Poetry and Politics: Basque Poetry as an Instrument of National Revival (Part II)

By GORKA AULESTIA  In an essay published in the Winter 1981 issue of this journal (WLT 55:1, pp. 48-52) I surveyed the literature of the Southern Basque Country beginning with the Carlis fists in the nineteenth century. In this sequel I would like to give the North and its literature the same recognition and, in particular, study the influence that Basque poetry has had in the resurgence of the Basque nationalism spirit in the Northern Basque Country since the French Revolution. A brief introduction and historical summary will help the reader understand the context in which this poetry developed.

The entire Basque Country (North and South) contains nearly 3,000,000 inhabitants, of whom 250,000 live in the North or French portion. The three Northern provinces are Labourd (800 km²), Basse Navarre (1,284 km²) and Soule (785 km²). The Southern Basque provinces are Biscay, Guipuzcoa, Alava and Navarre. Euskara is the Basque language, and Euskadi is the Basque name for the Basque Country. Although there are more than 500,000 Basque speakers, only 75,000 of them live in the North. Written Basque has never been a cultural vehicle. In general, Basques have been denied their own universities and schools, and as a result the majority of Basque speakers are illiterate where the written language is concerned. In the North the number of those who can write Basque is very small, and consequently literature, especially political literature, is quite limited.

Politically the Basque provinces of the North and South have followed different paths. For centuries the provinces were free both from foreign nations and from their sister provinces. In spite of the common ties of race and language, they never formed a state in the modern sense of that word. Only at the beginning of the eleventh century were they united under the reign of Sancho III, called “the Great” (999-1035). Later Navarre considered itself an old kingdom, Biscay a seigneury and Guipuzcoa a country of communes. The attitudes of the central governments in Paris and Madrid have been basically the same: desire for total control. Paris tolerates the Basques as long as their situation does not transcend the realm of folklore, and Madrid represses them, including their folklore. Economic differences are also evident: the Southern provinces are industrialized, whereas in the North industry is nonexistent and the people make a poor living off agriculture.

The French Revolution brought forth not only the slogan “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” but also consequences that were good for France and the whole world. In general it was a step forward for the liberty of a people subjected to the caprices of an absolutist king and a privileged nobility. In large measure it was a product of the spirit of the Century of Light that was realized in the battle waged against darkness by Montesquieu, Diderot and Voltaire. However, not all of it was positive, especially with regard to the minority nationalities. The 1789 spirit of liberty degenerated soon after into an avid Jacobin spirit of uniformity. This centralistic spirit of a Unified State had begun with the Capetian kings, grew stronger with Richelieu and the Bourbons and finally overwhelmed the world with the French Revolution and Napoleon I.

The majority of Basques in the three Northern provinces opposed the Revolution. They felt that they were losing a great deal more than they were gaining in the name of the total equality of the French, for the Basque Country was one of the oldest democracies in Europe and was self-governed by its thousand-year-old charter, “Usages and Customs.” The Basques had never known the servitude of a feudal period. In the midst of a feudal Europe the Basques maintained some genuinely democratic institutions, where individual liberties as well as local and regional affairs were settled in Assemblies. The revolutionaries considered these institutions and rights as special privileges which should be abolished. The Revolutionary Assembly divided the hexagon of French territory into eighty-three départements. In this way the three Basque provinces were forced to form the Department of the Lower Pyrenees, along with Béarn, a territory of very different cultural and political characteristics. The protests of the Garat brothers of Labourd were useless. José Garat’s cry, “my province protests,” was the death rattle of a region losing its self-government.

The fatal consequences of this reform were not long in coming. The Basque language, legalized by the new Constitution, became a symbol of fanaticism and was considered “barbarous and coarse gibberish.” Determined to survive, the Basque Country generally launched an active but nonviolent resistance to the assimilation efforts. This stubbornness elicited deportation and death. The situation did not improve with the seizing of power by Napoleon I. After a relative calm of twelve years, the Basques again found themselves wrapped up in the arbitrary reforms of the
Civil Code and the establishment of the prefectures. The war between France and Spain forced many Basques to take up arms against their fellow Basques. This imperialism of the young ruler also had an effect on Spain, causing a great deal of the political unease that led to the two Carlist Wars (1833–39 and 1872–76). As a result of these conflicts, the French Basque Country experienced strong cultural and economic deprivations throughout the nineteenth century, an experience reflected in the second half of that century in the literary work of the priest Gracian Adema or “Zalindu” (1828–1907).

