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Dolores Redondo's Detective Fiction and the Neo-Gothic

Jeffrey Oxford
Midwestern State University

Dolores Redondo's Baztán trilogy—*El guardián invisible* (2012), *Legado en los huesos* (2013), and *Ofrenda a la tormenta* (2014)¹—is one of the most popular detective fiction series in Spain, with approximately a million copies sold, translations into more than fifteen languages, and the first volume being cinematized in 2017. Closely related to the thriller genre, but not totally subscribing to all the characteristics of that paradigm, this series also incorporates important aspects of the police procedural and the “country noir” subgenres of detective fiction,² all in an uncharacteristically dystopian view of rural Navarre, Spain; here, clearly *beatus ille* is inverted on its head, resulting in narratives with an obvious debt to the Gothic. Additionally, the detective in charge of the investigations, Amaia, is a female police officer who, in all three novels, ultimately winds up investigating her own family for collusion with the criminals—or for their being the suspects/criminals themselves. In short, the mystery in *Guardián* is who is killing the young teenage girls throughout the Baztán Valley? That of *Legado* is why do all the suicide notes contain the single word “Tartalo,” what does that mean today, and how are the various murderers related to the missing/discovered baby cadaver bones? The principal plot of *Ofrenda* involves the discovery of missing baby corpses and how they are connected to a local human-sacrifice cult group. As I commented in the aforementioned essay, one can certainly expect to encounter a dark and dreary night when opening the covers of these novels; there is, in fact, quite a bit of pathetic fallacy—in addition to other gothic elements—in play in these narratives. Dolores Redondo's Baztán trilogy, then, is an important contribution to both

¹Hereafter referred to, consecutively, as *Guardián*, *Legado*, and *Ofrenda*. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2018 SCMLA Conference in San Antonio, Tx.

²For an examination of parallels between the Baztán trilogy and country noir, see my essay entitled “Spain's ‘Country Noir’ Genre: Dolores Redondo's Baztán Trilogy.”

detective fiction and the neo-gothic genre, combining these two together as the basis for a new type of detective fiction not previously seen in Hispanic letters.

Gothic literature is often characterized as arising from Romantic excessiveness and as such, in an effort to create a certain ambiance of fear or terror, employing dungeons, dilapidated old homes (often manors), castles, and other decaying buildings, cemeteries, prisons, spirits (and communications with them), stormy weather, and night-time scenes and noises that frighten, as well as other discomfiting elements. Lisa Koski notes that "Gothic literature is a deliciously terrifying blend of horror and romance," further adding that "Gothic novels home in on the environment" and "while reading a Gothic novel, you can expect to find ghosts and other supernatural features." Miriam López Santos posits that gothic literature is "hecha de atmósfera, atmósfera irrespirable: espacios tenebrosos, paisajes sublimes, descripciones horribles y agobiantes, escenas macabras" whose "principal objetivo para provocar terror era polemizar sobre los temas tabú" such as "la maldad humana, los deseos ocultos, las perversiones sexuales [y] el contacto con el más allá." And Tiffany Gagliardi Trotman argues that Gothic novels permit "the reader to work through social anxieties by experiencing them within the imaginary world of fantasy" (269). While the Baztán trilogy is not totally an "imaginary world of fantasy,"³ the application of (neo-) gothic characteristics to the three works is quite prevalent and does enhance the impact of the social commentary present in each.

On the macro level, the principal setting of the novels is the Baztán Valley of Navarre, Spain, more precisely, the forest surrounding the town of Elizondo and the 3,500-inhabitant village itself. Both of these are described in gothic terms. The forest, as per the narrator, "es hechizante, con una belleza serena y ancestral" (*Guardián* 88), and it is

³The various towns and other settings present in the novels do, for the most part, actually exist and are described in a verisimilitudinous fashion. Additionally, it should be noted that the author details the origin of the narratives, both the fictional and nonfictional aspects, in the "Nota del autor" at the end of *Ofrenda*, summarized briefly as follows: "Fue una noticia en la prensa [...]. Los hechos habían ocurrido treinta años atrás [...] en un caserío de una localidad Navarra, y los propios padres de la niña la habrían entregado como sacrificio, haciendo desaparecer después el cadáver y uniéndose al riguroso pacto de silencio que todos los miembros de la secta habrían respetado hasta la actualidad. [...] Me importaba resaltar la potencia de unas creencias para provocar actuaciones monstruosas, algo que lamentablemente no tiene nada de ficción y es, de hecho, muy real. Doctrinas pervertidas que se sustentan con la sangre de los inocentes" (537-38).

