CHAPTER-V

ORWELL AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR:

HOMAGE TO CATALONIA

George Orwells *Homage to Catalonia* an important writings of our time, is centered around the theme of Spanish Civil War. It is a testimony to the nature of modern political life and also a demonstration on the part of Orwell of one of the right ways of confronting that life. Its importance is therefore of the present moment as well as for the years to come. In a politics presumed to be available to everyone ideas and ideals play a great part. For example, communism made use of unregenerate force but many of us found it difficult to acknowledge this fact because communism spoke boldly of ideas and ideals. At the same time, it was unable to measure up to our aspirations. *Homage to Catalonia* is about disillusionment with communism.

The moral tone of *Homage to Catalonia* is true and simple where Orwell’s ascertaining of certain political facts was not the occasion for a change of heart or for crisis of the soul. What he learned from his experiences in Spain pained him and it led him to change his course of thought as well as writing.

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936 when a group of military commanders led by General Franco, resentful of the growing socialist and anti-clerical tendencies of the Republican Government, organized a revolt against it. Spain at once became an ideological battleground for fascists and socialists among many different nations.

The Civil War in Spain was not only a conflict between Republican (socialist) forces and Nationalist (anti-socialist) forces but also between the different shades of
socialists themselves. The various socialist and communist parties in Spain were deeply divided over fundamental questions of policy, and were themselves torn by internal dissensions of the Marxist and Trotskyist theory. The war in its early stages appeared as a simple struggle between socialism and Fascism, but in reality was a much more complicated scenario than these.

In this context, Orwell determined to journey to Spain in order to see the situation for himself. For him, it was not possible to enter the country without accreditation of some kind. With this in mind, he approached the ILP (Independent Labour Party), which became willing to provide him with the necessary accreditation and he was issued with a letter of introduction to their representative John McNair in Barcelona.

Orwell arrived in Barcelona in late December 1936, ostensibly as a correspondent for the New Leader, the journal of the ILP. With characteristic diffidence he remarks in the opening chapter of the novel: ‘I had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do’. (Homage to Catalonia 2) These militias were loosely organized armed groups. Because Orwell was carrying ILP papers he was automatically assigned to the militia of the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista: Worker Party of Marxist Unification) which was the ILP’s sister party in Spain. To Orwell, whose political beliefs then and later were completely undoctrinaire, it did not seem to matter which militia he joined so long as he was fighting for the Republic. In his innocence he had not realized that Spanish Civil War politics were a minefield of conflicting ideologies, that each militia had its own
ideological ‘position’, and that unwittingly the POUM was increasingly being caught up in an internal power struggle between Anarchists, Socialists and Marxists who disagreed violently over the future course the revolution should take.

Catalonia is a province on the north-eastern coast of Spain, adjoining its frontier with France. Barcelona is its principal city, its neighbouring provinces are Aragon (of which the principal city is Saragossa) and Valencia. At the outbreak of the war the Republican Government remained in control of Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, and Valencia; Cadiz, Saragossa, Seville and Burgos were under the control of the insurgents. Catalonia played a crucial role throughout the Civil War; it was Franco’s offensive against Catalonia in December 1938 that led to the collapse of the republican front and the final surrender of Barcelona to his forces. To Orwell, Catalonia with its revolutionary traditions and gentle, innately decent people was synonymous with the Spanish people at their best and with the values he was fighting for.

The province was also deeply attractive to him because it was there that the process of socialization had been carried out furthest. The resistance of General Franco had been accompanied in many areas by a spontaneous outbreak of revolution: land had been seized by the peasants, trade unions had assumed control of factories, and churches had been destroyed. Simultaneously there was an attempt to inaugurate the crude beginnings of a system of government through local committees of workers and trade unions. The war therefore was more than a simple struggle between Democracy and Fascism; it was a triangular conflict between those who wished to restore the status quo, those who wished Franco to succeed, and those who were determined that the revolution should be maintained and intensified. Once Orwell
grasped the situation he threw himself wholeheartedly on the side of the revolutionaries. His book is an act of homage both to the people of Catalonia and to the experiment in socialism he had briefly witnessed there. (Zwerdling 75) The six months he spent in the region were an interlude which he looked back upon for the remainder of his life with affection and nostalgia. ‘This period,’ he wrote, ‘which then seemed so futile and eventless is now of great importance to me. It is so different from the rest of my life that already it has taken on the magic quality which, as a rule, belongs only to memories that are years old.’