From what we have seen of the twentieth century, this centralist attitude of the different French governments toward the Basques has not changed, in spite of the many services they have rendered France. Lack of Basque identity is manifest. The number of Basques who do not speak their own language has risen from 6% to 55% in the last fifty years. However, owing to the defeat in the Algerian War (1954–62), the appearance of the Enbata movement and especially the radicalization of the nationalist ETA, a deeper Basque consciousness has been noticed in the last few years. In 1963, on “Aberri Eguna” (day of the Basque Country) in Itxaso, a great advance took place among the Basques of the North and South. A letter was written which declared that the Basques were a nation and wanted to live in a democracy as a people united by territory, race, language and institutions.

In addition to a desire to regain ethnic values, some markedly anti-capitalist tendencies are evident in certain Basque political movements. The socialist independence movement ETA has encouraged this attitude in the North of Euskadi. Part of the Basque youth has realized that ethnic alienation is above all cultural, political and social; the facts are too clear to go unnoticed. The loss of Basque identity is notorious: loss of the Basque language, the constant exodus of young people for lack of work, tourism by non-natives, no autonomy of management especially in the economic field, lack of factories, et cetera. This anti-Basque policy practiced by France for the last two centuries is reflected in the words of Georges Pompidou, President of the French Republic in 1972: “There is no place for regional languages and cultures in a France destined to mark Europe with its stamp.” The impression that many Basques have is that Paris doesn’t kill like Madrid, but that she helps one to die well. This unease has taken concrete form in the creation of a movement called “Iparretarak,” the Northern counterpart to the ETA, which also uses violence to attain its objectives.

The development of this sad reality has been reflected in poetry, especially in the last few years. Once again song and verse have united to condemn the unjust sociopolitical and cultural situation that Northern Euskadi suffers. One of the pioneers is the poet Jean Diharce or “Iratzeder” (b. 1920), at present an abbot in the Benedictine monastery of Belloc in Labourd. His poetry has centered particularly on the Second Vatican Council’s reform concerning the translation of religious texts into vernacular languages. However, the patriotic feeling manifested in some poems that appeared in his book Pindar eta Lanho (1920–1941) has not been relegated to second place by his religious work of the last few years. The deep feeling caused by the pain of seeing his country divided and destroyed stands out in his poetry. “Zorigaitzeko Euzkadi” (Unfortunate Basque Country) and “Aberri Eguna” (Day of the Country) reflect the young poet’s feelings in the years 1937–38. Although the spelling of some words does not agree with the norms handed down by the Academy of the Basque Language, his Basque is pure and reflects the Labourdin dialect of the northern Basque Country. “Unfortunate Basque Country” well illustrates this purity.

Oi, nere bibotzeko Sort-Herri gaiocha, Zenbat zaitut maite! Herri minez herrian hilzerat banoa . . . Gau egunzera daredak zu baitan gogoa. Gehiago ez naite Bizi atsegabetan. Zato herioa! (O beloved and unfortunate native country, How much I love you! I am going to die because of the sufferings of my country. Night and day I carry you within me. I cannot live with more suffering. Let death come.)

The patriotic writings of the young poet had to include one theme that in 1937 seized the attention of the intellectuals of the free world, the destruction of the symbolic city of the Basques, Gernika (Guernica), by the Nazi air force in service to General Franco: “Gerni­ka! / I see you as the city of the dead. / You are nothing but a pile of demolished houses . . . / Springtime mocks the world: / A few flowers bloom in the blackened [demolished] walls.”

In 1934 the political movement “Aintzina” (Forward) was created in the Northern Basque Country. It was a regionalistic movement fighting for the conservation of the Basque language and the restoration of regional traditions. In many ways it was a group from which the creators of the Enbata movement would later emerge. Michel Labeguerie was one of these militants. Although he has been discussed politically—he served in the French Assembly in the mid-1960's and joined the French Democratic Center in 1967—al Basques appreciate his work as a poet and a singer. His songs made the Basque soul vibrate during the sixties. His most famous poems are “Gu gira Eusakadiko gazte di berria” (We Are the New Youth of the Basqu Country) and “Nafarra, oi Nafarra” (Navarre, O Navarre). Both were written to be sung in the tradition: Basque % rhythm called sorkziko. He uses popular language, the Labourdin dialect dominating, and his didactic character stands out by means of a message directed especially at the young.
Father, what have you done
You have sold our beloved country to those from outside
What a disgrace!
All of Euzkadi is filled with foreigners
The Basque is no longer master of his destiny
We are the new youth of the Basque Country.
Euzkadi alone is our country.\(^{12}\)

In "Nafarra, oi Nafarra" Labeguerie praises the glorious past of the Kingdom of Navarre in contrast with the present sad reality. Prominent among the several symbols used in this poem are the rose, representing the unity of the seven Basque provinces, and the chains, embodying division and lack of liberty. The chains which form the escutcheon of Navarre are a symbol of honor and historical victories, but in contrast for the Basques:

seven sisters / Who has imprisoned you with chains?
Rise and go out in search of your sister provinces
the flower of unity in your hands.

