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The Generous Spirit: The Moral and Physical Experience of a Man at War in *Homage to Catalonia* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

One of the effects of safe and civilized life is an immense oversensitiveness which makes all the primary emotions somewhat disgusting. Generosity is as painful as meanness, gratitude as hateful as ingratitude. . . . Could you feel friendly 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. That is one of the byproducts of revolution, though in this case it was only the beginnings of a revolution, and obviously foredoomed to failure. (George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War" 232-3)

People from several countries went to Spain during its civil war, to serve as journalists and observers, as well as to fight for and provide various forms of material assistance to the Republican forces. According to Stanley Weintraub, the conflict "captured the moral and physical influence" of intellectuals to an unparalleled degree (2). The relationship between the collective goals of the Republican cause and the dislocation of the foreign volunteer informs a number of Spanish Civil War texts. Two of the better known are George Orwell's 1938 memoir *Homage to Catalonia* and Ernest Hemingway's 1940 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. These works differ in genre and narrative style, yet both treat the moral and physical experience of a man at war, by filtering his sense of collective responsibility through his individual observations.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson proposes a critical approach which recognizes both the mimetic (or immediate) and Utopian impulses of a text, an analysis "in which a *functional* method for describing cultural texts is articulated with an *anticipatory* one" (296). This approach permits exploration of the abstract motives underlying physical experience, and of the idealistic level of integration even the most singular protagonist can realize with his or her community. André Malraux's 1938 novel *Man's Hope* explicitly foregrounds the Utopian impulse. Malraux orchestrates episodes of individual and collective action through various perspectives, Spanish and foreign. By framing his narrative with two major Republican victories, he orients the text towards a positive future, despite its unflinching evocation of general and specific horrors of war. Manuel's reflections at the end of the novel integrate personal transformation and collective hope:

Most likely it was the same with all those others moving through the streets. . . . For the first time Manuel was hearing the voice of that which is more awe-inspiring even than the blood of men, more enigmatic even than their presence on the earth—the infinite possibilities of their destiny. And he felt that this new consciousness within him was linked up with the sounds of running water in the street and the footfalls of the prisoners, profound and permanent as the beating of his heart. (423)

This concluding paragraph suggests Jameson's "proposition that *all* class consciousness—or in other words, all ideology in the strongest sense . . . is in its very nature Utopian" (289). Yet a text need not be explicitly optimistic to have a Utopian impulse. Malcolm Lowry's relentlessly tragic novel *Under the Volcano* was begun during the Spanish Civil War; Hugh in his decision to join the doomed Loyalist forces in Spain alone overcomes the fatal atrophy of the other protagonists. His act might be read as an attempt at personal redemption, which, like the Consul and Yvonne, Hugh seeks, or perhaps as a realization that redemption, both personal and global, lies only in recognizing oneself as part of the human community. (The Consul partly realizes this at his death.)¹ Orwell and Hemingway both emphasize the perspective of a central protagonist with serious doubts. The specific ideological associations in each book differ; Orwell's POUM militia would not have found favor with Hemingway's guerrilla band, and both would likely have been regarded as corrupt in the

context of Malraux's novel, though in all cases the struggle does provide "an emotionally widening experience" of the sort Orwell suggests in the passage I chose as an epigraph. I want to examine this individualization of experience, and to demonstrate how, despite the realization by both that Spain is a prelude to a greater conflict,² a Utopian social impulse functions in each text.

Unlike Malraux or Orwell, Hemingway did not take up arms himself on behalf of the Republicans, although he visited Spain four times as a journalist between mid-1937 and late 1938, and helped raise money for humanitarian aid to the Loyalists. On 23 March 1939, he wrote to the Russian scholar and translator Ivan Kashkin about the nature of war and the Spanish experience:

We know that war is bad. Yet sometimes it is necessary to fight. But still war is bad and any man who says it is not is a liar. But it is very complicated and difficult to write about truly. For instance to take it on a simply personal basis—in the war in Italy when I was a boy I had much fear. In Spain I had no fear after a couple of weeks and was very happy. Yet for me to not understand fear in others or deny its existence would be bad writing. It is just that now I understand the whole thing better. The only thing about a war, once it has started, is to win it—and that is what we did not do. The hell with war for a while. I want to write.

