

BASQUE HERITAGE AND WESTERN NEO-REALISM:
AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANK BERGON



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Frank Bergon, a Nevada author of Basque ancestors, has eight books and numerous articles for *American Literary History* and other journals to his credit. In fact, he is regarded as one of the major contemporary Western writers. His books include *Shoshone Mike*, «the best Western since *The Ox-Bow Incident* to explore the darker side of the Nevada justice, to universally indict the frailties of man» (*Western American Literature*) and *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S*, (Finalist 1993, Best Novel of the West). His most recent novel, *Wild Game*, has also won critical acclaim throughout the United States. Bergon currently serves as professor of English at Vassar College. He was interviewed by David Río Raigadas on July 18, 1997.

Q. Mr. Bergon, may you start by describing your Basque roots and the influence of this peculiar background on your childhood and youth?

A. My mother's parents were both from Bizkaia. My grandfather was born in Ajangiz-Gernika, my grandmother in Markina. They settled in Battle Mountain, Nevada, where they owned the Midway hotel and grocery store. They had eight children. When I was a child the significance of my being Basque was hazy. It meant going to the Basque hotel on Sunday afternoon for family-style dinners. It supposedly meant inheriting certain traits of tenacity, stubbornness, strength, and reticence. It meant having a grandmother with a connection to someplace in Spain and the ability to speak an incomprehensible language. Basques fresh from Spain and France working the sheep on ranches seemed somehow different. They were foreigners. Ethnic-consciousness for me as a child was not as vivid as among current children of Basque heritage. Like other descendants of immigrants with whom I grew up, we knew we all had foreign roots but we were now something else. We weren't Basque-Americans. We were just Americans. Mostly we were Westerners.

Q. Did you feel at that time that being a descendant of immigrants was a negative factor in any way?

A. Not really. My parents had experienced that stigma, but I grew up in a ranching community in California's San Joaquin Valley where most of my friends and acquaintances were descendants of immigrants. We had assimilated.

Q. Do you have any current ties to the Basque Country?

A. Yes. I just returned from visiting my relatives in Bizkaia. There are a lot of them. One of my cousins is the writer Bernardo de Arrizabalaga whose novel, *En el principio era el roble*, won the Pío Baroja Award.

Q. What was the real role played by literature in your education?

A. I read a lot as a child. Fiction always inflamed my imagination, but serious literature did not become an important part of my life until I attended a Jesuit high school in California. I had read Charles Dickens and Mark Twain as a boy, but it was not until high

school that I discovered modern literature, although not in school courses. Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas constituted reading outside the classroom, but it was encouraged by my Jesuit teachers.

Q. When did you start thinking about writing and why?

A. In grammar school, the nuns had us write stories, sometimes incorporating the week's spelling words, and I discovered I could do it. I had always liked to tell stories. I can recall telling stories in the school yard about Nevada dust storms and ranch adventures, which seemed to engage my classmates. When I was around twelve or thirteen, doing ranch work alone during the summer, I imagined books I might write similar to the ones I was reading. While trying to read Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*, I remember concluding that the first obligation of a writer should be the avoidance of long passages that bored people. In high school, I began writing poetry, then short stories, and during my second year I was publishing in the school literary magazine. Writing poetry and stories was the most exhilarating experience I had encountered.

Q. Did you ever write any of those books you imagined as a child?

A. In a way, yes. I had imagined writing a book about an Indian similar to the biography of Cochise, an Apache chief, which I had enjoyed. Thirty years later I wrote the novel *Shoshone Mike*.

*Q. If I am not mistaken, prior to *Shoshone Mike* (1987), you only published scholarly books, such as *Stephen Crane's Artistry* (1975) and the edition of *the Wilderness Reader* (1980). Why did you decide that you should start writing fiction?*

A. In high school and college, I wrote both fiction and criticism, but fiction was primary for me. The fine Irish short story writer Sean O'Faolain was one of my teachers at Boston College. Then I received a post-graduate fellowship as a fiction writer to study at Stanford University for a year with the Western novelist and historian Wallace Stegner. In the doctoral program at Harvard, my emphasis shifted to literary criticism, but I continued to write short stories. The scholarship simply got published first.

