

## THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF BASQUE LITERATURE, OR THE LONG WAY TO THE WORLD REPUBLIC OF LETTERS\*

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### 1. BASQUE LITERATURE

Before going on, we would like to point out that when talking about Basque Literature we are referring to the literature written in Basque. This differentiation deserves clarification since literature written in the Basque language has not provided – neither has the language that supports it, Euskara – the exclusive and complete literary expression of Basque reality. As Jesús María Lasagabaster rightly notes (Lasagabaster 2002), as well as the literature written in Basque there is Basque literature written in both Spanish and French, identifiable by the Basque origin of the authors who wrote it, by their subjects, and even by the presence of a *singular worldview* that may be said to be Basque. This is why Lasagabaster talks about “the literatures of the Basques”, and although it is true that, from a comparative point of view, most literatures are compared in terms of the language in which they are expressed rather than in terms of the author’s nationality (Guillén, 1998), the truth is that only recently has Basque literary historiography opted for a post-national approach, i.e. an approach that takes into account literature written by Basques in their various languages (Gabilondo, 2006).

The question is whether such an approach, appealing as it would be in terms of overcoming the inertia in Basque literary historiography, may lead to a historiographical approach that actually exceeds the limits established by each of the Basque literary systems (the Basque, Spanish and French ones, for example). Indeed, although it is true that Basque literary historiography is largely anchored to the contribution that the eminent philologist Koldo Mitxelena made in his famous *Historia de la literatura vasca* (1960), it is also true, as Estibalitz Ezkerra establishes (2012), that there is a great degree of

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detachment and even of estrangement among the literature written by Basque authors. In fact, as noted elsewhere (see Olaziregi 2010), the limited flow and impact of translated literature written in Euskara to Spanish and French could give us a good basis for analyzing the relationship between the different types of Basque literature.

For now, we believe that it is our right to claim Spivak's "strategic essentialism", which Ezkerra refers to, in order to give visibility to the lines tread by a language and its literature which, until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have not had the historical, legal and social conditions to develop naturally, and even now continue to encounter obstacles, impeding its complete natural development. Mitxelena himself, in several of his publications, listed the impediments faced for centuries by Basque language and culture, which included the difficulties of publishing in Euskara, the fact that it was forbidden to do so, the lists of lost publications, and so on (Mitxelena, 2001). This highlights why one of the most essential elements for the canonization and legitimization of literary texts, which is their teaching at different levels, only took place in Euskara rather late in the twentieth century. The University of Oñati, which emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, or the Royal Seminary of Bergara, which was created under the auspices of the Enlightenment, exemplify the academic version of the endemic illness of our literary past: the fact that our leaders, even at the time of the *fueros*, never worried about the fate of Euskara, and particularly about making education and literacy available in our language. We must remember that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Euskara is declared "patois" in the French Basque region and, on the Spanish side of the Basque Country, laws are passed for the expansion of schooling in Spanish (e.g., in 1780 teaching the Royal Spanish Academy's grammar became mandatory in all schools).

We know, through the data provided in Juan Ignacio's *Guipuzcoaco provinciaren condaira* (A history of the province of Gipuzkoa, 1847), that five out of six gipuzkoan citizens knew only Euskara. However, everyday administration and politics took place in Castilian, oblivious to the world of Euskara, which meant that only one-sixth of the inhabitants of the province of Gipuzkoa were politically active at the time. Meanwhile, literary life was virtually nonexistent in the Basque language during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Lasagabaster, 2005: 157). Most of the authors and works that pre-date the 19<sup>th</sup> century, included in our literary history didn't belong to the Basque literary system, but were part of the pastoral and catechetical activity of the Catholic Church.

The significant achievement of Basque literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is undoubtedly meaningful, but such significance is justified not only by the definite increase in Basque literary production, especially from the 1970s on,

but by the fact that it was in the mid-20th century that Basque literature was established as an autonomous activity within the Basque society. Thus, as we can see, we speak of a late literature, a literature that has not had too favorable socio-historical-political conditions for its development and which has been linked, it goes without saying, to the vagaries of the language that sustains it: Euskara, a pre-Indo-European language that is spoken today by about 800,000 *euskaldunak* or Basque speakers who live mostly on both sides of the Pyrenees. The political border that divides the Basque Country or Euskal Herria today, marks, in turn, different legal situations. Whereas after the approval of the Spanish Constitution of 1978 Euskara became, together with Spanish, the official language of the two Basque autonomous regions in the Spanish zone (Basque Country and Navarre), this was not the case in the French Basque Country, where Euskara is a non-official language. The consequences of this inequality are easy to predict: the introduction of bilingual education models and the availability of grants for publishing in Euskara have meant that today, the Basque literary system is much stronger and dynamic on the Spanish side of the Basque Country than in France.