. . . I would like to be able to write understandingly about both deserters and heroes, cowards and brave men, traitors and men who are not capable of being traitors. We learned a lot about all such people. (*Selected Letters* 480)

He had earlier that month begun work on *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; "Kashkin" became the "rare name" of the explosives expert who preceded Robert Jordan in working with Pablo's band.

Hemingway places his protagonist, American writer and professor Robert Jordan, in the hills among a band of guerrillas whose help he needs in blowing up a bridge for the People's Army. According to Jeffrey Meyers, "*For Whom the Bell Tolls* is an allegory of, as well as an explanation of, the Loyalist defeat in the Spanish war" (16); certainly the various characters are both carefully individualized and strongly archetypal. Robert Jordan must confront his motives for joining this struggle, the nature of war and killing, and the significance of everything done in life, in this book about how to live and die properly, and

specifically about an outsider in Spain. Among the peasant guerrillas, he meets people whose characters have been formed more by physical than intellectual experience; more than his military or journalist connections in Madrid, they lead Robert Jordan to apply what he has learned in Spain to specific activity. When he arrives among them, his early dedication has given way to a cold, clear-headed rationalization of all he must do. This pragmatism is quickly qualified by doubts as these people, good and bad alike, become individualized to him. Tactically, the destruction of the bridge so that the Republicans can bomb the pass without Fascist intervention is a necessity; however, Jordan must always realize that it could result in Anselmo's death. Robert Jordan gains an appreciation of life, compatible with both his tactical concerns and abstract philosophy, in which self-interest is neither above nor below but integrated with group interest. Ironically, his discoveries arise from his acceptance of imminent death.

Hemingway's literal translations of Spanish idiomatic speech underline the motif of cultural difference in the novel. As a foreigner, Robert Jordan is an object of wonder and suspicion, the genius of the bridge and the bringer of bad fortune. His behavior reflects his autonomy: he is more technically proficient with weapons than the guerrillas, drinks differently and makes his own sleeping arrangements. He defines as an outsider manifestations of the Spanish mentality, in his attempts to differentiate between Fascist and Republican atrocities in "the only country that the reformation never reached" (355), as well as in this meditation on killing:

We do it coldly but they do not, nor ever have. It is their extra sacrament. Their old one that they had before the new religion came from the far end of the Mediterranean, the one they have never abandoned but only suppressed and hidden to bring it out again in wars and inquisitions. (286-7)

Such generalizations prove unsatisfactory, since Robert Jordan's singularity is part of the individualization which permeates the novel. Hemingway distinguishes virtually every death in some way. Hence, Jordan has difficulty reconciling the necessity of killing Fascists with the death of someone he could have "seen . . . run through the streets ahead of the bulls at the Feria in Pamplona," while always admitting his own complicity: "You never kill anyone that you want to kill in a war, he said to himself. Well, hardly ever . . ." (302). Pilar and Maria, in recounting

atrocities of the Republicans and Fascists respectively, demonstrate how a collective goal implies collective responsibility. Pilar's story, in individualizing the deaths of Fascists, does not dispute the goal, but shows how the sins of war are the property of all sides; she teaches Robert Jordan the danger of generalization, and how a sense of collective purpose can degenerate into a barbaric mob mentality. His ambivalence towards killing prefigures the sensitivity to dissonant elements of life which is part of the integration he achieves in dying. His reflection at the hour of his death implies both his bond with humanity and his sense of self:

I have fought for what I believed in for a year now. If we win here we will win everywhere. The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for and I hate very much to leave it. And you had a lot of luck, he told himself, to have had such a good life. . . . I wish there was some way to pass on what I've learned, though. (467)