Since the success of Labeguerie’s songs is due in large measure to the content of the poems which he used as lyrics, mention should also be made of the priest Pierre Larzábal (b. 1915), author of several poems sung by Labeguerie. In spite of his multiple occupations (priest, refugee-association director, ETA activist), Larzábal has shown himself to be a notable Basque writer as well. He is known especially for his dramatic works, which number more than a hundred. His poetic production is not very abundant, but some of his verses have been immortalized in the Basque Country because of their hopeful nature. "Aurtxo, aurtxoa" (My Child, My Child) depicts a mother cradling her infant as they await the return of the father from suffering.

Another poem, "Bakearen urtxoa" (Child of Peace), is full of tenderness. Larzábal’s Northern dialect is especially evident in some words—urtxoa (the child), girare (we are), gerla (war), othoi (please), errozute (say), behau (look), Eskualdunak (Basques)—and the poem thus demonstrates the sad reality of the Basques’ division into two parts despite belonging to the same race. Once again, however, hope is stronger than suffering.

Bakearen urtxoa, hemen zaite geldi
Lur hau da sakratua, deitzen da Euzkadi.
Zorte txar batez joak girare apaldi
Denak anaiak-eta, bizi bi alderdi.
Gerla da berrikitan pasa hemen gaindi;
Euskaldunen urtxoa, othoi, mintza bedi!

Errozute deneri:
Oi Eskualdunak
Ez behau gau beltzari,
Bainan bai izarreri!
Bakea dela zueri\(^{15}\)

Say:
(Gimmie bearer of peace, remain here,
This land is sacred, it is called Euzkadi.
For a long time we have lived afflicted by an evil.
Being brothers we have to live divided in two.
The war has passed through here twice.
Basque child, please speak!
Proclaim to all:
O Basques
Do not look at the dark night,
But rather at the stars!
May peace be with you!)

If written poetry has had great importance in the resurgence of the Basque national spirit, oral poetry has been even more important, especially "bertsolarism." Bertsolaris or Basque troubadours are men committed to their people, spokesmen for their troubles. On more than one occasion they have suffered imprisonment, fines, and have found it impossible to perform before the public because of their condemnation of injustices committed against the Basque people. Their bertsolari is oral poetry created to be sung. Its most important quality is improvisation. The bertsolaris are given the theme, the music, the rhythm and the rhyme, and in the interval of two or three seconds they must improvise the bertsos before the public. The Basque language, rich in suffixes, lends itself to this, but there are very few Basques who ever master this difficult art.\(^{16}\)

One of the best bertsolaris in all the Basque Country, and without a doubt the best from the North in the past thirty years, was Fernando Aire, known as "Xalbador" (1920–76). A profound sensitivity and a lyricism hardly surpassed by the rest of the troubadours stand out in his poetry. He uses his native Basse-Navarrese dialect, one which has contributed in large measure to the mutual comprehension and unification of the Basque language. In spite of the dialectal differences, his bertsolari is easily comprehended by those accustomed to reading Basque. His best poems are collected in Odolaren mintxoa (The Language of Blood; 1976), whose most prominent themes are family, love, shepherding, God, friendship, justice, the Basque language and the problems of the Northern Basque Country. One of his best poems is dedicated to Navarre, his native province, divided in two by Spanish and French political interests in 1512. In some aspects very similar to Labeguerie’s "Nafarra, oi Nafarra," the poem’s eight stanzas focus on this arbitrary division of the mother province of Navarre and the consequent separation of the Navarrese people through "despicable laws of unbending politicians," treaties that are "only empty words," boundaries that are "only appearances."\(^{17}\)

