

I write in a strange language. Its verbs,
the structure of its relative clauses,
the words it uses to designate ancient things
- rivers, plants, birds -
have no sisters anywhere on Earth.
A house is *etxe*, a bee *erle*, death *heriotz*.
The sun of the long winters we call *eguzki* or *eki*;
the sun of the sweet, rainy springs is also
- as you'd expect - called *eguzki* or *eki*
(it's a strange language, but not that strange).

Born, they say, in the megalithic age,
it survived, this stubborn language, by withdrawing,
by hiding away like a hedgehog in a place,
which, thanks to the traces it left behind there,
the world named the Basque Country or *Euskal Herria*.
Yet its isolation could never have been absolute
- cat is *katu*, pipe is *pipa*, logic is *lojika* -
rather, as the prince of detectives would have said,
the hedgehog, my dear Watson, crept out of its hiding place
(to visit, above all, Rome and all its progeny).

The language of a tiny nation, so small
you cannot even find it on the map,
it never strolled in the gardens of the Court
or past the marble statues of government buildings;
in four centuries it produced only a hundred books...
the first in 1545; the most important in 1643;
the Calvinist New Testament in 1571;
the complete Catholic Bible around 1860.
Its sleep was long, its bibliography brief
(but in the twentieth century, the hedgehog awoke).

Bernardo Atxaga
(in *Obabakoak*, Vintage, 1994)

Translated by Margaret Jull Costa

By Way of Introduction to Basque Literature

Mari Jose Olaziregi

As the poem that serves as an epigraph to this article (Bernardo Atxaga's "I Write in a Strange Language") indicates, we can think of Basque literature as a hedgehog that has been asleep for too long, but that, fortunately, has managed to awaken in the 20th century. Thus the last hundred years of our literary history are the most interesting and worthy of review and for this reason the introduction will deal mainly with them. There will be few references to our ancient literary past because since the first book written in the Basque language – Bernard Etxepare's collection of poems *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* – was published in 1545, until 1879 only 101 books were published and, of them, only four can be said to be literary works. It is clear, therefore, that we are dealing with a late-blossoming literature, a literature conditioned by socio-historical circumstances that have hindered its development and are tightly bound to the ups and downs suffered by the language that sustains it: Basque, or *Euskara*.

Basque is a very ancient language of pre-Indo-European origin, and its origins are unknown to us. When we refer to speakers of Basque, we should also keep in mind that we are referring to a very small language community. Nowadays there are about 700,000 Basque speakers, or *euskalduns*, who live on both sides of the Pyrenees, in France and in Spain. The political border that divides the Basque country today (*Euskal Herria*) separates two different legislative regions. After the Spanish Constitution of 1978 was approved the Basque language was accepted as an official language, together with Castilian, in the provinces in the Spanish region. But the same is not the case in the French Basque Country, where Basque has not been given the status of an official language. The consequences of this imbalance are easy to predict: aspects such as the establishment of bilingual models of teaching, or the existence of grants for publications in the Basque language have made the literary system in the Spanish Basque Country much stronger and dynamic than the one in the French side.

But it wasn't always so. The first Basque-language books were published in the French Basque Country. After Etxepare's 1545 text, others followed which proved essential to the development of literature in Basque. I am referring to the 1571 translation of the New Testament and several Calvinist treatises by de Leizarraga, and the publication in 1643 of Pedro de Axular's *Gero*, thought to be the best example of mystical prose in the language. The publication of translations and edifying texts continued to take place, and from the 18th century onwards the majority of authors and works were published in the Spanish region. In 1765, the Royal Basque Society of Friends of the Country (*La Real Sociedad Vascongada*

de Amigos del País) and the Royal Seminary of Bergara were funded. Under the influence of ideas from the illustrated period (*La Ilustración*), authors such as Francisco Javier María Munibe, Count of Peñaflores, promoted and enlivened the cultural atmosphere of the era. I would like to highlight the activities related to promoting the language which took place in the period 1794-1808. At that time the eminent linguist G. de Humboldt visited the Basque country and became a defender and disseminator of Basque in European circles. Others would follow on his footsteps and, thanks to the influence of Romanticism, this ancient language sparked the interest of artists and people with a thirst for knowledge, such as William Wordsworth or Merimée, who made Carmen, a Basque woman, the main character of his famous novel.

