

# Contemporary Basque Literature

Edited by Jon Kortazar

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Translated by Cameron J. Watson



Universidad  
del País Vasco

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# Preface

Contemporary Basque Literature, edited by Jon Kortazar

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In spite of the fact that we cannot envision a literature without a language, the mere existence of a language cannot be deemed sufficient for the creation and development of a literature. Take, for instance, the Livonian language. According to Valts Ernštreits and to translator Ryan Van Winkle, this Baltic language, whose earliest written records date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, boasted twenty speakers in 2019, all of whom were quite elderly, and three of whom were poets. However, it is fair to wonder: can we speak of a “Livonian literature” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Not by any means on the basis of an understanding of literature such as the one I will discuss forthwith and in which the literature written in Basque fully engages. Nonetheless, it may prove difficult to question the certainty of the fact that in the beginning was the word. Yet, we must also bear in mind the daring struggle of the writer, of every writer, to get hold of the most expressive words to convey his perception of the world and to open up to us, just as we cannot forget his efforts to find the best way to blend these words. As a consequence, we can deduce that the peculiarities

present in every language help unveil human existence as well as the motley multiplicity of the world.

Language itself is a social phenomenon. Yet, the speaker's individual flair can only influence it to a certain extent whereas great artists have been able to leave their imprint on it. On the other hand, literature tends to be understood nowadays as a complex system in which, apart from the creator of the text and its readers, other elements that mediate between them play a decisive role. Such elements help the books reach their recipients and get the repercussions that institutions such as the academia and the critics or any other form of recreation may grant them.

Octavio Paz highlighted all this when he stated, on the occasion of a solemn intervention in 1981, that literature did not simply refer to a collection of authors and books but to "a society of works" in which the co-creative role of the readers was fundamental. However, no less significant is the presence of a consolidated literary tradition, with its range of themes, procedures and styles, with its canon of commonly accepted authorities, a critique and didactics attentive to its analysis and interpretation, and a cultural industry that through publishing houses, literary magazines and supplements, and other related enterprises, provides channelling and support for pure creation, and satisfies the demands of the readers.

Literature does not end with the mysterious and germinal moment of the solo writing of the poem, the novel, the essay or the drama, because then the text hardly has a life of its own beyond its creator, whose talent, aesthetic perception of the reality, worldview and personal demons, is completely reflected in the work. On the contrary, it is then that the literary work begins to exist, and a vast panorama opens up for it in which there are no spatial or chronological limitations. Antonio Machado understood poetry to be "*palabra esencial en el tiempo*" [essential word in time (Own Translation)], and according to T. S. Eliot, universal literature as a whole, and within it the literature of each country, has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

Given these things, we must admit that Basque literature represents an exceptional and successful example regarding the configuration of a complete literary system. A team of researchers led by Jon Kortazar were responsible for the description and narration of this process. Between 2007 and 2014 this group of researchers published the eight volumes of their *Eguno Euskal literaturaren historia* [Contemporary Basque Literature], a great work focused, as the title indicates, on the contemporary peri-

od significantly begun in 1975, the year of the death of dictator Francisco Franco that triggered an unstoppable democratic transition and the full inclusion of the Spanish state in the European Union. Two years after that first publication, in 2016, the right decision was made to summarize it in a single volume published in English in the United States, which is now being republished by the University of the Basque Country in order to facilitate the dissemination of this *Contemporary Basque Literature* in Europe.

I am extremely grateful for the invitation extended to me to write, together with Xabier Irujo, a prologue to this volume that summarizes the panorama of Basque literature from the date indicated in what corresponds to the main literary genres: novel and short story, poetry, theatre and essay. There is also an essential chapter dedicated to children's and young people's literature, which, apart from the intrinsic value it can contain, represents a transcendental link for the consolidation of the entire literary system and a means to earn the early loyalty of its readers. 25% of the publishing production in Basque corresponds to this genre, which has such reputable names both inside and outside the Basque Country as Mariasun Landa. On the other hand, I am pleased to know that it was the publishing house Kalandraka that with the new century began to publish from Galicia children's and youth literature in Basque.

I could not refuse this invitation for three reasons that I will briefly state. These are fundamentally the bonds of intellectual understanding, cooperation in research and, of course, also friendships built over several decades between the work teams promoted by Jon Kortazar at the *Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea* [University of the Basque Country] (the LAIDA group, "*Literatura eta Identitatea Ikerketa Taldea*" [Literature and Identity Research Group]) and myself at the University of Santiago de Compostela ("Department of Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature").

We also pay full attention to children's and young people's literature in which to date it remains the most extensive, complete and updated History of Galician Literature until the year 2000, published in the framework of the encyclopedic *Proyecto Galicia* [Galician Project] published by *Hércules Ediciones*. The magnitude of the endeavor is reflected in the fact that eventually six volumes that were published between the years 2000 and 2003 to cover this literary chapter. Galician Literature occupied the first five: *La Edad Media; Los Siglos Oscuros. El Siglo XIX; El Siglo XX, La Literatura anterior a la guerra civil; La Literatura desde 1936 hasta hoy: poesía y teatro;*