Yet the novel's emphasis on singularity never denies the context of community. If each person, living or dying, is individualized, all are connected by their humanity and must recognize their collective responsibility through their common cause; Hemingway suggests this through both personal and political relationships in which connection is always somehow ennobling. Maria transcends her nightmarish experiences of rape and imprisonment in the love she shares with Robert Jordan; this elevates him as well. Pablo discovers only profound loneliness in his betrayal of the band, and ultimately returns to aid in the fight at the bridge. Anselmo at his death feels a mystical oneness with everything from the wire in his hand to the Republican cause. Jordan's brief sojourn with the guerrilla band provides him with all the close relationships he has never known: wife, family, friends. His reminiscences of Gaylord's evoke the international array of journalists and soldiers resident in Madrid. Despite his admiration for Golz and Duval, and his obsession with the enigmatic Karkov, Jordan knows this crowd has corrupted his ideals through its factionalism. He claims no specific ideology; while he accepts Communist military discipline as the most effective route to defeating the Fascists, he leaves rebuilding the Republic to others. However, he learns in Spain a sense of collective responsibility transcending specific political doctrine, and in the intensity of his last days, his

commitment regains some of its early, almost religious ardor, which made the struggle analogous to a crusade, despite there being "no purity of feeling for those who survived the fighting and were good at it":

It was a feeling of consecration to a duty toward all of the oppressed of the world which would be as difficult and embarrassing to speak about as religious experience and yet it was as authentic as the feeling you had when you heard Bach, or stood in Chartres Cathedral or the Cathedral at Leòn and saw the light coming through the great windows; or when you saw Mantegna and Greco and Brueghel in the Prado. It gave you a part in something that you could believe in wholly and completely and in which you felt an absolute brotherhood with the others who were engaged in it. . . . But the best thing was that there was something you could do about this feeling and this necessity too. You could fight. (235)

Erik Nakjavani contends that Robert Jordan, like three of the protagonists in *Man's Hope*, represents the militant intellectual, a literary myth whose "complexity derives from its manifest attempt to provide a synthesis of two traditionally different and seemingly contradictory modes of being: reflection and action or, to be more precise, intellectuality and political militancy" (200). By fictionalizing his observations of Spain, Hemingway (like Malraux) could attempt such a synthesis of modes of being, also of the general and specific aspects of war, while demonstrating the inherent contradictions in such an attempt. The Utopian impulse in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* functions in action and particularly through Robert Jordan, whose role as an explosives expert working with a band of guerrillas permits him greater singularity than if Hemingway had placed him within an organized military unit. George Orwell does not attempt such distance or artistic aspiration in *Homage to Catalonia*.³ As he chronicles his experiences as an English journalist fighting with a unit of the POUM militia, on the Aragon front and in the streets of Barcelona, he presents, structurally and implicitly, the dichotomy between his sense of collective responsibility and his ideological doubts.⁴ The fragmentation of *Homage to Catalonia* arises from its deliberate division of political analysis and personal reminiscence, and from the course taken by Orwell's experiences, especially, according to Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, his failure to join the International Brigade: "Staying on in Barcelona, he missed the opportunity of participating significantly in the actual fighting against the Fascist forces; instead he witnessed and

participated in the war-within-a-war within the Republic (the struggle on the Left) in that first week of May 1937" (219).

Although the perspective in *Homage to Catalonia* is always Orwell's, he generalizes his experiences sufficiently to involve his comrades, and even at times the Fascist conscripts, not so much for an explicitly ideological purpose as to provide what he considers a realistic picture of warfare in general. He seems more pragmatic about killing in battle than Hemingway; in discussing the injustice of Bob Smillie's death in prison, he claims

I know that in the middle of a huge and bloody war it is no use making too much fuss over an individual death. One aeroplane bomb in a crowded street causes more suffering than quite a lot of political persecution. But what angers one about a death like this is its utter pointlessness. (206-7)⁵