"El bosque más misterioso y mágico que existe [...] con] grandes robles, las hayas y los castaños" (*Guardián* 350). After one of the many rain storms in the narratives, Amaia notes that "Los troncos, oscurecidos por el exceso de agua, brillaban al sol incierto de febrero como la piel de un reptil milenario" (*Guardián* 86) when she enters "El sendero [que] se estrechaba a medida que penetraban en el bosque [...] En otras zonas, el bosque formaba un laberinto abrigado y suntuoso" (*Guardián* 87). At night, the labyrinthian forest takes on even more supernatural qualities: "Los haces de luz de las potentes linternas dibujaban destellos fantasmales entre los árboles desnudos de hojas, tan apretados entre sí que producían el efecto de un amanecer inverso, como si el sol brotara desde el suelo" (*Guardián* 62). And the supernatural becomes especially sinister when Amaia visits the forest after dark: "El magnífico bosque de Baztán es inmenso en negrura durante la noche, y la sensación que produce es sólo comparable a la noche en alta mar, pero todo oscuro, sin estrellas. La exigua luz de la luna, apenas visible entre las nubes [...] un haz luminoso hacia la espesura" (*Legado* 138).

Obviously, the forest has a profound effect upon those who dare enter there. It is variously portrayed as "Un bosque que brindaba multitud de sensaciones: el encuentro ancestral con la naturaleza" (*Guardián* 350) or as influencing Amaia's very thought process: "Amaia se calzó las botas mientras valoraba el efecto que aquel bosque tenía sobre sus pensamientos" (*Guardián* 62). After an unsuccessful forensic trip to the research lab in Aínsa, Amaia is driving back to Elizondo when she is inexplicably allured by the forest's supernatural power, and she "penetró en el bosque como atraída por una llamada mística. [...] Al penetrar en la bóveda formada por las copas de los árboles tuvo la misma sensación que al entrar en una catedral, el mismo recogimiento, y sintió la presencia de Dios" (*Guardián* 322). But the "presence of God" she often experiences in the forest is not the benevolent, Christian God, it is, rather, "el hechizo del bosque. Descubrió asombrada que estar sola en el monte le producía una inquietud aterradora, la sensación de ser observada, de estar en un lugar prohibido o de estar cometiendo un acto de expolio contra una reliquia [...] consciente del miedo ancestral que había experimentado..." (*Guardián* 85-86). In an interview with Begoña Piña, the author makes clear that the religious aspect in the trilogy is not Catholicism, unless specifically and overtly indicated as such; rather, it is "unas creencias con base cultural, de una religión que imperó en el Valle del Baztán durante siglos y que convivió con el cristianismo" (59) or, as

the judge Markina explains to Amaia late in the series, “una fueza de la naturaleza [...] una religión tan antigua y poderosa como el mundo que tiene su origen en tu valle, bajo las piedras que conforman tu pueblo, tu casa” (*Ofrenda* 526). Consequently, Amaia's feelings while in the forest often arise from a sensation that supernatural creatures live there: “El bosque en el Baztán es hechizante [y] evoca [...] las maravillosas hadas con pies de pato que vivían en el bosque,⁴ y que dormían durante todo el día para salir al anochecer [...]. Amaia sentía en aquel bosque presencias tan palpables que resultaba fácil aceptar una cultura druida, un poder del árbol por encima del hombre” (*Guardián* 88). At the same time, these unseen, but omnipresent, creatures often provoke terror even while she is driving her car, especially at night: “El bosque se lo tragaría como una criatura centenaria de fauces negras. [...] Un escalofrío recorrió su espalda” (*Legado* 138). But the forest can be equally as frightful a place during the daytime as when, for example, Amaia takes a break from searching for the cult house, and notices a movement among the trees:

[Amaia] Se mantuvo quieta donde estaba, percibiendo el temblor que comenzaba en sus piernas y se extendía por todo el cuerpo. [...] La mirada cruel, feroz y desalmada [of the unseen/unidentified creature] se clavó en su alma como si acabase de ser asaeteada, y la alarma que la hostilidad latente provocó en ella la desconcertó. [...] Percibió entonces el silencio en el que se había sumido el bosque. Los trinos y aleteos y hasta el rumor callado que siempre podía oírse entre los árboles habían cesado, como si la naturaleza entera contuviese el aliento, esperando. (*Ofrenda* 138-39)

A dark, somber atmosphere arising from nature also pervades the town of Elizondo and its surroundings; in fact, even though Amaia Salazar was born in Elizondo and lived there until moving to Pamplona as an adult, she “maldecía aquel lugar en el que, a veces durante días, no llegaba a amanecer [...]. En el Baztán, la noche era oscura y siniestra” (*Guardián* 349). The author clarifies, however, that the darkness of the area is not merely climatological; it is also metaphysical: “La oscuridad se debe al ambiente oscuro que tiene el propio valle” (Piña 61). Further emphasizing such is the textual, historical explanation that “en los valles

⁴For a brief analysis of these duck-footed beings, see the section over Lamiak in Adamah.

de Navarra que rodeaban Elizondo, la creencia en la existencia de brujas y brujos había llevado a la muerte, la tortura y horribles sufrimientos a cientos de personas acusadas de tener pactos con el demonio" (*Guardián* 208) during the 15th century, and there is more than merely passing reference in the trilogy to the Inquisitor—and possibly a distant relative of Amaia, so she suspects—Alonso de Salazar Frías, who investigated cases of witchcraft in the area in the early 1600s. Amaia's aunt, the widowed Engrasi, had returned to Elizondo after several years of marital bliss in Paris, but she still views the area several decades later as "aquel oscuro valle donde el cielo era de plomo y el río atronaba en mitad de la noche" (*Guardián* 303). The man-made aspects of Elizondo seem to correspond to this natural and religious darkness in that they also betray an ancient, dilapidated and decaying environment. Elizondo is a village "Plagada de casas señoriales" (*Guardián* 98) whose esplanade "no poseía hoy ni la mitad del encanto que debió de tener en el siglo pasado [...], el ayuntamiento, un noble edificio de finales del siglo XVII" (*Guardián* 98), and "El empedrado medieval" (*Legado* 350). The town's main square is anchored by "el palacio Arizkunenea, [where Amaia observes] los restos de antiguas lápidas funerarias discoidales expuestas en el patio" (*Legado* 154), and the old hospital which in remote times had served pilgrims on El Camino but is now falling apart becomes the almost-perfect hiding place for the criminal Garrido in *Legado*. In fact, Amaia refers to the center part of town as "aquel maldito lugar" (*Legado* 350), with the one exception to the pervasive decadence being the modern police headquarters, "huyendo de la arquitectura común de todo el pueblo y en el resto del valle" (*Guardián* 50).

But the gothic element is not just associated with Elizondo and the Baztán Valley/Forest. Other locales that Amaia visits in the trilogy also reflect that sentimentality; all of which add in accentuating the gothic and making it an omnipresent aspect of the narratives. Ainsa, some 240 kilometers to the southeast of Elizondo and the most distant traveling destination in *Guardián*, is where the scientists Raúl González y Nadia Takchenko have a laboratory in which they analyze different DNA samples of flours and pastries found on the bodies of the murdered girls in *Guardián*, as well as bones and other items of interest in *Legado*. That village is described as "un pueblo de aspecto medieval" (*Guardián* 298), as "una fortaleza medieval" (*Guardián* 307), and, in *Legado*, as "un túnel temporal, y al llegar a su plaza [...] se experimenta un viaje al pasado que hace contener el aliento durante un segundo"

(311). In *Legado*, Amaia and her husband James decide to purchase her grandfather's manor Juanitaenea, an isolated, ancient farmhouse long abandoned and in need of much restorative care:

