COMMENTARIES

Poetry and Politics: Basque Poetry as an Instrument of National Revival

By GORKA AULESTIA  Politics has had a marked influence on the artistic production of Basque poets, particularly since the nineteenth century. Due to the pragmatic personality of the Basques, their various artistic expressions, music and poetry above all, have become a means of survival and defense. A literary movement interested in the art of writing itself, like the French Parnassians of the nineteenth century, would be almost inconceivable among the Basques. However, fighter/writers like Blas de Otero could easily be accommodated within the framework of Basque authors, even if they have never expressed themselves in the Basque language. Most of the major Basque poets are more fighters than artistic innovators. This is especially true of the modern writers who describe their nonconformist attitudes, the lack of freedom and the rights of a minority which refuses to disappear. The Basque language and the suffering of the Basque people are the central themes of their production. This survival instinct is not unique to the present century; Víctor Hugo wrote of it following his brief trip to the Basque Country in 1843. 2

José M. Iparraguirre (1820-81), author of the poem of the national anthem "Gernikako Arbola" (The Tree of Gernika), 3 was the first poet-singer to describe the partial loss of Basque liberties as a consequence of the First Carlist War (1833-39). The old oak tree of Gernika (Guernica) is the symbol of the ancient Basque laws and liberties. Technically speaking, "The Tree of Gernika" is not a good poem; it even violates syntax in the first line. Yet its direct language and emotional content compensate for these deficiencies.

The quality of Iparraguirre's poetry is generally poor, due to the lack of rhyme and rhythm, but its deep emotion appeals to the most intimate feelings of the people. A good example is his poem "Ara, nun diran" (There They [mountains and meadows] Lie), which the troubadour sang upon returning from exile.

Oi Euskal-erri, eder maita
ara emen zure semea,
bere lurrari mun egitera
beste gabe etorria.
Zuregatikan emango nuke
pozik, bai, nere bizia,
beti zuretzat, il arerano,
gorputz ta arima guztia. 4

(Oh Basque Country, beautiful and beloved, here is your son who has returned only to kiss his land. I would gladly give my life for you, my body and my soul are always yours until I die.)

Felipe Arrese Beitia (1841-1906) writes technically better poems which have earned him several awards. Yet, similarly, his poetry does not reach the heights of that produced by more modern, conceptual poets like Lizardi and Orixe. Arrese Beitia's poems are colorful and overdeveloped. As in the case of Iparraguirre, his favorite subjects are Basque liberty and the gradual decline of the Basque language. After the Second Carlist War (1872-76), another defeat for the Basque forces, the remaining Basque laws and liberties were totally abolished. Arrese Beitia expresses the constant frustration of the people in this manner:

Beloved, ancient mother tongue,
a loyal son comes to you now
to salute you for the last time.
All these wars have aged you completely and you are sick from your wounds.
Beloved mother tongue, you will die. 6

Both Iparraguirre and Arrese Beitia prepared the terrain for the strong nationalist movement which sprang up at the turn of the century. The military
defeats and the loss of Basque autonomy caused a revival of the people's conscience. With Sabino Arana Goiri (1865–1903), the father of modern nationalism, there began the first revival of Basque letters (1876–1936). The fact that Arana Goiri learned the language in his youth is reflected in the rigidity of his expressions. His excessive use of neologisms gives his poems an artificial luster, as if created in a laboratory. His radicalism (as a result of the political situation in Euskadi at the end of the nineteenth century) prompted him to renovate the language's orthography, syntax and morphology, quite often ignoring the values of the traditional literature. In spite of these deficiencies, the work of Arana Goiri was outstanding and became the fountain which nourished the next generation of poets like Lizardi, Lauaxeta and Orixe. At the center of his poetry lies his main preoccupation: his downtrodden and defeated country.

Beloved homeland,
you are under the Spanish power.
Death is preferable.
Yesterday a good prayer
was raised from your forests.
Today, after the foreigners came,
the air is polluted here.
How are you still alive?

As he himself confesses, he conceives of poetry from a pragmatic point of view: "We have never liked literature. . . . But when poetry has a practical application, then it is adequate, honorable and fabulous." (360).