*Q. Could you explain the genesis of *Shoshone Mike*?*

A. It was a story I knew since I was a child. The massacre of the Shoshone occurred not far from my Basque grandmother's house in Nevada in the same year my mother was born. It was then called «the last Indian battle in America,» which seemed to make that empty desert country powerfully significant for me, especially since the story was not widely known. In the 1970s a so-called history of the event was published which was more fantasy than fact. It maligned both Shoshone Indians and Basques. At that time I was conscious of my Basque heritage and I knew something about Native American history. The book offended me. I returned to Nevada and discovered a whole network of people through the West who remembered the massacre of Shoshone Mike or whose parents had told them about it. I grew excited at the possibility of telling the story while drawing from the first-hand accounts of living witnesses.

Q. What is the interaction between history and fiction in this novel?

A. The novel is based on historical events and people. I invented a few characters, but most are based on people who actually lived. I refused to alter any hard, verifiable facts. For example, it would have been more dramatic to have the novel's main characters, Sheriff Lamb and Shoshone Mike, confront each other in the final battle, but such an encounter did not occur. I also refused to distort historical probability. It would have been more novelistic and dramatic to have the son of the slain Basque ride with the posse to avenge his father's death. But as I was told by surviving sons of the murdered man, Ne-

vada cowboys at that time would not have allowed a Basque to ride with them. I did, however, freely dramatize how historical events may have occurred. I imagined dialogue and action where sources did not provide such information. I based the personalities of people on reports of witnesses, newspaper accounts, letters, and diaries, but I freely invented how those personalities might have spoken and behaved in particular situations. For example, the local newspaper published summaries of Father Enright's sermons, so the sermons I invented were based on the type he actually delivered. In short, the thrust of the novel was to imaginatively dramatize historical events. A distinction I made in my own mind is that the burden of the historian is *verification*, while that of the novelist is *verisimilitude*.

Q. Although the book is called Shoshone Mike, it seems that there is not really one single central character in this novel. In fact, Shoshone Mike's story is closely linked to the lives of other characters, such as Sheriff Lamb or Jean Erramouspe, whose roles in the novel seem to be at least as important as Shoshone Mike's. Could you elaborate on this point?

A. The novel structurally employs a rotating point of view because the story is really about people's perceptions of Shoshone Mike, how he becomes a mythic creation of people's imaginations. Shoshone Mike and his family were not a real threat to anyone, but imagining them as dangerous savages allowed their destruction. The conflicting views of Shoshone Mike—how he lived in people's imaginations—reveal how the values of the time fostered violence in the American West.

Q. Is violence inevitable in Shoshone Mike, or is it just the result of a series of fatal misunderstandings?

A. The violence grew out of misunderstanding—a conflict between two cultures that couldn't talk to each other. It was tragic. But the point of the novel—something I discovered while writing it—is that the massacre didn't have to happen. If the massacre had been inevitable, it wouldn't have been tragic. History, in hindsight, only seems inevitable. The massacre was the result of attitudes, perceptions, and values that might have been different. As Sheriff Lamb says about the massacre, «Nothing's inevitable, especially that.» Tragedy is the consequence of choices. Other choices might have been made.

Q. What is the real role of revenge in the novel?

A. Revenge is an important motive for both Shoshone Mike and the men on the posse—a shared belief in taking an eye for an eye. But the massacre was not just the isolated act of a revengeful vigilante posse gone wild. The massacre happened because certain widespread attitudes and values of otherwise good people allowed it to happen. The attitudes and values weren't about revenge but about the belief that «savagery» and «primitiveness» needed to be eliminated for «civilization» and «progress» to thrive.

Q. Did you intend to recreate in this book the tension between traditional Old West ways of life and the progress symbolized by the New West attitudes and values?

A. Absolutely. What makes the story of Shoshone Mike so special and bizarre is that it occurred in 1911. In the context of the twentieth century, it achieves a surreal glow. Airplanes, telephones, automobiles, electricity, and movies were helping to create the New West, but technological progress couldn't expunge the values of the Old West, which, by the way, still survive in the contemporary West. The way we think changes much slower than the material surfaces of our lives.

Q. May we talk about the existence of a certain parallelism between Basques and Indians in this novels in terms of their role as victims of social prejudice and discrimination?