Juanitaenea estaba detrás del hostel Trinkete, en una zona plana de tierra oscura y rodeada de huertos. Las casas más cercanas se encontraban a unos trescientos metros y componían un grupo en contraste con la casa solitaria de piedra oscura por el tiempo. [...] la enorme entrada cuadrada entre los arcos conservaba sus hojas de hierro, que aún estando oxidado mostraba la belleza del trabajo de herrería que algún artesano de la zona realizó en otro tiempo. [...] En la parte trasera se veía un grupo de viejos robles y hayas y un sauce llorón. (*Legado* 175)

Views from inside the edifice are equally gothic: "La vetusta puerta se trabó un poco cuando James la empujó hacia el interior. [...] 'no hay mucha luz aquí,' dijo [Engrasi] dirigiéndose a las ventanas cerradas con maderas que aparecían cubiertas de polvo y telarañas" (*Legado* 176) and the "Pequeñas y profundas ventanas enclavadas en los gruesos muros y portillos de madera que actuaban como contraventanas. Las habitaciones estaban completamente vacías, y de la antigua cocina sólo quedaba la chimenea" (*Legado* 177). In fact, the age and abandonment which the building suffers draw attention to the gothic portrayals: before purchasing the estate, Amaia goes through the house "abriendo los portillos y dejando que un sol de entre las nubes iluminase las estancias proclamando la vetustez del empapelado que cubría las paredes. Apoyada en el ancho vano de la ventana, miró a lo lejos hasta localizar las torres de la iglesia de Santiago sobresaliendo por encima de los tejados perlados por la lluvia nocturna" (*Legado* 180). While outside, she "Percibió un movimiento a su espalda y se volvió a tiempo de ver un rostro arrugado que intentaba en vano ocultarse entre las varas que sostenían los cultivos del huerto" (*Legado* 181). Certainly, there is no doubt of the gothic qualities of the edifice or its grounds, thereby connecting Amaia's gothic past (as one born and raised in Elizondo) with the future (property owner in the village).

Additionally, the climax of all three novels of the series demonstrate heavy influences of the gothic. In *Guardián*, Amaia discovers that the various young girls murdered in the valley (dating back some twenty years) are the victims of Víctor, the estranged husband of her sister Flora. Amaia, realizing at the same time that Víctor is the perpetrator and that Flora has gone to confront him, drives quickly

toward his family's estate, sees in the distance Flora with a flashlight also headed toward the house, attempts to run through the forest "mientras una sensación cercana al pánico se adueñaba de ella y la creciente paranoia la obligaba a escuchar, forzándose a no respirar y segura de que había alguien más allí" (*Guardián* 417), and finally reaches the house from which "salía una tenue luz" (418). She pushes the door open and

comenzó un lento ascenso por la escalera. Había cuatro habitaciones cerradas que daban a un descansillo y una más al final del siguiente tramo de escaleras. Una a una, fue abriendo las puertas [...]. Empezó la subida al último tramo de la escalera [...]. Cuando alcanzó la puerta, los latidos de su corazón atronaban en su oído interno como latigazos cadenciales que le producían una sensación cercana a la sordera. Tragó saliva y respiró profundamente intentando clamarse. Se echó a un lado, giró el pomo de la puerta y accionó la luz (418)

finding "un altar," a room full of photos of the victims and crime scenes, newspaper articles and funeral announcements.

Amaia observó incrédula la cantidad de recortes que habían amarilleado por efecto del tiempo, curvándose en los bordes debido a la humedad, algunos fechados veinte años atrás [...]. Ocupando el lugar de honor en el centro del altar, una fotografía de ella misma impresa en papel foto, sin duda con una impresora, y recortada de otra en la que aparecía junto a sus hermanas. Extendió la mano para tocar la imagen, casi segura de que se equivocaba, rozó el papel seco y liso, y casi lo arrancó de su sitio al sobresaltarse cuando oyó el estruendo inconfundible de un disparo (420-21),

the gunshot of, as Amaia later learns, Flora shooting Víctor.

