Laxalt Family's Basque American Correspondence After *Sweet Promised Land*

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Abstract:

Dominique Laxalt is a Basque who became famous following the novel *Sweet Promised Land* written by his son Robert Laxalt in 1957. The novel relates the harsh adaptation to the life of a shepherd in the American West and the impossible definitive return to the native land, after decades of emigration and the journey made with his son Robert in the Basque Country (Ezkerra and Olaziregi, 2009; Laraway, 2019). As a result, the novel is an illustration of the altered identity of Basque Americans (Totoricaguena, 2014; Douglass, 2005; Decroos,1983).

We have examined the very rich correspondence of the Laxalt family where we can see a double alterity of identity, apart from that of Dominique Laxalt himself. It concerns, on the one hand, that of Dominique's American children, concerning their interest in the Basque language and the Basque Country (notably Robert's, long before his novel) and, on the other hand, the fascination of the Basque Country's relatives for the American life of the Laxalt family (and the success of Paul Laxalt in politics). But these letters also bear witness to the changes in society and the economy of the Soule of the 1960s.

The dozens of letters sent by Dominique Laxalt's children and sisters, nieces and nephews are, in a way, a continuation of the novel *Sweet Promised Land*, since they allow us to know the family events after the novel. But, above all, the letters show that the journey recounted in the book is a catalyst for the close ties between the Basque and American Laxalt families.

Keywords: Diaspora, Basque Literature, Correspondence

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her novel *Americanah* (2013), shows very clearly the change in the identity – or, more exactly, in the behavior – of Nigerian people living in the USA. They try to become Americans, changing, for example, their accent. Furthermore, they do not realize that their homeland has evolved during the same time.

This article will focus on another novel –and another region of the USA, another homeland and another era – but like in Ngozi Adichie's book, identity, diaspora and the return (Oliver-Rotger, 2015) are three important topics. The paper is about Robert Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land* (1957), a story about otherness, as defined as change in identity (Petersoo, 2007) and feelings of the Basque-american Dominique Laxalt. He made a trip to his homeland, fifty years after he arrived in Nevada, and he did not want to stay there: "I can't go back. It ain't my country any more. I've lived too much in America ever to go back" (Laxal,t 1997, p. 176). Robert Laxalt relates his father's life in the hills of Nevada as a shepherd and the trip that he made with him to the Basque Country, in order to meet their relatives.

This paper will focus on the story about the otherness not mentioned in the book *Sweet Promised Land*, and thanks to the dozens of letters of Laxalt's family before and – particularly – after the trip of Robert and Dominique. On the one hand, we will develop the interest of Laxalt's children, as Americans, in their roots. On the other hand, we will analyze the influence of having family in the USA for people living in the Basque homeland. Otherness can be observed in the attitude towards the languages (Basque, English and French), in the fascination of the relatives in the Basque Country for the American way of life and, hence, in their eventual resulting increased closeness to and awareness of the USA. Moreover, the letters illustrate the change in the relationship between the Basque and the American families and the influence of the trip on this change.

Diaspora and assimilation

Immigrants live together in a diaspora due to a number of factors relating to the «distance between cultures», such as sharing a common language and traditions, coming from the same district or through having been part of a network of contacts which gave mutual support in finding employment and emigrating. Paradoxically, this support is problematic for becoming economically and culturally integrated into the host society (Prinz, 2019, p.

16). For example, Armenians in the diaspora do not tend to work, to marry or to have contacts with people from other communities (Mkrtchyan, 2008, p. 12). Hence, diaspora organization comes about in order to maintain national identity, and the family is the main way to achieve this. Nevertheless, this protection of identity results in their isolation and, after that, risks unemployment. In order to avoid this difficult economic situation, members of the community may try to integrate into mainstream society despite, through this choice, bringing about weaker integration within the family (Mkrtchyan, 2008, p. 13).

Bhatia and Ram (2009) conclude that cultural integration «into the mainstream culture» – or «acculturation» – is not an individual choice, and that the web of «socio-political and historical forces» are key to acculturation (Bhatia and Ram, 2009, p. 147). However, they point to the analysis of Berry (1998) who suggests that assimilation is the result of the individual decision of members of the diaspora to break with their own cultural identity, having regular contact with the «dominant group» (Bhati and Ram, 2009, p.141).