The revival of Basque literature made an impression on other writers, such as Miguel de Unamuno. This renowned philosopher, who never had a good command of the Basque language, predicted its disappearance due to its inability to express modern concepts: "The Basque language is gradually disappearing. If the years of its life are numbered, what can the physician do?" Other great Basque poets like Lizardi, Orixe and Lauaxeta did not share Unamuno's views on the future of the language. The poetry of José M. Aguirre, "Xabier de Lizardi" (1896–1933), is comparable to the best produced by other literatures, and he undoubtedly the major Basque poet. In Biotzbegetian (In the Heart and in the Eyes; 1932) he describes nature concisely and conceptually, not in the manner of the romantics. His symbolistic style resembles more that of some authors of the Spanish "Generación del '27" than the warm poetry of Antonio Machado. He dedicated a poem to the philosopher and writer Unamuno, "Eusko Bidaztiarena" (Song of the Basque Traveler), in answer to Unamuno's attack on the Basque language in the Parliament of the Spanish Republic. Lizardi maintains that the ancient language can successfully express modern concepts, having an old body with a new spirit. Lizardi's poetry and the last twenty years prove his point. His contributions lent much prestige to poetry competitions.

The major poet of the revival period who wrote in the Biscayan dialect was Esteban Urkiaga, "Lauaxeta" (1905–37). Bide-Barriak (New Ways; 1931) and Arratzeberan (In the Late Afternoon; 1935) are his best works. Like Lizardi, he renewed Basque poetry by introducing the short verse. However, his excessive use of neologisms and synthetic verbs makes his poems difficult to understand. Because of Lauaxeta's political activity, he was assassinated by Franco's soldiers in 1937.

In addition to this educated poetry, mention must be made of a popular, less technical, but more spontaneous poetry: that of the bersolari or Basque troubadour who improvises and sings his poems at popular festivals. Kepa Enbeita, "Urretxindor" (1878–1942), was the best known and was much sought-after for the main festivities. His patriotic poems won many supporters for the Basque cause.

The Spanish Civil War (1936–39) divided the twentieth century into two parts. Once again, military defeat affected Basque literature. The revival movement originated by Sabino Arana suffered heavy losses. Some writers exiled themselves to South America, Basque schools were closed, and the language took refuge in rural areas, in churches and in monasteries. Only one book was published in Basque during the first ten years of the occupation of the Basque country by Franco's forces.

Telesforo Monzón (b. 1904), poet and minister of the Basque government-in-exile, published Urrundik (From Far Away; 1945) and Gudarien Eginak (The Actions of Basque Soldiers; 1947) while in exile. In the first he expresses his deep love for his distant country and praises the courage of peace-loving Basques who were forced to take up arms and defend their country; the courageous actions of the soldiers are described in his second book of poems. Another political figure and poet who deserves recognition is Jesús M. Leizaola (b. 1896), president of the Basque government-in-exile during the last twenty years; however, he is better known for his political actions than for his work in poetry.

Among the exiled poets, Nicolás Ormaechea, "Orixe" (1881–1961), is the most prominent. By 1934 he had published Barne-Muinietan (Deep Inside), an excellent collection of poems in which the author precisely and profoundly describes difficult subjects of Christian theology. Upon his return from exile Orixe published Euskaldunak (The Basques; 1950), a large collection of poems in which he depicts rural life in a small Basque village. Orixe's poetry is dense and at times difficult to understand, like that of Mallarmé. His return from exile and the publication of this book were important moments for Basque poetry. This unquestionable master of the 1950s attracted many young writers who later gave rise to a renaissance of Basque poetry. During the fifties poetry was the principal genre. Among the writers who remained in the Basque Country, Salbatore Mitxelena (1919–65) is an important fig-
ure. “Arantzazu” (You on the Hawthorn; 1949), a religious poem in popular language about the Virgin Mary, is the first major work of the postwar years. Mitxelena fought on the side of Basque culture during a period when writing in Basque was hazardous. “Bizi Nai” (Wanting to Live) reflects his preoccupation about the future of the Basques.

In the coming 21st century many will ask: where is the Basque Country? And we will have to answer: Yes, it existed here but the foreigners ate it up and swallowed it.

As it did during the European Middle Ages, Basque culture took refuge in several monasteries during the postwar years. In 1954 the Carmelite Santiago Onaindia (b. 1909) published the hitherto finest anthology of Basque poetry, Milla Euskal Oleri Eder (A Thousand Beautiful Basque Poems). His residence in Zornotza (Biscay) was the meeting place for many writers concerned, like Onaindia, about the survival of the language: “According to many / you [the language] are aged; / eaten by moths, / about to die. / If you die / how will I sing? / If you fail me / how will I breathe?”