Legado is the story of various suicides, all with an accompanying note containing the single word "Tarttalo"—Amaia is the intended recipient of more than one of these notes—, the discovery of human bones and remains, and the suspected empty graves of young girls "sacrificed" by their parent(s) in local cult rituals. At this novel's climax, Amaia intuits that her own child is in danger, speeds back from Pamplona toward Elizondo, and realizes that the perpetrator is probably headed to a cave in the forest where the bones from several young children had been discovered and where Amaia had photographed, with the assistance of luminol, the word "Tarttalo" smeared on the walls. In addition to the gothic element of nighttime terror, a thunderstorm that

shuts down the power grid in town and floods the village (thereby cutting off any possibility of assistance from that end) adds an immediacy and heightened emotional element to the chase as Amaia races to save her child. In gothic fashion, Amaia parks the car beside the road and runs through the forest toward the cave. Upon arriving there, "Giró hacia el interior, apuntando con su arma, y lo que vio le heló la sangre. Ibai estaba tendido en el suelo, en el centro de un intrincado dibujo que parecía trazado con sal o cenizas blancas, y rodeado de velas [...]. Rosario, de rodillas en el suelo, blandía un puñal sobre la tripita del niño como si trazase dibujos invisibles sobre él" (537). While Amaia is able to save her child and arrest Rosario's accomplice, the would-be assassin escapes into the stormy night after threatening Amaia with future, personal harm, a threat that Amaia has to take seriously in light of her past relationship with Rosario.

Ofrenda, meanwhile, is a direct continuation of the second part of the trilogy, with a search for the real "Tarttalo" after the aforementioned accomplice of Rosario also commits suicide. Finding this unidentified character is important given that recent crimes involving the deaths of young children, missing bodies from tombs, and past/recent child sacrifices continue to plague the area. At the novel's climax, Yolanda—who believes her husband to have sacrificed their child—returns once again to her family's mausoleum in Ainhoa, France (some 15 miles to the north of Elizondo) where she successfully blasts open the tomb of the suspected cult leader Xabier Markina during a torrential thunderstorm. Amaia, alerted by Yolanda's father that his daughter has disappeared, deduces that Yolanda has returned to that cemetery and races there to intervene in the unauthorized exhumation while lightning strikes repeatedly all around her. Once there, "Corrió rodeando las tumbas y, al llegar al acceso a la cripta, vio la luz de la linterna, que oscilaba adelante y atrás con cada patada de la mujer contra la puerta" (522). A brief struggle ensues, and Amaia finally enters the crypt. "A su alrededor, dispuestos formando un óvalo, había restos de al menos veinte criaturas. De algunos cadáveres no quedaban más que huesos que delataban la antigüedad de los despojos, pero a sus pies Amaia vio el cuerpecillo hinchado y muy descompuesto de la niña Esparza [Yolanda's child]. A su lado, colocado sobre una vieja toquilla, un esqueleto de huesos muy blancos" (525). And while Amaia confronts the recently-arrived Tarttalo, more than "Un rayo iluminó la noche fuera de la tumba" (526); "la tormenta desatada aullaba entre los árboles que rodeaban el cementerio

y la lluvia redoblada en fuerza y furia se deslizaba por las escaleras que descendían al interior de la tumba" (527). At the same time, "Una sucesión de truenos sacudió los cimientos del camposanto haciendo vibrar la tierra de los muertos, que ella sentía que se abría a un infierno" (530) while the "Tartalo" attempts to justify his actions and child sacrifice as "mucho más importante y poderoso" (526) than his own family, professional employment, or reputation.

Robert McKay and John Miller argue in *Werewolves, Wolves and the Gothic* that "Wolves are familiar figures in the Gothic imagination, creatures of pure animality that, when combined with the human in the form of the werewolf, offer powerful opportunities to explore complicated anxieties surrounding difference" (promotional flyer). Amaia is obviously a complicated figure, serving the public good by investigating, and solving, the various crimes in the three novels but also lacking in sufficient self-control to avoid repeatedly falling to the sexual allure of another man/criminal while her own husband has gone to the United States for his father's heart surgery. Tellingly, this complicated personality and association with evil is portended through a werewolf/vampire⁵ illustration in the early pages of the trilogy: in a moment of intimacy with her husband "Amaialadeó la cabeza ofreciéndole [a James] el cuello en un gesto que siempre le hacía recordar las viejas películas de Drácula, en las que sus víctimas se entregaban al vampiro descubriendo el cuello hasta el hombro y entrecerrando los ojos en espera de un placer sobrehumano" (*Guardián* 37). A more direct vampire reference occurs in one of Amaia's many nightmares, when she sees her mother "acercándose como un vampiro que se alimentase, no de sangre, sino de aliento" (*Guardián* 335). Dr. Berasategui, Rosario's accomplice, has a house in Pamplona which serves, apparently, the sole purpose of holding the refrigerated remains of the body extremities dismembered from the various girls killed in *Guardián*, at least one of which has his teeth marks on it when found by the police (*Legado* 521), and all of which are packaged in a manner similar to meat for sale at the local supermarket. This cannibalism had only recently been

