

Euskal Herria

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BASQUE LITERATURE FROM 1975 TO THE PRESENT DAY

edited by *Euskal Idazleen Elkarte*a - Basque Writers' Association

Many things happen on certain dates. Let's take 1975 as an example. It saw the death of the dictator Francisco Franco and also of the poet Gabriel Aresti. These were to exert a direct influence on cultural activity.

Publishing houses sprang up here, there and everywhere. There was plenty of good will but little in the way of money; it would take several years for these set-ups to become fully consolidated. The literary journals which were to be the training ground for many writers emerged in a similar way. The first ones was *Ustela*. A young man began signing his first works under the pen name of Bernardo Atxaga and another one called Koldo Izagirre put the wheels of that venture in motion, and in the first issue (in *Panpina Ustela*) their clear commitment to literature could already be detected. After that edition, two more, *Mermelada Ustela* and *Zorion Ustela*, were published, but they were edited by Izagirre himself and Ramon Saizarbitoria. That was the end of the *Ustela* venture, but not the end of the journal movement. *Pott* (which had, Joseba Sarrionandia, Atxaga, Ruper Ordorika, Manu Ertzilla and Jon Juaristi as its travelling companions from 1980 onwards), *Susa* (produced in 1979 by students connected with the University of Donostia-San Sebastian) *Oh! Euzkadi* (in 1980 produced by Izagirre and Saizarbitoria), *Maiatz* (published from 1982 onwards in the Northern Basque Country). They were all transformed into platforms for writers.

NARRATIVE IN THE 1990S:

CONTEMPLATING ONE'S SURROUNDINGS

By the time the 90s arrived Bernardo Atxaga and other writers like him made the leap to raw realism.



Gabriel Aresti



Bernardo Atxaga



In his case, *Behi baten memoriak* (1991) can be taken as the link between the two worlds, because, although there could be certain touches of fantasy in that novel (the speaking cow is the main character), the context itself (the Spanish Civil War) was totally realistic. After that came *Gizona bere bakardadean* (1993) and *Zeru horiek* (1995) that were to present characters that had to do with the Basque conflict. In both of them the Asteasu (Gipuzkoa)-born writer deals with the human being and his or her loneliness.

As far as Anjel Lertxundi was concerned, his *Carla* (1989) marked the end of one narrative era and the start of the next one. If the Orio-born writer had until then been looking to the South American styles, from this novel onwards he became immersed in the European tradition and the first clear result was *Kapitain Frakasa* (1991), which was reminiscent of Graham Greene's detective style. In the works published after that he became totally immersed in the European oral and written tradition to present a modern and updated interpretation of themes like immortality, the devil and death. The Alberdania publishing house created the *Ifrentzuak* collection specially to provide a place for these works. This collection included *Otto Pette* (1994), *Azkenaz beste* (1996), *Piztiaren izena* (1995), *Letrak kalekantoitik* (1996) and *Argizariaren egunak* (1998). *Zorion perfektua* (2003) is this writer's latest work which is full of innovations in style and theme compared with his previous works. It tells how a woman who witnessed an attack in her youth remembers the event.

In the meantime, Ramon Saizarbitoria broke 19 years of silence with the publishing of *Hamaika pauso* (1995).

This novel could be regarded as a synthe-
Anjel Lertxundi

sis of everything that he had done hitherto, on the one hand, because in it we will recognise the style exercises he used to do, and on the other hand, because content took precedence over the concern for structure in the books that had followed in close succession. Several people have written that *Hamaika pauso* is the portrait of Saizarbitoria's generation; in this novel the main character, Iñaki Abaitua, wrote a novel about the execution by firing squad [during the Franco regime] of Daniel Zabalegi (the ETA member Angel Otaegi) in 1975. But as the story progresses, the biographies of the two characters cross paths with each other. The novel *Bihotz bi. Gerrako kronikak* (1996) was to recall two wars, the Civil War, on the one hand (the memories of the pensioners who meet at the Hambre pub), and the war between couples, on the other. In *Gorde nazazu lurpean* (2000), in contrast, he put together five long narratives which share the theme of disinterment but in the end the author's permanent obsession emerges, too: Civil War, communication problems between men and women and a reflection on writing.