As Labeguerie’s songs dominated the 1960s in the North, so did the lyrics and music of Telesforo Monzón...
(1904–81) revive the Basque nationalist spirit in the 1970s. Few men have known how to use their poetry to serve the Basque Country as did Monzón, a blend of writer, musician, orator and politician. His life—including Basque government service in the 1930s, exile, then election to the Cortés and to the Basque Parliament in the late 1970s—is a reflection of illusions, martyrdom, exile, resistance and a small nation's fight for survival during the last fifty years. Because he was born in Guipuzcoa he is included in the list of Spanish-Basques, only Basques in a period of national recuperation. This attitude, this love for all of Euskadi, is reflected in his abundant writings, both drama and poetry. His most important dramatic works are Menditarak (The Mountaineers; 1975) and Zurgin zaharra (The Old Carpenter; 1956), both notable for their lyricism. In his poetry the works of his youth, imaginative and romantic works written with a defensive purpose, must be mentioned (see p. 49 of my earlier essay). It is his poetry of the last fifteen years, however, that has made him famous. Following the tradition of the great bards such as Iparraguirre (1820–81), Monzón knew how to tap the soul of the Basque people. His poetry is outstanding for its power to communicate with the masses. He uses many highly expressive similes, images and metaphors, and his language is easily understood by Basques on both sides of the Pyrenees.

Monzón’s constant obsession was the unity of the Basques, all Basques, including the Navarrese. He never accepted a Euskadi without Navarre. [Basque was not called “Lingua Navarrorum” without reason.] The arrano beltsa or black eagle, symbol of the kingdom of Navarre, was beloved by Monzón, who accepted neither Franco’s dictatorship or King Juan Carlos’s reforms. He believed that Euskadi was deserving of self-determination, which would lead to independence. The gudaris (Basque soldiers) who rose up against Franco in 1936 were as honorable to Monzón as the young members of ETA who continue fighting for independence. The Spanish press treated him like a Basque “Ayollah.” Nevertheless Monzón was a believer in unity, even in a united Europe, as long as the Basque entity was respected as a nation. His poem “Batasuna” (Unity) directs the Basques to remain unified in their fight against the “black wolf” (the dictatorship).

Up comrades, rise up young man! Wake up, girls and women! An irrintzi [Basque cry] fills the air a cry to battle! The Basque people are waiting for us and watching us, and so are the prisoners and the dead! Being patriots today, let us unite fraternally! If we are united in the battle for Euskadi, Let’s go into combat, we can overcome!19

After the fight will come liberty. The word nagusituko (we can overcome) here has filled many Basque hearts with courage, and this and other poems by Monzón have been sung in all Basque street demonstrations since the death of Franco.

In this united battle for national recovery, Euskara or the language of the Basques was one of Monzón’s greatest concerns. When he was a prisoner and was forced to appear before Spanish judges, he refused to speak Spanish, because he considered it to be one more weapon of cultural oppression in the Basque Country.20 His preoccupation with Basque makes itself especially obvious in the poem “Plazara, euskara” (Go Out Into the Square, Euskara), an echo of a piece written in 1545 by Bernard Detxepeire.21 In this poem Monzón wants the Basque language to go out into the plaza, to make itself public in everyday life; its festive nature is very evident. It is dedicated to the children in the ikastolas (Basque schools) so that teachers as well as students might bring this language back to life. During the last years of his life he worked especially for the unification of Basque as a means of unifying the Basque Country. Today, for the first time in the history of the Basque Country, Euskara is moving from the village into the university.

This type of committed poetry found great acceptance throughout Euskadi, but especially with the young people fighting for national Basque identity. In the North the French government has always respectfully maintained that the Basque problem is no more than a fact of folklore.22 In the South, in 1960, Franco’s forces began practicing torture on young militant Basques in jails and police stations. Then in 1968 the first death sentence was handed down—though it was not carried out. Monzón became a voice for this suffering and wrote the poem “Itziarren semea” (Itziar’s Son), a dialogue between a mother and her tortured son. The poem is quite distinctive because of the realism that is used when mentioning the different tortures. The influence of the Northern dialects is especially evident here, as the poet uses many words uncommon in the South: tinko (firm), nihor (no one), jali (to go out), mintza (to speak), fitzik (nothing), zango (leg), Igorri (to send), pulliki (softly), etcetera.

I had seven men around me striking me . . . They have beaten me and kicked me on the ground . . . but I have not declared a single name, and they are left knowing nothing.

They put my head in water four times They hung me by my legs But I have not declared a single name.

Blood and sweat dripped down my face . . . They have destroyed my lips and pulled out my fingernails

But I have not declared a single name And they are left knowing nothing.23

Monzón has passed into the history of Basque literature as a man of extraordinary sensitivity and refinement. In his final years he evolved socially from a
bourgeois attitude to a kind of humane and Christian socialism; still his entire literary production is an expression of a fire that burned within him: his love for the Basque Country. His friendship with the militants of the Marxist Left did not keep him from maintaining either his religious convictions or his loyalty to his people and their struggle.

