

Orality and Basque Nationalism: Dancing with the Devil or Waltzing into the Future?

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The Language Situation in the Basque Country

The Basque Country in northern Spain is comprised of two autonomous communities, also known by the names Euskadi and Navarra, as their respective polities refer to themselves. There are three traditional provinces within Euskadi: Araba, Gipuzkoa, and Bizkaia. There are also three Basque provinces in France, but this discussion will be limited to the Basque Country in Spain.¹

¹ Interest in Basque language and literature must necessarily awaken interests in other areas as well. Placing the language in its proper cultural milieu exposes us to works by Robert Clark (1979, 1984) and Stanley Payne (1975), and to Joseba Zulaika's *Basque Violence* (1988) for twentieth-century Basque history and the ineluctable impact of events on Euskara (the Basque language), nationalism, and the struggle for Basque autonomy. Migration plays such a large role in the Basque story that this topic as well is soon added to the list of fields of study (Douglass and Bilbao 1975). But even within language and literature and their purlieu, diverse avenues of exploration are constantly emerging, such as Jacqueline Urla's (1978, 2000) studies of the significance of Euskara to Basque identity.

The hegemonic Basque literary histories, including those of Luis Villasante (1961), Luis Michelena (1960), Santiago Onaindia (1975), Ibon Sarasola (1976), Luis Mari Mujika (1979), Jon Juaristi (1987), and Jon Kortazar (1990) inform us about the written variety of Basque literature (although they all mention the oral aspect to some degree). For a closer examination of *bertsolaritza*, there are works by Juan Mari Lekuona (1982) and Manuel de Lekuona (1965) and Joseba Zulaika's *Bertsolarien jokoa eta jolasa* (1985), as well as Gorka Aulestia's works (1995, 2000) on the orality of Basque culture and literature, and by extension, works on the nature of orality itself by Ong (1982) and by Lord (1960). It is impossible, however, to limit one's literary territory to the Basque-specific realm. Contemporary critics such as Javier Cillero Goiriastuena (2000), Iñaki Aldekoa (1992, 1993a, 1993b), Mari Jose Olaziregi (1998), Laura Mintegi (1994), Jesús María Lasagabaster (1990), Ana Toledo Lezeta (1989), and Joseba

The need for a standard written language has been manifest in Basque circles since Bernat Dechepare wrote and published the first book in Euskara² in 1545. In two of his poems he urged his readers to take their language into the world and use it there. Three hundred fifty years later, the Basques have a Unified Basque dialect. *Euskara Batua* was created by Euskaltzaindia (“The Academy of the Basque Language”), which was formed in 1918 and has worked tirelessly ever since toward the goal of a unified written dialect. Almost all literacy programs in Euskadi teach the Unified dialect, although there are some holdouts in Bizkaia where the Bizkaian dialect is favored. Linguists in the nineteenth century identified hundreds of individual dialects, but today informed sources, such as the Aulestia and White dictionary (1992), recognize far fewer: Bizkaian, Gipuzkoan, Zuberoan, Labourdin, Behe-Nafarroan (Low Navarrese), and, of course, Batua. The dialect of Araba is virtually extinct.³

Today, Euskara is one of four minority languages in Spain.⁴ The 1978 Spanish constitution granted three of these languages co-official status with Castilian within their autonomous communities.⁵ Ros and Cano state that the relationship between Euskara and Castilian has long been a diglossic one, especially during the Franco years with his vigorous anti-minority-language policies (1987:87-88). Since Franco’s demise and the subsequent 1978 constitution, Basques have been energetically involved in the re-Basquification of their territory and their people.

Gabilondo (2000) are increasingly cognizant of current trends in western critical theory as they approach literature in Euskara.

² Euskara is the preferred spelling in Unified Basque (“Batua”). However, the word often appears as *euskera*, with an *e*. I capitalize it in this paper in deference to standard English practice. Dechepare’s book of poems (1995) bore the Latin title *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* (“First Fruits of the Basque Language”).

³ For greater detail, see Michelena 1960 and 1964, Echenique Elizondo 1984, and Jacobsen 2000. Aulestia and White were forced to select a limited number of dialectal variations for their dictionary (1992), a project that spanned 12 years even under the limitation of six dialects. Dialectal variations can still be found from valley to valley and from village to village.

⁴ The others are Catalan, Galician, and Valencian. Valencian, however, was viewed as a dialect of Catalan, so it was not granted any co-official status.

⁵ The three are Euskara, Catalan, and Galician. See Mar-Molinero 1995 and 1996 on the politics of language in Spain.