## 2. A GLOBAL VILLAGE THAT IS NOT THAT GLOBAL

If the effects of globalization have come to be understood most prominently at a technical or economic level –giving rise to terms such as “economic liberalization,” “single thought” (*pensée unique*), “deterritorialization,” and “Westernization”– as regards the social, cultural and political spheres, the tendency has been more to emphasize that the global village is not so global. New “ethnic landscapes” are the most disturbing form of an unsteady and uneven world; a world in which the foreigner has become a symptom.

In this context, “What are the possibilities of a literature such as Basque, creating a place for itself in the World Republic of Letters?”. That was the subject that inspired the symposium titled, “Writers in Between Languages. Minority Literatures in the global scene”, held at the Center for Basque Studies in Reno, Nevada, in 2008. We attempted to think about the consequences of bilingualism for writers in a minority language, like Basque, in that they are located in that “in-between” state of different cultural and identity communities subjected to the constant exchange and recognition of differences. One could say that practically all the current million Basque speakers or *euskaldunak* who live on both sides of the Pyrenees in Spain and France are bilingual. And that this bilingualism is formed in conjunction with such a widely spoken language as is Spanish, and such a prestigious language in literary circles as is French; languages that, in turn, have been displaced by the enormously central

and legitimizing place that English occupies in the current global framework. The symposium attempted, moreover, to debate the consequences implied by linguistic extra-territorialization for many authors in a minority language, the realignment implied by the hegemony of English for all other literatures, and the options open to a minority author to get their voice heard in the World Republic of Letters.

But the question is whether writing in Basque is still a task undertaken for political reasons –such as that of contributing to the construction of the Basque nation– or, in contrast, whether Basque literature has gone through a clear autonomy process and now includes, among its requirements, that of literary validation by means of translation into more central languages. As Pascale Casanova argues, translation, beyond naturalization (in the sense of a change of nationality), implies *littérisation* or asserting oneself as literature –building up one’s literary capital– before legitimate institutions. The latter, due to the increasing reliance on the commercial model, is in fact shifting away from Paris to what she terms the “literary Greenwich meridian.” And in a market where intellectual and publishing logic have grown apart, it is clear from the outset that an author who already writes in a “universal” language can avoid having to be validated by translation when competing for a place in the world rankings. For this reason, translations are much less common in literary production in the United States or the United Kingdom. Indeed, this low figure of translations compares starkly with the 25 percent of publishing output in the Basque language, a production totaling 1,500 new titles annually. Indeed, the central place of translations in the Basque literary system is proof of its weakness and relatively short life.

One could say that the first book published in Basque –*Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* (1545), by Bernard Etxepare– was born with a clear universal vocation, but also that this longing to universalize Basque literature did not take shape until five centuries later. In effect, a saying included in one of the poems in Etxepare’s book (“Euskara, jalgi hadi mundura!” “Basque language, open up to the world!”), which is actually the motto of the Etxepare Basque Institute, the public institution that promotes Basque culture and language abroad, tells us that *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* sought to transcend the local arena. Yet it is also true that until Bernardo Atxaga’s *Obabakoak* (1989) was published, no other Basque literary work had managed to go beyond our own literary system. The favorable reception of the twenty-seven translations of Atxaga’s book demonstrates his skill in an eagerness to break down the invisibility to which globalization submits so-called peripheral literary voices. One might consider the imaginary geography he created, Obaba, to be a place of memory in which a collective Basque memory takes shape. Constructed

out of Basque legends and oral tales, this geography is broken down, at the same time, through the continual dialogue maintained with Western literary tradition.

Yet *Obabakoak* is the exception in our recent literary historiography and in this way is referring to a work whose international projection has no equivalent in the Basque literary system. The translation of universal texts into the Basque language allowed, as in the case of other smaller literatures, the autonomy process of Basque literature to accelerate after 1980 via the incorporation of a body of modern poetics and the renewal of Euskara. However, it is also true that translations in the other direction, namely, Euskara into other languages, have been few in number (around three hundred in total, more or less). This is then, a good example of the tremendous limitations of our literary institution at present.

In reality, the fact that Basque political institutions such as the Basque Autonomous Government did not subsidize Basque literature translations until 2000, or that until the creation of the Etxepare Basque Institute in 2008 (cf. <[www.etxepareinstitutua.net](http://www.etxepareinstitutua.net)>), there was no official body to promote Basque language and culture internationally, are clear examples that cultural priorities have been affected by political objectives. These objectives, in turn, have led to the heteronomization of literature, to use a Bourdieuan term. Even the 30 Basque language and culture lectureships present worldwide and in existence since 2003 have not helped to avoid the sense of insularity provoked by Basque literary institutions among Basque writers. Indeed, Basque literature has not been a means of situating the Basque Country globally.

For this reason, the Universal Basque Award, an award created to honor people and institutions that have spread the image of the Basque Country throughout the world, has only ever been granted once to a writer, out of the sixteen winners awarded since it was established in 1997. In fact, following Mark Kurlansky's list in *The Basque History of the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999) out of the different people and things that, within this global context, have been awarded the Basque stamp of authority via this honor—Basque cuisine; the best known Basque sport, jai-alai (Basque handball); our most famous religious figure, Saint Ignatius of Loyola; and our excellent Basque sculptors Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida—no writer and no literary work in Euskara have ever been included.