In 1937 in Spain when Orwell went to fight on the Republican side in the civil war against the fascists and to file reports for 'The New Leader', he enlisted in a Catalan militia organized by the POUM. He was seriously wounded on the front and was sent back to Barcelona to recover. There, Orwell witnessed a murderous power struggle between the Spanish communists and Independent lefts which in Catalonia consisted largely of anarchists and Trotskyists who dominated POUM. During this struggle the communists falsely accused the Trotskyists of plotting with Franco. Orwell's fierce commitment and determination to expose the lie, made him gather documents and take notes for his great book on the civil war Homage to Catalonia (1938).

In the novel Orwell explores the horror, disaster and banality of the Spanish Civil war in which hundreds of men were slaughtered cattle like. He has deep disgust against the horror and disaster of war. It is this element of dehumanization that he exposed in his novel. He writes about horrors of war and dehumanizing factors that trigger violence. War strips man of his glory and leaves him completely bereft of all myths. The machinations of war are always dehumanizing. In "Homage to Catalonia"
he exposes the disaster and filth caused by the Spanish Civil War. With complete
objectivity, he unveils the suffering of human beings caused by the politics of war and
confiscation. He writes, "No one who was in Barcelona then or for months later will
forget the horrible atmosphere produced by fear, suspicion, hatred, censored
newspapers, crammed jails, and enormous food queues and prowling gangs of armed
men". He also states that the purpose of joining the Spanish war was to fight against
fascism and if one asked him what he was fighting for, his answer would be 'Common
decency'. (Homage to Catalonia, 197) His concern is far from being just that of a
journalist or war correspondent, whose object is primarily to give an authentic picture
of what went on in the theatre of action in Spain. He firmly states his belief in the
importance and sanctity of the past.

"Homage to Catalonia" opens with an incandescent flash of human love
putting beyond question the dignity and worth of mankind. It is interesting in the way
form and subject are identified in it. The first clue of the nature of the book is to be
found in the title itself for what follows is not primarily a description of how
Catalonia won Orwell's admiration but for the spirit that prevailed there during the
war. It is expressive of a much more personal debt, a personal gratitude for one more
voyage of spiritual self-discovery. It was Catalonia in war time that provided for him
the ideal community in which he could come to terms with himself.

In one of the longest chapters in Homage to Catalonia he marshalled his
evidence of communist treachery with the painstaking thoroughness of a prosecutor at
the bar of justice knowing as he later conceded that he ran a risk of turning the
account, an otherwise lyrical piece of writing into a tedious exercise in Journalism. He
explained, "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. He felt that his obligation of the factual triumphed over his unrelenting preoccupation with the style of prose or for that matter his loyalty to any particular political cause. The experience left him with an admiration for the independent left and a hatred for the communists.

Orwell wrote in ‘literature and totalitarianism’ that:

> The whole of modern European literature I am speaking of the literature of the past four hundred years is built on the concept of intellectual honesty, or, if you like to put it that way, on Shakespeare’s maxim, ‘To thine own self be true’. The first thing that we ask of writer is that he shall not tell lies, that he shall say what he really thinks, what he really feels. The worst thing we can say about a work of art is that it is insincere… Modern literature is essentially an individual thing. It is either the truthful expression of what one man thinks and feels, or it is nothing. … Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age … It declares itself infallible, and at the same time it attacks the very concept of objective truth … writing of any consequence can only be produced when a man feels the truth of what he is saying: without that, the creative impulse is lacking.

(R. Sundararajan 61-62)
The same thoughts and feelings about truthfulness, the importance of objective truth and the need to feel the truth are pressed home by Orwell equally forcibly in ‘The Prevention of Literature’ published five years later.

Bill Hart’s essay ‘Speaking the Truth’ helps us to understand what Orwell achieves in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) because Hart shows us convincingly that speaking the truth is not merely a matter of stating facts. Instead, truth is something that must be thought and felt; truth is difficult to speak and involves us in finding appropriate language in which to speak.

Moving to the centre itself in a language unlike the overwrought language of the book’s opening, Orwell reaches, with anger and conviction, the core of *Homage to Catalonia*’s human truth:

“The damned impertinence of these politicians, priests, literary men, and what-not who lecture the working-class socialist for his materialism. All that the working man demands is what these others would consider the indispensable minimum without which human life cannot be lived at all. Enough to eat, freedom from the haunting terror of unemployment, the knowledge that our children will get a fair chance, a bath once a day, clean linen reasonable often, a roof that doesn’t leak, and short enough working hours to leave you with a little energy when the day is done. Not one of those who preach against ‘materialism’ would consider life livable without those thing. And how easily that
minimum could be attained if we chose to set our minds
to it for only twenty years!” (LBSW 10)

This, in essence, is what *Homage to Catalonia* is about.