In spite of the difficulties with integration for the first generation, the situation changes for their children. Indeed, adaptation is very much easier for the youngest generation, due to their daily relationships with other local children (Mkrtchyan, 2008, p. 25). The experience of the Basque diaspora is, more or less, similar to the situation of the Indian (Bhatia and Ram, 2009) and the Armenian (Mkrtchyan, 2008) diasporas. The first generation of Basque immigrants has been marginalized (Oiarzabal, 2009, p. 79), and colonies of Basques tended to group together (Alday, 1999. p. 164), and they were tenacious in the maintenance of their ethnic identity (Douglass and Bilbao, 2005, p. 329). However, this can not be explained by political motivations or attachment for the homeland (Douglass and Bilbao, 2005. p. 345). The main reason for this was isolation in the mountains since, as shepherds, Basques did not see anybody; they did not learn English and they did not have the opportunity to marry Americans (Douglass and Bilbao, 2005: 345). Nevertheless, as in the Armenian case (Mkrtchyan, 2008), members of the second or third generation did marry Americans (Douglass and Bilbao, 2005, p. 343-344). According to Jean-Francis Decroos, marriage with people born in America had brought about the loss of the transmission of the Basque language (Decroos, 1983, p. 77).

There are at least three further reasons which may explain this lack of transmission of the Basque language: insufficient teachers of Basque, the

difficulty in finding occasions to speak in Basque in America and the social stigma of not using a mainstream language (Oiartzabal, 2009, p. 81). Between the end of the19th century and the first part of the 20th, immigrants into the United States opted to abandon their own language in order to assimilate (Garikano, 2009). The later generations of the Basque diaspora tend not to think of going to live in the Basque Country, but they have a strong emotional connection with the homeland (Totoricaguena, 2015, p. 193). They do not see it as worth the effort to learn the Basque language (Michelena Smith, 2011, p. 52). Instead of the langage, their link with their «ethnic identity» is limited to cultural artifacts, such as Basque dances (Corcostegui, 1999, p. 247). Hence, dance has an acquired significance, because in most cases, it is the only way to achieve a stronger or weaker connection with the Basque Country.

This implies a political dimension because it demonstrates negation of identification with Spain or France (Corcostegui, 1999, pp. 255, 259). The proportion of Basque American people who said that they are only Basque was 72.% in the decade of the nineties (Oiarzabal, 2009, p. 99). Nevertheless, the perspective of some members of the Basque diaspora is cultural rather than political. Furthermore, this cultural expression appears as if frozen in time. Recent immigrants experience this phenomenon, because Basque culture (such as dance and music) has evolved since the emigration of the older generation. Such immigrants may express disappointment with the cultural expression of the older generation, because it shows a culture which no longer exists (Totoricaguena, 2015, p. 123).

Basque-American people who maintain connections with their homeland or the homeland of their parents or grandparents, try to keep informed about what is happening in the Basque Country. There are blogs and specialized websites in English about the Basque Country and aimed at people in the diaspora (Goirizelaia, 2019, p. 193). The existence of diasporic media is common, but transnational media are essential too (Budarick, 2014, p. 144). However, Basque-Americans tend to follow diasporic media more than websites based in the Basque Country, mainly because these are in Basque, in French or in Spanish. The other important channel of information is Facebook (Goirizelaia, 2019, p. 204).

Some decades ago, when Facebook or websites did not exist, letters were the main form of communication between relatives on either side of the Atlantic. Moreover, trips to the homeland were – and continue to be –

another important way to get in touch with the Basque Country and the family. Indeed, the need to see relatives was the strongest pull (Douglass and Bilbao, 2005, p.348).

This type of return –which is not definitive– inspires literature where the difficulty or the impossibility of feeling at home lies both in the homelend and in the hostland (Oliver-Rotger, 2015, p. 3). This impossibility is self-perpetuating and results in «alienation», «deterritorialization» or «exclusion" in both contexts (Oliver-Rotger, 2015, p. 5). The return – the trip to the homeland, more exactly – is the main subject of the book *Sweet Promised Land* (1957) written by Robert Laxalt. Rio (2002) has researched the literature of Robert Laxalt and, moreover, Ezkerra and Olaziregi (2009) analyze this book from the perspective of the otherness, or the change, of his father Dominique Laxalt who emigrated to the USA in 1906 (Rio, 1998, p.11)

At the beginning, Dominique Laxalt's intention was not to stay in the USA but to return to the Basque Country after earning enough money. It was the reason given for not having motivation to learn English (Ezkerra and Olaziregi, 2009, p. 49). But he spent nearly a half century before returning, and he learned English in this time. Nevertheless, he did not lose his mother language, the Basque language. But although he spoke Basque, his basqueness had changed (Ezkerra and Olaziregi, 2009, p. 51) and he did not know where his real «home» was: the homeland or the hostland? (Ezkerra and Olaziregi, 2009, p. 49-50).