In addition to Lertxundi and Saizarbitoria we could refer to many other writers of the same decade: Koldo Izagirre (*Metxa esaten dioten agirretar baten ibili herrenak*, 1997; *Ez duk erraza, konpai!*, 1995; *Nik ere Germinal egin gura nuen aldarri*, 1998; *Agirre zaharraren kartzelaldi berriak*, 1999); Patxi Zabaleta (his historical trilogy set in early 20th century Navarre: *Ukoreka*, 1994; *Badena dena da*, 1995; *Arian ari*, 1996); Edorta Jimenez (*Speed gauak*, 1990; *Azken fusila*, 1994; *Baleen barbaroa*, 1999); Joxemari Iturralde (the trilogy based on the Basque Country: *Izua hemen*, 1989; *Kilkerra eta roulottea*, 1997; *Euliak ez dira argazkietan ateratzen*, 2000); Aingeru Epaltza, Joxean Agirre, Jon Alonso, Laura Mintegi, Xabier Mendiguren Elizegi, Hasier Etxeberria, Lourdes Oñederra... And the young writers that emerged around the year 2000: Harkaitz Cano, Xabier Aldai, Ixiar Rozas, Jasone Osoro, Julen Gabiria, Unai Elorriaga (who won the Spanish National Literature Prize in 2002 for his debut novel *SPrako tranbia*), the Etxeberria brothers, Fernando Morillo... Many of them have become known as a result of a phenomenon gaining ever more strength in recent times: i.e. grants for literature.



Ramon Saizarbitoria
Koldo Izagirre
Edorta Jimenez
Joseba Sarrionandia
Mariasun Landa

Today's panorama has little in common with those first years following the Franco dictatorship. Not just in the quantity, but Basque production has grown considerably with respect to genre. There are humour novels (Joxean Sagastizabal's *Kutsidazu bidea*, *Ixabel* and *Gerturik daukagu odola*), as well as science fiction (Iñaki Irazabalbeitia's *Uda guztiak ez dituk berdinak*), travel novels (Jon Arretxe's work), love stories (Iñaki Mendiguren's *Haltzak badu bihotzik*), erotic novels (the novels of Paddy Rekalde, Aitor Arana and Juan Martin Elexpuru can be found in the "literatura" section launched by the Txalaparta publishing house), easy narratives (from the Gaiak and Elhuyar publishing houses), the so-called light novels...

All this is indicative of the maturity that Basque narrative writing has achieved.

We would not like to conclude narrative writing without mentioning story telling as well as literature for children and young people. Both carry considerable weight within Basque literature and in time have achieved considerable quality (and quantity). As far as story telling is concerned, it began to grow in importance during the 1970s and 1980s with the main sources of inspiration at that time coming from Jon Mirande and the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Belonging to that time we have the works of Lertxundi, Atxaga and Joseba Sarrionandia (*Narrazioak*, 1983; *Atabala eta euria*, 1986; *Ifar aldeko orduak*, 1990), among others. Since then, a number of writers have been involved in this genre: Mikel Antza, Inazio Mujika Iraola, Pello Lizarralde, Xabier Montoia, Laura Mintegi, Iban Zaldúa, Felipe Juaristi, Karlos Linazasoro, Edorta Jimenez, Arantxa Iturbe, Harkaitz Cano... not to mention the field of children's and young people's literature, which publishes the largest number of books every year. There we will find Felipe Juaristi, Arrate Egaña, Patxi Zubizarreta, Mariasun Landa (whose work *Krokodiloa ohe azpian* won the Spanish National Literature Prize in 2003), Juan Kruz Igerabide, Joxe Mari Iturralde, Joxantonio Ormazabal, Aitor Arana, Jesus Mari Olaizola aka Txiliku, Atxaga...

ESSAY WRITING

From the 1970s onwards many essays were published. When referring to that time

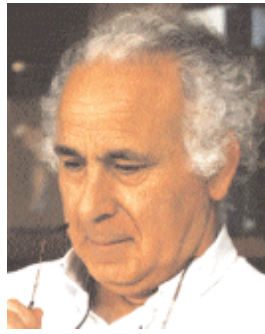
the indispensable reference is Joxe Azurmendi and the numerous pieces of work he has produced since, both on politics (*Errealismo sozialistaz*, 1978; *Arana Goirenen pentsamendu politikoa*, 1978; *Euskaldunak eta espainolak*, 1992), and on literature (*Zer dugu Orixeren kontra*, 1976; *Zer dugu Orixeren alde*, 1977; *Schopenhauer Miranderen pentsamenduan*, 1989).

In the 1980s, however, the ones which stood out were Sarrionandia (*Marginalia*, 1988; *Ni ez naiz hemengoa*, 1985), and Eduardo Gil Bera (*O Tempora! O Mores!*, 1989; *Fisikaz honatago*, 1990). During the following years the works of Patziku Perurena, Joseba Zulaika, Mikel Azurmendi and Jose Angel Irigarai appeared on the scene.