However, the first signs of the emergence of a new spirit appeared in the last decade of the 19th century – a spirit that would shake the roots and shape the future of the literature. The dominance of works of religious edification and education was eroded, and the spectrum of literary genres widened: the work of poets such as Bilintx and Etxahun benefited from the emergence of new authors such as Arrese Beitia and the new narrative genres, particularly the novel, which at this point burst onto the Basque literary scene. The loss of the *fueros* after the second *Carlista* war (1873-1876) signalled the start of what critics have called the Basque literary “Renaissance”. During this period – and through the figure of Sabino Arana – the roots of Basque nationalism were firmly settled, and this influenced all the Basque literature of the first third of the 20th century. The pre-eminence of nationalist ideology meant that literary production in the first few decades of the 20th century was characterized by extra-literary aims, and was alien to the European Modernist movement, which attempted to subvert the language and forms of the modern age. I am referring to the group of writers who, in 1930, chorused Ezra Pound’s proclamation: *Make it new!* The regenerating airs of this movement did not reach the Basque shores until rather late in the 20th century, around the 1960s. The Basque novel took its first uneasy steps at the end of the 19th century, with Agirre, who tried to portray an idealized, essentialist world far removed from the industrial cities that were beginning to emerge in the Basque country. This first type of Basque novel was in fact a thesis novel, built around the three main themes of faith, patriotism and Basqueness, and its influence would last until the 1950s.

As for the other genres, it was undoubtedly poetry that bore the best fruits during the first half of the 20th century. Its literary tradition was much more established than that of the narrative genres; Lizardi, Lauaxeta and Orixe’s post-symbolist poetry, which explored and stretched the expressive possibilities of the Basque language, is among the best of its kind.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) had devastating effects on Basque literary production. The great number of dead and exiled authors, as well as the

tremendous repression exerted by the winning side, contributed to this factor. This was an era in which Basque names were prohibited, as well as inscriptions on Basque on tombstones; an era in which streets, government buildings, the cultural world, and more, were the channels through which Francoism imposed its censorship. It has been said that the post-war generation was one of the most important in Basque literature, because it was given something it needed more than anything else: continuity. The most popular genre at that time was poetry, among other reasons because it was easier to publish a few loose poems than complete works, and because during the years 1940-1950 normal publishing activity was practically impossible. Jon Mirande (1925-1972) stands out among the poets of the time: he was the first to counter the religious spirit that had permeated Basque poetry until the 1950s. Mirande was a heterodox and nihilist writer, a follower of Poe and Baudelaire and an avid reader of Nietzsche. He also wrote a novel, *Haur besoetakoa* ("The Goddaughter", 1970), a sort of Basque version of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Both Gabriel Aresti (1933-1975) and Jon Mirande belonged to what became known as the '56 Generation, a generation that tried to modernise Basque literature by bringing into it the modern propositions of the literatures of Europe, but which also, and above all, tried to liberate Basque literature from its political, religious and folkloric ties and make the aesthetic function paramount to any literary exercise. The events that took place in the Basque country a few years later, in the 60s (the economic and industrial developments, the establishment of Basque schools or *ikastolas*, the unification of *euskara*, political activity against the Francoist regime, campaigns for schooling in Basque, and so on), created a seedbed for new literary propositions. It has been said that the reigning cultural orthodoxy of the time was confronted by the political and cultural heterodoxy promoted by authors such as the aforementioned poet Gabriel Aresti, the famous philologist Koldo Mitxelena (1915-1987) and the sculptor Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003). After the publication of *Maldan Behera* ("Downhill", 1960), which showed the influence of Eliot, Aresti turned to social poetry with his famous collection *Harri eta Herri* ("Stone and Country", 1964).