Two organizations were established to wage the Basque literacy wars: HABE and AEK. HABE (*Helduen Alfabetatze Berreuskalduntzerako Erakundea*, “Organization for Adult Literacy and Re-Basquification”) was created by the Basque government (Euskadi) on October 4, 1981, and was approved by the Basque parliament on November 25, 1983. It operates under the wing of the Ministry of Culture and was created to spearhead a literacy and language-teaching campaign among adults within Euskadi.⁶ HABE has created its own teaching centers, the *euskaltegiak*. It has created entire programs and masses of language-learning materials on the leading edge of language instruction, including games, audio cassette tapes, video tapes, and slides to help them achieve their goals. It has offered didactic and pedagogical assistance to public and private organizations that have created *euskaltegiak*. And it has built up a group of its own teachers and offers help to other teaching staffs in a variety of ways. The AEK (*Alfabetatze Euskalduntze Koordinakundea*, “Coordinating Group for Teaching Basque and Literacy”) sponsors the *Korrika*, a footrace held every two years in which people pay for the privilege of running or walking a few meters or several kilometers, depending on their ability, in order to fund literacy programs in the Basque language.⁷ AEK is not a government organization, and there is much competition between AEK and HABE for potential students in their classes.⁸

⁶ In the words of 1995 General Director José Joan G. de Txabarri, “Since it was created by the Basque Government, HABE has adopted the dream of many Basques as its own: to make *euskara*, the language that gave a name and an essence to our country, once again the language of the Basque Country” (taken from promotional material issued by HABE in 1995).

⁷ See del Valle 1994 for an in-depth study of this phenomenon and its significance in Basque culture.

⁸ Municipalities often dedicate city money to public relations for the language, as in Donostia-San Sebastián, where the people at Euskararen Udal Patronatua (“City Patronage of Euskara”) distribute a weekly magazine, *Irutxulo*, in Basque. The 1994 head of the Patronatua, Imanol Galdos, implemented a series of radio spots entitled *Euskara, zeure esku* (“Basque, your right”) that dramatized real-life situations in Basque and encouraged people to live in the language. In Galdos’ opinion, the battle to provide instruction in Euskara has been won, but the next stage of the struggle looms even greater, that of convincing the population to use Euskara in their everyday dealings with the plumber, the clients in the front office, and the people in the shops.

Even with all this effort to save the language, I find that in the cities I must make my own opportunities to speak Euskara. Outside the *euskaltegiak* and the *barnetegiak* (“boarding schools for learning Basque”), the municipal environment is overwhelmingly

Today, although Euskara putatively shares co-official status with Castilian within Euskadi, the vast majority of Basque speakers are still unaccustomed to reading in Euskara. According to the *Euskal Herriko soziolinguistikazko inkesta 1996* (1996 Sociolinguistic Survey of the Basque Country)⁹, *erdera* (Spanish in the south, French in the north) was the first language for 77.7 percent of the population of the Basque Country *over age 15*, while 18.8 percent claimed Euskara as their first language. The remainder, 3.5 percent, grew up bilingual. Although the numbers differ somewhat if we break the territory down into Navarra (89.8 percent), Euskadi (75.8 percent), and Iparralde (the Basque Country in France, 68.5 percent), we can see that within the Basque regions of Spain, Spanish was the first language for over three-quarters of the population.

Translated into numbers of people, the figures for the over-fifteen age group in 1996 (the most recent year for which figures are currently available) show 456,300 monolingual native speakers of Euskara and 84,700 bilingual native speakers, for a total of 541,000 (*Euskal Herriko* 4:4-5). This figure does not reflect the changes in language status that occurred over the lives of the surveyed population, but it gives us a feel for the body of native speakers within the Basque Country.

The 1996 survey also examined the linguistic competence of the same population group (as opposed to simply how many learned Euskara as a first language). Within Euskadi (and in Iparralde, as well), one in four people is bilingual in Euskara and *erdera*, while in Navarra the figure falls to one in ten. This means that 25 percent of the population of Euskadi is capable of some level of linguistic competence in Euskara. But that 25 percent excludes most of those whose knowledge is minimal or passive, those who can speak a little bit in Basque or who at least understand it “rather well” if they do not speak it. We can include this category of passive bilinguals in our numbers of possible readers of Euskara and obtain a figure of 899,400 people aged 16 and over who are capable of communicating at some level in the language (*Euskal Herriko* 18-19).¹⁰

Spanish. Often in the shops, more English than Basque is heard because the piped music is Sinead O'Connor or Boyz II Men. In the small villages Euskara is still heard on the streets, but in Donosti, Bilbo, Gasteiz, and Iruna you must look for it and insist on it, and that constant effort wears you down.

⁹ Volume 1, *Euskal Herriko*.

¹⁰ This figure of 899,400 people capable of some level of communication in Euskara is for all of Euskal Herria: Euskadi, Navarra, and Iparralde. It does not include speakers living abroad, but those numbers would not significantly alter the total. Tejerina

Although the literati are striving to create a written literary heritage where none existed a hundred years ago, new generations of readers have not yet been created. Of the numbers discussed above, Mendiguren Elizegi has estimated that perhaps 100,000 were capable of reading Euskara with some facility, but he added that the number who read Basque literature for pleasure is very small, perhaps as low as 1,500 individuals (1998:46), although Cillero Goiriastuena (2000:101) would caution us against making any generalizations and reminds us that this is a difficult quality to measure.

The Oral Art Form Known as *Bertsolaritza*

In this milieu, the oral art form known as *bertsolaritza* is thriving. The artists (*bertsolariak*), often called “Basque troubadours,” perform in competitions broadcast on television and become regional celebrities. The audience does not need to read Euskara in order to enjoy the “sport of words,” as it is called.