Orwell claimed 'Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has
been written directly or indirectly against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism
as I understand it'. (Orwell 9) His literary and political commitments deepened with
the passage of time. Orwell could not join the army as he was declared medically
unfit. Anxious to lend his talents to the war effort he took a position at the BBC
(British Broadcasting Corporation) in 1941. He submitted himself to Government
censorship in order to make a contribution to the battle against Fascism. He wrote
news scripts and broadcast his sophisticated blend of political commentary and allied
propaganda. During the war he served as a literary editor and columnist for *The Tribune*. At the core of his writing was his obsessive concern with factual truth. 'Good
Prose is like a window pane' he once declared. As war went on he developed a first
hand understanding of the difficulty in conveying facts and political ideas to the
largest possible audience. For his war time work he knew fully well that the critics
would accuse him of being an intellectual snob who wants to talk down to the masses
and suspect him of plotting to establish an English Gestapo. But he was certain that he
was on the right path. Someday we may have a genuine democratic government, he
left a government which will want to tell people what is happening and what must be
done next and what sacrifices are necessary and why. It will need the mechanism for
doing so, of which the first are the right words and the right tone of voice, he wrote in
1944.
In his essay 'why I write' he states, "The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I know where I stood." (Orwell 9) His sense of moral outrage, the mendaciousness of the communists, the barbarism of the Nazis, the politically motivated obfuscation produced by the liars in every party provoked him to write *Homage to Catalonia*. The bigger the audience he could reach, the more lies he could expose, the deeper his political impact would be.

At the core of Orwell's writings is his obsessive concern for factual truth which he could see was an infinitely fragile thing, forever susceptible to the kinds of lies favoured by those who were in power. He was staggeringly successful in reaching to the largest possible public in a way that very few 20th century writers have been. As Paul Berman has rightly summed up in one long sentence, "The writer who coined 'Hate Weak', 'Thought Crime', 'Thought Police', 'Vaporize', 'Newspeak', 'Double Speak', 'Some are more equal than others' and 'Big Brother is watching you' has sold more than 40 million books in sixty languages which is more than any number of books by a serious, committed, popular post-War author. His writing is a product of his commitment to equality and an end to injustice, set against the shadow of Stalinism and war that loomed over life. We can say that Orwell was an enemy of injustice and inequality, that he believed democracy in Britain was perverted by power and influence of the rich, that he championed civil liberties, that he opposed the exploitation of the so called Third World, tyranny and was an enemy of the class system. Moreover he thought it a duty to fight against these evils, to try and help create a better, never a perfect world. For him commitment was a willingness to give his time and energy to something that he believed in.
*Homage to Catalonia*, the memoir of his war experiences which he wrote on his return to England (the book was written at his home at Wallington between July 1937 and January 1938) is an unforgettable book: unforgettable because of its passionate honesty and its moving evocation of a stricken nation, divided against itself, struggling against impossible odds to achieve a more egalitarian society. The book is cast in the form of a series of documentary essays relating in chronological order to his experiences.

His enlistment in the Lenin Barracks in Barcelona, his adventures as a soldier on the Aragon front, account of the street fighting he witnessed whilst on leave in Barcelona, the nightmare events surrounding the suppression of the POUM, and his eventual return to England are captured in the book. There is a summary of the internal political situation at the commencement of the war, and a resume of the larger issues behind the street fighting and an attempt to disentangle the truth from the widespread distortions circulating at the time in the Spanish and English press.

The novel opens in December 1936 as Orwell enlists in the militia and experiences for the first time the ‘special atmosphere’ of revolutionary spirit in Barcelona. After the briefest and most ineffectual ‘training’ (HTC 5) he is sent to the front in early January and remains there until the parapet attack. He returns to Barcelona on 26th April to find that the civil war has become triangular, with the communists and socialists fighting each other as well as the fascists, and spends most of his leave involved in street-fighting for the socialists. He returns to the front on 10th May, disillusioned though awakened, and is shot through the throat ten days later. He spends the next month in various hospitals and then seeking his discharge papers,
returns to Barcelona for the last time on 20 June to discover his militia-party outlawed and his life in danger.

