

A CLEAN WRITER: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT LAXALT

DAVID RÍO
Universidad del País Vasco

Robert Laxalt was born in Alturas, California, in 1923. He grew up in Carson City, Nevada, and graduated from the University of Nevada in 1947. The founder director of the University of Nevada Press, Laxalt has also been a United Press correspondent, a Fulbright research scholar, a consultant in Basque culture to the Library of Congress and a writer-in-residence at the University of Nevada. He currently serves as visiting professor at the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada-Reno. Mr Laxalt is the author of twelve books, both fiction and nonfiction, and numerous articles for National Geographic and other magazines. His books have won critical acclaim and awards throughout the world. Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land* (1957) became the first selection of the National Book Society in England and an alternate of the Literary Guild in the United States. *A Man in the Wheatfield* (1964) was chosen as one of the most distinguished works of American fiction for that year by the American Library Association. *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona* (1985) earned him the Tambor de Oro prize in Spain for his literary contributions to the Basque culture. *The Basque Hotel* (1989) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in fiction.

Q. Mr Laxalt, may we start talking about your early literary experiences? Elsewhere, you have said that the fact that you came from an immigrant (Basque) household did not allow you to know certain books and authors during your childhood. Could you comment on this?

A. Well, I still remember when we moved from our little house to a nicer house in Carson City and we started visiting some of the well-educated families that lived on the same street... My mother just couldn't believe that there could be a whole wall of books. But she started soon to ask for books, encyclopedias and everything else. And at that time I really loved to read. For example, when I was sick, during my rheumatic

period, my sisters would bring me lots of books. There were adventure books that I loved: Jack London's novels, Jules Verne's stories, the Tarzan books, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*... However, as I was from an immigrant household, I didn't read some of the standard children's books that were common for Anglo-Saxon families. Thus, I didn't read until much later *Alice in Wonderland* and it surprised me how wise and profound it was. In general, western, frontier and adventure were familiar for me, but the serious reading began after college.

Q. When did you decide to become a writer and why?

A. I don't know. In the first place, my mother convinced me that if I were a writer, I would die broke. My father was interested because he was a very good storyteller, but he never dared to voice an opinion on it. I loved to write always, but I also knew practically that I couldn't make a living in that way. So, actually when I went to Nevada I was studying to become a diplomat, not Journalism, but History and English, to join the diplomatic service. However, in order to help myself through school, I began to write stories part-time for the Reno newspaper, so I just got taken on to that and followed it after. I was almost 22 at that time and writing then was something adventurous. I knew no writers, I never took a writing class in my life, so this was a huge disadvantage. So, I was writing as best as I could, and made errors. But I started selling stories almost from the beginning. I sold the first story article I wrote and I sold the first fiction story I wrote.

Q. However, during those first years you were not very certain of your success as a writer. Even you wrote a letter to your literary agent where you included the following statement: «I'm born and raised here, the son of a livestockman, and conducting a very interesting experiment: how long does it take a writer to starve to death.»

A. Well, at first I didn't think I was that good, just trying to stay alive as a writer, make a living. So, I thought to have a job and then writing was something you did extra, for fun and pleasure. Then, after *Sweet Promised Land* I began to take it seriously.

Q. Do you share Hemingway's definition of writing as a gut-tearing ordeal?

A. No, never gut-tearing and never an agony. It is an utmost pleasure, really. However, I am very careful, writing and rewriting. I follow word upon word, sentence upon sentence. Sometimes I get into a writing block and I don't know exactly where I'm going next. Then, in desperation I just type all bunches of everything, crazy, and then out of that will come some sense of order of what I'm really trying to say. But, mostly, I'm a very careful writer.

Q. You don't write very long books. Is there any particular reason for it?

A. Well, there are at least three reasons. One, the newspaper training has made me a writer. Two, that's the kind of writing I like to do. And three, I guess it's the Basque part in me. They are short-spoken people, so me too. You do not find too many Basques that waste words.