As for the narrative genre, I would suggest that Txillardegui's (1929-) existential novel *Leturiaren egunkari ezkutua* ("Leturia's Hidden Diary", 1957) marked the beginning of the representation of modernity in Basque literature. A few years later, in 1969, the writer Ramon Saizarbitoria (1944) turned the literary tables with the publication of *Egunero hasten delako* ("Because It Starts Every Day"). This book brought about a rejection of existentialist poetics and an embrace of the type of experimental novel exemplified by the French *nouveau roman*. Thus began a period of experimentation with the genre of the novel. This exploration of form reached a peak in 1976 with the publication of *Ene Jesus* ("Oh Jesus"), also by Saizarbitoria. During the 1970s the country's most international author, Bernardo Atxaga, made his mark in the literary landscape.

Although at the beginning of his career he published post-avant-garde and experimental works, he soon moved towards more fantastic and realistic terrains. Towards the end of the 70s, the Basque novel recovered its love of storytelling, as did the literatures of neighbouring countries.

Although the arrival of democracy in Spain in 1975 did not bring about a dramatic change in the Basque literary paradigms of the era, it did provide the necessary objective conditions for the institutionalisation of Basque literature as an autonomous activity.

Basque Literature Today

The passing of the Statute of Autonomy (1979) and the Law of Normalization of the Use of the Basque Language (1982) permitted, among other things, the incorporation of bilingual education and assistance for publishing in Basque. With these changes, new publishing houses were established and the number of books published in Basque increased significantly. Between 1876 and 1975 an average of 31.5 books were published each year in Basque, while from 1976 to 1994 the average increased to 660 books per year. At present, some 1500 books are published each year, 59% of which are narrative. This is a significant increase, since only 18.7% of books published between 1876 and 1935 were narratives; the figure rose to 23.8% between 1936 and 1975, and to 48.5% from 1976 to 1996. The Basque literary network now consists of more than 100 publishing houses and approximately 300 writers (83% men, 17% women). Furthermore, the 1980s saw the establishment of a university degree in Basque Philology as well as that of organizations like EIE, the Basque Writers' Association (www.idazleak.org), and EIZIE, the Association of Translators, Correctors and Interpreters of the Basque Language (www.eizie.org). We have achieved excellent quality in the translation of international writers into Basque (Faulkner, Hölderlin, Maupassant, etc.); however, promoting the translation of Basque works to other languages is a task that remains to be done.¹

As in contemporary Spanish literature, in Basque literature also, the novel is the genre with the greatest impact and literary prestige and, of course, the one that offers the greatest profit for publishing houses. We could say that the Basque novel of the last three decades has adopted the postmodern premise that everything has already been told, but that we must remember it. That is, after the experimental period of the 1970s, the Basque novel seems to have regained its pleasure in simply telling a story. The modern Basque novel displays a clear eclecticism in its influences and literary intertexts and, although it adopts the techniques of modernism, it enjoys creating parodic and ironic combinations of genres and offering a considerable diversity of typologies. It could be said that most Basque novels of the last thirty years look inward (they are concerned with the subjective point of view, the narrative "I"), and that when they do look

outward, rather than a realism understood as a mimesis or representation of reality, they reflect a subjective realism that affirms that everything is a linguistic construct. Of course many other types of novels are being written, including genre novels (crime novels, comic novels and travelogues), historical novels (including historiographic metafiction) and hybrids that mix novel- and essay writing. However, it is no exaggeration to say that today's literary landscape is eclectic.