Though the subject of the novel is war, Orwell insists it would be quite impossible to write about the Spanish war from a purely military angle. It was above all things a ‘political war’. (CEJL: 1.28-29) The vital connection between personal narration and political reporting of the war is skillfully communicated through the description of his retreat from the parapet and retreat from the Hotel Continental, where the police are searching for him. The tragedy of Spain is a foretaste of the tragedy of humanity as a whole. It is the shattering proof of the unhappy condition of men of good will in modern society, which little by little eliminates them, as a by-product that can be turned to no good account. These ‘men of good will’ (Orwell 1538) are always the victims of war, and it is from his traditional viewpoint that Orwell narrates his war memoir. He specially compares the Spanish Civil War to the Great War when he says that it was a bad copy of 1914-18, a positional war of trenches, artillery, raids, snipers, mud, barbed wire, lice and stagnation – and defines his tradition of writing by comparing books on the two wars. In ‘Inside the Whale’, Orwell criticizes the Spanish war books for ‘their shocking dullness and badness’ and states that ‘almost all of them, right-wing or left-wing, are written from a political angle, by cocksure partisans telling you what to think’. *Homage to Catalonia* is distinguished from these books by its truthfulness and objectivity, and by its frank portrayal of Orwell’s helplessness and confusion.

With reference to the present book, Orwell’s achievement was to create a meaningful work out of his immediate involvement in a contemporary event, despite
his perspective and political ignorance, and *Homage to Catalonia* stands as a valuable English account of the Spanish war. This is how the book has been commented on:

Orwell’s experiences on the Aragon front surpassed anything he had previously endured in Burma or Wigan or while ‘down and out’. He insists that, in war, ‘the physical details always outweigh everything else’, and he is constantly submerged in an atmosphere of ‘filth and chaos’, ‘excrement and decay’, ‘boredom and discomfort’ – in ‘mud, lice, hunger, cold’. (*Homage to Catalonia* 18) The ‘nightmare’ feeling is constantly stressed, and rats appear frequently. During the parapet attack he feels ‘a deep horror at everything: the chaos, the darkness, the frightful din, the slithering to and fro in the mud’. When he returns to Barcelona, he finds the suspicion and hostility of his former comrades ‘sickening and disillusioning’. (Rees 60) Helpless and confused, war is a trial, an ordeal that ends with his wound and his flight. The most interesting things about his narrative are his startling honesty and the accuracy of his psychological responses. Orwell admits that he is often frightened. Though a soldier, he is always a sensitive humanist who observes, ‘it was the first time in my life that I had fired a gun at a human being’.

(*Homage to Catalonia* 21)
Though Orwell’s vivid account is a re-created experience, it conveys the illusion of immediacy by a subjective series of closely observed details – the bag, the flash, the shock.

War, for Orwell, is not all futility and suffering. He reverts at times to the self-conscious and adventurous Boy Scout attitude of the Eton OTC, where snipping and whizzing bullets are ‘rather fun’, patrols and trenches are ‘not bad fun in a way’, and building barricades is ‘a strange and wonderful sight’. Here the boyish naivete in combat, a kind of playful whistling in the dark, is the military correlative of Orwell’s political innocence. But as the political realities darken his vision, the fighting does not seem quite so much ‘fun’ as before. Like all victims in war, Orwell is immersed in immediate events and confused about the political situation. ‘There is no such thing as a genuinely non-political literature’, writes Orwell in 1946, ‘and least of all in an age like our own, when fears, hatreds and loyalties of a directly political kind are near to the surface of everyone’s consciousness’. (Orwell IV 6.5) And he adds that, a writer’s ‘subject matter will be determined by the age he lives in’. (Orwell 1.3) Orwell believes that one of the primary obligations of the writer is to be honest, to establish the truth; and he writes, ‘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’. (Orwell 1.6) Orwell came to know this truth by a series of accidents. He describes his connection with POUM, ‘the most extreme of the revolutionary parties’ (Orwell 1.287), in which Orwell idealistically affirms, ‘There are occasions when it pays better to fight and be beaten than not to fight at all.’ (Orwell II 349) He also states: ‘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’. Orwell gradually recognizes that the
real struggle is between revolution and counter revolution, between the Comintern
and the Spanish left-wing parties. The Russian government tried to prevent revolution
in Spain, just as it had done in China ten years earlier.

Orwell tells what happens, but not why, because he cannot see any reason why
the Communists destroyed their Socialist allies. And his bewilderment continued
beyond 1943, when he said, ‘As to the Russians, their motives in the Spanish war are
completely inscrutable. (Orwell 11.263) This confusion results because the Russian
policy was both contradictory and ineffectual. Orwell saved nobody’s respectability
and he antagonized everybody.

