A Comparative Study of Basque and Yugoslav Troubadourism

By GORKA AULESTIA

The Basques were the only people in Western Europe who survived the invasion of the Indo-European. They were spoken by thousands, a relic of the past, having never been swallowed up by the Indo-European languages. As a result, it has inspired great interest among linguists and ethnologists. As a prehistoric people, the Basques have a predominantly oral character. Basques in general are reluctant to write. Their written literature, the first example of which appeared in 1545, was somewhat limited and generally dominated by religious authors. Until the end of the nineteenth century, few Basque books could be considered "literary." In contrast, Basque oral literature is very rich, and its quality compares favorably with the oral literature of the neighboring nations, Spain and France. Especially noteworthy within this oral literature are the old plays (pastorelas from Zabe- re) and Basque troubadourism.

Reading the accounts by Milman Parry and Albert Lord of studies made in Yugoslavia has moved me to undertake a comparable approach to their "oral-formulaic" theory and Basque troubadourism. I will limit myself to pointing out some similarities and differences between two phenomena, with special emphasis on the techniques, rhythms, themes, and music. Basque troubadourism can be described as kantarran kantzek hutsa (the sung word of the people), in which improvisation, above all, is the essential quality. The task requires a rapid, schematic, and unorganized, and performance. In a matter of seconds, the Basque troubadour must search for the subject matter of his song, then organize his ideas and images into the best possible mode of expression, and finally express them by performing them in song. In order to do this, the bard or Basque bard constructs a phrase in the reverse order of its logical formation. As the Basque says, "Anna da hasieras" (the end is the beginning). That is, the end is the beginning in the planning stage, although it is the last to come in the execution. Thus, the Basque bard searches rapidly for the rhyme of the last line of the verse. This rhyme will be the axis for the entire strophe and the foundation stone of the artistic edifice. Keeping this rhyme in mind, he will begin to sing the first verse.

In Basque troubadourism, composition and execution are simultaneous, with no preparation or pre-established formulae. Music is very important in the artistic expression of oral literature, but the Basque bard is no simple singer or minstrel who performs another's composition. On the contrary, he is poet, singer, and group combined. Written poetry and Basque troubadourism have something in common in that they both use words, rhyme, and rhythm, but the techniques and the language used are very different. There are ornamentation and ornamentation, both rich and poor, the former being preferred because they are more difficult. The rhymes are quite varied; more than twenty different rhymes can be used. The most common strophes are the zortziko and haranrekko nagusiak, the first (as the writer suggests) containing eight lines and the second containing ten. In the zortziko as well as the haranrekko nagusiak, the odd lines are composed of ten syllables and the even lines of eight. Also, you will find the zortziko and haranrekko tsiskalak. As in the previous strophes, the first contains eight lines and the second contains ten, but in the tsiskalak (short ones) the odd lines have seven syllables and the even have six. Finally, there exists a more difficult rhyme called beredatzu pantuko bertsoa (a strophe of nine rhymes). This verse is composed of fourteen lines, nine of which carry the rhyme lines 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 14. The odd lines are seven syllables long and the even lines are six syllables long, except for lines 4 and 14, which contain only five syllables.

As an example of this difficult verse, I cite one of three that the current champion Xabier Amurua had to improvise during the National Championship in 1982 on the required theme of "Woman."

1. Emakumea esan da (A woman should be)
2. jaiak da daena (many are)
3. emakumnetan bada (she is good)
4. bat tol baton (and she is)
5. irratian han dago (without her)
6. Sortu ndi dauna (Set it down)

In the context of character in Basque troubadourism is the bertsolaria; the second most important entity is the audience. The jury and the gai-jartasail or moderator also play important roles, especially in competitions such as the famous "Bertsolaria" contest, organized by many organizations. Education is beginning to be important but is not absolutely necessary. In fact, there were several illiterate among the best Basque bard, especially in the nineteenth century. Voice and physical presence also play a role, albeit not as large a role as other qualities. A few of the most important attributes are: mental agility, a quick tongue, memory, a knack for captivating the audience, imagination, sensitivity, and communication with the public.

The public is an absolutely necessary ingredient, since without it there would be no competitions. This artistic expression of oral literature is a kind of intellectual group experience, containing division of labor and cooperation. The public takes an active part, applauding the bertsolaria's best moments and often repeating the last two lines with him. On several occasions the audience guesses the end of the line and sings it with the bard. The bertsolaria, without an opponent and especially without an audience, either refuses to perform or ends the performance very quickly. No bertsolaria begins singing in his own family; he needs more people, as many as water or a plant needs earth in which to take root.

The contests are diffused and assume a great gift for improvisation according to the modality of the public. The moderator imposes a complete set of requirements (thème, rhyme, rhythm, and music) on the bertsolaria. Occasionally the first or last two lines of the strophe are sung for the public, and the bertsolaria and a jury of about ten members. 2. Challenges between two bards or between two pairs or teams. These tests took place during the nineties of the century but today have disappeared. Rhymes and themes were not imposed on contests, and the challenges lasted only a couple of hours. The audience was large; a great quantity was wagered. There was no moderator, but a three-member jury was present. 3. Popular festivals, the most common modality of Basque troubadourism. Such a festival does not last all day but is a complementary part of a general celebration. Generally the theme is open. There is no jury, but there is a moderator. Not as much technique is required of the bertsolaria here as in a taspelketa; however, the rapport with the audience is greater. The important thing is to create an atmosphere of fun rather than of challenge. There is no set time limit. The performance ends when the audience is satisfied. 4. Juegos florales (Floral Games), sessions of oral literature or troubadourism which used to take place on the occasion of literary contests, especially for poetry. They were very famous in the first half of this century, but today they have disappeared.