As far as the first typology is concerned – the novels rooted in subjectivity –, we could mention lyric and poetic novels that often reflect a *feminist/feminine* point of view, such as those that began to proliferate in the late 1970s: *Zergatik Panpox* (Why Panpox, 1979) and *Koaderno Gorria* (1998; *The Red Notebook*, translated by Kristin Addis, 2008) by Urretabizkaia; *Eta emakumeari sugeak esan zion* (2000; *And the Serpent Said to the Woman*, translated by Kristin Addis, 2005) by Oñederra; *Sísifo maite minez* (Sisyphus in Love, 2001) by Mintegi; *Agur, Euzkadi* (Goodbye, Basque Country, 2001) by Zabala; *SPrako tranbia* (Streetcar to SP) by Elorriaga, which won the Spanish National Prize for Narrative in 2002; *Larrepetit* (2002) by Lizarralde and *Negutegia* (Winter Quarters, 2006) by Rozas.

Another genre of novel, which has recently become popular in Basque is the crime novel. The influence of the American detective novel, for example, is particularly evident in the Chandleresque *Rock 'n' Roll* (2000) by Epaltza, *Euliak ez dira argazkietan ateratzen* (No Flies in Photos, 2000) by Iturralde, and the intriguing *Beluna Jazz* (Dark Jazz, 1996) and *Pasaia Blues* (Pasaia Blues, 1999) by Cano. Above all, these writers seduce the reader with suspense stories and often do so by subverting the parameters of the crime genre. Many realist novels have also been published in recent years. In fact, we should speak about *realisms*, such as the magical realism of *Babilonia* (1984) by Irigoien, or other (more or less subjective) realist novels such as *The Lone Man* (1996, translated by Margaret Jull Costa), *The Lone Woman* (1999, translated by Margaret Jull Costa) and *Soinujolearen semea* (2003) (*The Accordionist's Son*, 2007, translated by Margaret Jull Costa) by Atxaga, *Azken fusila* (The Last Rifle, 1993) by Jimenez, *Agirre zaharraren kartzelaldi berriak* (The New Jailtime of Old Agirre, 1999) by Izagirre, and *Urregilearen orduak* (Good Words, 1998) by Aristi.

We could also say that the contemporary Basque novel offers its writers a privileged means thorough which to analyze and reflect upon historical events such as the Spanish Civil War or the development of the terrorist violence of ETA in the bosom of Basque society. Often we visit our recent history in order to explore an historical discourse that is alien to us, and to prove that fiction can be much truer than history. The novels that Saizarbitoria and Atxaga have written since the 1990s are good examples of this type of novel. Saizarbitoria's *Hamaika pauso* (Innumerable Steps, 1995) is a novel about the generation of the 1970s that participated in ETA, and *Bihotz bi. Gerrako kronikak* (Love and War, 1999)

presents scenes of the Spanish Civil War that serve as a counterpoint narrative for the domestic war between the protagonist couple of the novel. The five stories of Saizarbitoria's most recent book, *Gorde nazazu lurpean* (Let Me Rest, 2000), reflect the two major threads of his recent work: the problems of communication between men and women (see *Rossetti's Obsession*, 2005, translated by Madalen Saizarbitoria), and the disastrous experiences of the Basque soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (two of the stories in *Gorde nazazu lurpean* could be considered historiographic metafiction). Whether recounting the vicissitudes of the Basque soldiers in the Spanish Civil War or telling of the burden of nationalism on his generation, he conjures up to some extent the ghosts that haunt Basque society.

The Lone Man and *The Lone Woman* are Atxaga's first realist (chronotropic realism) novels. Both deal with ETA's violence and the personal and social fragmentation the terrorist band leaves in its wake. Atxaga employs subjective realism in order to give voice to characters and situations that are rarely seen in the never-ending media bombardment about the 'Basque troubles.' The loss of revolutionary ideals (*The Lone Man*), the political re-insertion of ETA prisoners (*The Lone Woman*), and the betrayal of the armed group by one of its members (*Soinujolearen Semea*) are examples of a literary evolution that clearly intends to destabilize monological discourse (whether nationalist or non-nationalist) and to create an *oeuvre* that demonstrates the author's rejection of violence and his love of life (cf. Olaziregi: 2005).

