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'MARX: G. O.'S DOG': A STUDY OF POLITICS

AND LITERATURE IN GEORGE ORWELL'S

HOMAGE TO CATALONIA

That was about as far as my thoughts [about the Spanish Civil War] went. I did not make any of the correct political reflections. I never do when things are happening. It seems to be always the case when I get mixed up in war or politics—I am conscious of nothing save physical discomfort and a deep desire for this damned nonsense to be over. Afterwards I can see the significance of events, but while they are happening I merely want to be out of them—an ignoble trait, perhaps.¹

After Orwell returned from Spain, he struggled to write *Homage to Catalonia*. As he tells us in that work, the Barcelona police had raided his hotel room and seized his Spanish diary and notes. (From a literary point of view, this was probably fortunate: *Homage* has an organic quality that Orwell's previous work, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, lacks; the latter, mainly transcribed from notes, shows its patch-work composition.) Orwell spent the first six months back in England trying to write his Spanish experiences and at the same time study the historical background of the war. Being a part-time journalist and book reviewer, he was able to turn his study to profit and in so doing leave a complete record of his growing understanding of the Spanish Civil War.

In *An Age Like This* we can follow Orwell's attempt to define his political position on the Spanish Civil War after he returned from Spain (Vol. 1, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*).² He had left England so quickly in Autumn, 1936, and without having gone through the political meetings or indoctrination in London, that he had no time for preconceived opinion. He preferred independent action, and although it

enabled him to avoid the presumptions of many of his English compatriots in Spain, it forced him into working out his political position after the event.

As Spain turned out to be the most important experience of Orwell's life, and he always referred to it this way, the writing of *Homage* was an essential part of his literary-political education. Orwell came to understand that he could not ignore the omnipotence of politics: he had seen politics in Spain translated into the most immediate and human of terms—life and death. In the same way, he realized that he could not write about politics as an abstract, separate entity. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* he had divided the long descriptions of the miners' lives from the political passages at the end; in so doing, he had separated the miners' plight from the English political situation and he had weakened his political point. Spain was different; he had been politicized there, and in trying to explain this to his reader he would attempt to guide the latter through the same process.

Orwell was able to profit most from his Spanish Civil War experience by focusing his personal and political feeling upon the P.O.U.M. (*Parti Obrero Unificacion Marxista*) and much of this occurred back in England when he read the newspaper accounts of the events he had lived through with the P.O.U.M. in Barcelona. His own sense of himself—part odd-man out, part under-dog, all individual—found its political counterpart in the P.O.U.M. and to a lesser extent, the I.L.P. (Independent Labor Party). Like most individuals in politics, he defined what the P.O.U.M. stood for by what he wanted it to stand for: "The Communist's emphasis is always on centralism and efficiency, the Anarchist's on liberty and equality. . . . From about February 1937 onwards the Anarchists and the P.O.U.M. could to some extent be lumped together".³ Because this is so historically untrue, it is significant that Orwell believed it. After all, the P.O.U.M. belonged to Trotsky's Fourth International, and nowhere in their literature did they ever indicate a tendency toward Orwell's very English sense of "liberty and equality". In addition, the Spanish Anarchists were basically collectivist and operated through their syndical-anarchist unions and cooperatives.⁴ Thus, Orwell created political definitions for himself and *Homage to Catalonia*.

By the time Orwell declared himself for the I.L.P. and the P.O.U.M. these organizations were almost defunct. Orwell was aware of this. There is the element about him, as there was of Ford Madox Ford, of championing causes he knew to be lost. Indeed, Orwell remarks about the P.O.U.M.: "I myself never joined the party—for which afterwards, when the P.O.U.M. was suppressed, I was rather sorry".⁵ Throughout *Homage*, Orwell trans-

lates politics into personal terms: "The news gave me a shock. It was the first glimpse I had had of the interpretation that was likely to be put on this affair later. I dimly foresaw that when the fighting ended the entire blame would be laid upon the P.O.U.M., which was the weakest party and therefore the most suitable scapegoat".⁶ The analogies here are to Orwell's portrayal of his childhood when he was the "weakest" and something of a "scapegoat" at his school (see his famous essay, "Such, such Were the Joys. . .").⁷

In Spain, it was only when Orwell saw the political fighting in human terms that he could connect his pragmatic bias to a political point of view. In writing *Homage*, he reinforced this experience, partly by recording it but also by arguing with other versions of the war, and his politicization continued:

At the beginning I had ignored the political side of the war, and it was only about this time that it began to force itself upon my attention. If you are not interested in the horrors of party politics, please skip; I am trying to keep the political parts of the narrative in separate chapters for precisely that purpose. But at the same time it would be quite impossible to write about the Spanish war from a purely military angle. It was above all things a political war. No event in it, at any rate during the first year, is intelligible unless one has some grasp of the inter-party struggle that was going on behind the Government lines.⁸

As almost every critic of *Homage* has pointed out, Orwell begins the work in personal description and later, when he discusses the politics in detail, he writes about it in separate chapters. This has led to the standard critical view of *Homage* as two separate books and the argument that since the first book is memoir and the second politics, it is the first book that contains the makings of literature and the second book, the destruction of same. Therefore, *Homage* is a flawed work.⁹

In fact Orwell conceived *Homage* as a total rhetorical experience and in clarifying and recording his Spanish adventure, he wished his reader to undergo a similar process of enlightenment. Most importantly, he wanted to move his reader to his own new perceptions about man and especially man in politics and war. Therefore, rather than being intrusive, the political discussions are a key part of the work.

Why then does Orwell tell the reader that "if you are not interested in the horrors of party politics, please skip"? The best explanation for this injunction seems to be Orwell's concept of his ideal reader: that average, commonsensical Englishman who could be persuaded by sound argument and dramatic example, but who possessed a congenital fear of and contempt for

"party politics", especially the squabbling Continental variety. Frenchmen might find the Spanish ideological quarrels fascinating and immediate, but as Orwell knew and felt himself, the average Englishman would be appalled and soon bored. Thus, if he is to move his readers to his new perceptions, especially of politics, he must first overcome a deep national prejudice.

Partly to appeal to that ideal English reader, as well as to define his own personality and authorial *persona*, Orwell had created, and was evolving, the narrative character of George Orwell. The George Orwell of *Homage* is not the Eric Blair who went to Spain in 1936 and sat down every day for six months in 1937 to write this book. In fact, as his letters and journalism show, the use of the pen-name is a very conscious attempt by Blair to create a narrative character: George Orwell is less cranky, more honest, more British (George, the Patron Saint and Royal surname; Orwell, the river in Suffolk), and in all ways more admirable than Eric Blair, just as George Dowling (the hero of *Coming Up for Air*, the novel started at the same time as *Homage*) is another side: irrational, self-deceiving, and at times, pathetic.

As Orwell begins, in a slow, almost apologetic way, to outline the basic political positions in Spain, he reinforces his commentary with many hints that just as he discovered the truth with his own eyes (the only commonsense way) so can the reader if he pays attention: "This of course was the correct 'anti-Fascist' attitude which had been disseminated by the English newspapers, largely in order to prevent people from grasping the real nature of the struggle".¹⁰

If the reader has any doubts about whether to separate Orwell the memoir writer from Orwell the political commentator (and son, participant) he is set straight immediately:

For even if one cared nothing for the political parties and their conflicting 'lines', it was too obvious that one's own destiny was involved. As a militiaman one was a soldier against Franco, but one was also a pawn in an enormous struggle that was being fought out between two political theories. When I scrounged for firewood on the mountain-side and wondered whether this was really a war or whether the *News Chronicle* had made it up, when I dodged the Communist machine-guns in the Barcelona riots, when I fled from Spain with the police one jump behind me—all these things happened to me in that particular way because I was serving in the P.O.U.M. militia and not in the P.S.U.C. So great is the difference between two sets of initials!¹¹

Thus, as Orwell launches into his version of the political origins of the Spanish Civil War and their current manifestations, the reader has no choice but to

follow. The politics might appear separate, but that is only because their presence must be felt—Orwell, like his reader, begins in political innocence—before they can connect to the military events.

Although Orwell would have shunned the term, the structure of *Homage* resembles the standard dialectical form: the long opening section of mainly personal narrative but with many hints of political problems; then a chapter of ostensibly political discussion but also personal involvement (it is hard for a reader to “skip” a chapter of twenty-five pages when the previous four chapters have been only forty-two pages in total); and finally, the remainder of the book, a synthesis of the two—where the politics and personal experience become so intertwined that, in the end, they are inseparable. It is impossible to tell whether Orwell owes any of this to Marx. It is probable that just as the truth of the dialectic is a most general one, so Orwell found this one way to resolve his rhetorical problems. More importantly, such a pattern fits the journey or learning experience—personal, political, and literary—that Orwell wished to reproduce in *Homage*.¹²

In *Homage*, Orwell not only wants to overcome his reader's prejudice against politics, but almost unconsciously he nudges him to take the next step: toward Orwell's own political viewpoint, aware individualism. This is often done in subtle ways:

It was an expensive shop and the shop-people were U.G.T. and may have been P.S.U.C. members—at any rate they were politically on the other side and they knew that I was serving with the P.O.U.M. Yet their attitude was completely indifferent. ‘Such a pity, this kind of thing [the street-fighting] isn't it? And so bad for business. What a pity it doesn't stop! As though there weren't enough of that kind of thing at the front!’ etc., etc. There must have been quantities of people, perhaps a majority of the inhabitants of Barcelona, who regarded the whole affair without a flicker of interest, or with no more interest than they would have felt in an air raid.