Q. The autobiographical elements play an important role in most of your works, both fiction and non-fiction. Do you think that personal experience is fundamental for a writer?

A. I think so, like Hemingway said, writing comes from what you know. Yes, I think that personal experiences are very important because we learn from personal limitations, about what you would do upon certain circumstances. For example, I learnt an awful lot about myself in politics, working with my brother in his political campaigns. After you have been through a political campaign, nobody is gonna fool you. You get to be a good judge of human nature. Politics fascinated me, but journalism was valuable, too, because of the experiences it gave to you. For instance, *The Lean Year and Other Stories*, that was from journalism, taking actual events and inventing. And as a professor now, I love the exchange with young minds. I've watched too many people get old and their reactions, their ways, become old, too. But with young minds, you stay young. So, I've learnt from each of these activities.

Q. Related to this, why have you not written a book about your university experience? I think that you mentioned this possibility in the past, but so far you have not dealt with this subject.

A. Well, I have nearly forgotten I wrote a pretty good share of a book on academia and administration crisis. And it is not bad, but it is about a negative crisis. I think that in the university you often have diversity: a lot of wonderful teachers and professors, but also a few that have totally disillusioned me. They have to stab each other in the back, they have no sense of honor. I did a satire on politics in *The Governor's Mansion*, but I cannot do this on the university.

Q. By the way, why do you include at the beginning of *The Governor's Mansion* the following words: «All characters and events are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.» Is it due to its political content? If I'm not mistaken, you haven't used this statement in any of your earlier novels or short stories.

A. Well, these are not my words, the publishers included them. I know that the university board of regents was worried because I used real facts and names—hoodlums, J. Edgar Hoover, Howard Hughes and Sinatra. It was an era that Nevada conveniently forgot because it was embarrassing... Well, you start the book, you start an incident and you start writing, you follow the sense of the dramatic, and you add characteristics so that the incident and the characters are totally unrecognizable. Today if you asked me what really happened in *The Governor's Mansion*, exactly what literally happened, I couldn't tell you what of this is literally true or is invention. I couldn't. On some incidents I fabricated, invented, something to dress them up. With the hoodlums, however, I didn't do any dressing. I used real names, but I didn't rip them. I don't like hurting in books. It's easy to do that, but I don't like to do that.

Q. Which are your main literary models or influences? You have been compared to a great number of different writers: Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, William Saroyan, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Sherwood Anderson and even Juan Ramón Jiménez.

A. When I started writing, I had not read Steinbeck, I had not read Hemingway, though when I started reading him, I liked him very much. Walter Van Tilburg Clark did not influence my writing either, because I was a clean writer, and what I was writing

about I lived, and he didn't... None of the Russian writers either, though I liked Turgenev. I think Jack London probably influenced me subconsciously because I loved the adventure, the clean writing. However, I never tried imitating any of them.

Q. It seems that critics do not agree on a definition for your style of writing. Thus, some of them have called it simple, direct, unadorned and journalistic. However, other critics have talked about its poetic and lyrical qualities. How would you define it yourself?

A. I think it's very dangerous for a writer to try to define his style of writing because you have to believe that and you will be in trouble. But if you wish me to do so, I would say clean, clean writing, no obscurities.

Q. You said once, «I have worked hard to develop a style.» Do you consider that the style of *Sweet Promised Land* is your natural style? And, particularly, could you explain the importance of humor in it?

A. It's my style, that was written from the heart. I had no models to come from. Someone said I should read *The Return of the Native* by Thomas Hardy. I refused because I wanted to write my own book and I haven't read it yet. *Sweet Promised Land* was a book written with no influence of any other writers. And humor is important in it. I love humor. I think that if a book is very serious, you can use humor as a counterpart. It helps the message that you want to convey. And so much can be accomplished with humor. I particularly love the Basque sense of humor because it is wry, ironic and sacrilegious.

Q. Do you agree that the main subject of *Sweet Promised Land* is the modern individual's need for meaning, for a sense of place and identity?