Anjel Lertxundi is an author whose work is not only extensive but also offers continuous esthetic innovation with novels of magical realism (*Hamaseigarren aidanez*, *On the Sixteenth, They Say*, 1982), fantastic literature (*Azkenaz beste*, *Endings*, 1996) and even suggestive metanovels (*Argizariaren egunak*, *Days of Wax*, 1998). His latest work, *Perfect Happiness* (2006, translated by Amaia Gabantxo), is a realist novel with lyrical overtones. It explores the effect that witnessing a terrorist assassination has on the life of a sixteen-year-old girl. The novel is moral but not moralistic, because by confronting such horror the author takes a clear stand against the pursuit of a happiness devoid of conscience.

The Basque short story is a relatively recent genre in Basque literature for it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that writers like Aresti and Mirande first published stories that followed the modern tradition of Poe, Gogol and Maupassant, among others (cf. Olaziregi: 2004). Basque critics consider *Hunik arrats artean* (*Until Nightfall*, 1970) by Lertxundi to be the first book of modern stories in Basque, a book in which the echoes of magical realism are evident (García Márquez, Rulfo, etc.), as well as the influence of the literature of the absurd (Kafka, Artaud, etc.). Other collections of stories published in the same decade were more traditional or incorporated the experimentalism that was so much in vogue in Basque novels of the time. The 1980s, however, marked a

definitive turning point in the evolution of the modern Basque story. As in the case of Spanish literature, the greater numbers of literary journals and prizes encouraged a renaissance of the short story, but in the case of Basque, the ‘short’ genres (short stories and poetry) were revolutionized by the arrival on the literary scene of the Pott group (1978-1980) which included Atxaga, Sarrionandia, Iturralde and Odorika, and which was greatly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon tradition (crime novels, cinema, adventure fiction, etc.).

The Basque short story reached maturity in its most translated work, and the one that has received the most prizes: *Obabakoak* (1988; translated by Margaret Jull Costa, 1992) by Bernardo Atxaga. With this collection of stories, Atxaga demonstrates that although Basque writing may be described as ‘peripheral’ or as belonging to a minority literature this does necessarily imply that borders are impassable for a Basque writer; that is, it is possible to be international without forfeiting a genuine Basque identity. The emotional landscape of the imaginary town of Obaba is described as a virtual infinity in which the memory of the narrator weaves a suggestive framework of stories that combine metanarrative reflection with strategies of fantastic literature. For this purpose, the narrator departs on an intertextual voyage beginning with the *Thousand and One Nights* and ending with allusions to 19th and 20th century masters (Poe, Chekov, Maupassant, Villiers de l’Isle Adam, Waugh, Borges, Cortázar, Calvino). This voyage allows Atxaga to reflect on the relationships between literature and life and on the battle between nature and civilization.

Basque short stories have gained in richness over time (cf. Olaziregi: 2004). Within the present postmodern panorama, Basque short stories tend toward realism, whether of the fantastic type (as in the stories of Elorriaga), or of a type similar to the American dirty realism of Carver or Wolff (Montoia, Iturbe, Lizarralde), metafictional stories (Garzia, Zaldua), the literature of the absurd (Linazasoro, Cano) or microstories (Sarrionandia). Above all, the experimentalism of the 1970s has disappeared and simple pleasure in telling stories has been recovered. The fragmented reality that is described in our most recent stories shows the influence of the cinema, music and the media, and explores new modes of narration, new rhythms and linguistic registers.