In this chapter I have described only my personal experiences. . . .”¹³

Orwell does many things in this passage: most importantly, he politicizes the reader by forcing him to choose sides: of course, dear Reader, you are not like these apathetic and contemptible people, or are you? Is Orwell being ironic when he adds that “In this chapter I have described only my personal experiences”? The “I” has moved only through political action; indeed, in the passage quoted, even the shopkeepers have been identified according to party and persuasion. And because this section is a rhetorical transition to the reader's total acceptance of the politics, it follows that the chapter ends with

another injunction to "please skip". This time it is even more perfunctory than before (and the joke about the Chinese generals is particularly lame); in addition, if the reader has any serious desire to skip, the final line, with its foreshadowing, insures that he keep his place:

As before, if you are not interested in political controversy and the mob of parties and sub-parties (rather like the names of the generals in a Chinese war), please skip. It is a horrible thing to have to enter into the details of inter-party polemics; it is like diving into a cesspool. But it is necessary to try and establish the truth, so far as it is possible. This squalid brawl in a distant city is more important than might appear at first sight.¹⁴

At this point in the narrative, Chapter XI, Orwell not only begins another discussion of party "polemics"—set up in detail in the previous chapter of "personal description"—but also he devotes many pages to an analysis of English Press reports about the suppression of the P.O.U.M. Such lengthy quotations from newspaper files are something new in a war memoir, and usually they are pointed to as the irrefutable proof of the two *Homages*.

Once again, if we merely follow Orwell's rhetorical strategy and see these Press quotations within the context of the entire work, we can make perfect sense of their presence. Orwell was always fascinated by what he later called, indeed, gave the words to the language, "Double-think" and "Newspeak". Because he was infuriated by the British Press reports from Spain, particularly their explanation that the P.O.U.M. was "'Franco's Fifth Column'—a 'Trotskyite' organization working in league with the Fascists",¹⁵ he felt that this discussion of propaganda was essential to what he wished to say about the war. Originally, as he mentions in a letter, he had planned to place this discussion of the British Press in an appendix to the work.¹⁶ He included it within the main text, however, because he came to see it as central to his purposes. He wanted to show his reader, as he himself discovered, that there were many levels of reality in the Spanish Civil War.

Most people, sitting at home in England, only knew what they were told in the Press. To hold opinions based on such sources, renders you, in Orwell's eyes, a fool. To act out of such opinions, makes you a dupe. Then there were those, mainly correspondents and/or celebrities, who went to Spain, were escorted around, and wrote glowingly and inaccurately about the war, and especially the politics. To do this renders you worse than a fool or a dupe, a knave. It was only those who participated honestly in the war, tried to perceive what was actually happening (and you had to join with the Spanish to do this) and then thought about it, who could make any claim to under-

stand reality. To do this you had to set yourself apart and comment fearlessly, you had to be, Reader, you and I.

Therefore, the long quotations from the English Press, rather than being so much dry space, serve as an extension of the reality we have experienced through the narrator-hero. We have been moved by his adventures in battle, and perplexed, with him, at the political in-fighting, and now we share his separate view of reality (and he has convinced us that he is an honest man and a reliable observer) as opposed to the newspaper and propaganda distortion. Orwell underlines the fact that merely by chance was he able to acquire this double vision. (This section is especially powerful for anyone who has participated in and then read about the same event. They are not the same event. Granting all the confusion that surrounds the participant within the maelstrom, the Press accounts appear to the participant as not only gross simplifications but ones with a malevolent bias behind them.) Orwell's point is that it is human to lie but dehumanizing to do it consistently for a cause: the latter method is the destruction of truth and soon, humanity.

