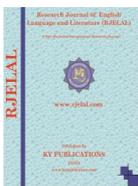




HOW ETHICS AND POETICS BLEND IN ORWELL'S *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on what has been described as Orwell's 'most poignant' war document namely, *Homage to Catalonia*, first published by Secker and Warburg in 1938. Because of the acrimonious debate engendered by the consequences of the Spanish civil war, both in Spain and abroad, Orwell's work has continued to attract the attention of critics and scholars both because of its political content and literary qualities. Merging ethics and aesthetics, Orwell manages to blur the boundaries of the war memoir while aiming to reveal the 'truth' about the Spanish civil war – dubbed a tragic 'rehearsal' for the Second World War.

Introduction

Since the middle of the last century, few writers have attracted as much interest as George Orwell. Mostly fuelled by the publication of his two novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the complex web of Orwelliana has expanded well beyond the borders of England to reach all parts of the world, stirring a strong interest in the man and his works. At the time of writing, this attention, far from waning, is witnessing an extraordinary boost.

In this paper, I will focus on his powerful account of the Spanish war, *Homage to Catalonia*, first published by Secker and Warburg in 1938. According to the American critic Lionel Trilling, *Homage* is:

one of the important documents of our time ... a testimony to the nature of modern political life ... a demonstration on the part of its author of one of the right ways of confronting that life. Its importance is therefore of the present moment and for years to come (Trilling 1974: 62).

In his *Why I Write*, Orwell himself, in turn, expresses the view that it is 'the best book I have ever written', after admitting that it was 'frankly a political book, but in the main it is written with a certain detachment and regard for form. I did try very hard in it to tell the whole truth without violating my literary instincts' (see Meyers 1975: 114). In his preface to the 1952 edition of *Homage to Catalonia*, Trilling writes that 'its particular truth refers to events now far in the past, as in these days we reckon our past. It does not matter the less for that – this particular truth implies a more general truth which, as now we cannot fail to understand, must matter for a long time to come' (Trilling 1974: 79).

The main aim of this essay is to show how ethics¹ and poetics blend in the text (see Bal 1982: 185-222). Moreover, Orwell's rhetorical strategy of persuasion incorporates both ambivalence and contradictions even though the writing seeks, in particular, to promote the notion of *truth* about the Spanish civil war.

To use terminology borrowed from speech act theory, *Homage to Catalonia* is both 'constative' and 'performative'¹ in the sense that it seeks both to affirm the truth but also refers to real events and people. Accounts of Orwell's physical bravery during the months he spent at the front are plentiful (Crick 1980: 216-17). His own detached account of being shot by a fascist sniper at the Aragon front, in April 1937, testifies both to his physical courage and commitment to socialist principles in the war. As John Wain argues, *Homage to Catalonia* is 'the most important book for anyone who wants to understand Orwell's mind. It is a book that describes the hinges of a man's life' (in Orwell and Williams 1974: 61.)

On the other hand, it is also true that because of the acrimonious and ongoing debate the Spanish civil war has given rise to, his book is in constant need of a re-appraisal as the recent exhumation of Franco's remains (where he was buried in 1975) from the imposing basilica whose construction he ordered in 1940 at the Valle de Los Caidos (The Valley of the Fallen) some 50 kilometers from Madrid, has shown. Built over 20 years by political prisoners of el caudillo's regime, the monument, overlooked by a 150 meter high cross visible kilometers around, it was meant to highlight Franco's 'crusade' of the Catholics (Nationalists) against the 'enemies of God' (Republicans) following the 3-year Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The removal of Franco's remains from the Valle de Los Caidos to an ordinary cemetery north of the capital, had been one of the main priorities of the Socialist Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez after his election in June 2018. However, due to the protracted legal battles between Franco's supporters and relatives and the parents of victims, it was only made possible more than a year later in October 2019, following a ruling of Spain's Supreme Court.

At first glance, *Homage to Catalonia* may appear to the reader as a war document. However, as one gradually immerses himself/herself in the book, it is difficult not to perceive a complex narrative strategy that seeks to reconcile objective facts with subjective comments and historical events with personal feedback. Alok Rai speaks of 'a strategy of rhetorical persuasion' at work in Orwell's

writings. It is from the struggle of such irreconcilable elements in Orwell's empirical vision of the world and this complex rhetoric that the Orwell myth derives its power and resilience (Rai1988: 59). In *Homage to Catalonia*, the many voices and styles Orwell resorts to are worth examining, as they provide us with clear evidence of his poetics.

