



# Basque Writing 9

## Basque Literature in Exile

• Exile lives inside me.  
While living in exile, I carry my country  
around with me.  
While living in my own country, exile and I  
are one.  
The future always treats us  
worse.



**Mahmud Darwish,**  
Palestinian poet

One cannot but remember the late Darwish in this autumn of 2014. The future always treats some people worse. In our language, the Basque language, we have many words, *erbestea*, *desherria*, *besterrria*, for example, to express that "exilium". In all of them the word "(h)erri" (country) appears. "Someone else's country" or "a broken country". Each of them conveys the idea of a place that is not the country, a country that is not the country.



**Lutz Egia**  
Basque PEN, member of the Board

Exile and, as far as our theme is concerned, literature in exile have historically exerted a considerable weight in the Basque Country, in particular in the wake of the Spanish Civil War (1936). Nevertheless, we could say that it was the period that saw the greatest number of exiles not only in our country but also across a part of Europe. Many writers and people involved in culture in the Basque Country (**Zaitegi, Orixe, Monzon**, etc.) and in Spain (**Juan Ramon Jimenez, Rafael Alberti, Max Aub, Francisco Ayala**, etc.) were forced to flee the totalitarian regime imposed by the dictator Francisco Franco. But perhaps Germany is the country that endured the most widespread movement at that time. **Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Elias Canetti, Thomas Mann, Eric Maria Remarque** and **Stefan Zweig**, just to mention a handful, had to escape from Nazism. Most of the literature produced by these German writers during the 1933-1945 period is referred to as *Exilliteratur*.

When one takes the *Exilliteratur* authors together, their differences notwithstanding, they shared a number of features in terms of their subject matter: the denunciation of Nazism, everyday life before fleeing Germany and while in exile, the exile itself, the homecoming, etc. And of course the exiles of other countries were also destined to create themes. So these themes were universal ones.

In the Basque Country, without looking beyond the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two periods can be distinguished when talking about literature in exile: one is the Spanish Civil War and the post-war period (mostly from 1939 to 1960); the other is the dynamics established against the Dictator Franco and in favour of the independence of the Basque Country (from 1962 and up to the present day).

We quote the Professor of Literature Lourdes Otaegi to offer an X-ray of those years following the Spanish Civil War: "*Between 1942 and 1963 authors of poetry reflected the situation of the Basque language and Basque culture; the future of these two things and the problems surrounding them were the themes of their poems. Anguish and pessimism were prominent in these poems, but so was a desire not to become resigned. On the whole, reflection and nostalgia emerge, and dramatic features can also be seen in the works of many writers. That is why the lyrical poetry of the post-Spanish civil war period is raw in literary terms and highly committed in every sense.*"

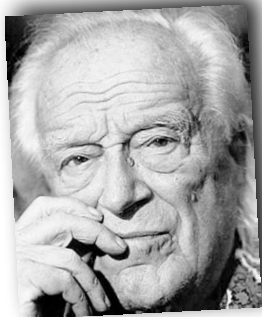
The second generation of exiled writers also tackle the theme of exile in a similar way, without forgetting what has been established by the passing of time. But there is no doubt that, unlike the prisoners behind bars during more or less the same period, the exiled writers do not form a significant group in terms of numbers.

In literature, exile acts as a convex mirror. When literature reaches us from exile, it does not just mean that it is being produced outside the country and in an abnormal situation, but that something is missing in the country itself.



# The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)

Calling that brutal war started by the Spanish military and fascist groups a *civil* war has always struck us as overstated. That may be because thousands upon thousands of civilians were killed, wounded or had to escape into exile; the latter group included hundreds of writers and people involved in culture. One of them was the Spanish poet **Rafael Alberti**. While he was in Paris, he wrote the following verses:



• I wake up.  
Paris  
Is it that I'm alive,  
or that I'm dead?  
Have I finally died? •

The poet in exile does not know exactly how he is, neither does he recognise himself. At around the same time (in 1937) it was the turn of the Basque extempore verse-maker and writer **Iñaki Eizmendi** aka *Basarri* to go into exile in Les Landes, not so very far from Paris, to a concentration camp the French had set up for those who had escaped the claws of Franco.



The exiled person lies on the floor unable to regain consciousness from the punch delivered by a heavyweight boxer. The blow of the journey (not always a return one) resembles a question that one asks oneself: Am I perhaps alive? Am I perhaps dead? What may have happened to those left behind? Whenever "perhaps/might/may" appears in all the questions, the person who is away will recover by virtue of time.