In some ways, Orwell's use of these Press reports is an attempt to break through to new forms of narrative prose. Dissatisfaction with the traditional literary forms, especially the straight war memoir, and an overwhelming desire to convince his reader of his wider personal and political truths force him to innovate. Because he is neither self-conscious nor overly concerned with literary genre, he does not make any special claims for his form (as will Norman Mailer with his reportage a generation later) but Orwell begins the experiment here that will produce literary effects in *Animal Farm* and *1984*.¹⁷

The rhetorical strategy of *Homage* succeeds when finally, the reader's viewpoint has moved to the same line of vision as the narrator's. Then all the false injunctions can stop and the reader can participate with the narrator at the latter's level. Probably nothing confirms this bond better than a shared joke. In the following passage, Orwell includes the reader in the politically aware "everyone" and excludes him from his more natural "English visitor" group. Thus, he completes communication with his no-longer-average English reader. And with these English prejudices put aside, the reader can see the events from Orwell's particular—and unique—position:

It was as though some huge evil intelligence was brooding over the town. Everyone noticed it and remarked upon it. And it was queer how everyone expressed it in almost the same words: 'The atmosphere of this place—it's horrible. Like being in a lunatic asylum'. But perhaps I ought not to say *everyone*. Some of the English visitors who flitted briefly through Spain, from hotel to

hotel, seem not to have noticed that atmosphere. The Duchess of Atholl writes, I notice (*Sunday Express*, 17 October 1937):

'I was in Valencia, Madrid, and Barcelona . . . perfect order prevailed in all three towns without any display of force. All the hotels in which I stayed were not only 'normal' and 'decent' but extremely comfortable, in spite of the shortage of butter and coffee.'

It is a peculiarity of English travellers that they do not really believe in the existence of anything outside the smart hotels. I hope they found some butter for the Duchess of Atholl.¹⁸

Orwell triumphs in *Homage* because of his rhetorical skill. He often works by setting up seemingly disparate elements—for example, "everyone" noticing the "huge evil intelligence" and the Duchess of Atholl's obliviousness—and he resolves the tension by forcing the reader to a new perception. (Once again, he uses dialectical forms to achieve his ends.) He has moments of real suspense, fear and terror, alongside disclaimers of heroism or even bravery. Particularly significant is the narrator's recurring behavior: he plays down all individual courage, but somehow he is a part of every volunteer patrol and action. And yet, Orwell makes us believe in his seriousness; we never question it, we never break into the superior smile, we are always moved by his assertions of life over death.

Any analysis of Orwell's politics in *Homage* must end, as it began, in his personality. Other writers, such as Malraux in *L'Espoir*, lend themselves to a point-by-point political explication. But because Spain, for Orwell, was essentially an adventure (not a confirmation of previously held creeds, not a shattering of idols), his politics remained personal. The power of *L'Espoir* is its fierce, analytic truth; the power of *Homage* is its very personal statement: we go to Malraux for definitions, to Orwell for identification.

Although by the end of *Homage*, Orwell has been politicized (and so has the reader), he does not go beyond the politics of individualism. He prefers knowledge to power. As if to reinforce his political awareness, and the necessity for it, he has his wife tell about the final events in Barcelona (but he shifts into his own voice to underline his new conclusions):

Patiently she explained the state of affairs. It did not matter what I had done or not done. This was not a round-up of criminals; it was merely a reign of terror. I was not guilty of any definite act, but I was guilty of 'Trotskyism'. The fact that I had served in the P.O.U.M. militia was quite enough to get me into prison. It was no use hanging onto the English notion that you are safe so long as you keep the law. Practically the law was what the police chose to make it.¹⁹

Understanding the suppression of the P.O.U.M. completes his political education and removes forever the possibility of English naiveté.

For Orwell, the politics of individualism did not lead to the invention of a new ideology (by definition, he was opposed to such a course) but to a stronger awareness of his fellow man. The most important lesson Orwell learned in Spain was the connection between politics and humanity. (And it was on this point that he attacked Auden for his line in the poem "Spain" about "the necessary murder". Only a man who has never seen another die, Orwell argued, can say that murder is ever "necessary".)²⁰ For Orwell, the human virtues were personal honesty and decency; man's vices were dishonesty, especially of a political kind, and dehumanization. He came to realize, unlike most Englishmen of his time, that in the modern world an individual man cannot escape from politics. He saw that in a political age, a man without political awareness will not only be killed but he will die in ignorance. Each individual must go from innocence to awareness and pass through the horrors of politics.