At the end of the 1950s a second cultural revival took place in the Basque Country. Once more poetry was the primary genre and the fighting instrument of the people. Several political and religious events initiated this revival. In 1959 university students and a few others, tired of the long and oppressive period of Franco’s dictatorship, decided in favor of a political and cultural fight and created the movement “Euskadi Ta Askatasuna” (Basque Homeland and Liberty), popularly known as the ETA. One of its founders was the brilliant writer José Luis Alvarez Enparantza, “Txillardegi.” Among the religious events that influenced this revival were the presentation of Pope John XXIII’s Pacem in Terris and the meeting of the Second Vatican Council, both of which proclaimed support for the rights of ethnic minorities. The role of the clergy was decisive in this cultural renaissance. The Franciscan monastery in Arantzazu (Guipuzcoa) was an important meeting place for writers as well as a cultural center. It produced one of the best modern poets, Bitoriano Gandiaga.

Until this time Basque literature had been dominated by religious writers and subjects, but during this period numerous young, nonreligious authors wrote about social, urban and economic questions. From this new generation sprang a new radicalism, which accentuated the generation gap. Widely accepted poets like Lizardi and Orixe were reviewed and criticized mainly because their poetry did not reflect life in their industrial society. The desire which had arisen at the beginning of the century to unify the various dialects of the Basque language was rekindled. Unification was forcibly and polemically attempted, based on the Labortan and Guipuzcoan dialects, and the first attempt was accused of negligence toward literary tradition and popular expression in favor of creating neologisms. There was strong support for using Basque as a generalized means of communication in making the transition from a rural to a modern, industrial society. All these changes had marked influence on modern poetry, which again became the instrument of revival. Two poets stood alone in the decade of the 1960s—Gabriel Aresti and Bitoriano Gandiaga.

Gabriel Aresti (1933-75) attempted to renovate both the subject matter and the technique of modern poetry. As is often the case with pioneers, he was widely criticized. His opinions met with disapproval due to his radicalism, which had sprung from dissatisfaction and deep anxiety. The unification of the Basque language was one of his many preoccupations, and his poetry was both social and political. Like the Spanish writer Blas de Otero, Aresti had a marked preference for leftist movements. For his poems he chose free verse instead of the elaborated rhyme of Lizardi. Aresti’s language is not difficult to understand, although sometimes it does not flow smoothly, probably as a result of having learned it in his youth. Harri eta Harri (Stone and People; 1964), his best book of poems, is an excellent example of utilitarian verse devoted to social and political ideals. The poet compares such poetry to a hammer used to carve out truth. In those difficult years of Franco’s dictatorship, metaphors were necessary to camouflage otherwise prohibited ideas. Obsessed by the pain of his oppressed country, Aresti compares the central government to a bear and his homeland to his father’s house. To defend it, he is willing to die.

I will defend my father’s house against bears, against droughts, against usury and injustice. I will lose cattle, gardens, and properties, rents and interests, but I will defend my father’s house. They will take away my guns and with my hand I will defend my father’s house. They will cut off my arms, and with my arms I will defend my father’s house. They will cut off my arms and shoulders and with my soul I will defend by father’s house. I will die, my soul will be lost, my progeny will be lost, but my father’s house will still be standing.

The poetry of the Franciscan Bitoriano Gandiaga (b. 1928) conveys the same deep love for his Basque homeland, but from a different viewpoint. Unlike Aresti, Gandiaga is a native Basque speaker, and his language flows easily. Biscayen is his original dialect, and he is a strong advocate of a unified Basque. Gandiaga has two different periods. In Elorri (Hawthorn; 1962) his first book of poems, the author presents himself as a poet of nature and praises God for the small and beautiful things like white blossoms on a hawthorn shrub. His poetry is symbolic, and exhibits perfect rhyme. After twelve years of silence, he published Hiru Gizon.
Bakarka (Three Men by Themselves, 1974), a collection of social and political poems. This book reflects the thoughts and feelings of a person who does not accept the genocide of his people or the view of his country as merely of folkloric importance.

Gandiaga repeatedly complains because the truth and in his opinion those who ignore and neglect it are guilty: "They do not see our truth / or do not want to see it / Our truth is our identity, / our thirst to live as a people" (98). Examining the frustrating list of unfilled promises made by the central government, the poet warns his people about possible traps.

A thousand times we have fallen into the same trap: we extended our hands for help and each time we were tied down, losing our hands and our rights. Let's be careful with our hands: let's not extend them, with new chains. It is better to break them against the rocks, against those who offer us help. It is only we and nobody else who must free our heads from chains. (78-79)

Basques do not remain silent but cry out with their desire to develop their own identity fully: "We are not willing to be quiet / or to become like wine in the winepress / for the rich or the poor. / We express the thirst of a country / which did not grow up and mature" (41).