As for poetry, words such as “eclectic” spring to mind again when one tries to describe the diversity of voices and poetic schools that populate it (cf. Olaziregi: 2007). The avant-garde ideas of the 1970s have been left behind, and instead, a variety of tendencies emerge on the horizon of contemporary Basque poetry: a wide diversity of poetics (poetics of experience, surrealist poetics, post-symbolist poetics, poetics of silence, etc.); use of various narrative styles; a preference for non-aesthetic poetics that dwell within the quotidian; an emergence of female voices that reclaim other codes, other universes, based on the female body; and so on. In addition, more and more often, audiences enjoy poetic

performances that combine poetry with music or other arts. Young contemporary poets especially seem to be influenced by the Beat generation and gritty realism. It is clear that what happened to the other literary genres has also happened to poetry – it has absorbed the characteristics literary critics describe as postmodern: a denial of transcendental meaning; an assertion that all literature is metaliterature in the end; a non-elitist attitude towards literary creation; use of pastiche; mistrust of language; hybridization of genres; and so on. In other words, Basque poetry displays a tendency towards aesthetic populism and a totally non-auratic attitude to the figure of the poet.

The development from Aresti's social poetry took place during the 70s, when the more existential poetry of authors such as Xabier Lete, Arantza Urretabizkaia or Mikel Lasa took over. Other authors took a post-symbolist stand – their aim was to evolve towards a more concise and synthetic style (e.g. Juan Mari Lekuona) or to move towards a deeper degree of introspection (e.g. Bittoriano Gandiaga). Koldo Izagirre also started writing in the 1970s. His *Itsaso ahantzia* ("The Forgotten Sea", 1976) dabbled with surrealist aesthetics, but his poetry became more politicized in 1989, with the publication of *Balizko erroten erresuma* ("The Realm of Fictitious Mills"). In the same way, Joseba Sarrionandia undertook a journey that revisited Kavafis, Holan and Pessoa in a collection of poetry that made many references to high literature: *Izuen gordelekuen barrena* ("In the Hiding Places of Fear", 1981), but he too moved closer to political poetry in *Marinel zaharrak* ("The Ancient Mariners", 1987) and *Huny illa nyha majah yahoo* (1995).

But the book that truly shook the poetic world of that time was Bernardo Atxaga's *Etiopia* (1978): it set the standard of modern Basque poetry. The appearance of this collection, together with some of those mentioned above, took place during a period, 1976-1983, in which Basque poetry experienced its most avant-garde moment thanks to the proliferation of literary magazines that acted as springboards for many of these authors. *Etiopia* could be defined as a collage of poems and stories with a circular structure. Atxaga addresses the tedium brought about by the end of modernity, the impossibility of addressing poetic language itself. There are ways to mock the sterility of language, to deny the Romantics' idealised assertions, and Atxaga borrowed from the spirit of Dadaism and invoked it in the scattered "blah, blah, blahs" and "etceteras" of his poetry. With the years, Atxaga's poetry became more "original" in Chesterton's sense of the word: it began to seek the origins of things. Freed from the baroque and far removed from the dramatics of his previous work, in *Poemas & Híbridos* (1990) Atxaga tries to recover poetry's essence. For this purpose, he tears up the non-neutral, topical language that is traditionally used in poetry and mixes it with Dadaist strategies, with the primitive and the infantile.

The 1980s started with a variety of poetic tendencies. Poets of the stature of Felipe Juaristi are indebted to the poetic, expressive and sentimental imaginary world of symbolism, to the *fin de siècle* movement. His *Galderen geografia* (The Geography of Questions, 1998) is worth of mention. Although the publication of poetic works has declined since the 1990s, new very interesting voices have joined the literary world in the last years. Ricardo Diaz de Heredia (*Kartografia* (“Cartography”, 1998)), Miren Agur Meabe (*Azalaren Kodea* (“The Code of the Skin”, 2000)) and Kirmen Uribe (*Bitartean heldu eskutik* (2001) (*Meanwhile Take My Hand*, Greywolf, 2007. Translated by Elizabeth Macklin) have played a defining role in the development of Basque poetry of the last ten years. In addition, interesting poets such as Aurelia Arcocha (cf. *Septentrio*), or the group of writers associated with the magazine *Susa* and writing more breakaway, underground poetry – Izagirre, Aranbarri, Nabarro, Montoia, Otamendi and Borda – has grown, and now includes the new voices of Olasagarre (*Bizi Puskak* (“Pieces of Life”, 1995)), and Cano (*Norbait dabil sute eskilarean* (“There’s Someone at the Fire Escape”, 2001).