One might say that literature written in Basque has never been considered by our political leaders as a potential passport to universalize our culture. Jaume Subirana makes a similar point regarding the Catalan literary sphere: “When Catalan identity achieves international status, language, that key historical element, becomes a hindrance, a problem”.

The Bilbao Guggenheim museum is the best example of the fact that the cultural policies favored by Basque nationalist governments have also been influenced by the dominant market logic in the new world scenario. A desire to regenerate the great Basque metropolis, Bilbao, and transform it into a city geared towards services that would make it attractive to tourists, led Basque politicians to “fall for” (according to Joseba Zulaika) the seductive charm of Thomas Krens. Yet this desire was also based on locating Bilbao “within the global culture of travel and consumerism, bridging transatlantic distances, linking New York with Bilbao, and thereby facilitating traffic in modern art, museum franchises, tourism, and reformulated urban images.” It was precisely this visibility and profitability that justified the major local investment underpinning the project; a project that (it is worth mentioning although just in passing) has helped to put the Basque Country on the world map, not just because of its so-called “Basque troubles” –that is, the terrorism of ETA– but for an architectural landmark, a masterpiece, whose artistic attraction was unquestionable. There is no doubt that the Basque Country, and especially Bilbao, have achieved a degree of visibility thanks to the impact of what has been termed the first global museum. However, could we also say that this visibility has resulted in greater visibility for Basque cultural creation? We doubt it. Basque art does not play a leading role at the Guggenheim.

### 3. BASQUE LITERATURE UNIVERSITY STUDIES, OR NEW CHALLENGES FACED BY LECTURESHIPS

So far, we have spoken about the late development of Basque literature and its scarce influence on the internationalization policies of Basque culture. But what could be said about Basque literature university studies? Have they contributed to the establishment of an academic discourse that legitimizes its presence? What are the challenges current lectureships should set in regards to the teaching of Basque literature?

According to Professor Urkizu (2002), the teaching and university study of Basque literature was practically inexistent, until after the Second World War, when René Lafon at the University of Bordeaux III and Koldo Mitxelena at the University of Salamanca started teaching Basque literature. Professor Jean Haritschelhar was the first, after Albert Léon (1909), to publish a doctoral thesis on Basque literature, circa 1969. His area of research was the poet Pierre-Topet Etchahun (1786-1862) and traditional Basque literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was then followed, 10 years later, by Patxi Altuna’s thesis on the metric and lexis of Etxepare. These were theses where the philological and biographical approach prevailed, methodological approaches that were

only renewed after the 80's, with the theses of Basque philology graduates, read at the University of Deusto and the University of the Basque Country, to which theses read during the 90's at the University of Navarre and the State University of Navarre, the Euskadi Peninsular, and the University of Pau and Pays de l'Adour in continental Euskadi were added.

During this development, the inclusion of new theoretical and methodological paradigms for the study of Basque literature excelled. Narratological and semiotic examples stood out in theses during the 80's, and approaches similar to systematic theories in those during the 90's, just as we highlighted in an article published in 2002. Theses read in the USA in the 90's and early 21<sup>st</sup> century include other paradigms, such as research dedicated to the analysis of gender in Basque literature, inclusion that we should say, proved very refreshing and necessary to the inertia present in Basque university studies at the time.

It is in this aspect, the renewal of theoretical paradigms that apply to the study and teaching of Basque literature, where the current network of 32 lectureships of Basque language and culture can be crucial.

In fact, lectureships such as the ones we currently offer at the universities of Liverpool, Birmingham, or UC in Santa Barbara, are located in departments where the teaching of Basque literature shares a comparative approach to that of other Iberian literatures, or presents an analysis of literary texts that exceeds the philological point of view that has prevailed in Basque (and generally Spanish) universities, which favors an approach where cultural studies enrich text-centered and decontextualized readings in excess that have prevailed in Spanish universities. Lecturers that impart classes in foreign universities must be sensitive to the methods of analysis and teaching that prevail at that university, but in addition to that, they must also be able to promote discussion and collaboration with their academic colleagues from other fields. Only through this, will we be able to enable the teaching of Basque literature to benefit from any feedback lecturers obtain from their assigned universities. Feedback, which will obviously, also mark new ways of reading, to the ever-increasing collection of Basque literary texts translated into other languages (cf. <[www.basqueliterature.com](http://www.basqueliterature.com)>). I am of course referring to collections such as, the Basque Literature Series from the Center of Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, in Reno, or the Zubia collection, published by Pahl-Rugenstein in Germany. From this perspective, there is absolutely no doubt, that present-day Basque literature and its university studies, have in their Basque language and culture lecturers, the best allies for an adjustment that we crave more necessary every time.

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