ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY COLLECTIONS

Obabakoak: Stories from a Village
Bernardo Atxaga
Graywolf Press
978-1-55597-551-7
(Mar 2, 2010)

A book that foregrounds the importance of literature and language, Barnardo Atxaga's *Obabakoak* is an achievement. Its methods are varied, and much is bound by its spine—wit, fiction, autobiography, metafiction, explication, literary and aesthetic theory, instructions for writers (with chapters titled "How to Plagiarize" and "How to Write a Story in Five Minutes"), and letters penned by characters of all walks of life. This inventory does not begin to account for *Obabakoak*'s many delights. Readers find character reappearances, linguistic repetitions, and alternate endings. With so much to them, these pages sate.

Obabakoak is largely responsible for Bernardo Atxaga's international renown. The book has a circulation history that testifies to its importance. It was originally published in Basque by Editorial Erein in 1988. In 1989, a Spanish version was released, and *Obabakoak* was awarded the National Literature Prize. Three years later, Hutchinson released the English translation in Great Britain. To date, the book has been translated into more than twenty languages.

An international audience is fitting, given the book's international scope. While the book's title, which roughly translates to "the things and people of the village of Obaba," indicates a local focus, the work is not fixed to a single location. "These days nothing can be said to be peculiar to one place or person," Bernardo Atxaga writes in his final chapter, closing a book of many places—not only the Basque village of Obaba, but also Hamburg, Peru, Castile, Baghdad, and elsewhere.

Readers are in the hands of an erudite author, one who is thoughtful about the literary traditions he joins. The last chapter explicitly discusses the tradition of Basque writers and what it means to write with a "lack of an antecedent." Preceding this passage, Atxaga takes his readers on a literary excursion that stops by the narratives of Waugh, Chekhov, Garcia Lorca, and Maupassant.

And Atxaga discusses his poetics explicitly: "I would say that the first duty of literary language is to be unobtrusive," he writes. Here, Atxaga names his *modus operandi*: he skillfully sidesteps the heavy-handed or bold. Still, he is able to speak politically and philosophically. The

question of how words signify is consistently raised. What are words capable of, the author asks. The author subtly teaches his readers to question each object presented—what could it symbolize? What interpretations are available? With this approach, Atxaga makes literary theory accessible to a wide audience and, what's more, he makes it entertaining.

Atxaga has accomplished a work of metafiction that considers writing not only theoretically, but also materially and from a process perspective. The author is noticeably interested in the material reality of writing—pen and paper and desk—from the first lines of the book. The chapter titled "An Exposition of Canon Lizardi's Letter" details the physical letter—its contact with the floor, the type of paper used, and so on.

The process of writing is likewise highlighted. A commonality among the characters in this book is their engagement with the literate act. On the fifth page, Atxaga writes, ostensibly of his character, "He never got off to a good start. The words refused to give faithful expression to what was demanded of them." Reading such a statement, one considers the labor that produced *Obabakoak*'s opening lines.

In many ways, this is a writer's book, with all the (ir)reverence the word-craft invites. Atxaga's capacity to deliver the *bon mot* is on display. His humor draws the reader in, as if into a close circle of peers. Such is the case in the lines, "To write a story in just five minutes you need—as well as the customary pen and blank paper, of course—a small hourglass, which will provide accurate information both on the passing of time and on the vanity and worthlessness of the things of this life, and, therefore, of the actual effort you are at the moment engaged in."

The collection is more than worth its effort. Atxaga offers a work that warrants study and analysis as it is born of such pursuits. He brilliantly merges narrative and discussion of narrative. He enfolds stories within stories, writing within writing. With *Obabakoak*, Atxaga names the world aptly as he problematizes that act. The collection deserves preservation, like the language of its original publication. It will likely shape thought and literature for years to come.