, a bitter contest between love and pain.

The homeland, now (1981)

And the homeland, now,
is the picture of all shame and decline:
I watched sunrises from that doorway
waiting in vain for surprising events.
Here, furious yesterday and timid today
have forced the common passages of every human upon me.
Here, my steps have woven an inalterable labyrinth
in incinerated sunsets
tomorrow's result
that we have desperately longed for.
Here, I had to accept that my shadow
will be totally lost in the vague shadow of everything.
We are united not by love, but by great fear.
Hence, perhaps, my loyalty to this wretched country.

Urrats desbideratuak is a bleak song, the opposite of the epic Basque fight song. Poem by poem, Lete portrays a situation with no Utopia, a Basque labyrinth with no exit. The Basques were trapped in that inalterable labyrinth, taking disoriented steps. And in that labyrinth, Lete. And the efforts he made in the 1980s to escape it looked nothing like Icarus' flight...

A POET IN POLITICS

In *Bigarren poema liburua,* there is a piece called *Poeta bat politikan (A poet in politics*). It is a poem full of jeering irony, quips and buffoonery, along the lines of social poetry. It could be taken as a piece in favor of committed poetry. I will change the beginning and the ending here: "The poet should not talk or write about politics: the new regulation says this"; "Here let everyone play their poetry, play their politics, play their violin, play arpeggios, play with themselves, play hide the sausage. And that's all. That's all once and for all. Done. London and done." I often wonder what Lete would have said if he had read that poem about ten years later. He wanted to do something and by that time was involved in institutional politics.

He experienced the impact of violence first-hand in the 1980s, and was particularly struck by the case of Imanol Larzabal: "One evening that we all remember, he went to Ordizia and there sealed his fate; Imanol's star blinked out once and for all." That evening in Ordizia was in 1986, when Imanol participated in a festival in honor of Yoyes. The persecution Imanol suffered in those years is well known.

In November of 1989, another festival was organized in support of Imanol, under the title *Todos contra el miedo (All Against Fear)* and after it, several people were publicly arrested, among them, Xabier Lete. This social and political situation of violence and fear made Lete vulnerable, and even more so when he decided to enter institutional politics.

Along other lines, some of Lete's emotional issues date back to that time. According to Eugenio Ibarzabal, Lete was interested in the type of relationship represented by Sartre and Beauvoir's *essential love and contingent love*. This was probably due to his own situation. In her memoirs, Beauvoir detailed the light and dark aspects of her relationship with Sartre, which Lete referenced in his subsequent poetry.

Lete's illness began to make itself known in 1985. It is difficult to arrive at a firm conclusion, but those close to Lete and his doctors agreed: his health paid the price for his public and political activity in this decade.

At present, it remains to be researched how the historical and cultural situation of Basque society affected the individuals of this generation. In fact, the experiences of Lete, Artze, Laboa, Iriondo and many others show common elements. After epitomizing experimentalism and the musical and artistic avant-garde, they hit rock bottom; the gap between society and their individuality was so great, that from then on, they were marked with the tragic cost of disenchantment. This is not a simple metaphor. What Beorlegui (2016) says about activists is useful, and not only for political activists, since cultural activists also took action and suffered a lot too: "For the activists, it was closer, more tangible and real than it had ever been before, and when that possibility evaporated it would leave deep scars that would mark their bodies for a very long time, dragging with it all past expectations."

In my opinion, some of the attitudes and actions later shown by that generation, especially since the 1990s, are desperate responses to try to heal the terrible wounds that the Transition opened in these individuals; these attitudes and actions include the return to faith, the search for mysticism, new poetic statements, etc. This is what happened in Lete's case. He sought another voice in the 1990s, a stronger and more balanced voice that would help him withstand the darkness of his deepest bitterness.

In the end, although he did not perform much as a singer between the Transition and the 1990s, Lete's figure as an intellectual and thinker remained

strong. As Jon Sarasua (2015) suggests, Lete was an intellectual who knew how to make his audience uncomfortable; however, in the 1980s, some of his audience distances themselves from him, and the pain caused by his ethical and political stance forever marked Lete's life and poetry.

Perhaps —and perhaps paradoxically— the most complete despairing, *disenchanted* and critical song to come out of the social and personal wounds caused by the Transition in the Basques was composed by Lete himself in his book *Urrats desbideratuak*.