Troubadourism as encountered within the Yugoslav context, by comparison, is clearly outlined in the book The Singer of Tales by Albert Lord. This famous American scholar used as a point of departure his studies made by his professor, Milman Parry, on Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Applying Parry's findings and his own concepts to the Yugoslav bards, Lord arrived at a series of conclusions which appear to be quite valuable to the study of oral literature. In spite of the fact that some of these conclusions are today very controversial (e.g., the incompatibility of written and oral literatures), his theory is extremely interesting for the comparative study of other artistic expressions of oral literature. The fact that an illiterate Yugoslav bard was capable of singing thousands of lines of verse about epic themes, accompa-
one element in common, which in turn differentiates them from other similar artistic expressions such as that of the Gaelic bards: in both, the composition and performance are inseparable, and the performer and the performer and the performer are one and the same. The bard is poet, singer, and speaker simultaneously—three facets within a single entity. Lord's words concerning the Yugoslav bard may be as applicable to the Basque troubadour: "Singer, performer, composer and poet are one under different aspects but at the same time." (13).

In the Basque context, troubadour is everything, encompassing even the subject matter. There is no room here for any prepared topic or for any theme known beforehand in Yugoslav poetry: "Sometimes singers prefer to have a day or so to think the song over, to put it in order, and to practice it to themselves..." (14).

The Yugoslav bard concentrates exclusively on events that occurred during the time of the Turkish Empire (wars, deaths, weapons, rescue, castles, victors, etc.). On the other hand, the Basque troubadour is not so concerned with different subjects; there are all variations on the same theme. In contrast, the themes of the Basque troubadour are quite varied and reflect modern life. Epic poetry and the battles waged by the Basques against Poland's and Charlemagne's troops, even though the Basques emerged victorious, are not the main objective of the bard. The bard is generally selected from everyday life, from the most serious to the most humorous, from the predictable to the unpredictable. Some of the bard's themes are love, politics, problems, and especially themes dealing with the language and life of the Basque Country are currently the most often used.

One of the most surprising aspects of both artistic phenomena is the speed of the elaboration of verses. As soon as the last line of his composition, the bard must stand and recite it, as the voice of the bard is raised immediately. Among Basque troubadours this type of error is rarely committed. The rhythm and number of syllables are not serious grounds to exclude a line; instead of spelling out numbers or syllables, he carries a feel for the meter with him and performs like a dancer who dances without counting the beats of the music. The error that most concerns the baskitori is called peko egin, or the repetition of the same word as a rhyme in a single verse. The various languages of the bard: "Verbs may be placed in unusual positions, auxiliaries may be omitted, cases may be used strangely." (12).

Since the means of transmitting verses is oral and accomplished by singing, music is another element common to both Basque and Yugoslav artistic expression. Unlike the Basque language, which is an instrument, however, the Yugoslav accompanies himself on the guše (a kind of mandolin which plays a single string) or on other instruments (tsaita, tirsula, talaporta, alabka, triktika, et cetera) is used in Basque troubadourism. Basque melodies are unique and cannot be translated. Although Basque music is very often made up of simple songs, it is remarkable in this context that it is slow and syllabic—that is, very musical in its shape. One can envisage the character of Basque troubadourism in the saying "The Basque troubadour is the troubadour who could not naturally live by his profession. He is not really a professional, but his audience does buy him drinks, and if he is good, they will give him a little money for the entertainment he has given them." (15). Fortunately all this is not changing, but even today no baskitori makes a living from his art. After this brief study of some of the similarities and differences between Basque and Yugoslav bards, one can say that improvisation is more complete among the singers of Basque than in the Yugoslavs. A bard is made up of a clear and well-developed formula; the quantity is less than that achieved by the Yugoslav, it is still amazing, considering that the Basques do not have the tradition of the troubadour. Listening to baskitori is rare, it would seem from the paucity at the end of each line. In bertsolarism, enjambment is practiced to a lesser degree.

Due to the speed with which the Yugoslav constructs verses, errors are not unusual: "His text line may be broken in the middle of a verse. Among Basque troubadours this type of error is rarely committed. The rhythm and number of syllables are important and it is clear that, instead of correcting errors or stopping to count syllables, he carries a feel for the meter with him and performs like a dancer who dances without counting the beats of the music. The error that most concerns the baskitori is called peko egin, or the repetition of the same word as a rhyme in a single verse. The various languages of the bard: "Verbs may be placed in unusual positions, auxiliaries may be omitted, cases may be used strangely." (12)." Since the means of transmitting verses is oral and accomplished by singing, music is another element common to both Basque and Yugoslav artistic expression. Unlike the Basque language, which is an instrument, however, the Yugoslav accompanies himself on the guše (a kind of mandolin which plays a single string) or on other instruments (tsaita, tirsula, talaporta, alabka, triktika, et cetera) is used in Basque troubadourism. Basque melodies are unique and cannot be translated. Although Basque music is very often made up of simple songs, it is remarkable in this context that it is slow and syllabic—that is, very musical in its shape. One can envisage the character of Basque troubadourism in the saying "The Basque troubadour is the troubadour who could not naturally live by his profession. He is not really a professional, but his audience does buy him drinks, and if he is good, they will give him a little money for the entertainment he has given them." (15). Fortunately all this is not changing, but even today no baskitori makes a living from his art. After this brief study of some of the similarities and differences between Basque and Yugoslav bards, one can say that improvisation is more complete among the singers of Basque than in the Yugoslavs. A bard is made up of a clear and well-developed formula; the quantity is less than that achieved by the Yugoslav, it is still amazing, considering that the Basques do not have the tradition of the troubadour. Listening to baskitori is rare, it would seem from the paucity at the end of each line. In bertsolarism, enjambment is practiced to a lesser extent...