The 'I' Voice

It punctuates the book; however, it is not always associated with subjectivity. Note for instance the difference between the opening page of the book: 'In the Lenin barracks, the day before I joined the militia, I saw an Italian militiaman,' (Orwell *Homage* : 19) then, the opening lines of chapter 11: 'It will never be possible to get a completely accurate and unbiased account of the Barcelona fighting... I myself have little data beyond what I saw with my own eyes and what I have learned from other eye-witnesses whom I believe to be reliable. I can however contradict some of the more flagrant lies and help to get the affair into some kind of perspective" (Ibid: 239) (my italics). While the passages are the result of an eye-witness account, the 'I' in the first passage clearly purports to be objective. In the second example, there is a telescoping between Orwell's objective stance and his (subjective) desire to press his own version of events on the reader.

The Impersonal Voice

Let us consider first the following passage where Orwell describes the situation in Barcelona in 1936 when the anarchists were in control of Catalonia and there reigned, according to him, an atmosphere of equality: 'Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and in the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine' (Ibid: 239). Immediately recognizable here is the directness and so-called 'simplicity' of Orwell's prose. The blending of such concepts as equality and freedom is likely to shock the liberal-minded reader; however, Orwell manages to give to his views a safely inert historical flavor while impressing his'

righteous' stance. In his *Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War*, Orwell wrote the following passage which incidentally has infuriated a number of Marxist critics:

The struggle of the working class is like the growth of a plant. The plant is blind and stupid, but it knows enough to keep to keep pushing upwards towards the light, and it will do this in the face of endless discouragements. What are the workers struggling for? Simply for the decent life which they are more and more aware, is now technically feasible. (Orwell *Homage*: 239)

By resorting to the metaphor of the plant, Orwell gives free rein to his socialist fervor while totally discarding the material circumstances of the workers' struggle. Later, he adds: 'the common people knew in their bones that the Republic was a friend and Franco the enemy.' (Orwell *Homage*: 239) The same vegetal imagery is at work when Orwell describes the Italian soldier in *Homage to Catalonia* as the 'flower of the European working class, harried by the police of all countries, the people who fill the mass graves of the Spanish battlefields and are now to the tune of several million rotting in forced labour camps' (Orwell *Homage*: 212)

It can be added that Orwell's skilful, even if at times uncanny blending of voices in *Homage to Catalonia*, is meant primarily to back up his defence of what he considered as a right cause (the Republicans) in their feud with the 'fascists' (Nationalists). His rhetorical persuasion coupled with his angry poetics, are meant to end up convincing the reader of the righteousness of the cause he served.

The Fictional Garb

Homage to Catalonia is replete with metaphors, metonymies, rhetorical questions, imagery and iterative statements that are some of the conventional attributes of a fictional style. As a matter of fact, Orwell's descriptions of the Barbasco and Huesca fronts can be considered as 'literary' in their own right, so can his description of the revolutionary atmosphere in Barcelona in the opening chapter of the book. Other instances of

imaginative writing are found in chapter 14 where, at the peril of his life, Orwell is attempting to rescue his superior officer in the POUM, Major Kopp, from the hands of the Barcelona chief of police: 'The little officer went in; there was a long heated conversation. You could hear voices furiously raised: you pictured violent gestures, shrugging of shoulders banging on the table' (Ibid: 212).

It is also difficult not to comment on the poem dedicated to the memory of the Italian anarchist soldier that closes *Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War*. Orwell's strong desire to celebrate the valour of the struggle of the common man exemplified by the Italian soldier is evocative of his belief in resistance even when confronted to such lethal weapons as bombs:

But the thing I saw in your face

No power can disinherit

No bomb that ever burst

Shatters the crystal spirit. (Orwell *Homage*, Ibid: 247)

Perhaps the poem can also be read as Orwell's own attempt to capture the distinctive spirit and singularity of the Spanish civil war that attracted so many other international literary figures like Koestler, Hemingway, Malraux, to name but a few. W.H Auden had already written his own poetical tribute to the men and women who had volunteered to fight for democracy and against fascism in Spain. Orwell, who had later criticized Auden's poemⁱⁱ, could have possibly sought to emulate him by writing his own poem on the war.

Similarly, both *Homage to Catalonia* and its epilogue, *Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War*, are laden with literary allusions whose effect can only strengthen Orwell's testimonial memoir by instilling in the reader a lasting appeal. The last chapter of *Homage to Catalonia* provides us with a vivid account of his narrow escape from Spain with his wife Eileen followed by his crossing into France and his arrival in southern England. The final paragraph is particularly evocative:

And then, England,-southern England,
probably the sleekest landscape in the world.

It is difficult when you pass that way...to believe that anything is really happening anywhere. Earthquakes in Japan, famines in China, revolutions in Mexico? Don't worry, the milk will be on your doorstep tomorrow morning, The New Statesman will come out on Friday (Ibid: 221).

The closing statement reaffirms the writer's commitment to his motherland in the face of an otherwise war-torn, danger-stricken world. England is exorcized from the evils that beset other parts of the world by naming them and contrasting them with the image of an eternal England coming straight from his childhood memories:

Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood, the railway cuttings smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barge on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the Red buses, the blue policemen- all sleeping the deep sleep of England, from which I fear we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of a bomb (Ibid).