The idea of comradeship is at the very core of Homage to Catalonia and is
elaborated in numerous ways – humanistic, psychological, idealistic and heroic. When
enemy deserters slip across the Loyalist lines and Orwell sees his first real ‘Fascists’,
‘It struck me that they were indistinguishable from ourselves, except that they wore
khaki overalls.’ (HTC 16) And when he lies next to a wounded Assault Guard in
Monzon Hospital, he says, ‘In Barcelona we should have been shooting one another’,
(HTC 163) and they laugh over this. This powerful bond makes Orwell a reluctant
warrior. Once, in a trench, Orwell suddenly came very close to the enemy and ‘could
see him clearly but he does not want to kill the man. This is reinforced by the well-
known incident described in ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’.

“Early one morning another man and I had gone out to
snipe at the Fascists in the trenches outside Huesca.
Their line and ours here lay three hundred yards apart,
at which range our aged rifles would not shoot
accurately, but by sneaking out to a spot about a hundred yards from the Fascist trench you might, if you were lucky, get a shot at someone through a gap in the parapet. Unfortunately the ground between was a flat beet field with no cover except a few ditches, and it was necessary to go out while it was still dark and return soon after dawn, before the light became too good. This time no Fascists appeared, and we stayed too long and were caught by the dawn. We were in a ditch, but behind us were two hundred yards of flat ground with hardly enough cover for a rabbit. We were still trying to nerve ourselves to make a dash for it when there was an uproar and a blowing of whistles in the Fascist trench. Some of our aeroplanes were coming over. At this moment, a man presumably carrying a message to an officer, jumped out of the trench and ran along the top of the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him. It is true that I am a poor shot and unlikely to hit a running man at a hundred yards, and also that I was thinking chiefly about getting back to our trench while the Fascists had their attention fixed on the aeroplanes. Still, I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I
had come here to shoot at ‘Fascists’; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a ‘Fascist’, he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him.” (Orwell 135)

This sense of comradeship and solidarity that Orwell experienced in Spain answered his deep-rooted psychological need. Orwell’s powerful sense of solidarity in Spain is related to the symbolic experience in Wigan.

There are few books in the genre which convey the reality of modern warfare with such veracity and readability as Homage to Catalonia. Orwell achieves his effects through the use of simple, direct language even when describing the most extraordinary or horrifying events; by communicating to the reader a strong sense of participation which adds conviction to the narrative; and, dominating all else, by the overwhelming impression of honesty which breathes through the entire work.

The overriding impression one receives from a reading of Homage to Catalonia is that of a deeply honest man, powerfully moved by all that he has seen and participated in, who is determined to tell the truth at all costs. In the opening chapter, the moving description of revolutionary Barcelona is provided in a sense which must have seemed in the completest contrast to England at the height of the depression:

To anyone who had been there since the beginning it probably seemed even in December or January that the revolutionary period was ending; but when one came straight from England the aspect of Barcelona was
something startling and over-whelming. It was the first
time that I had ever been in a town where the working
class was in the saddle…. All this was queer and
moving. There was much in it that I did not understand,
in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it
immediately as state of affairs worth fighting for.

(HTC 2-3)

For Orwell, the few days he spent in Barcelona were a revelation. The workers
had seized all buildings of importance and draped them with revolutionary flags; all
shops and cafeterias were under common ownership; tipping was forbidden by law;
extremes of poverty and wealth seemed to have disappeared. It was superficially at
least, a classless society. Now, for the first time in his life, he was witnessing such a
community in being. During the months which followed he was to have a much more
extensive experience of classlessness as a militiaman he wrote later that ‘I had
dropped more or less by chance into the only community of any size in Western
Europe where political consciousness and disbelief in capitalism were more normal
than their opposites’ – which affected him even more profoundly. This foretaste of a
social revolution in action made an impact on Orwell as a man and as a writer.

He was made a corporal as soon as the militia reached the front, and was in
command of a guard of twelve men. The phrase ‘at the front’ suggests a picture of
intense military activity; however, the reality for Orwell was very different. The
Aragon front at that time was in a state of lull. The substance of his war experience
was one of sentry duty, volunteering for patrols, gathering fuel, trying to keep warm
in the intense cold, and keeping the enemy positions under constant surveillance. It is
the boredom and frustration of this life, the mundaneness and comradeship of life in
the trenches, that are vividly portrayed in the opening chapters.