Orwell's days at the front are uncomfortable and uncertain. The horror of war is graphically present, but actual combat is only one part of life in the trenches; he reflects in long periods of inaction upon the appalling inadequacy of available weapons, as well as the monotony and frustration of standing guard, patrolling, digging, keeping warm and trying to manage an underaged, undisciplined troop. This Briton of a privileged class brought to Spain notions of military organization and life in the trenches formed in his boyhood during the First World War: "War, to me, meant roaring projectiles and skipping shards of steel; above all it meant mud, lice, hunger and cold. It is curious, but I dreaded the cold much more than I dreaded the enemy" (21). At times, his deflation of romanticism verges on the sardonic; the Republican cause takes second place to burning old boots to keep warm, trying to avoid accidental shooting by one's own men, and demoralizing the enemy with the lure of hot buttered toast.

Orwell expresses a sense of futility in accomplishing so little, while retaining great enthusiasm for his moments of action or peril. His reflections when wounded are less obviously heroic than Robert Jordan's dying thoughts, yet express similar regrets at leaving a world in which he feels well integrated socially and physically:

My first thought, conventionally enough, was for my wife. My second was a violent resentment at having to leave this world which, when all is said and done, suits me so well. . . . The meaninglessness of it! To be bumped off, not even in battle, but in this stale corner of the trenches, thanks to a moment's carelessness. (178)

Since like Hemingway he is aware of contradictions, he almost immediately qualifies this by presuming "that if you were really dying your thoughts would be quite different" (179) and describing the painfully difficult process of getting his stretcher to the hospital. Nevertheless, like Robert Jordan, he is acutely aware of his natural environment; while the former feels "his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest" (471), Orwell feels leaves brushing his face and reflects "what a good thing it was to be alive in a world where silver poplars grow" (179). For both Orwell and Hemingway, the Utopian impulse is qualified by a sort of edenic longing, represented for the former by a peaceful English countryside in summer, and for the latter by an unspoiled wilderness. That both realize that this paradise has been lost complicates any optimistic social projections; in fact, neither dwells too much in specific terms on what form life after victory would take. Orwell rhapsodizes about the revolutionary moment in 1936 Barcelona, and the egalitarian qualities it might forecast, while Hemingway has Robert Jordan indulge in what are clearly fantasies about life in Madrid with Maria, while leaving more concrete, thoughtful speculations to such characters as Anselmo, so that at the centre of each book, the Utopian impulse is qualified.

The tone of *Homage to Catalonia*, which Michael Shelden calls "Orwell's most optimistic book" (312), owes much to its time of writing. His later essay, "Looking Back on the Spanish War," while still conceding many of the sources of idealism, emphasizes much more the dystopian impulse which characterizes Orwell's late fiction: the factionalism of 1937 Barcelona presages the institutionalized treachery of 1984 Oceania. In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell analyzes this factionalism with cynicism and anger, yet upholds the value of camaraderie; he claims his experience (even though it ended with his running for his life to France after the suppression of the POUM, in whose militia he served) left him "with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings" (220). By 1938, when he wrote his prewar novel *Coming Up for Air*, the

dream of a world reshaped by socialism rather than fascism must have seemed far more remote than in the immediacy of the Spanish reminiscences.

In "Looking Back on the Spanish War," Orwell claims that the atmosphere in Spain during the early days of the civil war was created by an expansive communal experience in which positive possibilities of revolution seemed real, since "in Spain in 1936 we were not living in a normal time" (233). Neither, one could add, are the characters in *Coming Up for Air*; however, its context leads to a different evaluation of engagement and commitment. *Coming Up for Air* is written and set in the ominous days preceding the Second World War. Hence, its speculative impulse, like that of "Looking Back," is dystopian, forecasting both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Its protagonist, George Bowling, attempts to find sources of tradition and grace in a return to his childhood village, only to find that he is inexorably caught between the bourgeois sterility of his life as a middle-class insurance salesman and the equally real terror of incipient fascism, with no way to reconcile these elements of existence: no faith or ideology to integrate them in a comprehensive and self-justifying world view. If the political analysis in *Homage to Catalonia* is characterized by frustration and anger, that in *Coming Up for Air* is permeated by fear. At one point, Bowling envisions a whole litany of embodied fears, both local and global, ranging from family to work to "the Home Secretary, Scotland Yard, the Temperance League, the Bank of England, Lord Beaverbrook, Hitler and Stalin on a tandem bicycle, the bench of bishops, Mussolini, the Pope" (173-4); these represent the forces inimical to recovering forms of peace and security which may have been illusory yet which retain great allure.

