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Robert Laxalt: La voz de los vascos en la literatura norteamericana

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Perhaps no other specialist in literature could capture the overall essence of Robert Laxalt's works in the manner achieved here by the author David Río Raigadas. Río's analysis is enriched by personal interviews with Laxalt and his family members and friends, and additionally with years of fieldwork among Basques in the United States and discussions and communications with Laxalt's English-speaking audience. Though Laxalt's works have been analyzed and critiqued previously by specialists from various environments, this is the first to marry an informed and representative understanding of Basque diaspora identity, with Basque Country rituals, history, and tradition, together with literary expertise.

Río utilizes a wide variety of published works, personal interviews, and Laxalt's private papers to create this interpretation. He quotes anthropologists, sociologists, historians, linguists, writers, critics, long time friends and professional colleagues of Laxalt, as well as Laxalt himself, to give the reader a multi-dimensional understanding of this Basque and American author. The publication begins with more than thirty pages of introduction to Robert Laxalt the man, which are indispensable to understanding his literature and the characters portrayed therein. Río describes Laxalt's upbringing and family experiences from his birth in Alturas, California in 1923, to the eventual settling in Carson City, Nevada. The introduction follows his years in journalism and his early minimalist style of the 1950s with popular local histories and fictional short stories. He interestingly weaves Laxalt's professional trajectory with details of his personal life; military service, health issues, education, and family members. Río provides a theatre backdrop for each scene in Laxalt's career, explaining the events, people and issues of his publications. Laxalt himself pointed to his marriage with Joyce Winifred Nielsen and the births of his three children, Bruce (1951), Monique (1953), and Kristen (1956) as the highlights of his life, and he wanted to be remembered as a good father first, and secondly, as an honest writer (p. 40).

This analysis points out that Laxalt's first published novel resulted from his initial trip to Euskal Herria with his father Dominique; Dominique's first return since immigrating to the United States, and Robert's first ever meeting with his homeland. His novel, *Sweet Promised Land*, was published four years later. Like so many other Basques from the diaspora who make their first pilgrimage to their homeland, Laxalt's life was changed. His written description rang true for hundreds of Basque families who recognized themselves in the characters. Río also highlights the fact that two years after the book's release and its effect on Basque-America, the first ever Western Basque Festival was held in Sparks, Nevada, with the promotional aid of

Robert Laxalt. The significance and timing of the book's release and the following national Basque festival allowed for the imagining of an interconnected Basque presence in the American west, and Robert Laxalt was one of the most significant pillars of these intercommunications. Río also follows Laxalt's significant involvement in the founding of the Desert Research Institute in 1960-1961, which would later include the Basque Studies Program in 1967, which then changed its name to the Center for Basque Studies in 2000.

Río utilizes appropriate quotes demonstrating his full understanding that Basque diaspora identity is not exclusive, but inclusive and layered. He quotes Laxalt, "I am North American, I am from Nevada, and I am Basque. No one is one single thing only, and I do not believe there is any contradiction in affirming this. It is not about exclusive elements, and I am very comfortable being all three at the same time (p.68)." This is a diasporic identity. What Río does not highlight is the fact that because Laxalt's works are written in English, emigrants themselves did not usually read his work. It is the second and third generation Basques who have enjoyed his historical novels, allowing them the luxury to better understand their own parents and family structures, and simultaneously seeing themselves in the characters.

The author demonstrates his profound understanding of the emigration experience with his analysis of how Laxalt portrays his father, Dominique, and the manner in which Laxalt himself infuses characters with emblematic features of those Basques transplanted in the west. Río points out the recurring themes of thrift, sacrifice, honesty, responsibility, consistency, and hard work in Laxalt's stories, themes which Basque-American readers know very well from their parents' sermons.

In a Hundred Graves: A Basque Portrait -a literary mosaic of forty-five sketches- represented the Basque-American perception of the homeland and focused on the traditional lifestyle of the rural villages, which then also perpetuated this idea to the later generations of readers. However, *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona* critiqued the social injustice and economic poverty of the Basque Country for the readers, utilizing the themes of smuggling and contraband markets across the Pyrenees in contrast to respectability and honor in Basque society. Río reminds us that Laxalt's depictions of the Basque Country are fragmented and heavily traditional and rural, and do not pretend to be exhaustive. Unfortunately, many readers are not analytical and do not notice this gap, but rather assume that the entire Basque Country maintains this customary heritage and folk life. Like Laxalt, they are attempting to reconnect with the homeland of their parents and grandparents, and are not as interested in post-modernity because they already live it daily in the United States. It would be most beneficial for Laxalt's readers to keep a copy of this publication by David Río as a reference for interpretation.

Río has personally visited the mountain meadows, towns, and businesses described in Laxalt's various stories, and he has seen and felt the wide-open expanse of the American west, which Laxalt regularly depicts in his novels. Río quotes Laxalt describing his interest in rural Basque society as opposed to urban life, much the same as his interests in the United States were also with rural life. The major theme of Laxalt's works are people-land relationships, which are significant in the American west as well as Basque Country society and culture. Río's publication demonstrates that he not only understands the author rationally and psychologically, but also -very importantly for diaspora works-, emotionally. He comprehends the Basque diaspora phenomenon and the inseparable affective and sentimental factors in Laxalt's Basque-American, or American-Basque, worldview.

Many Basques in Vasconia know almost nothing about the Basque diasporic reality in general, and even less about that of the United States. It is especially curious, as Río points out, that translations of Laxalt's works appear in German and French much earlier than an edition in Euskera, and that the first Spanish version was only published in 2000. Diaspora specialists might argue that this is evidence of the homeland's disinterest in the Basque diaspora experience. David Río Raigadas is working to change this apathy by introducing this detailed and valuable analysis. I was also driven to re-read several works because of his suggestive interpretations and evaluations. He recognizes both the Basque and the American, and especially the western character and Nevada behavior of Laxalt.

Río's many interviews and informal interactions and communications with the author enhance his analysis. He also understands the importance of Laxalt's mother, Thérèse, in her son's life and her desire to provide opportunities for education to her children. Laxalt's loss of Euskera, once enrolled in public schools in Carson City, and his explanation that ethnic identity maintenance had no place in the United States of the 1930s, is important for readers from Euskal Herria to remember. As Río points out, being ethnic, was not always *en vogue*, and this reality colored Laxalt's Basque-American experience and its expression in his literature. Río emphasizes that Laxalt worked for many years as a journalist and this influenced his writing style. He was the first director of the University of Nevada Press and served from 1967-1983. His years of teaching and tutelage at the University of Nevada, Reno won admiration from students and colleagues. And Laxalt's years of political campaigning for his brother Paul, also marked his cynicism toward politics and politicians. Laxalt's many honors included nominations for Pulitzer Prizes for both, *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona* and *The Basque Hotel*, the Tambor de Oro, and induction to the Basque Hall of Fame by the Society of Basque Studies in America, in addition to several literary awards.

This book describes Robert Laxalt as a versatile writer who specialized in American western and Basque themes. Río demonstrates his expertise and detailed knowledge of the author himself, and his many works, which span more than four decades. Any researcher working in literature or Basque diasporic themes will greatly benefit from this publication.

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