Method

This paper, not based on the novel, explores the family situation of Dominique and Robert Laxalt and the years following the trip of 1953, related in *Sweet Promised Land.* The material analyzed here consists of the dozens of letters received by Dominique from the Basque Country and from his children in other parts of the USA or, in the case of his son Robert, the world. In order to analyze these letters, the author traveled to Nevada, from the Basque Country. There, the archive of the Center of Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, in Reno – a Center created by Robert Laxalt himself in 1967 – was consulted (Rio, 1998, p. 11).

There are many collections in this archive, and some of them could be accessed, including collections belonging to the Laxalt family. Three collections from the Laxalt family were consulted: "Laxalt family correspondence"

(2 boxes); “Robert Laxalt Papers” (3 boxes); “Dominique Laxalt Papers” (2 boxes). The boxes contain letters, Christmas cards, press clippings and other documents. All the letters were read and pictures of a large part of them were taken – particularly of letters talking about the social, economic or cultural life of the Basque Country, of stories about the family or relating to the trip of Dominique and Robert Laxalt –. For each letter a couple of sentences were written about the main information contained in it and background links were made to other topics relating to time, location, etc. The next step was the classification of the topics and the content analysis.

Results

Otherness

The letters were written either in English, French or Basque. Laxalt himself wrote letters in Basque to his brother living in the United States, but the letters of his sisters, his nieces, his nephews or his cousins were in French or in Basque. Concerning the correspondence between Dominique Laxalt and his children, they communicate only in English. In them, there can be observed the otherness mentioned by other researchers (Decroos, 1983; Douglass, 2005) in the identity of the Laxalt family and in the relation to the majority of American families from the Basque emigration.

The lack of transmission of the language of the homeland becomes an obstacle to maintaining the family ties between Dominique Laxalt's children and the family living in the Basque Country. This is illustrated in the following extract from the Dominique Laxalt's letter to his daughter Suzanne (in English):

“Suzanne, if you have any spare time please write a letter to your aunt Marie at Pau France. She has been very sick last year although she is better; Madeleine Laffargue and Marie-Jeanne Bente have asked me to write as often as possibly can. […] I had send her a clipping of Mickey’s and Cathi’s wedding and this professor could read and translate very good (so you can write in English)” (January 16, 1957).

The last part of the quotation illustrates one aspect of the concept of linguistic stress (Badu Bada, 2014), a phenomenon in bilingual societies where one of the two languages is a minority one and the other is spoken by everyone: the speakers of the minority language may not know if they can address stranger in that language. It is the opposite situation to English in

the Basque Country, where the majority language of the United States was not spoken, and may not be understood by the Basque speaking aunt in Pau. Dominique must reassure his daughter about language: he knows someone who can translate the letter written in English.

References to the language are present in other letters as well, such as the other one written to his daughter Suzanne. Dominique tells her about his encounter with people from the Basque Country, (in English): "…in June they will go back to San Sebastian, Spain thats their home town. The 11 year old boy goes to school there during Summer Vacation so not to forget Spanish schooling"; "…don't speak French and neither one talk Basque" (January 3, 1958).

American family about Basque language

Despite not speaking Basque, the (adult) children of Laxalt show quite some interest in the language and culture. Suzanne (Sister Mary Robert) tells her parents (letter of July 17, 1962) that she met a linguist, and that they had discussed the Basque language: "It turned out that his name is Jose Sola – and he came from the Navarro province Spanish Basque. I had more fun expounding my Basque words walking stick – (makila) – bread – (ogie?) – etc". This fragment shows that Laxalt's daughter does know a few Basque words: the first word mentioned is related to her father's job (the shepherd's stick) and she is not sure of the second word (bread).

The most famous son of the Laxalt family, Paul Laxalt (future Governor of Nevada and close to President Ronald Reagan) does not tend to talk too much about the Basque Country and the Basque language, but in a letter (March 26, 1948) addressed to his uncle Pete, he speaks about a "Spanish-Basque" man who works with his father.

On the other hand, Mick Laxalt expresses his regret at not knowing Basque: "I kick myself in the pants a million times for not learning Basque. My professor thinks I'm really insane not having learned what to him is the most "baffling, interesting, and precious tongue in the linguistic system." (December 21, 1957). In fact, Mick does not speak Basque, but is learning French as are the other sons or grandsons of Dominique Laxalt. The link with Europe will be made through the French language.

It is above all, the son Robert who shows a special interest in knowing his father's country of origin. Robert Laxalt made the trip to the Basque

Country with his father in 1953. But, ten years before that, he shown the inclination to meet his family one day. In the letter sent from Congo, he mentions the possibility of moving to Europe: “If it is, I would appreciate your sending me the addresses and directions as to how to find your relatives in France, in case I go through the Pyrenees. It would be wonderful if I could get stationed there, because then, I could see them all the time” (n.d.). These two sentences tell us that the children of Dominique had very little information about their family in the Basque Country.