Bertsolari Xabier Amuriza calls it the “sung word of the people” (Aulestia 1995:21).¹¹ *Bertsolaritza* is a competitive art form in which the artist/performer/poet stands before an audience and sings extemporaneous lyrics to folk melodies. The subject matter of these verses, as well as the tune to be used, is provided by a *gai jartzaile* (“imposer of subjects”), who also serves as a master of ceremonies. The performances—including creativity, wittiness, and technical aspects of the *bertsoak* (“verses”)—are judged by a panel of knowledgeable people, and one of the participating *bertsolariak* is proclaimed the winner at the end of the competition.

The traditional venues for these competitions were folk festivals, weddings, and other social events. The modern *txapelketak* (“championships”) began in 1935 with the first Day of the Bertsolari. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, committees were established to choose judges and moderators for the competitions, to decide what the rules would be, and to pick the themes for the *bertsolariak*. Loudspeakers and microphones are now ubiquitous, and performances are recorded and videotaped for later transmission via radio and television

Montaña and MacKinnon 1997 both offer a great deal of valuable information and insight on the language situation in Euskadi.

¹¹ Several books are available on this topic for those who read Spanish or Basque, including: Canton et al. 1992, Eizmendi 1984, J. M. Lekuona 1982, M. Lekuona 1965, and Zulaika 1985. In English, Aulestia 1995 provides a wealth of information.

(Aulestia 1995:41, White 1996 69). But thus far at least, no amount of end-of-millennium technology is able to accurately record the *bertsolaritza* experience. As Ong puts it, most of us are “so resolutely literate that we seldom feel comfortable with a situation in which verbalization is so little thing-like as it is in oral tradition” (1982:11).

Within Basque circles, the survival of the *bertsolari*'s art has historically been touted as a unique phenomenon, but a more realistic view would place *bertsolaritza* in a category of oral forms of literature from different languages that have survived to a greater or lesser extent down through the ages. Today in the Basque Country, the magazine *Bertsolari* runs features on the conferences being held to bring together artists and practitioners of all these art forms to perform for each other and for attentive audiences in large celebrations of the oral art.¹²

Language of the Bertsolari

The language of the *bertsolari* is much closer to the spoken language of the people than it is to written Basque. This is due in part to the creation of the standard dialect known as Euskara Batua (“Unified Basque”), which is used in official communications, in the media, and in textbooks and classrooms; it is even spoken by those who acquire it as a second language. Native speakers educated in Batua often speak one of the dialects at home. However, regardless of the dialect used by the artist, the Euskara produced by the *bertsolari* differs from the language heard in normal speech in four ways: rhythm and rhyme, structure, tonality, and level of metaphorical content.

Rhythm and Rhyme

The verses created by the *bertsolari* must comply with specific rhyme patterns.¹³ When aficionados discuss *bertsolaritza*, such rhyme patterns are

¹² Examples of these other art forms include Galician *regeifas*, Argentinian *payadores*, Cuban *décimas*, and so forth. See further Aulestia 2000.

¹³ The most common types of verses discussed in this way are *zortziko handia* (“long eight”), *zortziko txikia* (“short eight”), *hamarreko handia* (“long ten”), *hamarreko txikia* (“short ten”), and *bederatzi puntukoa* (“nine rhymes”), the latter generally considered to be one of the most difficult verses to perform well. *Zortziko handia* is a verse of eight lines in which the odd lines contain ten syllables and the even lines contain

often at the center of their evaluation of an artist's creative production. To the novice, it can often seem as though these oral artists are faced with the onerous task of counting rhymes and syllables as they versify. However, the rhyme patterns and syllable counts per line are an intimate part of the melody being used for a particular verse, and the music is what makes it possible for a *bertsolari* to keep all these schemes in mind during performance.

We can demonstrate this dynamic by picking a popular folk melody and humming the tune. Although we are not conscious of how many notes there are per line, or how many beats per measure, we do know whether the tune is hummed correctly. We are aware of mistakes in the length of the notes, and variations in the melody are glaringly obvious and usually unwelcome. If we make up words to the melody and our line of verse is too long for the musical phrase, we will be forced to fit several syllables into a note that should logically carry only one. If we have too few words, then we must sing one word for a duration of several notes, dragging the word out in order to allow for the singing of all the notes of the melody. Some people are very adept at this lyric-to-music match, and some are not. But nearly everyone can discern whether another person is doing a good job of making the match, which is the skill involved in extemporaneous versifying. Discussions of the number of syllables per line and the patterns of the rhymes at the end of the lines can be very misleading if we lose sight of the lyric-to-music matching that underlies the performance of the *bertsolari*'s art.

Structure and Syntax

The syntax of the versifier is not more flexible, per se, than that of everyday speech, but the *bertsolari* manages a syntactic flexibility beyond the scope of those engaged in normal conversation. Verbs are often omitted. The highly inflected nature of Euskara allows for great variety in sentence structure with little or no confusion resulting from variable word placement.

eight (a syllabiatic pattern of 10/8). The even lines carry the rhyme (ab cb db eb). *Zortziko txikia* is also an eight-line verse, with a syllabic pattern of 7/6 and the same rhyme pattern as above. *Hamarreko handia* is a verse of ten lines with a syllabic pattern of 10/8 and the rhyme again on the even lines (ab cb db eb fb). *Hamarreko txikia* differs in that the syllabic pattern is 7/6. *Bederatzi puntukoa* is a fourteen-line verse with the syllabic pattern 7/6 7/5 7/6 7/6 6/6/6/6 7/5 and the rhyme pattern ab cb db eb bbbb fb. For more detailed information on the structure of these verses, see Aulestia 1995:22-27.