Lastly, I would like say a few words about a genre that makes up 25% of the contemporary Basque publishing market: children’s and young people’s literature. The modernisation and stabilisation of this genre started in the 1960s (thanks partly to the influence of Marijane Minaberri’s books and the many translations that were published in those years). However, it was in the 1980s that children’s and young people’s literature written in Basque truly started to become established. Many books were published and many literary prizes were created during those years (the Lizardi, Baropea and Bilintx prizes, among others). Also, new and challenging literary styles started to emerge as young writers strove to renew the genre. For instance, Mariasun Landa wrote a critical-realist text such as *Chan fantasma* in 1984 (English title: *Karmentxu and the Little Ghost*. Translated by Linda White. Reno, University of Nevada Press, 1996), Bernardo Atxaga and Anjel Lertxundi wrote fantastic tales such as *Chuck Aranberri dentista baten etxean*, (“Chuck Aranberri at the Dentist’s”, 1980) and *Tristeak kontsolatzeko makina* (“The Happiness Machine”, 1988), and Bernardo Atxaga wrote avant-garde stories such as *Logalea zeukan trapezistaren kasua* (“The Case of the Sleepy Trapeze Artist”). The protagonists of this literary renewal were authors and illustrators who during the 1980s joined what was then known as LIJ, a tiny artistic enterprise.

As with Basque literature for adults, the textual poetics, trends and typologies are at present very varied in this field of Basque literature. So much so that trying to use generic typologies to describe the careers of some of the most relevant authors would be problematic. An example is Mariasun Landa’s constant renewal of her own writing. Other canonical contemporary Basque authors are: Bernardo Atxaga, Juan Kruz Igerabide, or Patxi Zubizarreta

Three interesting female voices to finish with:

Mariasun Landa, Aurelia Arkotxa and Miren Agur Meabe

The female writers that we are going to analyze now, as well as the ones we have mentioned before (Urretabizkaia, Mintegi, Oñederra, Rozas...) are particularly noteworthy, not only because they belong to the small percentage of female Basque writers, but also because, using various strategies, they give voice to female protagonists who were previously silenced in Basque writing.

Mariasun Landa (Renteria, 1949) has published 30 books so far and, after Bernardo Atxaga, is the most widely translated Basque author. She is a Philosophy graduate from Sorbonne and currently teaches at the University of the Basque Country. She has received many prizes both in the Basque country (the Lizardi prize (1982), the Euskadi prize (1991) and the Antonio María Labaien prize, 2002) and abroad (the White Ravens in 2002 for *Elefante corazón de pájaro* ("The Bird-Hearted Elephant" – 2001) and the 2003 Spanish Premio Nacional for children and young people's literature for *Un cocodrilo bajo la cama* ("A Crocodile Under the Bed" – 2004). For Landa, portraying intense and universal human emotions in a simple way is the greatest challenge for a writer in her field. Recently, she has published the autobiography: *La fiesta en la habitación de al lado* [The Party Next Door, 2007].

After publishing several books that were clearly influenced by Gianni Rodari's fantastic literature, the publication in 1984 of *Chan el fantasma* (*Karmentxu and the Little Ghost*), a text written in a critical-realist vein, was a turning point in Mariasun Landa's literary development. *Iholdi* is another key text in Landa's body of work. With it, the author matured into a more postmodern aesthetic expression. *Iholdi* is a fragmentary book, made up of sixteen micro-stories woven with surprising simplicity and exactitude and imbued with tremendous suggestive power.