⁵I am using the terms "werewolf" and "vampire" interchangeably since the author—as will shortly be seen with Dr. Berasategui—does not adhere totally throughout the series to the normal characteristic dietary distinctions between the two: vampires drink blood while werewolves consume flesh.

foreshadowed by Amaia's thoughts concerning Dr. Berasategui when she saw a security camera image of him posing as her brother in order to gain unauthorized access to Rosario: "No hay miedo como el que ya se ha probado, del que se conoce el sabor, el olor y el tacto. Un viejo y mohoso vampiro que duerme sepultado bajo cotidianeidad y orden" (*Legado* 512). In *Ofrenda*, Amaia ponders Rosario's suicide, finally concluding that neither hers nor Dr. Berasategui's was truly a voluntary suicide, that they were simply following the orders of someone else, the real Tarttalo: "No se vencía así el lobo. Al lobo había que perseguirlo, sitiario y enfrentarse a él cara a cara para arrebatarle su poder. El lobo no se suicidaba, el lobo no se arrojaba a los acantilados; al lobo había que matarlo para que dejase de ser lobo" (*Ofrenda* 454).

Other gothic aspects of the novels include Amaia's insistence and repeated night-time contacts with her mentor the FBI agent Dupree in order to get his insight into the various crimes she is investigating. His location in New Orleans offers particular ease of access to "el pueblo de los muertos" –as cemeteries are called in both New Orleans and in the Basque language–, his eerie ability to know about events related to Amaia's family and Elizondo even before they become public knowledge, and his affinity for, and association with, pentagrams (*Guardián* 331) and the spirit world. Closer to home, however, Amaia's aunt Engrasi consults tarot cards and often learns from them how/what Amaia is doing and that Amaia's enemy "quiere tus huesos" (*Guardián* 293), a common element in all three novels. Tellingly, even Amaia herself seems to have, dating back to her youth (*Guardián* 188), an uncanny ability to have questions answered through the same deck of cards and quite frequently receives communication from both the spirit and dream worlds: "escuchar en la quietud de la casa el crepitar de los troncos en las chimeneas, los crujidos del suelo bajo su peso y la cadencia del tac, tac que, casi estuvo segura, provenía de arriba" (*Legado* 222-23). Young girls in her dreams "sonrieron mostrándole sus dientes afilados como agujas y golpeando con sus pies de pato la superficie quieta del agua [diciendo] 'Limpia el río'" (*Ofrenda* 249), and, in a neo-gothic twist, Amaia receives email from her former police partner Jonan after his death (*Ofrenda* 366) via pre-programmed auto-send messages.

As has been shown, then, Dolores Redondo's Baztán trilogy is an important contribution to both detective fiction and the neo-gothic genre. The setting is a landscape saturated with both climatological and metaphysical darkness; the forest's supernatural powers, old oaks, and

weeping willows all attract and threaten at the same time, and dilapidated buildings are present on every corner. Even the crimes themselves harken back to gothic sentimentalities through child sacrifices, corpse mutilations, and tomb desecrations. And the sinister way in which Amaia repetitively consults the deck of tarot cards and the cabalistic Dupree—as well as the obvious involvement of her immediate family in the crimes and her inexplicable attraction to the current cult leader himself—leaves the reader with the sense that even the “heroine” has become an “anti-heroine.” No element of the story is pure and/or innocent; all is haunted, and nothing is to be trusted. Without a doubt, then, Redondo’s fiction is heavily influenced by the Gothic genre and melds those characteristics into a detective trilogy written by a female author, containing a female protagonist, and set in a rural environment—all resulting in a new type of narrative not previously seen in the Hispanic world.

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