This same highly inflected quality, combined with the postposition nature of Basque declensional endings, eases the task of rhyming.

Tonality

The words of the *bertsoak* are sung, not spoken, so as the performer creates a line or a verse the creation is shared with the listeners via musical tone. Tonality plays a greater or lesser role in speech production, depending on the language being spoken. Certain Asian languages (in which tonality plays a much lesser role in the differentiation of meaning, or rather where the range of tones used in this manner is more limited), for example, are perceived as musical by the Western ear. Although we would not ordinarily refer to a melody as a tonal quality of language, in the *bertsolari's* art, certain melodies are selected as the foundation for a *bertso* based on emotional impact or shades of meaning that the melody itself will connote for the listener.

Level of Metaphorical Content

A *bertsolari's* speech in performance is often metaphorical in the extreme. In a different context, such condensed speech could be inappropriately elliptical, if we concur that the goal of normal speech is most often communication; speech that hinders comprehension is at the very least discouraged, and at the other end of the spectrum can even be life-threatening. The highly metaphorical speech of the *bertsolari* is framed by a context that does not require total comprehension, where failure to understand will not result in economic misfortune or physical danger. The *bertsolari* is free to pack as much meaning as possible into his or her work, and the audience is free to interpret, translate, or decipher as much of that meaning as each individual is capable of doing.¹⁴

Inadequacies of Recording the Bertsoak

Although the modern *bertsolari's* verses are recorded on audio and video tape, and even transcribed and published in books, the art form itself is

¹⁴ John Miles Foley describes this phenomenon with eloquence and specificity in his discussion of metonymy and traditional referentiality (1991:7).

not accurately or truthfully represented by those attempts at record-keeping. In the case of recordings, the sound of the *bertsolari*'s voice and words are more accurately transmitted than they are in a written record, but even so the acoustic inscription does not truly reflect a *bertso* and its creation. Watching a performance on video tape is the next best thing to attending a live competition, although the interactivity between *bertsolari* and audience cannot be fully experienced in this format. However, video is an excellent medium for observing the structure of a *bertsolari* competition and witnessing how quickly the artists respond to each other's verses.

For example, on a video of the *Hitzetik hortzera* television program, recorded in the early 1990s, Maialen Lujanbio, a young woman of about seventeen, competes against Peñagarikano, a middle-aged male veteran of the art. They are given the theme of a failed date around which to build their *bertso*.

The *gai jartzaile* explains that Peña and Maialen have a date for 10:00 p.m., but he falls asleep. When he shows up at midnight, he learns that Maialen has gone out with someone else. Peña sings *bertsoak* from the wounded male's perspective, and Maialen responds (using the same melody and verse structure) from the woman's point of view. There is a lively chemistry between these two performers, and responses begin almost before the last note of the previous verse has faded. The elapsed time between *bertsoak* is often as brief as one second. Three seconds "feels" like a long time between *bertsoak* when watching a competition, and *bertsolariak* who take too long before responding are penalized by the judges.

Peña begins by accusing fickle Maialen of "looking for a pastry to her liking." Maialen responds that if he does not like the way she acts, he can leave and that he will regret what he said to her. Peña comes back with a lament that their two-year relationship should not end because of the two hours he overslept. Maialen replies that he suspected that she would wait around for him to show up, but she went out for her eleven o'clock turn (implying that he missed his ten o'clock slot and that she had other gentlemen standing in line).

The last two verses of their exchange are transcribed here in Euskara (to provide an example of the rhyme pattern) with English translation.

Peña:

Sines zazue ez nengoela
holako errezelotan.
Hara zer gauza gertatu zaidan
gaur egoteangatik lotan.
Barkatu baina esango dizut
nik zuri momentu hontan:

aizu zure zai egon izan naiz
ni behin baino gehiagotan.

‘Believe me, I did not
have such suspicions.
Look what has happened to me
for being sleepy today.
Excuse me, but I will tell you
at this moment:
hey, I have been waiting for you
more than once.’

Maialen:

Barkatu baina esan bezela
ez zera etorri garaiz.
Beste batekin juana naiz ni
ta oso aurpegi alaiz.
Beste batzutan zu ’re nere zai
egoten omen zera maiz.
Hortze itxoiten jarraitu zazu
noizbait etorriko naiz.

‘Excuse me, but as I said
you did not come on time.
I went with someone else
and I did so happily.
You say you also waited for me
quite a few times.
Well, keep waiting,
I’ll come back someday.’

(White 1996:95-96)

Maialen responded so quickly with this last verse that even Peña was surprised, and the audience was delighted.

To fully experience a *bertso*, the audience must be present at the moment of creation. The art of the *bertsolari* requires an audience. If Peña and Maialen had been practicing alone in a room with the same theme, the result might have been very different, for there was no audience to please and entertain. The audience participates in the creation of the *bertso*, both vocally (as when they deduce the punchline of the verse before the *bertsolari* arrives at it, and then sing it along with the performer as it is produced) and non-vocally (by their mood, responses, level of excitement, anticipation, comprehension, shared cultural referent, and even physical appearance).