Dozens of Basque writers and people involved in culture had to go into exile while the war was raging in Spain. Others were much less fortunate and were either

shot or, in the best of cases, imprisoned. The war and massive exile led to a hiatus in Basque literature. By chance, a different kind of hiatus had taken place during the previous ten years (1925-1936): the golden age of Basque lyrical poetry which resulted in a flourishing of literary subjects with respect to the previous age. But, as pointed out already, the War and the protracted dictatorship that followed totally destroyed everything that had been planted. It was called *Lurperatuena belaunaldia* (The generation of the buried ones).

In a small country like the Basque Country these writers had known about each other before the war. But exile cut them off from each other. Thus affected were **Jokin Zaitegi**, **Telesforo Monzón**, **Pedro Ormaetxea** aka *Orix*, **Ixaka López de Mendizabal**, **Martin Ugald**, **Salvatore Mitxelena**, **Juan Ignazio Goikoetxea**, **Juan Antonio Irazusta**, **Sebero Altube**, **José de Izagirre**, **Andoni Arozena**, **Ander Arzelus**, and many others. Some headed to South America (mainly to Venezuela, Guatemala, Argentina and Mexico). Others wandered around inside Europe (in the United Kingdom, France and, in particular, in the Continental Basque Country located in France and under French administration). Nevertheless, they strove to maintain contact with each other. What is more, relations became essential. They built a network. A spider's web. One consequence of that was **the setting up of the Basque PEN Club in Paris in 1951**.

Those exiled as a result of the war developed all the genres. Publishing houses (*Ekin*), magazines (*Euzko Deya* -Paris, Buenos Aires, Mexico-, *Argia* -Caracas, New York-, *Aberri alde* -Mexico-, *Batasuna* -Chile-, and in Basque literature in particular *Euzko Gogoa* -Guatemala and Biarritz-), radio stations, etc. were either set up or revived. Thanks to its 44 issues, *Euzko Gogoa* left a deep imprint on literature, produced an unending list of writers and linked together our pre-war literature with literature in exile and modern literature.

But all that would not of course have been possible had it not been for the key network formed previously by the Basques in the Americas. The *Euskal Etxeak* (Basque Centres set up by associations of emigrants) that had already been strong since the end of the 19th century became a place of refuge for the refugees. That undoubtedly must have helped to sweeten the time spent in exile. Nevertheless, nostalgia or memories predominated in the verses of many poets, even if there was no single attitude. Koldo Izagirre (*Poesia Kaierak*) writes, "We have a little group of poets that produced complete works or who embraced the new



trends during the post-war period and from abroad. But Orixé started a new era of poetry from the line of individualism in a mystical merging with nature; the most characteristic work of Toribio Etxeberria is a collection of anecdotes comprising verses; while Telesforo Monzón, who emerged sometimes as an epic writer and sometimes as a costumbrista one, has only one poem full of nostalgia (**Tropikotik**). Iokin Zaitegi sung the saudade of the homeland. He best expressed the burden of exile, the chasm of distance and the dream of a free Basque Country. It is difficult not to fall into the stereotypes of nostalgia for one's homeland, and we would say that is what the affliction of the exiled person is in fact based on: the past is his/her future."

• In your graveyard at least, tomorrow or  
the day after  
I would like to rest in peace in the country  
of my parents. •

(Euskel kanta atzerrin)

• I have my homeland in my heart!  
My internal wound has festered abroad (...).  
In the old, black, blind forest far from the  
Basque Country,  
I have found a tall, solid, rigid oak tree. •

(Erbestean aritza)

Zaitegi has left us verses like these:



**Zaitegi**

The oak symbolises Basque freedoms. And like Zaitegi, Juan Ignazio Goikoetxea declares: "In exile how am I to fill my verses? / But what flows from the grape? - Wine. / And from the apple? - Cider. / And from the homesick heart? - / Love of my homeland and nothing else!" (**Atzerritik**).

As pointed out above, **Orixé** is one of the exceptions with respect to nostalgia. In Izaguirre's view, "when the poet has no land, he retreats within himself. By putting on one side the nostalgia that was so widespread among the exiled, he would produce a violent poem of great ingenuity, free imagination and in no way weepy. He takes refuge under the shade of a Mexican tree and does not dream of the walnut tree by the entrance, as Otaño does." Then again we have **Zaitegi's** symbolic oak tree. "Therefore, the Basque poet belongs anywhere, he discovers a

new quality in himself, and does not mind being alone in the world either, because he has the world inside himself. In the painful journey from having to sing an ethnographical we/us to singing a mystical I/me, Orixé ushers in modern Basque literature, or rather, the modernity of Basque literature: in a culture which has no land, the language is the only refuge, and one sings about the things that belong to one." (**Poesia Kaierak**).