At the end of the 1960s "Ez dok Amairu," a newly-formed musical group, sang about Basque national values as well as social questions. One of the members of the group was Xabier Lete (b. 1944). Among his numerous poems about social and political injustice, "Poeta hoie (These Poets) is the most famous.

The man is taken prisoner.
What did he say? What did he do?
He asked for justice.
And the poet, and the poet stayed at home silent.
The man has been tortured.
What did he say? What did he do?
He has asked for freedom.
And the poet, and the poet remained silent behind closed doors. (14)

The fight against capitalism and social injustice spread over the Basque Country. Lete described the hardships of fishermen and their perils at sea in his poem "Atako Bandan" (Toward the Open Sea; 1974), where-in the conflict between ship owners and employees, the insufficient salaries and death at sea are dramatically portrayed.

Izerdia da gure, gurea da neke, soldata gutiekin alegia eske. Handik diru nahia inoiz ezin ase, behekoak hitzik ez du goiskoak du lege. (15)

(Hard work and sweat are for us, we are exploited in return for a meager salary. The owner loves money and never has enough. The worker cannot say a word: those on top make the law.)

Toward the end of the 1960s, violence increased in the Basque Country. Torture in prison, which had already been practiced for a few years, became more intense, and for the first time since the Spanish Civil War people were killed in the streets. Basque militants and Spanish policemen staged armed clashes, and repression increased. Since there was no freedom of the press, Basque priests again became the voice of condemnation. In 1968 five priests went on a hunger strike. Among them was the troubadour Xabier Amuriza. They published an open letter addressed to international organizations and denouncing the state of violence. They were convicted, sentenced to many years in prison, but later freed in 1976 after Franco's death. In a sad poem Amuriza describes their years of imprisonment in Zamora, one of the worse penitentiaries in Spain.

Zamora is in a corner of Spain. Perhaps there will be a better desert elsewhere. No mountains, no sea, no grass, no flowers. We have to live here for so long, away from our beloved Basque Country. The stomach is empty and the tongue tied up. Brutally punished, as if we were dogs. This is our dirty jail. We are still mentally sane but there are many reasons to be crazy. If by mistake one disobeys an order he is taken to an old, dark cell for forty days, alone.
No bed, no chair, no table. Nothing.
Rats live a thousand times better.\textsuperscript{16}

In the past fifteen years music has become a necessary companion of poetry in an attempt to reach the largest audience possible. Many poems become songs which people sing on almost any occasion. Today, in the democracy of King Juan Carlos, repression is still a fact of life, and penitentiaries are crowded. Simultaneously, the cultural revival is at its peak, and excellent poets are in the making. Basque poetry continues to serve a worthy cause and looks toward the future with hope.

In this brief survey I have sketched the interrelationships between poetry and politics only in the southern Basque Country (Spanish-Basque area). For a complete picture, a similar analysis of the situation in the northern Basque Country (French-Basque area) is necessary. From the days of the French Revolution to the present, French Basques have also been repressed, and their cultural life curtailed. Although the situation in this area has not been as brutal as that in the South, it must be duly recognized. In a future essay for \textit{World Literature Today} I hope to give the North and its literature this recognition.

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\textsuperscript{1} Some modern Basque poets like Jean Mirande do not accept a social or political poetry, but rather prefer simply the art of writing in itself.
\textsuperscript{3} The oak tree of Gernika represents Basque laws and liberties. Until the nineteenth century the kings of Spain came to Gernika to swear under this tree that they would respect Basque laws.
\textsuperscript{4} Luis Castresana, \textit{Vida y obra de Iparraguirre}, Bilbao, La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1971, p. 220. All translations in this essay are my own.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., p. 256. To give some flavor of the poetry discussed in this essay, I have included citations in the original Basque from three poets whose language represents three widely divergent styles.
\textsuperscript{7} Euskadi is the political name of the Basque country coined by Sabino Arana Goiri. The traditional name was Eusko Herria or Euskalherria.
\textsuperscript{9} Miguel de Unamuno, "Del elemento alienígena en el idioma vasco," in his \textit{Obras completas}, vol. 6, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{15} Xabier Lette, \textit{Atako Bandan}, Aristondo, Ondarroa, 1976, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{16} Anuriza's poem is cited here from a recorded song version by Maite Idirin, published by Elkar in Bayonne, France, 1976.