In performance, there is a symbiosis between performer and public, a mutual sanctioning, a reciprocal discipline, that demands the *bertsolari*'s best efforts while requiring the audience's attention to such a degree that it often seems that they are singing in silent duet with the performer, as if the impromptu words falling from the *bertsolari*'s lips were being experienced simultaneously in the minds of the audience. I have elsewhere described the process as follows (1996:68):

Bertsolaritza is a public sport. Without an audience, a *bertsolari* cannot perform. Singing improvised verses with no audience is merely practice, not the art itself.

A *bertsolari* must have the wit and language facility to improvise rhyming lyrics of consistently high quality and content to entertain a group of informed, discriminating listeners. They, in turn, provide the artist with instantaneous feedback, and in some cases they may even anticipate the last lines of a *bertso* and sing it along with the performer.

Being in the audience, feeling the anticipation and the tension between the competitors, adds to the emotive power of the *bertso* itself. When a *bertsolari* is able to craft a poem so cogent and pertinent that the last line is an unavoidable conclusion, and as a result the audience is able to sing the line along with the *bertsolari* (because they were able to follow the line of thinking to its completion), then that *bertsolari* has won the audience completely. This is important because audience response can also affect the judges' decision when they award points to the competitors.

With all this in mind, it becomes evident why the transcription of a verse is not a *bertso*.¹⁵ A transcribed verse is several stages removed from the intended form. It is not even an echo of the original, because no sound is produced on the page. Rhythm is lost, tonality (music) is lost, spatial reference (location of the performance) is lost, audience is lost; indeed, everything necessary to the *creation* of a *bertso* is lost. All that appears on the page is a semantic shell composed of symbols (letters) that represent the individual words uttered during performance. This semantic shell cannot accurately transmit the *bertsolari*'s meaning. The quality of the *bertsolari*'s voice, the melody chosen to carry the words, the choice of key (major or

¹⁵ There are *bertso-paperak*, *bersto-jarriak*, and *bertso-berriak*, each of which refers to verses that have been written down. Aulestia describes the first two as "popular verses that are transcribed" and the third as "written verses common in Gipuzkoa during the nineteenth century" (1995:231). But these written versions are attempts to record the words of the verses, not necessarily an attempt to create actual *bertsoak*, which must, by definition, be sung extemporaneously before an audience.

minor), and the artist's physical bearing, facial expressions, and appearance all combine to influence the audience and their reception of the verse.

On the other hand, the audience of the transcription is a reader, and the reader is the only source of orality for the transcribed *bertso*. The quality of the "mental" orality brought to the work by its readers depends on many factors, including the readers' dialect of Euskara, their status as native or non-native speakers, their familiarity with the art form and its components, their knowledge of the Basque melodies used for creating *bertsoak*, and their cognizance of current events in Basque society (because the sounds of certain names or words can evoke entire scenarios connected with those sounds in the larger socio-political context). Although an informed reader is capable of bringing many of these factors to the textual representation of a *bertso*, the fact remains that no remnant of the artist's orality survives on the written page.¹⁶

The Rush to Literacy and the Written Word

Sadly, the Basque culture's rush to literacy (deemed necessary to insure the survival of the language) has also affected its scholars, such as Aulestia in his *Improvisational Poetry from the Basque Country* (1995) and Juan Mari Lekuona in his *Ahozko euskal literatura* (1982), both of whom study *bertsolaritza*. Basque written literature, for all intents and purposes, has only been a serious proposition for a hundred years (Lasagabaster 1990:4). Since oral literature survives and thrives in Basque culture, it is surprising that there are few truly successful descriptions of the oral phenomenon in print. Those who attempt to describe it (myself among them) cannot overcome the ineluctable difficulty of using the language of and about the written word to re-create an art form intended to be experienced at the moment of creation. The lexicon of the written word is simply inadequate to the task.

Bertsolaritza is an art of immediacy, an art for an oral culture, an art that is still vital in the lives and sentiments of modern Basques. The difficulties involved in describing or discussing *bertsolaritza* stem from the tradition of classifying it as literature. Or rather, such difficulties stem from the loss of orality in other literatures (in the major languages) and the effect that loss has had on the vocabularies devoted to discussions of literature. The literary metalanguage of the major Western tongues lacks appropriate

¹⁶ Again, Foley's discussion of traditional referentiality is pertinent here.

terminology for describing a literary genre that incorporates spontaneity, music, and the spatial cohabitation of artist and audience/“reader.”

A partial remedy lies in borrowing terms used for discussing music. This strategy enables us to speak of major and minor keys, rhythm and tempo, reader as audience, and so on. But even here, certain terms are inadequate. For example, the word “listener” works very well for an audience of music, but it is much too passive to transmit the level of involvement that an audience of *bertsolaritza* brings to the creative act. The word “reader” is equally weak and assumes that we are talking about a literary genre. Ironically, the term “genre” itself so strongly suggests the written word that it, too, may prove inadequate in reference to *bertsolaritza*. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, the use of “genre” to discuss film has expanded the set of connotations that accompany the word, making it at least adequate to the discussion of *bertsolaritza*.