### Under the shade of an Amate tree

As a child I remember  
it was dangerous to be sweating  
and to go and sit in the shade  
in a beech grove in Musulun;  
but when it was so sultry  
how delightful it was to lie down!  
But here the shade of the Amate  
tree  
is something even more delightful

A blue fly is flying in the middle  
or does it remain still?  
In the clear sky a silent Condor  
soars above the aircraft.  
In the scorching heat here  
I forget about the weather;  
this pleasure forces me to  
go inside myself even more.

(Euskaldunak, 1950)



**Orixé**





## Exiles after 1960

We have carefully read what **Jokin Urain** wrote from the prison of Dueñas (Spain) about the exiled people in the book *Errotarri*: *"During the war from 1936 to 1939 and the post-war period, many of those who crossed the Bidasoa (the river that divides the Basque Country between Spain and France) were arrested by the French police and handed over to Franco."*

That practice was once again revived in the 1960s with a fresh generation of refugees. In 1962 the French authorities started political deportations and control orders with measures taken against four Basque refugees. In 1965 they were expelled by the French government: Irigarai and Madariaga were deported to Algeria, and Del Valle and Txillardegui to Belgium.

*According to a 1972 Anai Artea association report, after 1963 the Paris Government authorised over forty expulsions and control orders. The Francoist regime found loyal collaboration among the French authorities."*

During the first two decades under the Franco dictatorship (the 1940s and 1950s) the general public was bound by silence. In the 1960s, however, various cultural initiatives and political struggles emerged in the Peninsular Basque Country. ETA was born to stand up to the fascist regime and to liberate the Basque Country. In that same decade, another generation of refugees, deportees and extradited people emerged and persists to this day.

In actual fact, as Urain has admitted to us, *"the person who escapes for political reasons goes with the hope of returning. As time goes by, the hope is forever being extended... When that hope is extended so much, it also begins to weaken. And after many years many people were to settle in these places, thus turning the hope of returning into a distant utopia."*

In this period, two Basque writers in particular have turned exile into the theme of many of their poems: **Joseba Sarrionandia** and **Mikel Ibarguren**.





# Mikel Ibarguren:

## *Exiled in one's own country*

*Today, too, the exiled person will be sleeping in a bed that is not his own,  
he will be drinking coffee from a cup that is not his own and  
he will be gazing at the moon from the window of a house that is not his.  
Little by little he will begin to love the country that is not his,  
and will gaze at his homeland from a seashore that is not his.*

Mikel Ibarguren's book *Deserriko Karrikak* (Susa, 2002) opens with a quotation from Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel Prize in Literature:



*"You can take away all a person's possessions  
and he will not stop being a person.  
But if you deny him his homeland, his language  
then he will be completely lost."*

An exiled person is a deprived person. Yet the category is not linked to the name. The exiled person can be offered another land, another language and even another homeland. The most beautiful land, the most complete language and the most charming homeland. The exiled person has a noun: he has a bed, a cup, the windows of a house, and the moon of course. He lacks a pronoun, *mine*, which in the poem is rendered by *his*.

It is Mikel Ibarguren, but it could be anyone (there are many others!). He fled the country in 1991 for political reasons. He was arrested. He became familiar with many different prisons. He was extradited. Later he spent many years in Ziburu (Continental Basque Country, France) and was not allowed to return to live in *his* town of Zestoa (Peninsular Basque Country, Spain). So near and yet so far! (according to the Michelin Guide, only 63 km away and 46 minutes by car). In the country administratively divided between two States, the number of Basques who have been forced to live on the other side of the border, on the French side to be more precise, since the start of the Franco regime is not insignificant.

There are no capital letters in Mikel Ibarguren's poetry at that time. Country is written in small letters. Abandoning the argument that the Basque person could constantly live in exile, the writer is deprived of Zestoa, a town of 3,600 inhabitants. As he admitted to the *Argia* magazine journalist Mikel Asurmendi in 2008, "I had to manage to live somewhere else. To do that I had to establish roots, but I carry my homesickness around with me. I've learnt to live with that homesickness and I have to go on learning to live with it."