At the time of writing, the experience seemed to him as one of the most futile
of his whole life. Orwell makes no attempt to conceal the sordid reality of war fought
with shells and machine guns. He was well aware that war means death and suffering
as well as sense of fellowship with people fighting on one’s side affords only
momentary happiness; his concern is to tell it as it happened, making no attempt to
conceal unpleasant facts from his readers.

Orwell was by no means a conventional aspiring author. Instead, he chose a
succession of unusual occupations: a member of the Indian Imperial Police, a hotel
scullion, a tramp, a teacher in an impoverished private school, a village shopkeeper.
To these he now added the experience of serving as a poorly paid militiaman during a
particularly bloody civil war.

*Homage to Catalonia* would have been an ordinary work had it not been
written by a man who was actually a participant in all that he describes. The first
person narrative, the continual use of such phrases as ‘I remember’, ‘it was an
extraordinary life that we were living’, (HTC 33) ‘I crept up to the barbed wire to
listen’, give to the book an immediacy and urgency. Continually one has a sense of
participation, of a narrator who does not simply describe his adventures as they unfold
but is physically involved in all that he relates. Through language he communicates
not only the sounds, sights and smells of war but the nature of the experience itself;
the reader sees the trenches in his imagination and becomes part of the narration.
Orwell’s skill as a writer is such that the reader shares with him the feel of warfare.
The first eight chapters of *Homage to Catalonia* relive an extraordinarily striking
manner the experience of serving as a militiaman among the Aragon mountains at the height of the civil war. *Homage to Catalonia* is a better book about war itself than about the Spanish War. (Hugh 653)

The book owes its distinctive flavour not only to its documentary qualities but to the highly individual character of Orwell as a narrator. One detects at once that, as in all his books told in the first person, the ‘I’ is a persona with a quirkiness and independence all his own. Years later Orwell wrote:

> “I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience. Anyone who cares to examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains much that a full-time politician would consider irrelevant.” (Why I Write 9)

The book is not only a moving account of one man’s testimony of war but also an aesthetic experience. The overwhelming impression one receives from a reading is of a deeply sensitive man, fascinated by Spain and its history, outraged by the affront to human decency symbolized by the Fascist uprising.

Orwell conveys in precise terms the horror and desolation of the sodden battlefields: “Along the line for miles around a ragged meaningless fire was thundering, like the rain that goes on raining after a storm. I remember the desolate look of everything, the morasses of mud, the weeping poplar trees, the yellow water in the trench-bottoms; and men’s exhausted faces, unshaven, streaked with mud, and blackened to the eyes with smoke”. Again, there is the skilful deployment of graphic
adjectives: “the ragged rifle-fire”, ‘the weeping trees’, ‘the yellow water’, ‘the blackened faces’. It is as if the description is painted on canvas or recalled from a coloured photograph. And it is entirely characteristic of Orwell that when he himself was almost mortally wounded – he was hit in the throat by a Fascist sniper – he proceeds to describe the occurrence with a dispassionate regard for the truth: ‘The whole experience of being hit by a bullet is very interesting and I think it is worth describing in detail….’ (Homage to Catalonia 143)

The great virtue of Homage to Catalonia is not merely that it brings the period back to life in one’s mind, but that it does so in graphic detail and with nuances. Its qualities as a war memoir are due in equal measure to the literary skill with which he organizes his materials and communicates his effects to the reader. In his essay ‘Why I Write’ he observed with characteristic modesty: ‘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’. (Orwell 10) Orwell had achieved a mature and accomplished style and in doing so he found himself as a creative artist. That simple, direct, honest style a form of writing which later generations were to characterize as ‘Orwellian’ was brought to perfection in Homage to Catalonia. One thinks of the unforgettable picture of the trenches on the Aragon front and the manner in which Orwell conveys the sights, sounds and smells of warfare; of the vivid descriptions of battle which seem to owe so much to his boyhood enthusiasm for tales of adventure; of the horrifying description of street fighting, so evocative that one senses the evil atmosphere brooding over the city and the constant crackle of rifle fire the final recounting of his flight from Spain to France and then on to England, a beautiful piece of writing which brings the entire work to a satisfying
conclusion. Regarded purely as a literary achievement *Homage to Catalonia* should rank highly in the literary canon. It takes its place alongside Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Koestler’s *Spanish Testament* as a true and moving account of one man’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War.

The book is also significant in that it marks a crucial stage in Orwell’s political development: first, because it marks the beginning of his concern for objective historical truth – a concern which came increasingly to dominate his life; and second, because it records the transformation of his socialism from a theoretical belief to a positive faith.