Perhaps the solution to the general inadequacy of terms pertaining to *bertsolaritza* lies in limiting such discussions to Euskara, but unfortunately Euskara itself has been influenced by the pervasive written-word mentality rampant in the major Western cultures. The result has been the creation of a written literature and the adoption of written-word terminology with which to discuss and describe that literature. Even if discussions of *bertsolaritza* were limited to Euskara, similar problems would be (and are) encountered with regard to vocabulary choices available in Basque. What bitter irony, that the orality of Basque culture should remain strong enough to preserve and maintain—and even foster evolution in—the art of *bertsolaritza* while losing the lexicon needed to precisely and appropriately discuss it.

On the other hand, perhaps Euskara never contained such a lexicon because there was no need for it. The immediacy and ephemerality of the *bertsolari*'s artistic production resists critical discussion, an activity that requires “close” and repeated “readings” of a text. The *bertso* is intended to be heard at the moment of creation and thereafter remembered (or forgotten) by the audience. *Bertsolariak* do not reproduce existing works in concert. Their performances are fashioned not to endure, but rather to be experienced. In this sense, critical discussion as we know it with regard to written literature is inappropriate in the case of the *bertso*.

Excellent work has been done in the area of describing *bertsolaritza*,¹⁷ but critical discussion of form and content is never quite satisfying. The informed reader of such discussions experiences the critic's frustration while applying theories and methods designed around written literature to the oral

¹⁷ Aulestia 1995; J. M. Lekuona 1982; M. Lekuona 1965; Zavala 1964, 1984; Zulaika 1985.

genre. (Joseba Zulaika does not do this. He discusses *bertsolaritza* in an anthropological, as opposed to literary, context, and as a result the overall effect is, in a way, more gratifying.¹⁸) At best, one comes away with a sense of the grandeur of a performance art that cannot quite be explained on a page. At worst, the *bertsolari*'s work is diminished by attempts to frame its form and content in the lexicon of written literature.

For an example of a critic who impresses us with the grand scope of the art but who is nevertheless limited by the lexicon, we need only peruse Gorka Aulestia's highly informative *Improvisational Poetry from the Basque Country* (1995). Aulestia speaks in terms of "verse models" (22), and although he makes a valiant effort to impress the reader with the oral and musical aspects of *bertsolaritza*, his message is suppressed by his medium—the printed word.¹⁹ The opening paragraph mentions melodies serving in a supporting role and reminds the reader that a major or minor key can be used to substantiate and bolster the feeling that the *bertsolari* is trying to express, but the description is ineluctably framed by the lexis of written poetry. He speaks in great detail of rhyme patterns and rhythms (meter), providing us with a treasure of information unavailable elsewhere to the anglophone audience. He presents famous examples of *bertsoak* and analyzes them for content and form, revealing much about the Basque worldview and the complexities and shadings that can be achieved by a skilled *bertsolari* in verses of deceptively simplistic structure.

As a native Basque speaker, Aulestia is in a position to reveal double-entendres and nuances that the *euskaldunberri* ("new speaker of Basque") might miss. If Aulestia neglects to emphasize sufficiently the enormous role that music plays in providing the artists with the rhythm and rhyme patterns they will be using, the fault lies with the paucity of terms available in written language for describing an oral phenomenon. In addition, since oral literature is foundational to much of Basque poetry as it has evolved over the years, and since for Basques the link between "verses" and singing is so strong that modern poets will publish written verses and append the name of the melody that can be used to sing them, it is not surprising that the musical dimension of the medium might be assumed by native experts like Aulestia. A non-native, unfortunately, can easily lose track of the musical element of *bertsolaritza* through discussions such as these. Even though Aulestia later spends considerable time emphasizing the musical elements of *bertsolaritza*,

¹⁸ See further Zulaika 1985, 1988, 2000.

¹⁹ I employ Aulestia for this example because of my great respect for his work and because I am most familiar with it, having translated the book referred to here.

the milieu of the presentation—written words on a page using language that has been co-opted by written literature to describe written poetry—renders the experiential nature of the art form opaque.

When we speak of the rush to literacy shifting emphasis from orality to the written word, the elements of the oral art that suffer are the intangibles such as the rapport between artist and audience. Moreover, literary critics find it increasingly difficult to discuss the oral phenomenon without resorting to a scrivener's lexis. No written method yet exists that would allow us to *de-scribe* the oral experience. Let us now examine the relationship between Basque orality (*bertso* and Euskara) and the Basque nationalist movement.