A. Prejudice against Basques at the turn of the century generated the derogatory term «Black Bascos,» which implied a similarity between Basques and African-Americans

then tagged with the racial slur of «niggers.» I recall reading a Nevada newspaper article complaining about a trainload of Basques who had arrived from Spain to take «good jobs» away from «real Americans.» Prejudice and discrimination against Basques certainly existed, but in no way did it equal the virulent treatment of Indians.

Q. In your second novel, *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S* (1993), one of the main characters is half-Basque and there is also a Basque prospector who plays a secondary role in the book. Does this particular origin of both characters add a special significant feature to the plot of the novel? Do they have anything in common because of their Basqueness?

A. Yes, they are both contemporary Basque-Americans, and as a result they harbor a sense of their minority status in mainstream American society, which aggrandizes their personal sense of individuality, specialness, and even uniqueness. It's a trait I've noticed among many Americans of Basque heritage. Being Basque allows them to think of themselves as «outsiders» to mainstream culture even when they're an integral part of that culture. Their Basqueness becomes a matter of pride that shapes both how they think of themselves and how they act in relation to the larger culture.

Q. In this novel it seems that the modern individual's need for meaning, for a sense of place and identity, is related to both religion and environment. However, we can see in the novel that these two elements are also subject to manipulation and controversy. Could you expand on this point?

A. Where we live and what we believe certainly create a sense of personal identity, but at the same time our sense of identity can alter, distort, and, in fact, create environments and religious cosmologies to fit our sense of self. The human brain is an amazing instrument of self-rationalization and self-deception, my own included.

Q. Does this novel emphasize the fact that religion and, in general, traditional ways of life, have to coexist with technology and the modern world? As St. Ed says at the end of the book: «The business of the world is our business. We will choose the Cloud of Unknowing—in this world.»

A. What St. Ed discovers is that the world, as always, follows him into his retreat. There's no way to stand apart in isolation, even in a desert hermitage. To deny our historical reality as technological and communal creatures is folly. This discovery is nothing new. It's one that monks have made throughout history.

Q. What kind of research did you carry out to write this novel? I particularly would like you to comment on the religious passages you chose to illustrate some of the main points of this book.

A. My interest in monasticism and the mystical tradition was rekindled during a sabbatical year that my wife and I spent in Spain in 1984. I visited monasteries and read widely in monastic history. While writing the book I immersed myself more deeply in primary sources, such as the works of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, John Cassian, the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Fray Luis de León, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and many others. Echoes of Ramón Lull's extravagant language, «I want to die on the high seas of love,» suffuses the expressions of the monks in the novel.

Q. In your recent novel, *Wild Game* (1995), you use again an actual event, the hunt for survivalist and convicted killer Claude Dallas, as the main source of your story. Why did you choose this particular event?

A. It dramatized for me the modern West in conflict with itself—the clash of Old West values with New West realities. There were also personal reasons. Claude Dallas had wor-

ked for a shirttail relative of mine on a ranch in Nevada, and Dallas was on the run while I was in Nevada researching *Shoshone Mike*. Many people who knew Dallas urged me to write about him, but I did not share their admiring view of him. I didn't want to write about him. To me he was a murderer, not a hero. Only when I discovered fictional characters and a novelistic point of view that allowed me to present this negative perspective (along with a more positive one) did I start the book.

Q. May we say that this novel portrays basically two types of conflict: natural law (the survival of the fittest) vs. human laws (e.g., gaming laws), and individual rights vs. community rights?

A. Yes, although I think the terms might be shifted a bit to say the story dramatizes a contemporary conflict between Old West notions of individualism and independence and New West values of environmentalism and interconnection with the natural world. The rights of wild animals and natural ecosystems are at the heart of the conflict.

Q. How would you define the interaction in the book of the mythological Western experience with the real, modern West, particularly regarding the figure of the «outlaw.»

A. The «outlaw» in the novel is really an ersatz survivalist. He's not a very good trapper or hunter, but people imagine that he is a throwback to some mythical tough, independent, self-sufficient Westerner. He's a punk who really doesn't understand or care about animals or the natural world. And he's not truly tough. He's mean, but not tough. Yet a TV movie and popular magazines transform him into a heroic Western loner. In contrast, the media and popular opinion vilify the real heroes of the book, wildlife biologists and game wardens who understand and care about animals and the wilderness. Fantasy and myth are stronger than fact in their creation of a distorted reality.