So homesickness is something you wear. "Everything has become *dis-*, *de-* or *-un* for me: *dislocated*, *dispossessed*, *unloved*, keeping *unearthly* hours," he said at the time before returning from exile. "It is the logical result of being *disrooted*. I feel outside that small location of mine, Zestoa. I feel rooted and foreign at the same time." And that is precisely what he reflected in his poetry:

*"We have no choice but to live in the fortresses of loneliness,  
we go outside and the exile is the first street.  
The soulless man in the raincoat goes down the path,  
we will have to manage with these gloves this year."*

Poesiak baina badu ifrentzurik. "Errotzeko modua ere bada. Bertakoa sentitzen nauk, hemengo girora egina nauk, lagunak egin ditiat". Baina ez da nahikoa: "Hala ere, hori gero eta gehiago bizi arren, ez nagoen lekukoa naiz, ez nagoen lekuan bizi nauk uneoro. Zauri dezente ditiat noski, eta poesia jostorratz modukoa duk, hitzak sentipen mingotsak ixteko hariak dituk. Eginak *deslotzeko* eta *deseginak* lotzeko erabiltzen ditiat hitzak. Poesiarekin bizitzaren ziklo bat itxi nahian hasi ninduan, baina oraindik ez diat itxi. Egunen batean zirkulua itxiko ote dudán esperantzarekin bizi nauk". Bitartean, hutsak (eta ez bakarrik sorlekuarena, noski) eta bakardadeak ("*Deklinabide zaila da bakardadearena*") ehuntzen dituzte hari poetikoak:

*"Impatiently, I go into street exile,  
expecting to find you in the last bar still open,  
expecting that we will once again control time  
Exile becomes more exile  
whenever I touch your absence with my fingertips."*

## Out of the wind

*Deserriko karrikak*  
Susa 2002

This is not Commander Passicot street,  
but any old street on the other side.  
The bridge that joins you and me  
has nine flags wide open to the wind.  
In vain do they build breakwaters against the  
sea  
because the saltiness will always penetrate our  
memories.  
You can dream about me often even if the sea  
is rough,  
It wasn't me who  
anchored this rusty heart here.  
The moorings of impossibility are weak.

Mikel Ibarguren



# Joseba Sarrionandia:

*We will live everywhere in exile*

*One's homeland is chosen  
—and one's woman— or  
loneliness or lack of anything else  
impose on us .*

People easily fall into the temptation of labelling. So do we! 'National poet' is how **Joseba Sarrionandia** (Iurreta, Basque Country, 1958) has been described on more than one occasion. In 1980 he was arrested by the Spanish police. A year later he published his first collection of poems entitled *Izuen gordeleketan ba-rrena*. The book had strong reverberations and also influenced new writers in the Basque language. **In 1985 he managed to escape** by seizing the opportunity presented by a concert given by the singer Imanol at the prison of Martutene (Donostia-San Sebastian) to hide inside a loudspeaker. For various reasons (the escape itself, a song that turned the escape and the refugee himself into a myth, his abundant literary production, the mystery surrounding the places he was living in after his escape, and his life), Joseba Sarrionandia **became a myth in the Basque Country**, but more than anything, he has become a reference for the writers and readers of a whole generation.

**Having lived underground for twenty-nine years** suggests to us that exile must make its influence felt in Joseba Sarrionandia's literature. The journey starts with the refugee's fears and doubts, as he says in his story "*Denbora presentea eta denbora pasatua*" [Present Time and Past Time]:

*"I looked back and was overwhelmed by a strange sadness as that corner of Irish land slowly slipped away into the distance, that dark coast which was concealed from time to time by strips of fog. Then I recalled the words of the Venerable Bede that the Irish live in extremis terrae finibus, in other words he was saying that they live at the very end of the world. But if the world ended there, where were we supposed to go?"*

Urain himself could not describe this more clearly: "Not all refugees are the same. But in the mists of flight, the same gait is shared by the majority of the ones who set off without knowing the roads in advance, and they are united by the same anguish."

By contrast, Sarrionandia tells us in his poem *Iheslariaren ekipaia* that a sign forces you understand that you have reached the finishing post, exile:



*"We long for news from home,  
the radio hasn't broadcast anything;  
granddad died ages ago in the summer,  
no idea whether granny is still alive.  
Under the bed a suitcase  
searched by so many customs officers  
we sit by a window and stare out:  
the snow is falling.  
We've learnt a different grammar, yet they point to  
us saying: 'He's a foreigner'.  
We may never return,  
to the place that we thought we were returning to,  
to the place we'd like to go back to, because not  
only will the land of our birth change  
we too will change."*

On such a long journey all the corners of exile appear in the poet's texts. As a theme it is stronger in the poems of the early years. But more important than that is realising how he lives and how he expresses this in literature. The initial doubts are followed by calm questions:





*"When we came from there, did we remain there?  
When we stay here, are we staying here?  
When we leave here, will we return there?  
Is leaving always returning?  
Will we return to a place we've never been to before?  
And what if returning is no more than going beyond that place?  
Can the person who stays think they will stay for ever?  
Is it inevitable that we may set off, yet be unable to arrive?  
Will those who set off never stop anywhere?  
Or will they return?  
But do those who return go back to where they started out?"*

The questions will seek out the answers as time goes by. They will turn into definitions (what is more, in another language that is not the poet's own language):

*"Exile is to walk in streets covered by dead leaves  
Exile is a night on fire  
Exile is to speak without one's own lips  
Exile is to take shelter in the future, and in the rest of verbal tenses  
Exile is a word that sounds absurd  
Exile is to hide in a wardrobe for fear that someone will open it,  
and for fear that no one will ever open it.*

**As it becomes impossible to return home**  
(and not just physically), nostalgia ends up like a blot on a poem: "

*" We are here  
and we are there,  
If only we could  
return to our Basque countries soon!"*

The nostalgia felt by writers during the post-war period is not the kind of nostalgia that can be destroyed by a tempest, and that lovely poem written in prison could sink in the sea of forgetfulness:

*"The tree does not easily leave its soil  
unless weighed down or turned into planks.  
The pupil does not leave the eye  
unless in the beaks of ravens or mouths of salamanders.  
The saltiness does not easily leave the sea,  
nor sandstone the desert.  
Lilies do not relinquish the spring,  
nor the snow its whiteness.  
Whoever has one's roots in one's homeland  
/ does not leave it easily."*

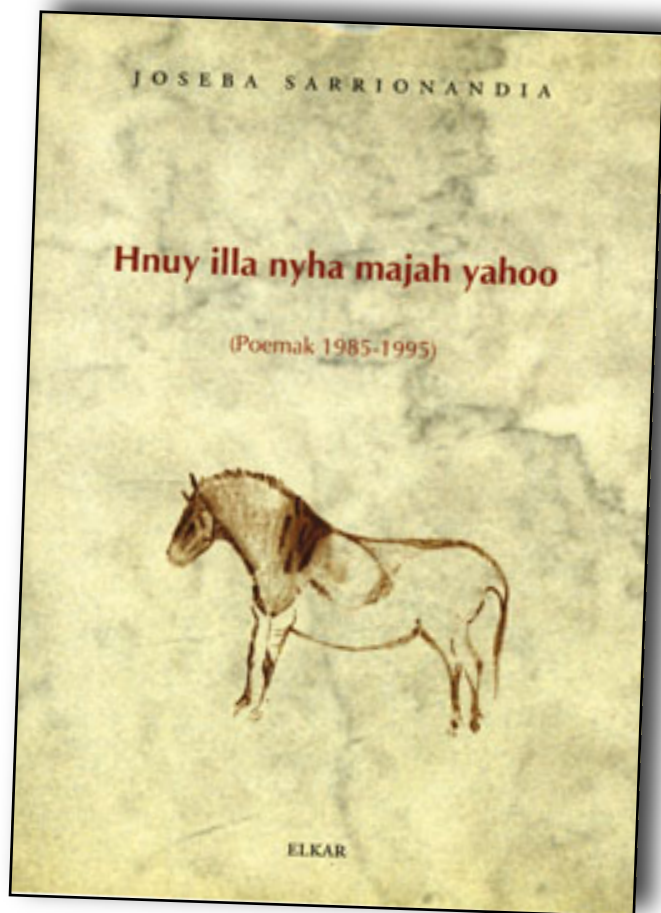
The exiled person is condemned to making a stone like that move. If there is any doubt, it is cleared up by the Minotaur:

*"Since then, even if we returned  
we wouldn't return to what we were,  
and we would not recognise what we wanted,  
we will always be in exile,  
without roots, like the wind. We will not belong to the place  
anywhere, neither there nor here  
our acts will be lost for nought in any place,  
nor are we what we are deep down  
we will live anywhere In Exile."*

So what happens to the homeland? The Minotaur spoke once again:

*"We have no homeland  
only what we carry around with us,  
we lost it in the attempt to create the homeland  
we wanted to live in,  
and since then we no longer have what we had  
nor what we wanted."*





## Geography

*Hnuy illa nyha majah yahoo*

Elkar 1995

Some die far away from home,  
out of necessity.  
Some coffins have to be placed  
far away from the cradles.

We won't die in Igorreta,  
we will fall in the sands  
like arrows shot in war.

We will be buried in the forest  
covered by the letters  
of cousins and friends.

The wind will blow away our ashes,  
towards the lips speaking  
in other languages.

Our father's house will remain standing  
without us.

Joseba Sarrionandia



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