A. Yes, that makes sense to me. I guess I was searching for identity, but I was writing mostly about my father and my ancestors' identity as a byproduct. I think that identity is very important to me.

Q. Would you say that in this book the immigrant's desire for integration and his reluctance to lose his ethnic identity act as opposing forces?

A. Yes, I think that is sound, but both forces are not mutually exclusive, they go together, they influence one another.

Q. Critics have emphasized the contrast between *Sweet Promised Land*, a non-fiction book, and *A Man in the Wheatfield*, your first novel. How different do you think both works really are?

A. Oh, they're altogether different. *Sweet Promised Land* was published by Harper's and they loved it as a memoir, an affectionate memoir of his son to his father. Then, I sent them *A Man in the Wheatfield*, with all the snake business in it, and they almost had a heart attack. They did me an injustice in the sense that they didn't realize that a writer can have many facets through his life. Then, Elizabeth Lawrence at Harper's sent it out to some critical readers and they said it was superior. Then she realized there was something there, the book went out and the reviews were very good news.

Q. Could you explain the genesis of *A Man in the Wheatfield*?

A. My view of the book is not objective and also there are things that happen in the creative process that the author is not aware consciously, they exist in the

subconscious. I think that writing comes from what is purely superstition, imagination, folk memory, actual memory and anger, injustice. When a writer has to speak out to say something, that makes a difference...In fact, I had been working on another novel for a year and a half, but the only copy of it was stolen while we were in France. So, I tried to reconstruct it, but it didn't work. At the back of my mind I had the idea about the new novel, and I had even done some research on rattlesnakes before I left America. So, I began thinking seriously about the book in a state of despair. I had these elements bouncing around in my head, but before I wrote the work I had to sort out two dreams or nightmares that I used to have: one was the dream of a child and the other was a nightmare that I still had until I wrote the novel. Then I never had this dream again. I guess that the novel was my exorcism. Both dreams progressed to the dreams of Father Savio in the book. Well, about the characters, they grow as you write about them, and they take on characteristics often different from the ones you conceived. Every one of the characters in this novel grew up in this fashion. So, Father Savio was created after a Jesuit priest at St. Clara University in California, but I added new dimensions. And part of the priest is in me, in my dreams, in my background (I was raised in a Catholic family and my sister was a nun). Now, Smale Calder was created after a man that lived in Dayton and had the gift of picking up rattlesnakes and never being bitten. Also I knew rattlers. So, I took this strange chemistry and invention to make my character, an innocent living in an unattractive world and almost repulsive environment, who loves snakes for the sake of their grace and movement. And I chose a setting: a town peopled by Italian immigrants. I couldn't use Americans because Smale was the outsider and he was American. I couldn't use Basques because they just don't show their emotions. So the only other group I knew was the Italians. I was only struck by their classic nature: classic reactions, classic anger, classic politicians and classic underlying passion. I realized that I was writing in this book about the meanings of such overused words as good, evil, love, envy, ego, hypocrisy, innocence, and symbol and myth. This book was my exploration into all the things you don't know. As Hemingway said, «writing comes from what you know, but it also comes from all the things you cannot know.» So, I guess that the book was my own devil dematerialized.

Q. Which is the importance of symbols in this novel? Perhaps you have even heard about a critic who said that the book collapsed under a heavy load of symbolatry.

A. I only used a few symbols in it because I, on principle, do not like too many symbols. Besides, whatever symbols I used, they were earthbound symbols. The snake, for example, as a Christian symbol for evil, though in Greek times they had a different, holy meaning. And then, some were purposeful. Manuel Cafferata, for example, he stands for Emmanuel or God, the father symbol who creates the town. And things like that.

Q. Would you say that in *In a Hundred Graves: A Basque Portrait* and *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona*, both of them set in the Basque Country, the meaning of the past and tradition constitute a recurrent topic?