Q. What is the real role of violence in this novel? («We are all predators» ... «Life without bloodshed is impossible.»)

A. I think that the novel shows the lines you quote to be only partly true. Violence is certainly a reality in the world of the novel, but cooperation, interdependence, and the avoidance of violence are also integral to both human and non-human communal existence. Partial visions become reductive distortions of how the world actually works, allowing rationalization for outbursts of unjustified violence.

*Q. The novel is full of Basque elements. At least three major characters are Basque (the protagonist, his uncle, and Jenny Zubillaga). There are also many references to Basque rituals, religious beliefs, ethnic features, places, attitudes, and even to an old movie (*Thunder in the Sun*) dealing with Basque pioneers. How different would this novel be without all these Basque elements?*

A. The Basque features are present because, as you point out, the novel's protagonist happens to be of Basque descent. If he were of Greek ethnicity living in Utah, his frame of reference would be of Greek immigrant experience in the West. In terms of the novel's themes, which I think is the point of your question, the Basque elements of the novel introduce values and attitudes about revenge, toughness, and independence that are very close to those of the «outlaw» and which the protagonist must struggle to understand and overcome.

Q. Do you consider that the term «Basque-American» is appropriate to refer to any of your works, or to yourself as a writer?

A. The experience of Basque-Americans in Nevada is a central concern in all my novels, but since Basque experience serves as a dramatic focus for broader concerns and issues in the West I think the term «Western novelist» more appropriately describes my impulse as a writer.

Q. How would you define your style of writing?

A. *The Columbia History of the American Novel* describes me as a Western «neo-realist» writer. I think the term is fine if you think of «neo» as meaning both «recent» and «different.» My work has also been described as «eco-fiction.» a shorthand term for «ecological fiction.» which also strikes me as appropriate since the natural world functions as both a character and a source of value in all the novels.

Q. What is the relevance of autobiographical elements in your fiction? Do you think that personal experience is fundamental for a writer?

A. I think that the fundamental obligation of a writer is to know what he or she is talking about, but such knowledge can come from both personal experience and research—the same sort of research that a conscientious historian might undertake. The difference in research for a novelist, however—or at least for the kind of novels I try to write—is that details gleaned from research must be filtered through the memory of personal experience. For example, in *Shoshone Mike* I write about cowboys in 1911, who in Nevada are called «buckaroos.» but many of the details of buckaroo experience come from my own experience of ranch life. I was trying to show «buckaroos» not as Hollywood cowboys but as laborers with particular jobs to do, which is how, in my experience, they saw themselves—as workers.

Q. What are your main literary models or influences?

A. Literary models and influences are probably different for me. As a boy my first literary models were Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Faulkner, but the modes of characterization and style of humor in the work of the Southern writer Flannery O'Connor may have exerted a greater influence on my work. Perhaps my favorite novel is *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but Stendhal, whom I also admire, is certainly a greater influence on my fiction than Proust. For example the literary inspiration behind *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S* is Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*. Among my own contemporaries, those writers who provided inspiration at a crucial point in my career are the California novelist Leonard Gardner (*Fat City*), the North Dakotan Larry Woiwode (*Beyond the Bedroom Wall*), and the Native American James Welch (*Winter in the Blood*).

Q. How complete in your mind is the conception of a book? Do you introduce important changes as you go along?

A. I am about to begin a new novel, and I must confess that at the moment the story is pretty murky. I have a few characters and incidents in mind. I will try to outline a firmer sequence of events before I begin—I try to have as clear a sense of the story as possible before starting—but I know that the story will change as I write. Each novel seems to go through three major phases, although each phase may constitute more than one draft. First, I get down the characters engaged in a series of events; next I reshape the narrative to emphasize the connections between events, which, I suppose, is way of clarifying the «plot» of the story. Only during the final phase of writing am I able to highlight the significance of the story as it has emerged during the process of revision.

Q. Do you regard writing as a painful process, which requires constant revision and re-elaboration (to use Hemingway's words, as «gut-tearing ordeal»)? Do you consider yourself an obsessive writer, endlessly revising, changing, and polishing? How much re-writing do you do?