The “Language and Nationalism” Waltz

As a movement, Basque nationalism was officially born at the end of the nineteenth century when Sabino Arana Goiri set down his principles of nationalism and founded the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco), commonly called the PNV. Antonio Elorza explains nationalism as a reaction against the demographic, economic, and cultural changes linked to industrialization, and he calls Arana's nationalism “una religión política de la violencia” (“a political religion of violence,” 1995:33). The ability to speak Euskara was high on Arana's list of necessary qualities in a good Basque nationalist, but his primary requirement was Basque blood and lots of it.²⁰

The three most important qualifications for being a good Basque, according to Arana, were to be of the Basque race, to speak the Basque language, and to be a good Catholic. These priorities carried the nationalist movement through the years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, through the Spanish Civil War, and on through the 1940s. But during the 1950s, there ensued a heavy immigration of non-Basques seeking employment into the Basque Country. They spoke no Euskara and, as they intermarried with the local population, the emphasis on Castilian in the home was rising. But language was not the only issue. The swelling numbers of working-class residents worried the political thinkers of the day in other ways as well. How were they going to integrate these people into their social agenda for the Basque Country? How could they justify including racially non-Basque

²⁰ For in-depth information about Arana's nationalism, see Arana Goiri 1965, Corcuera Atienza 1979, Heiberg 1975 and 1989, and, of course, Elorza 1995.

immigrants in an agenda designed for and by the Basque nationalist movement?

At the same time that workers were flocking to the two most industrialized regions of Spain, the Basque Country and Catalunya, Franco was spending money on less developed areas in the hopes of making things better for those groups. This economic policy proved disastrous for the Basque Country. Basques had to deal with pollution, urban decay, inadequate schools and hospitals, congested transportation, and cramped housing (Clark 1984:18). Per capita incomes fell and Basques began emigrating while non-Basques were immigrating.²¹ The consequence, as Clark observes, was the radicalization of the Basque working class (20): “Not surprisingly, then, there emerged an entirely new movement, one centered on revolutionary socialism blended with intransigent Basque ethnicity.”

Forming their political consciousness at this time was a group of young Basque nationalists that included the writer José Alvarez Enparanza, or “Txillardegi” as he is widely known.²² During the fifties, this group called itself Ekin. They were publishing clandestine material and advocating that Euskara be made the sole official language of a new and independent Basque republic. Sabino Arana’s Basque Nationalist Party thought that this was an unreasonably utopian goal, considering how many areas within the Basque territory had lost the language completely. By 1959 the young Ekin members could no longer restrain themselves as their impatience with the old guard increased. At last on July 31, 1959, the organization Euzkadi ta Askatasuna (Euzkadi and Freedom) or ETA was founded (Clark 1984:27).

²¹ The shock to the Basque economy was foregrounded against a history of strong international economic relationships with major world powers. Joseba Zulaika notes (2000:265) that “foreign investment in the iron and steel industries, railroads, and harbor facilities was crucial to the region’s industrialization. International companies extracted 40 percent of Bizkaia’s iron during the 1880-1890 period. What is remarkable is the symbiotic relationship between foreign and Basque capital. Historians estimate that between 60 and 75 percent of all profits remained in the pockets of Bilbao’s industrial elite. . . . By 1929, although Basques constituted a mere 3 percent of Spain’s population, Basque capital represented 25 percent of Spanish banking resources, 38 percent of the investment in shipyards, 40 percent of the funds dedicated to shipping companies, and 62 percent of the monies invested in steel manufacturing.” Zulaika goes on to explain that the boom mentality is once again in full force in Bilbao.

²² The use of nicknames is common among Basque writers and political figures. The early *bertsolariak* were frequently known by these *ezizenak* (“nicknames” or, literally, “not names”), and modern performers often continue the tradition.

As Tejerina Montaña observes, with the formulation of ETA Euskara acquired preeminence over purity of race as the basic component of collective Basque identity (1992:125).

The Basque language had become the single most important factor in identifying Basqueness. Young people with no Basque blood or with one Basque grandparent or parent could now be equally Basque if they spoke the language. Such, at least, is the Basque nationalist point of view.²³ As an art form intimately related to the everyday lives of the people and impossible to separate from the language employed by the artists, *bertsolaritza* has also been held in high esteem as a uniquely Basque phenomenon.²⁴

Since nationalism of any flavor depends on difference to set the ethnic group apart from others, language and ethnic minority literatures are almost always featured as vital elements in any nationalist self-identification kit. Manuel Castells (1997) expounds at length on these characteristics of nationalism, including its predilection for the past, looking for some golden historical heyday that may or may not have existed for the people in question. Thus, it is natural for Basque nationalists to cling to Euskara and to the traditional and “unique” art form of the *bertsolari* when seeking attributes that will set the Basque people apart from all others. The *bertsolari* himself²⁵ has often been equated with Basque patriotism, and the

²³ There are, of course, Basques who are native speakers of Euskara and who do not happen to be Basque nationalists. Some of them even attribute little or no import to the possession of the language. These people are not interviewed in studies of Basque nationalism, or, if they are, their viewpoints are seldom included.

²⁴ The survival of oral literature is not unique to the Basques, however, as even a cursory examination of the field reveals. For varieties of oral literature within Spain, see Caspi 1995. For a broader world-view, see Foley 1981, 1985, 1998, and earlier issues of *Oral Tradition*. In the Basque Country as well, other forms of oral literature are acknowledged and conferences are held to allow various artists from different cultures a chance to perform for each other and to allow scholars the opportunity to experience their art.