Today if essays are published, it is largely thanks to the contests devoted to it. Among others we can mention the Mikel Zarate award organised every year by the BBK savings bank and the Euskaltzaindia (Royal Academy of the Basque language), the Bilbo city council's Miguel Unamuno, the Irun City award, the Becerro de Bengoa organised by the Provincial Government of Araba, the Pedro Axular promoted by the Government of the Basque Autonomous Community, the Xalbador organised by the Provincial Government of Navarre, the Santi Onaindia award of the Zornotza town council and the Justo Garate award of the Bergara town council. In that context we can put the essays written by Jon Sudupe, Jose Manuel Odriozola, Patri Urkizu, Jon Alonso, Luis Alberto Aranbarri aka "Amatiño", Kirmen Uribe, Jon Elordi and Juana Atxabal. There is a wide variety of themes: politics, culture, society and economy. Noteworthy is also the Alberdania publishing house's "Zerberri" collection which includes a number of short essays including Saizarbitoria's *Aberriaren alde (eta kontra)*. Literary critique also has a significant role in essay writing. Examples of these are the ones written by Lourdes Otaegi (*Lizardiren poetika Pizkundearen ingurumariaren argitan*, 1994), Iñaki Aldekoa (*Zirkuluaren hutsmina*, 1993; *Antzarra eta ispilua Obabakoaken irudimen mundua*, 1992; *Munduaren neurria; Arestiren ahots biblikoaz*, 1998), Jon Kortazar (*Laberintoaren oroimena: gure garaiko olerkigintzaz*, 1994; *Luma eta lurra. Euskal poesia 80ko hamarkadan*, 1997) and Mari Jose Olaziregi (*Bernardo Atxagaren irakurlea*, 1998; *Intimismoaz haraindi: emakumezkoek idatzitako euskal literatura*, 1999; *Ramon Saizarbitoriaren unibertso literarioa*, 2001; *Euskal eleberraren historia*, 2002).

THEATRE

The theatre movement of the 1970s has been referred to by some as the third post-war generation. Once the Franco dictatorship was over the group made up of Atxaga, Haranburu, Lete, Arozena and Landart was joined by Amestoy, Eneko Olasagasti,



Joxe Azurmendi

Xabier Mendiguren and Yolanda Arrieta, among others. Among the works at that time stands out *Borobila eta puntua* by Aresti's successor Atxaga. That work of drama combines popular tradition with avant-gardist elements, as he explained in the statement called *Euskal Teatro Berria(ren alde)*, which was later to appear in the journal "Anaitasuna", because these had to be the components of the so-called NHI (national, popular, revolutionary theatre).

The infrastructure at that time was minimal. When necessary pelota courts, schools and sports centres lost their traditional functions and were turned into provisional theatres. That way, despite all the obstacles, the theatre movement kept going.

At the start of the 1980s the well-known "Cómicos de la legua" of Bilbo split and two groups were formed out of it: "Karraka" under the direction of Ramon Barea and "Maskarada" with Karlos Panera. The latter group performed many works in Basque, both contemporary ones (Atxaga's in particular) and classical ones translated into Basque (Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of being Earnest* and Marc Legasse's *Las carabinas de Gastibeltza*.) At that time a number of groups set up the Theatre Groups Committee aimed at providing an impetus for the Basque theatre circuit. Nevertheless, they did not succeed in their aims, because there was a huge difference between the professional groups (Maskarada and Kukubiltxo) and the amateurs (all the rest).

The following years were somewhat sombre for Basque theatre. The Antzerti school set up to train actors disappeared and its place was taken by drama schools which sprang up here and there. Furthermore, playwriting has fallen into decline. Since then, as with essay writing, awards have had the last word in playwriting. Involved in this is the "Toribio Alzaga" prize awarded by the BBK-Euskaltzaindia and the "Donostia Hiria" Award.

During the last decade Xabier Mendiguren, Luis Haranburu, Junes Casenave, Juanjo Olasagarre, Martin Irigoien, Karlos Linazosoro, Juan Karlos del Olmo, Koldo Daniel Izpizua, Ramon Agirre, Aitzpea Goenaga, Antton Luku, Pantxo Hirigaray and Javi Cillero figure among the writers who have contributed to this genre.

POETRY OF THE 1970s: THE WAY TO EXPERIMENTATION

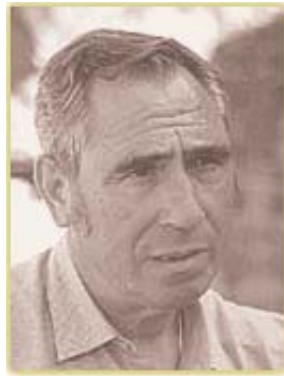
Just like the times, the literary code of those voices broke away from the previous trend. The novel, *Leturiaren egunkari ezkutua* by Jose Luis Alvarez Enparantza aka "Txillardegí" and the modernity it brought was far away in time. New models had to be sought and experimented with. In fact, when defining the 1970s we would have to use two words: the avant-garde and experimentalism. In poetry the



starting point for the new trend was established by Atxaga's *Etiopia*. And it is from there that the name Gabriel Aresti comes back to us. Among the works of Basque poetry, *Etiopia* and Aresti's *Harri eta herri* are, in fact, the most widely read and the ones which have exerted the greatest influence on Basque poets. As Atxaga himself said, he is no more than Aresti's natural successor. The thing is Aresti's *harria* (stone) turned into *harea* (sand) in *Etiopia*.