There are numerous instances in *Homage to Catalonia* and in the essay ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’ (1943) in which he records his disillusionment that the whole concept of objective truth was not merely being challenged but blatantly denied in the nineteen thirties. In short, he had learned the validity of the aphorism that ‘in war, the first casualty is truth’. What so distressed him was the deliberate manufacture of false statements, even to the extent of asserting that a particular event in the past had not happened.

“I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased, but what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history could be truthfully written… It is just this common basis of agreement, with its implication that human beings are all one species of animal that totalitarianism destroys… This prospect frightens me much more than bombs and after our experiences of the last few years that is not a frivolous statement.” (Orwell 6)
The fundamental difference between the Orwell of pre-1936 and the Orwell of post-1936 was this: that until he arrived in Spain his advocacy of socialism was entirely theoretical, based upon a passionate concern for social justice. To say this is not to question in any way the genuineness of his beliefs but merely to point out that he was much more clear about what he was fighting against than the concept he was fighting for. Catalonia, on the other hand, provided him with a practical experience of socialism in action: an experience which, though of brief duration, was of incalculable significance to his development as a novelist. In the deeply moving concluded passages of the novel he gives eloquent testimony to the reaffirmation of his faith:

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.

*(Homage to Catalonia 195)*

*Homage to Catalonia*, as Orwell says, is a focal point in his career: it both epitomizes his earlier experiences among the poor and oppressed and foreshadows his political satires. When he first became attracted to the poor he had ‘no interest in Socialism or any other economic theory’, and when he first came to Catalonia he ‘ignored the political side of the war’. (CEJL: 1,30)
More symbolic than real, he exists as a prototype of a soldier-hero and embodiment of the ‘special atmosphere’ of the time (the ‘palms are only able/ to meet within the sound of guns’). Orwell idealizes this man in the same way he did the Burmese, the tramps and miners.

The ‘special atmosphere’ that Orwell describes is one where the primary emotions are released, a time of generous feelings and humane gestures. ‘War brings it home to the individual that he is not altogether an individual. (Orwell 11.94) This comradeship, so vital and so necessary to Orwell, beings even before he reaches Spain, for the night he leaves Paris, the slow train was packed with Czechs, Germans, Frenchmen, all bound on the same mission’.

‘No one who was in Spain during the months when people still believed in the revolution will ever forget that strange and moving experience’. (Orwell 1.287) Four years later he states that the Spanish civil war made a deep and painful impression on the English intelligentsia, deeper, than has yet been made by the war now raging’.

Orwell lived his words: ‘To understand a political movement one has got to be involved in it’. (Orwell 1.348) The greatness of *Homage to Catalonia* is that Orwell’s idealism and courage are embodied in his spirit and action. ‘We started off by being heroic defenders of democracy and ended by slipping over the border with the police panting on our heels.’ (Orwell 1.279) The factors that guarantee Orwell’s sincerity in *Homage to Catalonia*, is that Orwell writes not only what he ‘believes’ but also what he ‘knows’ Orwell is faithful to his experience; his lively self-irony acts as a further guarantor of his sincerity and sense of reality; and Orwell’s capacity to reach through the political to the human world wins the reader to his side against the *News Chronicle’s* and the *Daily Worker’s* false accounts of the war. One of the most
convincing passages is that where Orwell recounts the night attack on the Fascist lines.

We crept onwards, always more slowly. I cannot convey to you the depth of my desire to get there. Just to get within bombing distance before they heard us! At such a time you have not even any fear, only a tremendous hopeless longing to get over the intervening ground. I have felt exactly the same thing when stalking a wild animal; the same agonized desire to get within range, the same dreamlike certainty that it is impossible. And how the distance stretched out! I knew the ground well, it was barely a hundred and fifty yards, and yet it seemed more like a mile. When you are creeping at that pace you are aware as an ant might be of the enormous variation in the ground; the splendid patch of smooth grass here, the evil patch of sticky mud there, the tall rustling reeds that have got to be avoided, the heap of stones that almost makes you give up hope because it seems impossible to get over it without noise.