In the character of the narrator in *Homage*, Orwell illustrated this odyssey. For it is in *Homage* that, for the first time, Orwell was able to integrate successfully the personal experience with the political one. Part of the reason is that Spain forced him to integrate his political experiences into his mature self. In *Homage*, politics pervaded and controlled all: it was not tacked onto the end of his tramping adventures as in *Down and Out in Paris and London*; nor was it spewed out between trips down the coal mine as in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In *Homage*, the personal, political, and literary come together for Orwell and he could conclude (with reference back to innocence) that:

This war in which I played so ineffectual a part, has left me with memories that are mostly evil, and yet I do not wish that I had missed it. When you have had a glimpse of such a disaster as this—and however it ends the Spanish war will turn out to have been an appalling disaster, quite apart from the slaughter and physical suffering—the result is not necessarily disillusionment and cynicism. Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings.²¹

It is difficult to summarize Orwell's achievement in *Homage to Catalonia*. After all, he saw only one small part, and an odd one at that, of a vast and complicated war, and yet he was able to extrapolate from that experience the essential meaning of not only the Spanish Civil War, but modern man in politics and war. Most writers placed in such hard and limited terrain would

have given up in frustration (the few that tried to write about Catalonia failed), but Orwell was able to turn it all to his advantage. Convincing the reader—and never lying to him—that this was one of the most important experiences that a man could endure, he was able to move his readers to new perceptions. Writers who campaigned with the International Brigade and saw all the “important” events—from the defense of Madrid to the Retreats—were unable to come near his achievement.

NOTES

1. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, Boston, 1952, p. 212.
2. George Orwell, *An Age Like This* (Vol. 1, *The Collected Essays. Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*), ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, New York, 1968. See “Spilling the Spanish Beans”, p. 269-276; Review of *The Spanish Cockpit* by Franz Borkenau, *Volunteer in Spain* by John Sommerfield, p. 276-278; Letter to Rayner Heppenstall, p. 278-280; Letter to Geoffrey Gorer, p. 283-285; Review of *Red Spanish Notebook* by Mary Low and Juan Brea, *Heroes of the Alcazar* by R. Timmermans, p. 287-288; Letter to Jack Common, p. 288-290; Review of *Storm Over Spain* by Mairin Mitchell, *Spanish Rehearsal* by Arnold Lunn, *Catalonia Infelix* by E. Allison Peers, p. 290-291; Review of *Spanish Testament* by Arthur Koestler, p. 295-296.
3. Orwell, *Homage*, p. 61-2.
4. The standard, and still the best, histories of the Spanish Civil War are Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, London, 1961, and Pierre Broue et Emile Temine, *La revolution et la guerre d'Espagne*, Paris, 1961. The definitive work on Spanish Anarchism is Cesar M. Lorenzo, *Les anarchistes espagnols et le pouvoir*, Paris, 1969.
5. *Homage*, p. 71.
6. *Homage*, p. 137.
7. George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays*, New York, 1954.
8. *Homage*, p. 46.
9. For the most recent versions of this argument see, Jenni Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience: A Study of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler*, Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1969, p. 100-110; and Katherine Hoskins, *Today the Struggle: Literature and Politics in England During the Spanish Civil War*, Univ. of Texas Press, 1969, p. 103-105. Most Orwell criticism contains it in one form or another.
10. *Homage*, p. 47.
11. *Homage*, p. 47-8.
12. Orwell did study Marx seriously at this time and his increasing ability and desire to connect human actions to political and economic causes reflects this reading. But Orwell's individualism was so strong, and his dislike of philo-

sophical speculation so intense, that it is doubtful whether he gained more than the basic Marxist outlines. As the index entry in *An Age Like This*, "Marx: G. O.'s Dog", indicates, Orwell named his dog of this time after Karl. No doubt it was done with ambiguous irony, the same way Swift named a horse, Bolingbroke. For Orwell, like Swift, appreciated the faith but not its adherents.

13. *Homage*, p. 148.

14. *Homage*, p. 149.

15. *Homage*, p. 160.

16. Letter to Geoffrey Gorer, Aug. 16, 1937, George Orwell, *An Age Like This*, p. 281.

17. It is within this context that we must read Orwell's famous statement on *Homage* in "Why I Write" (*A Collection of Essays*):

My book about the Spanish civil war, *Homage to Catalonia*, is, of course, a frankly 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. But among other things it contains a long chapter, full of newspaper quotations and the like, defending the Trotskyists who were accused of plotting with Franco. Clearly such a chapter, which after a year or two would lose its interest for any ordinary reader, must ruin the book. A critic whom I respect read me a lecture about it. 'Why did you put in all that stuff?' he said. 'You've turned what might have been a good book into journalism'. What he said was true, but I could not have done otherwise. I happened to know, what very few people in England had been allowed to know, that innocent men were being falsely accused. If I had not been angry about that I should never have written the book. (p. 319)

In other words, what the critic said was true if you accept his distinction between a "good book" and "journalism"; however, Orwell found such categories less important than falsehood versus truth. The latter was what he wished to write and he believed that the traditional literary categories no longer applied.

18. *Homage*, p. 198-199.

19. *Homage*, p. 211.

20. Orwell, *A Collection of Essays*, "Inside the Whale", p. 215-256.

21. *Homage*, p. 230.