A member of the Pott band rounded off the metaphor of what *Etiopia* signified: just as the students who took part in the May 1968 revolt wanted to find grass beneath the asphalt, that book of poems was an endeavour to find asphalt under the grass. To somehow take the Basque language out of its rural context and into the city. The *Etiopia* poems were urban ones, produced by a young poet who had a good grounding in Rimbaud's teachings. And even though it aroused criticism at the beginning, it demonstrated that Basque could have possibilities outside the farming world. A similar point of view could be found in Koldo Izagirre's *Itsaso ahantzia* (1976). The main themes of these poems were love, the sea and solitude, and the influence of the surrealist poet Eluard is noticeable. Later on Izagirre was to write *Oinaze Zaharrera* (1977), *Balizko erroten erresuma* (1989) and *Non da Basques' harbour?* (1997).

Faced with the avant-garde model proposed by Atxaga and Izagirre, Bitoriano Gandiaga (*Hiru gizon bakarka*, 1974; *Uda batez Madrilen*, 1977; *Denbora galdu alde*, 1986) and Juan Mari Lekuona (*Muga beroak*, 1972; *Ilargiaren eskolan*, 1979; *Minodramak eta ikonoak*, 1990) adopted a different attitude. Although the admiration for the sculptor Jorge Oteiza and for Aresti of the 1960s was to serve as a bond between the poetry of the two authors, each one's work was to maintain its own characteristics. In Gandiaga's case, in contrast to his mythical, harmonious *Elorri* published in 1962 (in which the Basque Country was idealised by the peaceful atmosphere of Aranzazu), his next works portrayed a more pessimistic, conflictive point of view: no firm faith in nature, concern for the



Jose Luis Alvarez
Enparantza "Txillardegia"
Bitoriano Gandiaga

Basque Country and its language, the loneliness and anonymity of urban life. Lekuona used the term "social expressionism" when defining the style of the Mendata (Bizkaia)-born poet Gandiaga. In the meantime, Lekuona himself was to put human beings and the unity of basic matter in contact with each other in his works, while never failing to express a concern for society and a commitment to a new human race and to the world. His poetry could almost be said to have created a school, because Imanol Irigoien (*Argiaren barne distantziak*, 1989) and Amaia Iturbide (*Gelak eta zelaia*, 1994), for example, followed in his footsteps. One can mention the works of the poets Joxe Austin Arrieta, Juan Ramon Madariaga, Juan Kruz Igerabide, Pello Zabaleta or Patziku Perurena; each one maintained his own characteristics, but did not stray very far from Lekuona's path.

The 1970s' desire to experiment led to all kinds of attitudes: the existentialist attitude from Joseba Zulaika (*Adanen poema amaigabea*, 1975), M. Arregi (*Hego haizearen konpasean*, 1975) and Luis Mari Mujika (*Hitzak ebakitzen*, 1975; in the following books of poetry he was to revert to popular, measured poetry: *Zortziko hautsiak*, 1978; *Herria eta bidea*, 1978; *Arnas gaiztoa. Erromantzeen airera*, 1979; *Aire neurtuak*, 1984); inward looking poetry which can be seen in Arantxa Urretabizkaia's long poem *San Pedro bezperaren ondokoak* and in *Maitasunaren magalean* (1982) by the same author; romantic nihilism as in the case of Amaia Lasa (*Hitz nahastuak*, 1977; *Nere paradisetan*, 1979); Manu Ertzilla's simple poetry with great feeling. In fact, everything was possible and in the same group one came across different sensibilities. An example of this is the poetry of Xabier Lete, Joxean Artze aka "Hartzabal" and Joxe Angel Irigarai around the cultural movement "Ez dok Amairu". Next to Lete's conflict-ridden, inward looking perspective (*Bigarren poemategia*, 1974) one finds Irigarai's symbolic-mythical perspective (*Kondairaren ihauterian*, 1978). Between these two one has the totally experimental poetry of Hartzabal (*Isturitzetik Tolosan barru*, 1969; *Laino guztien azpitik... eta sasi guztien gainetik...*, 1973; *...bide bazterrean hi eta ni kantari...*, 1979), the lyrical, visual experiment: verses that move from right to left, organised in a spiral, etc.