A. Well, not exactly so. In *In a Hundred Graves* I was just trying to capture the Basque villages. It was my Basque project. I was taking notes, voluminous notes and I didn't know if the incident or the conversation was worth a story. Then, when I had put them down, the only problem there was what order to put the stories in in a small volume. Actually those were actual notes because I realized, once I got there, it was almost impossible to find a formula for explaining what was going on the Basque village. I was just trying to build a mosaic of a Basque village by taking individuals and incidents. Then I made one mistake on a particular story in the book, «No Crossroads for Augustine.» The story should have been a novella, it had all the ingredients for a novella. And *A Cup of Tea in Pamplona* was strictly adventure. I wasn't making a big statement, though I made a social comment on what happens in countries where rich and poor are so sharply divided. In the time the book was written one had to keep station and appearance, and for a peasant to break the code of station was disaster.

Q. Which is, in your opinion, the most important common thread of your Basque-family trilogy (*The Basque Hotel*, *Child of the Holy Ghost* and *The Governor's Mansion*)?

A. Family... *Child of the Holy Ghost* was written because my mother was hurt so badly. I didn't try to portray the village as cruel, it's just the way things were. In a way that's healthy because it casts credibility on the rest of it, too... *The Basque Hotel*, that was just a kid's experience growing up. The kid doesn't understand what the immigrants are supposed to be. It's a kid not denying his ancestry, it is just that he can't understand it. In *The Governor's Mansion* family is fundamental, too. I think that during that period the love of people for their relatives was so strong that they would sacrifice their own careers in order to help family. Also I realized writing it that this was an invaluable experience. I finished the book and then I had this dream of going home, but there was no home and no family. I wrote it and it was Monique, my daughter, who read it and said: «Papa, that's the end of your book.» I couldn't see it and then I did see it. She was right.

Q. You have published so far two collections of short stories: *The Violent Land: Tales the Old Timers Tell* and *A Lean Year and Other Stories*. Both of them include an important number of «Western» stories. How can you explain your attraction toward this genre, considered as a minor one by some critics?

A. Well, *The Violent Land* was my first attempt to take an actual event and fictionalize it, dramatize it. So, most of the stories actually happened, but I gave them dialogue, descriptions, Indians, soldiers... *A Lean Year*, well, I was trying to find out what kind of writer I was and obviously I didn't know anything about the world of writing up there. And I chose Western stories because it was all that I knew then. And my first love has always been the West and the people there.

Q. *A Lean Year and Other Stories* consists of stories that you wrote in the fifties and that you haven't changed for their publication in 1994. Some of them were rejected then and now they are published. How do you explain this change? Is it due to an evolution in the audience or to the fact that you now have a long-established reputation as a writer and editors can accept your stories without taking risks?

A. Yes, I guess it's this second reason. I never tried to put all these stories together, but at that time I was really fighting the establishment. I was afraid that every one of these stories would be taboo in the magazine market. They were too «dark» for the establishment. You didn't write about gambling, politicians or executions. However, I got every story in then, except «The Murderer.» «The Herd Stalker» and a couple of others, but they were totally taboo.

Q. Finally, which are your writing plans for the immediate future?

A. I'm writing a novella loosely based on an incident my father had to do with in 1912. It's a story about a young white cowboy and his closest friend, an Indian boy. The story involves rustlers, bandits and some remarkable Indians that you have never seen before. It's gonna be a serious story. I can draw on my knowledge of Indians and cowboys and my dad's experiences, too. Oh, and my last book it will be about Africa, about my experience there in World War II. I kept a diary of it until the point I was dying of what seemed to be dysentery. I had a weird experience a couple of months ago. I opened the diary, and I realized that the diary was important not because of what it said, but because of what it didn't say. It brought back so many bad memories that I had to close the book. At the end of it, it says: «why do you continue writing if you are going to die in two weeks?» So, I threw it down and I forgot about it. But there is a potential there, if I am lucky to get detached. There's a potential there for the best thing I ever write in my life.