He expresses the same desire in a letter sent from Washington, pending a trip of which he does not know the destination. But he would like to have the opportunity to know his family: "If I was in Spain I could go to France sometimes + visit our relatives. That would sure be good” (October 2, 1943). We notice a clear difference between these two letters: “your relative” in the first, “our relative” in the second. From one letter to the next, Robert felt more integrated into this family.

The admiration of the Basque family

Beyond the otherness of Dominique Laxalt himself and, above all, of his children born in the United States, the letters between the family in the homeland and the family in the diaspora reveal that there is a different kind of otherness for the relations living in the Basque Country. There are many letters praising the success of Dominique Laxalt's children and grandchildren. They are especially proud of Paul Laxalt, for his political career. Paul's Souletine family shows great pride in having the Governor of Nevada among their cousins in America. Some letters are accompanied by press clippings from a local newspaper: «Le gouverneur du Nevada parle basque» (“The Governor of Nevada speaks Basque”), in *La dépêche du Midi,* from Friday, November 11th, 1966.

On November 21st that year, a very distant relative whom he did not know wrote to Dominique, introducing himself and congratulating him and, particularly Paul, on the election (in French): "It was through the newspapers that we learned here that a Souletin Basque was elected to the post of Governor of Nevada. And my aunt, whom I also congratulated, kindly gave me your address. […] This is to convey to you our joy at your great success, crowned by that of your son, and that of your other children”.

However, one sister of Dominique mentions the difficult beginnings of her brother, in a letter of March 1st, 1957 (in French): “The beginnings in America were hard but what happiness you knew how to create around you. Your efforts have not been in vain you have an admirable family; I can only congratulate you”.

The trip became a link

All these letters confirm that the journey recounted in the book is a catalyst for the close ties between the Basque and American Laxalt families. Of nearly 200 letters, only 12 letters predate Robert and Dominique Laxalt's trip. One explanation could have been that the letters prior to the trip were lost and the later letters kept. In this case, how can these 12 letters be explained? Even if the old letters were lost, the fact of having kept the later ones would show us an increased interest by the American family in the European one, after the trip.

Between October 1953 and the end of 1954, there were 13 letters received from the Basque Country. The following years, between 1955 and 1972, there were between 4 and 8 letters per year, except in 1961 (year of a second trip by Robert Laxalt with his family) with 16 letters and in 1966 (year of the election of Paul Laxalt) with 17 letters. So the trips appear to have had a real impact on the relationship between members of the home-land and the diaspora.

By analyzing the content of the letters we can say that the journey recounted in the novel had the effect of improving the relationship. There is, first, the letter from his sister Marie, sent as soon as Dominique and Robert returned (October 25, 1953), thanking them for the visit. Her follo-wing letters, like those of the other members of the family, always evoke the memory of this visit and the desire or even the request for a future trip (however, Dominique was never going to return to his native country).

Several nieces, nephews or more or less distant cousins write to him over the years after the trip, to wish a happy new year, to give news of the family, in view of a trip to the United States or an upcoming visit from a son or grandson of Dominique… It is through these letters that we understand that these members of the family had not previously met Dominique – and even less Robert – before their trip, and that they were delighted to have got to.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our analysis of the correspondence of the Laxalt family demonstrates that the trip made by Dominique Laxalt with his son Robert to the Basque Country, related in the book *Sweet Promised Land,* formed a pivotal event in the construction of the link between family living in the Basque Country (homeland) and the relatives living in the USA (hostland). The letters confirm the references to otherness in relation to difference when compared with one's original identity (Petersoo, 2007), made by Decroos (2005), Goirizelaia (2019) and Ezkerra and Olaziregi (2009). One type of this otherness was that the Basque-American family did not speak Basque or French while the Basque family did not speak English. This situation would not have been problematic if they had not had a relationship and if the American children had had no interest in the homeland of their parents.

However, despite assimilation into mainstream American society (Bhati and Ram, 2009), having connections with Basque family (Gorizelaia, 2019) increased the sense of otherness for the American Basques and, in addition, in the case of the Basque family, they felt more involved with America. Indeed, the Basque family would not have had the same interest in American life if they had not had relatives in the USA and a relationship with them. Finally, the otherness of Dominique Laxalt, who did not feel at home in his homeland (Ezkerra and Olaziregi, 2009), can be understood by reading the letters of his sister, which describe the great changes taking place in society in the Basque Country.

The connection between the novel and the actual artifacts (letters, etc.) of the writer and the protagonists of the novel has permitted a deeper understanding of the situation described in the book, that is, the complexity of the changes undergone/ experienced by emigrants and their relatives, with regard to their identity.

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