Spain, localized in the focus of the memoir, but also foreign and an arena of Orwell's active participation, invited contemplation of the sort of positive world view which is unavailable to George Bowling. (At the Left Book Club meeting featuring the anti-fascist speaker, Bowling distances himself from the enthusiastic young man who approaches him yet also assumes some of his friends might be fighting in Spain.) Perhaps this immediate sense of shared purpose and activity on the part of the writer influences the value accorded social integration; both *Homage to Catalonia* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as well as *Man's Hope*, were

written during the Spanish Civil War itself, and before the Republican defeat became inevitable.⁶

The structure of *Homage to Catalonia* indicates the depth of the dichotomies Orwell faced even at the time of his active participation. Nevertheless, a genuine idealism informs this book, surviving even the incisive analysis of internecine Republican conflicts, and based on Orwell's belief in the justice of the workers' revolution in 1936 Barcelona, as well as in the necessity of fighting Fascism. Orwell indicates the split in his responses much more than Hemingway or Malraux. While he upholds as strongly the necessity of defeating Franco, he mourns passionately the subversion of the revolutionary spirit in Barcelona and the socialist militias which, "while they lasted, were a sort of microcosm of a classless society . . . a crude forecast of what the opening stages of Socialism might be like. And, after all, instead of disillusioning me, it deeply attracted me" (102-3). Throughout the book, this idealism manifests itself in Orwell's belief in what he terms decency, and in a unifying sense of purpose. He evokes the latter in his observation of Italian soldiers from the International Column on a train, and the wounded men who salute them. Orwell invests the scene with the vibrant, sentimental romanticism of a propaganda poster.

I remember with particular vividness the spectacle of that train passing in the yellow evening light; window after window full of dark, smiling faces, the long tilted barrels of the guns, the scarlet scarves fluttering—all this gliding slowly past us against a turquoise-coloured sea. . . . No other people could have grouped themselves so picturesquely or returned the salutes of the crowd with so much grace—a grace that was none the less because about half the men on the train were drinking out of up-ended wine bottles. We heard afterwards that these were some of the troops who won the great victory at Guadalajara in March; they had been on leave and were being transferred to the Aragon front. Most of them, I am afraid, were killed at Huesca only a few weeks later. The men who were well enough to stand had moved across the carriage to cheer the Italians as they went past. A crutch waved out of the window; bandaged forearms made the Red Salute. It was like an allegorical picture of war. . . . (183-4)⁷

The imagery reflects the romanticized portrait of the Italian militiaman which opens the book. Such romanticization is a structural artifice

reflected in Orwell's occasional schoolboyish tendency to find fun in sandbagging trenches or to long for combat. This tendency finds its apotheosis in such images as the train; these provide a contrast with the more straightforward, often sardonic, accounts of boredom and discomfort. The Italians suggest not so much the physical reality of war (in the way that the passages about the trenches, the field hospital and the Barcelona jail do) as the sort of allegorical unity Jameson defines: "The achieved collectivity or organic group of whatever kind . . . is Utopian not in itself, but only insofar as all such collectivities are themselves *figures* for the ultimate concrete collective life of an achieved Utopian or classless society" (291). George Woodcock argues that "a political passion—the quest for human equality—led [Orwell] into the most meaningful and possibly—in spite of everything—the happiest experience of his life" (134). Orwell and Hemingway, as well as Malraux, treat the frustrations of communication between cultures as well as personalities. Nevertheless, even if for Orwell and Hemingway this struggle involves some attempt to recapture an edenic past, each implies a hope for the future which the collectivity experienced in the fight inspired and embodied. All affirm the validity of this common vision, and the value and necessity of comradeship.