Not only Monzón’s work but also the writings of such younger poets as Manex Pagola (b. 1941), author of the strongly anti-capitalistic “Ez dut bilatzen” (I’m Not Searching), are a consequence of centuries of absurd centralism. This type of policy leads only to mass uniformity, whose first victim is France. Sartre, for one, wanted true independence for France, not an outdated chauvinism: “Il y a un peuple basque et un peuple breton, mais le jacobinisme et l’industrialisation ont liquidé notre peuple: il n’y a plus, aujourd’hui, que de masses françaises.” The Basques continue to prefer a Europe of nations rather than of states. They are aware that with the cry “Long live France” or “Long live free Québec” they can disappear from the map of Europe. They are neither racist nor violent when they are not attacked. They only wish to survive as Basques—and not merely dancing, as Voltaire defined them: “Ce peuple qui saute au pied des Pyrénées.” As long as there are Basque poets who sing with love to their people, Euskadi will continue to exist.

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The institutions that regulated judicial, political and administrative order were the Bilzar (Assembly) of Ustaritz (Labourd) and the Couris of Basse Navarre and Soule. These institutions were replaced by the Constitutional Assembly in 1790.

After nearly two centuries of such arbitrary reform, François Mitterrand, on the eve of France’s 1981 presidential elections, promised the creation of a département called “Basque Country” (Euskadi, 234, 25 May 1981, p. 6).

The Basque Joseph Garit, in his capacity as Minister of Justice, was the one who informed the unfortunate Louis XVI of his death sentence. Later as a Senator of the Empire he suggested to Napoleon I the creation of an autonomous Basque state composed of the seven provinces (North and South) and federated with France. See Philippe Veyrin, Les Basques, Bayonne, Arthaud, 1975, p. 191.

The guillotine was being used in Labourd. On 3 March 1794 4,000 Labourdins Basques were deported to Les Landes; more than half of them died under atrocious conditions (ibid., p. 34).

After the Spanish Civil War, Basque refugees formed the Euskadi battalion, which liberated Bordeaux with the Allies. De Gaulle said that France would not forget the sacrifice of the Basques, but events soon proved his words false. In 1945 France and the Allies did not depose Franco, who remained in power for another thirty years. See Ronald Koven, San Francisco Chronicle, 4 December 1970, p. 2.


“Enbata” (meaning the ocean wind that precedes the storm) is a Basque nationalist movement favoring liberation and holding federalist principles. It was created in 1960 in the North and cooperates with other ethnic movements of the “Hexagon”—Bretons, Corsicans, Occitans, etc. The ETA or “Euskadi ta Askatasuna” (Basque Country and Independence) is a socialist movement for independence created around 1958 in the South; today it is divided into military and political-military wings.

Goyhenetxea, p. 42.

Iratzeder, Cure Herría, January 1954, pp. 42-44. All translations are my own.

Outstanding among these intellectuals are Jacques Maritain, François Mauriac and Paul Eluard. The last-named writer’s poem “La victoire de Guernica” reflects the courage of the Basques in spite of the destruction; its last line, “Nous en aurons raison” (We will be right), reflects the hope of the Basques for the future.

Iratzeder, pp. 45-46.

Euskadi, no. 192, 7 August 1960, p. 32.

Michel Labeguerie, Cure Herría, October 1964, p. 22.

Euskadi, no. 192, 7 August 1960, p. 32.

Laume, with music by Michel Labeguerie, Göttrich, record no. 50.327, Baiona.

My detailed study of the berolcarlos, “Characteristics and History of Basque Troubadours,” is forthcoming from the Basque Studies Program, University of Nevada, Reno.

Fernando Alae, Odalaren mintsoa, Tolosa, Aupsa, 1976.

Navarre remains separate from the three Basque provinces (Biscay, Guipuzcoa, Alava) in the South. No one has been able to resolve this problem, not even in the new constitution ratified under the mandate of King Juan Carlos. For a variety of reasons the great majority of Basques rejected this constitution.


Monzón was very fond of the Spanish language, and in fact his first poems were written in that tongue. Sensitive to the problems of Spanish immigrants in the Basque Country, he dedicated several poems to them in Spanish. See e.g. Herríaren oñatua, with music by Monzón, Dialkia, record no. 84.002, Donibane Lohitzune.

Linguas Vasconum Primitias (First Fruits of the Basque Language, 1545) by Bernard Detexpare was the first published Basque book. It is composed of fifteen poems written in the Basque-Navarrésse dialect. Poem number XVI is titled “Kontrapas.”

The difficulties that the Basque schools have had demonstrate the policy the different French governments have maintained toward the Basques.

Punto y Hora, no. 217, 13 March 1981, p. 32.