Again, it is hard to disregard the literary qualities of this passage in which the idyllic description of London, reminiscent of William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, contrasts with the roar of bombs, foreshadowing the dystopian nightmare of *1984*. Actually, many of Orwell's commentators have rightly pointed out that Orwell's Spanish civil war experience provided him with the inspiration and the material to write *1984*. Striking examples of such a filiation can be found in the overwhelming presence of the rats at the front, the ominous, gloomy offices of the Barcelona police headquarters, and the witch hunt against the POUM.

The Use of the 'Seemingly Unnecessary Detail'

Orwell punctuates his narrative with the use of the 'seemingly unnecessary detail' which he attributes to Charles Dickens (Orwell 1977: 46), by which he meant the detail that would immediately arouse all of the reader's senses and not just the aesthetic sense. Again, evoking the rats, a recurrent feature of life in the trenches in Spain, he wrote: 'The ones at La Granja were really as big as cats, or nearly, great-bloated brutes that waddled over the beds of muck, too impudent even to run away unless you shot at them' (Orwell *Homage*: 77). The vividness of the detail and economy in the style is also seen at work in his description of frogs: 'The frogs were mating noisily in the ditches' (Ibid: 81). Orwell use of imagination is also one of the features of his work: "When an airplane swoops down and uses its machine gun, the sound from below is like the fluttering of wings" (ibid: 77. See also: 80).

In an episode strangely reminiscent of *Animal Farm*, Orwell shows how the POUM was gradually transformed into a scapegoat by Russian agents in Barcelona: 'The fat Russian agent was cornering all the foreign refugees in turn and explaining plausibly that this whole affair was an anarchist plot' (ibid: 212). Later, as he was wounded, Orwell comments on the smell in the sanatorium: 'The place had a beastly stench that you always get when crowds of people are penned together without proper sanitary arrangement' (ibid: 208). Similarly, in the opening passage in *Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War*, the reader can note a distinctly Swiftian tonality: 'One of the essential experiences of war is never being able to escape from the disgusting smells of human origins' (ibid: 225).

The Ethnographic Commentary

Orwell's skilful use of the ethnographic commentary with its corollary reliance on details can be found in a number of his essays and journalism. In his essay *Marrakech* (1939), for instance, the poverty of the indigenous Arabs (Moroccans) was associated with invisibility.

In *Homage to Catalonia* the Spaniards are described with a wealth of ethnographic details which are related 'objectively', thus avoiding demeaning or controversial comments, except perhaps in one instance where a young 'wild looking'

recruit is wrongly accused by Orwell of stealing his cigarsⁱⁱⁱ. Indeed, on the whole, Spaniards are often portrayed in favourable terms: 'How easy it is to make friends in Spain!' (Orwell *Homage*: 15) and 'I have the most evil memories of Spain, but I have very few bad memories of Spaniards... They have there is no doubt, a generosity, a species of nobility, that do not really belong to the 20th century. It is this that makes one hope that in Spain, even fascism may take a comparatively loose and bearable form" (ibid: 2013). Earlier in the narrative, Orwell observantly notes: 'The Andalusians however, could roll admirable cigarettes and had a special technique for tucking the ends in' (ibid: 100). As often in Orwell's work, the ethnographic detail is meant to add to the verisimilitude of the description. The result is that an acute sense of realism is instilled in the story and with it a dynamic quality that a vivid evocation of 'cultural' features, can help convey. In Orwell's hands, the ethnographic detail also becomes a weapon to combat ideology and generalizations which are the stuff of fascism and totalitarian systems. By giving prominence to the way Spaniards fought and lived during the war, the book has made a lasting impact on generations of readers and has come to stand as a reference when it comes to what really took place during the Spanish Civil War.

Conclusion

Despite its hybrid structure and form, *Homage to Catalonia* is possibly one of Orwell's most successful attempts to show 'truth in writing' and thus to leave a lasting testimony of what really took place during the war. The vindication of Orwell's historical views and notably his resistance to fascism will come in the 90's when both Orwell and Andreu Nin, the executed POUM leader and Catalan intellectual, were posthumously honoured when the city of Barcelona and the neighbouring town of Can Rull renamed respectively a square: Placa Orwell and a street: Calle Andreu Nin^{iv}. It ought to be added that the mayor of Can Rull in the 90's, was, during the war, a member of the communist party. This long overdue historical recognition casts a particular 'aura' on Orwell's work. Later, both Michael Selden (Shelden 1991: 295) and Christopher Hitchens (in *George Orwell and Raymond Williams* 99: 3-22) will attempt to show

the recent unearthing of the Spanish war archives both in Madrid and in Moscow, fully vindicated Orwell's political analyses especially in relation to the Soviet role in 'monitoring' the Republican side.