A. I find writing difficult but less a painful ordeal than a gratifying experience. In that way, writing is similar to my daily six-mile runs, hard but emotionally transformative. I revise and polish until the book goes to press and I can no longer make changes. The de-

gree of revision has become less for each novel. I cut nearly 150 pages from the original draft of *Shoshone Mike*, and the original seventh chapter became chapter one. With *Temptations*, the second chapter eventually became the first, but with *Wild Game*, chapter one remained chapter one, although the first three chapters required more revision than other parts of the novel.

Q. How and when do you choose the titles for your books?

A. It varies. The title *Shoshone Mike* did not emerge until I had finished the novel. I wrote the first draft under a completely different working title. *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S* was a potential title that solidified halfway through the first draft. When beginning my third novel I had a list of twenty or thirty possible titles, but *Wild Game* soon established itself as literally and metaphorically appropriate to the story. I don't have any calculated system for selecting a title, but I try to avoid vague poetic phrases that might be applied to any number of novels. For example, the first title of *Shoshone Mike* was *Tonopah Silence*, which is badly poetic and uninformative. I prefer titles that are both specific and thematically resonant. For example, *Shoshone Mike* was the name of the actual historical Indian, but his hybrid moniker also thematically symbolizes his divided existence between a traditional Native American world and a modern Anglo one.

Q. Do you follow any special criteria to choose the names of the characters?

A. Most of the names in my first novel are historical. I probably wouldn't have dared to invent such an allegorical name for a pacifist lawman as the one history handed me with «Sheriff Lamb.» Fictional names are important for their resonance, but again I don't have a system. Since *Temptations* is fundamentally a comic novel, the names tend to be comically exaggerated. In *Wild Game*, the names tend to reflect the commonplace bourgeois American world of the novel—Jack, Bob, Cindy, Larry, Pete, and Beth. Of course, the name of the «outlaw» Billy Crockett echoes those of his Wild West and frontier prototypes, Billy the Kid and Davy Crockett.

Q. Apart from being a writer, you are also a university professor. How do these two different activities influence one another?

A. Teaching has the sinister effect of preventing me from doing as much writing as I would like to do. At the same time, since I teach courses about Western and wilderness literature, I am put in touch with issues and concerns that make their way into my fiction. Since I also teach creative writing, I bring my experience as a novelist to the classroom at the same time that I'm forced to hone my skills as a reader and editor of my students' fiction and subsequently of my own. Working with young people, I think, besides being satisfying in itself, also subjects my most entrenched opinions to fresh interrogation and revision.

Q. How would you define the reception of your novels both by the general public and by the reviewers?

A. My novels fortunately have been critically well received. They do not, however, fall into the popular genres that generate large sales.

Q. Could you tell me something about your present writing? What are your writing plans for the future?

A. I have just finished a series of short stories, mostly set in Colorado where I have been spending a sabbatical leave of absence from teaching. I am about to begin a novel set in Chiapas, Mexico, the site of the recent Zapatista Indian uprising. I have visited and lived in Mexico off and on for the past twenty years, and the current Indian conflict in Chiapas is a continuation of the story I told in *Shoshone Mike*. My novel, tentatively titled,

¡Adiós México!, has a Basque-American anthropologist as the protagonist. The novel will bring together the subjects that weave throughout my fiction: Native-American and Basque-American experience, environmental issues, and spiritual concerns.

Q. Do you consider that writers and intellectuals in general should take an active role in political or social issues?

A. I can only speak for myself, and as a citizen of an increasingly interconnected and beleaguered planet I feel I must. Most of the writers and intellectuals who are my acquaintances share a similar sense of responsibility to extend their involvement in political and social affairs beyond the reach of their scholarship and art. I might add that since I write about the kinds of people I know, I also feel compelled to include in my fiction characters who possess a political and social awareness of their citizenship in local and global communities, both human and non-human.

Q. How do you see the American novel today?

A. Serious American fiction suffers from the current economics of publishing. Since the takeover of publishing houses by international conglomerates, the desire for Hollywood-style profits prevents the publication and distribution of books whose subjects and styles challenge the expectations or abilities of average or below-average readers. There are exceptions, of course, but, in general, editors are under pressure to find best-selling genre fiction that appeals to mass market tastes. Good fiction is still being written, and there are readers hungry for it, but as I witness with the struggles of my talented writing students, there is not an eager commercial market for it.

Q. Finally, what function has literature nowadays?

A. The same as always. To make the world fresh. To render experience in a sensuous, memorable way that compels brightened awareness of our human predicament and its significance.

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