NOTES

1. In letter to Jonathan Cape on 2 January 1946, defending his refusal to revise the novel, Malcolm Lowry writes "if Hugh strikes you as himself slightly preposterous, there is importance to the theme in the passage *re* his passionate desire for *goodness* at the close" (*Selected Letters* 73) and that "Hugh may be a bit of a fool but he none the less typifies the sort of person who may make or break our future" (75).
2. In letters, both Orwell and Hemingway address the factionalism of the left and the inevitability of a more widespread war. To Rayner Heppenstall on 31 July 1937, Orwell argues "that people can be deceived by the anti-Fascist stuff exactly as they were deceived by the gallant little Belgium stuff, and when war comes they will walk straight into it. . . . I still think one must fight for Socialism and against Fascism, I mean fight physically with weapons, only it is as well to discover which is which" (*Collected Essays*, Vol. I: 280). On 9 Feb. 1937, to the Pfeiffer family, Hemingway writes:

The Reds may be as bad as they say but they are the people of the country versus the absentee landlords, the moors, the Italians and the Germans. I know the Whites are rotten because I know them very well and I would like to have

a look at the others to see how it lines up on a basis of humanity. This is the dress rehearsal for the inevitable European war and I would like to write anti-war war correspondence that would help to keep us out of it when it comes. (*Selected Letters* 458)

3. According to Michael Shelden's biography, Orwell "appears to have been a far more effective soldier than *Homage to Catalonia* would lead one to believe" (282). Orwell's thematic purposes in his memoir may be served by a deliberately self-effacing participant-narrator.
4. The 1986 *Complete Works* edition "places Chapters V and XI—the two most political chapters—at the back of the book in two appendices. This was done in accordance with suggestions for revision which Orwell made near the end of his life" (Shelden 311). Perhaps later on, Orwell felt an even greater split between the value of the active experience and its dystopian implications.
5. He treats political murder and the romanticization of ideology sternly in "Inside the Whale," where he criticizes W. H. Auden's reference to "necessary murder" in his poem "Spain":

To me, murder is something to be avoided. So it is to any ordinary person. The Hitlers and Stalins find murder necessary, but they don't advertise their callousness, and they don't speak of it as murder; it is 'liquidation,' 'elimination,' or some other soothing phrase. Mr. Auden's brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled. (37)
6. Rowland Smith treats the effect of time of writing on production in terms of Second World War literature and Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory; his analysis suggests why some of this literature is not anticipatory in the way that Spanish Civil War writing can be; despite an "all-intrusiveness of sharing" (39), after 1940, writers found themselves . . . in a team effort that became more centralized, more efficient, and more rhetorically self-righteous. Although they could associate themselves with the war itself, they could not associate themselves with its trappings. In fact, the very group mentality which helped win the war was threatening to writers' values. ("Jauss" 47)
7. Malraux creates a much more sombre, yet still Utopian, allegorical picture of war in his description of the wounded airmen being brought down the mountainside by the peasants in villages along the way. Magnin, their leader, reflects "that shattered leg which the muscles barely held together, that sagging arm, that obliterated face, that machine-gun on a coffin, all these were the results of risks voluntarily accepted, sought after. The solemn, primitive march of that line of stretchers had something as compelling about it as the pale rocks that merged into the lowering sky, something as fundamental as the apples scattered on the ground" (400). As well, the consequences of war are brought into the intensely personal focus that co-exists with and is part of the allegorical, through the brief statement that Gardet, whose face has been virtually blown away, "had been a great lover" (403); the airmen retain both their unity and their individual identities. Yet Malraux also implies the effort and goal which the procession represents. To the peasants, the stretcher bearing Gardet

is "the visible incarnation of [their] immemorial conception of war. And no one had forced him to fight. For a moment they hesitated, not knowing what to do, but determined to make some gesture. Then, as at Valdelinares, they silently raised their clenched fists" (402).

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