*(Homage to Catalonia 69)*

We feel here that Orwell is speaking in his own voice and that his communication of painful experience is genuine. Likewise, Orwell’s self-irony reveals his growing self-awareness; In the beginning he refers amusingly enough to ‘my bad Spanish’ *(Homage to Catalonia 1)* and when later the phrase recurs when
Orwell is bravely attempting to save Kopp, the ironic self-awareness lightens to a more serious situation. His selfless action is described in a convincing and unselfconscious way: ‘But it was obviously quicker and surer to go in person’. (HTC 209) Then, when he tries to explain Kopp’s situation to the little officer, Orwell’s lack of voice (the result of his throat wound) is exacerbated by ‘my villainous Spanish which lapsed into French at every crisis’. The self-irony helps to convince us of the genuinely selfless nature of Orwell’s courage. To quote:

‘One wretched brute that marched with us had had POUM branded on it in huge letters and slunk along as though conscious that there was something wrong with its appearance. (Homage to Catalonia 17) Later, at the front Orwell writes, ‘There were nights when it seemed to me that our position could be stormed by twenty Boy Scouts armed with airguns, or twenty Girl Guides armed with battledores, for that matter’.

(Homage to Catalonia 8)

On the night attack he says:

“To prevent us from shooting each other in the darkness white armlets would be worn. At that moment a messenger arrived to say that there were no white armlets. Out of the darkness a plaintive voice suggested: ‘Couldn’t we arrange for Fascists to wear white armlets instead? (Homage to Catalonia 67)
Orwell’s rightness of tone persuades us that he speaks in his own voice. ‘The real preoccupation of both armies was trying to keep warm’. (Homage to Catalonia 23) ‘Often I used to gaze round the wintry landscape and marvel at the futility of it all’ (Homage to Catalonia 24), he writes. Comically, he notes, ‘the real weapon was not the rifle but the megaphone. Being unable to kill your enemy you shouted at him instead’. (Homage to Catalonia 44) It frames and focuses for us his sense of the meaning of his Spanish experience. Of this he writes, ‘But it lasted long enough to have its effect upon anyone who experienced it. However much one cursed at the time, one realized afterwards that one had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism… One had breathed the air of equality’.

(Homage to Catalonia 87)

Even in the fighting in Barcelona which Orwell describes as ‘one of the most unbearable periods of my whole life. I think few experiences could be more sickening, more disillusioning, or, finally, more nerve-racking than those evil days of street warfare’, (Homage to Catalonia 116) and when his bitterness breaks out as in his description of the fat Russian agent, ‘it was the first time that I had seen a person whose profession was telling lies unless one counts journalists’.

(Homage to Catalonia 127)

Orwell’s account of the disillusioning street fighting in Barcelona and the suppression of the POUM shows that he is concerned to tell the truth and disabuse his readers of the lies of the News Chronicle and Daily Worker. It is probably not far from the truth to say that the six months in Spain in 1937 were the turning point in Orwell’s life. Although he was politically disillusioned he remained optimistic about human nature:
Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings. And I hope the account I have given is not too misleading. I believe that on such an issue as this no one is or can be completely truthful. It is difficult to be certain about anything except what you have seen with your own eyes, and consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan.

*(Homage to Catalonia 195)*

Orwell acknowledges the difficulty of speaking the truth and in acknowledging it he says:

I had come here to shoot at ‘Fascists’, but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a ‘Fascist’, he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him. *(Homage to Catalonia 231)*

Penetrating the political world, Orwell discovers the human world. It is a world that leads him beyond his belief in the Italian militiaman to his sense of importance of the loyalty of the Arab youth whom he has come to know well. Significantly, Orwell’s prose here is not tense with strained idealism but simple, natural and truthful.

Could you feel towards somebody, and stick up for him in a quarrel, after you had been ignominiously searched in his presence for property you were supposed to have stolen from him? No, you couldn’t; but you might if
you had both been through some emotionally widening experience. \textit{(Homage to Catalonia} 233)\)

Orwell’s increased grasp of and participation in the human world survives the political disillusionment he felt. He says, ‘In Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie.’ \textit{(Homage to Catalonia} 234)\) He continues:

This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history… what is peculiar to our age is the abandonment of the idea that history could be truthfully written. \textit{(Homage to Catalonia} 235-236)\)

Nazi theory indeed specially denies that such a thing as ‘the truth’ exists… If the Leader says of such and such an event, ‘It never happened’ – well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five well, two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs and after our experiences of the last few years that is not a frivolous statement. \textit{(Homage to Catalonia} 236)\)

Thus George Orwell went to Spain to fight for common decency against fascism and he found decency in the Spanish people. But he also found something that went deeper than that. ‘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 twentieth century’. (Homage to
Catalonia 213) Orwell is telling the truth as there is the simple sincerity of his
language to support him, the moving episode of the two young Spanish soldiers who
see him in the hospital and give him all their tobacco. Moving through politics to
human nature, Orwell found a simple, sincere and flexible language in which to speak
the truth.
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