One feature that stands out in many of Landa's tales is humour, especially nonsensical humour. Two good examples of this are *Galtzerdi suizida* ("The Suicidal Sock" – 2001), which tells the story of an adventurous sock who wants to commit suicide, and *Errusika* (English: *The Dancing Flea*, translated by Linda White. Nevada University Press, 1996), published in 1993, which is the story of a flea who wants to be a ballerina. Best among Mariasun Landa's most recent publications are *Elefante corazón de pájaro* ("The Bird-Hearted Elephant" – 2001) and *Un cocodrilo bajo la cama* ("A Crocodile Under the Bed" – 2003). The latter deals with themes such as solitude and anguish in an absurdist style. It relates the complicated ups and downs in JJ's life. JJ is an office clerk, a grey man leading a lonely grey life until the day he finds a shoe-eating crocodile under his bed. The tale is rich and audacious in its parody of psychiatric treatments and

anti-depressants, and the comic situations the main crocodrilitic character experiences will put a smile on most readers' faces.

Aurelia Arkotxa (1953) is a professor at the University of Bordeaux and a member of the IKER Centre UMR 5478 of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Bayonne, an association for research on the Basque culture, language and heritage. She is also a member of the Royal Academy of the Basque Language, and a French-Basque poet who defines herself as a hybrid writer, a writer who likes to cross and subvert borders. She has published two books of poetry: *Atari Ahantziak* (Forgotten Gates, 1993) and *Septentrio* (2001). *Septentrio* was rewritten for the French edition, which was published in Belgium in 2006 by Atelier du Héron (2006), and was published in Spanish translation in 2007 by Alberdania. Readers can find her work in the newspaper Berria, where her poetic narrations are published in Basque.

According to Arantzazu Fernández Iglesias and Eli Tolaretxipi, "Aurelia Arkotxa considers herself to be part of the so-called "Geopoetic" Movement, whose philosophy leads her to treat geographical spaces as the locus of the literary. The heart of her writing, the ramifications of her geopoetic stance in the texts of *Septentrio*, her debt to cartography, toponyms and itineraries, and her love of the wakes of the boats that set off across the ocean from Labourd must all be understood within this context."

Miren Agur Meabe was born in Lekeitio in 1962. She is a qualified teacher and has a degree in Basque philology. She taught at a Basque school (*ikastola*) in Bilbao for some years, but since 1992 she has been an editor at the Giltza-Edebé publishing house – where she is now senior editor. Meabe started her literary career with a collection of short stories, *Uneka... Gaba* (Momentarily... Night, 1986). She has also published a number of books for children and young people, among them *Itsaslabarreko etxea* (The Cliff House, 1999), which received the Euskadi Prize for young people's literature. This is a gothic adventure story, lyrical in tone, which is strongly influenced by one of the author's favourite novels: *Jane Eyre*. But it is her poetry, which has received most critical acclaim; her first collection was *Oi, hondarrezko emakaitz!* (Oh, Wild Woman of Sand, 1999), but her greatest success was *Azalaren Kodea* (The Code of the Skin, 2000), which received the Critica Prize in the year of its publication. Meabe has said that rebellion, non-conformity and a critique of stereotypes are at the heart of this book. The titles of the four different sections that make up the volume (Notes, Scars, Tattoos and Passwords) reveal the author's demand for a new code of communication, one that is more personal and ambiguous, more body-centered; a code unrelated to words, a code of the skin. Love, observed from different perspectives (nostalgia for lost love, desire and eroticism, the pain of distance) is an ever-present theme, but there is room for other subjects too, such

as the stress of everyday life, solidarity with the oppressed, and the rejection of aesthetic clichés.

Notes

¹ A list of works that have been translated to other languages can be found at www.basqueliterature.com.

Works Cited

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