The same however, cannot be said concerning Orwell's literary 'posturing' in *Homage* which certainly put a lot of strain on his readers then and now. It can safely be argued that the book's intertextuality, coupled with a wealth of literary references, in addition to real historical events, literally exploded the war memoir genre, triggering enthusiasm from his many followers and fierce criticism from left wing critics such as Christopher Norris (Norris 1984) and Claude Simon, a Nobel Literature Prize winner and a fellow fighter with Orwell on the Aragon front.

In his novel, *Les Georgiques* (1981), Simon, a former French communist party member, discards both Orwell's 'Etonian' attitude and the POUM's role in the civil war, focusing on Orwell's alleged omissions and manipulations of the reader. At no point does Simon deal either with the legitimate subjective stance requested in any writing or with the writer's textual/narrative autonomy in selecting and combining the various elements at his disposal, in order to shape his text. Incidentally his criticism of Orwell's *Homage* will be harshly rebuked by Christopher Hitchens in his *Why Orwell Matters* (Hitchens 2002).

It must also be added that none of Orwell's detractors were able to challenge his historical version of events which was vindicated by history as we have argued before. Orwell was able to turn a literary 'assignment' into a quest for truth where literary aesthetics are not incompatible with the 'Law of the genre' (to quote from Derrida). I argue that regardless of the ambivalence inherent in his work in general, and/or of his own 'posturing' as a writer, Orwell's war document has not yet exhausted its readers' 'horizon of expectations'. It has also had the merit of putting in perspective the generic debate on war memoirs, on journalism and political commitment, as well as the ethical necessity of resistance in the face of injustice and orthodoxy.

Notes

¹ I am aware here that in speech act theory, the term 'performative' is associated with the function of referentiality. John Hillis Miller (after J. L. Austin) calls it a 'serious' use of literature as opposed to the 'radical irresponsibility' of literature, a conception brought about by Derrida. Of course this discussion is part of Derrida's critique of Austin's contention that literature is a 'non-serious' form of utterance and that it should be distinguished from 'normal' and 'serious' speech acts. Incidentally, even if outside the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to expose Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* to Austin's and Searle's theories and see 'where' it fits. For an interesting perspective on this debate, see J. Hillis Miller's article: "Derrida and Literature" in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, Tom Cohen, ed. 2001: 59-81.

² W.H Auden, S. Spengler and D. Lewis were part of a group of communist aficionados who defended the 'official' line that blamed the P.O.U.M along with the two other anarcho-syndicalist trade unions, namely the C.N.T. and the U.G.T, for betraying the Republicans. In *Inside the Whale* (1940), Orwell wrote an essay criticizing two stanzas from Auden's poem *Spain*:

Tomorrow for the young the poets exploding
like bombs,
The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect
communion;
Tomorrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings:
but to-day the struggle.
To-day the deliberate increase in the chances
of death;
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the
necessary murder (my emphasis);
To-day the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the
boring meeting.

Following Orwell's critique, Auden changed 'the necessary murder' with 'fact of murder'. However, it is interesting to note that Orwell's own poem, written in 1943, opens with the same image of the bomb that bursts, even if the overall tone of his poem is distinctly... 'Orwellian'.

³ The description of the boy 'from the back street of Barcelona' strikes a curious echo with that of the wide-eyed negro in his essay *Marrakesh*. 'He was ragged and barefooted. He was also extremely dark (Arab blood I dare say), and made gestures you do not usually see a European make; one in particular-

the arm outstretched, the palm vertical-was a gesture characteristic of Indians' (*Homage*: 231). The young recruit easily forgives Orwell for his false accusation of theft while becoming one of his staunchest supporters in the section. Orwell's prose stresses the 'fatalism' and 'humility' of the innocent boy implying in passing that this uncommon spirit of fair-play is not something one can easily expect from a representative of the wretched of the earth. So how can one explain Orwell's attitude if not by pointing out his essentialising description of the boy's poverty associated with his dark skin and Arab origins: 'In the fatalism of his attitude, you could see the desperate poverty in which he had been bred...With a humility which was horrible to me (my emphasis) he stripped himself naked, and his clothes were searched' (*ibid*). It is interesting to note that in *Marrakech*, the same connection between docility and Negroness is also made: 'It was the shy, wide-eyed Negro look, which actually is a look of profound respect. I saw how it was...He has been taught that the white race are his masters, and he still believes it.' (in "Marrakech" Trilling 1974: 187).

⁴ For a thorough analysis of this historical update, see Christopher Hitchens, "George Orwell and Raymond Williams." In *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 41, n°3, Autumn 1999: 3-22. The paper also discusses Raymond Williams' controversial attitude to Orwell's life and work.

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