²⁵ The use of the male pronoun is deliberate. Only recently have women entered (or been allowed to enter) the public realm of the *bertsolari*. See White 1996:63-108 for more about female *bertsolariak*. In December 1997, Maialen Lujanbio became the first woman *bertsolari* to reach the finals of the Basque Country’s championship competition (Iturbe 1998:60). In the same article, Lujanbio observes (59-60): “Nik uste jendea ohitu egin dela neskak ere bertsoetan ikusten” (“I think people have gotten used to seeing girls also creating verses”). For women *bertsolariak* in history (there were a few), see Larrañaga Odriozola 1999 and more recently Larrañaga Odriozola 2000. For a succinct overview of women in Basque literature, see White 2000.

names of certain individuals, such as “Bilintx,” who died as a result of wounds received during the Second Carlist War, can evoke *abertzale* (“patriotic”) sentiment in the Basque breast regardless of which side one’s ancestors fought for.²⁶

Just as Euskara has been considered the “secret language”²⁷ of the Basques, so has *bertsolaritza* served a similar function in times of turmoil. This reality was brought home to me in a very personal way by a Basque friend’s story of her arrest and detention by the Guardia Civil in the early seventies. While attending a university-sponsored conference, J. was rounded up with the rest of the participants and transported to jail. The men and women were separated from each other and housed in different cells in different parts of the facility. There was much anxiety, although J. reported that she was relatively well treated. She was nineteen at the time and was merely slapped around by the Guardia Civil. She said others in her group fared much worse. When no news from their captors was forthcoming regarding the status of the men in their group, the women began singing *bertsoak*, couching their questions for the men in their verses: Where are you? Who has been questioned? Who has been taken away? Has anyone been released? The men could hear the women singing, and they replied by creating their own verses. In this way, the groups maintained contact and kept each other’s spirits up throughout the ordeal.

Dancing with the Devil?

Now that the central government in Madrid no longer persecutes minority-language use within the autonomous communities, some young people are finding it more difficult to expend the time and energy necessary to learn Euskara. Others have grown up in a non-Euskara speaking home with parents who are not ethnically Basque, and yet these young people

²⁶ “Bilintx” was the nickname of Indalecio Bizkarrondo (1831-76). A chain of bookstores bears his name today. Another bookstore, Urretxindor, is named after *bertsolari* Kepa Enbeita. Ironically, “Bilintx” had a weak voice and was self-conscious about his physical appearance; as a result he is better known for his written verses than for his public performances (Aulestia 1995:83-84).

²⁷ As far back as the conquest of the Americas, Basques recognized each other by means of their language. The first Bishop of Mexico, Juan Zumarraga, communicated in Euskara when he wanted to maintain confidentiality (Mallea-Olaetxe 1998:148).

identify themselves as Basque through means other than the language.²⁸ However, the reclamation of the language has been significantly successful; anthropologists Joseba Zulaika and Sharryn Kasmir have both remarked that acquisition of Euskara is today independent of ethnic background, and that opportunities for learning it extend throughout the school system (Zulaika, personal communication; Kasmir 2000:200). The death of the language no longer looms on the horizon, and those who wish to do so can demonstrate a more blasé attitude toward Euskara, finding a basis for Basque self-identification in other areas. But for all that the language remains a powerful nationalistic talisman. Young nationalists who are not fluent in the language will still listen to Basque rock. Those who know very little Euskara will cultivate simple phrases, such as “Zorionak!” (“Congratulations!”) and “Gero arte” (“See you later”), as shibboleths of solidarity with the cause. And those who cannot understand what the *bertsolariak* are singing about will attend a *bertsolaritza* performance and support the cultural phenomenon because of what it represents.²⁹

For these non-speakers, the language and its acquisition have become the devil of Basque nationalism. Now that Franco is dead, some Basques no longer feel the need or the political compulsion (based on the threat to the existence of the language) to spend long hours studying Euskara. But many still dance with the devil, working toward fluency, for reasons that may have more to do with economics (and the ability to qualify for a position in the

²⁸ Sharryn Kasmir’s study of Basque punk explores the self-identification process of a group often omitted from studies on Basque identity—those who have no Basque blood and no Euskara (2000:180-81): “Approximately half of Arrasate’s population of 25,000 are immigrants, their children, and now their grandchildren. The first generation came to Arrasate in the 1960s, when cooperative and private factories drew labor forces from rural and underdeveloped regions of Spain. They lacked ethnic features of Basqueness—lineage, language, cultural traditions—yet some became Basque through other means. The women bartenders of Jai are not representative of all immigrants and their children, many of whom say they do not feel fully “integrated” into Euskadi and some of whom identify themselves as non-Basque; nor is their Basqueness equal in every context. However, they are not unusual in asserting their Basqueness, and the construction of their identities and their ways of being Basque are critical to our understanding of national identity in the decades following Franco’s 1959 Stabilization Plan.”

²⁹ This is true in America as well. During the 1999 Renoko Aste Nagusia, a Basque culture week sponsored by the Reno Basque Club as a forerunner of the July meeting in that city of the North American Basque Organization, *bertsolariak* from the U.S. and from Euskal Herria performed for an audience of 200. Fewer than one-third of them actually understood the lyrics.

autonomous government) than with nationalist sentiment. Whatever the current reasons are for learning Euskara, it is clear from the healthy condition of the local and regional *bertsolari* competitions that the link between Basque nationalism and the language and literature has benefited Basque oral literature.

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