

## ENGLISH POETRY AND THE SPANISH WAR

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EVER since the wooden horse penetrated into the streets of Troy, war has never failed to commandeer the attention of poets. The very word "epic" implies the glorifying of a nation through its exploits in war. The qualities of courage and endurance, which a soldier's life is supposed to call into play and without which a nation cannot hope to survive, constitute the bone and sinew of some of the greatest poetry in the world. Odysseus is one of the few heroes of antiquity who were not primarily warriors. In Dante's eyes there are only three subjects worthy of poetry—*Salus*, *Venus*, *Virtus*—War by which life is defended, Love by which it is perpetuated, Conduct by which it is controlled. Gradually, as civilization has become more complicated, poets have tended to emphasize not so much the Berserker joy of fighting as the glory of renunciation and sacrifice. Even men who hated the destruction of war, men like Rupert Brooke, were convinced that civilization had grown flabby and that it needed the tonic of war if it was to survive.

The disillusionment that followed the World War had its inevitable repercussion upon poetry. Not the least virtue of poetry is that it constitutes an infallible index to public opinion. The exaltation of 1914 and the bitterness of 1918 are nowhere more accurately represented than in the poetry of Rupert Brooke and of Siegfried Sassoon. "All squalid, abject and inglorious elements in war should be remembered," wrote Sassoon in his autobiography, and in his poetry he took infinite pains to fix them forever in men's minds. Once and for all, Sassoon seems to say, I am going to strip off the tinsel of war and portray it as it is.

For a moment it looked as if Sassoon had sounded the death knell of war, at least as far as poetry was concerned. The ultimate truth had been uttered, and there was nothing more to be said. But questions that are supposed to have been settled have an uncanny way of cropping up again in the most unexpected places. In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats drops a casual remark about war that

revives the question apparently buried by Sassoon. His anthology includes poems describing the joy of battle, while he deliberately omits poems that expatiate on the horror of war. "I have rejected these poems," says Yeats, "for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. . . . If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell, or as we forget the worse moments of more painful disease."

The two views expressed by Sassoon and Yeats are diametrically opposed. One wants to remember the horrors of war, and the other wants to forget them. The issue may not seem an important one to the layman, but, after all, poetry reflects the temper of the people, and inasmuch as we live in an atmosphere of war, it is at least interesting to see what the poets have to say about it. Just as the flood of war books was beginning to recede, the Spanish war broke out, and once again we are being inundated by meticulous description in prose and verse of battle, murder and sudden death. Once again poets are insisting, as they did in 1914, that it is necessary for civilization to defend and renew itself. Two books recently published in England, *Poems for Spain*, edited by Stephen Spender and John Lehman, and *Flowering Rifle*, by Roy Campbell, prove that there are still plenty of young men in the world who agree with Emerson,

'Tis man's perdition to be safe  
When for truth he ought to die.

*Poems for Spain* is an anthology, ardently Communist in sympathy, of poems written by Englishmen most of whom served in the International Brigade. Several of the poets represented were killed in the war. *Flowering Rifle*, on the other hand, is a long poem by an exultant nationalist glorifying General Franco and all his works. No one can glance at these books and still complain that the poetry of to-day is too remote from the world in which we live. Excessive preciousness may be a fault of the modern school of poetry, but if so, it is a fault from which these particular volumes are entirely free. Roy Campbell and the poets of Spender's anthology are all in deadly earnest, and when men are in earnest, when they feel that everything they care about hangs on the success of their cause, their affectations melt away from them and they write with startling lucidity.

No two men are more utterly different than Roy Campbell and Stephen Spender. They are different in temperament and inheritance, in intellect and in physique. It is impossible to conceive of a single axiom upon which they would both agree, except perhaps that the Spanish War was a clear-cut conflict between Right and Wrong.

Spender was brought up in the shadow of Fleet Street. If we may believe what he says of himself in his poetry, he was an unathletic boy, awkward at games, and unpopular with his contemporaries. He seems to have come in contact with the injustice of the world at an unfortunately early age. His father is a champion of liberalism, but he himself has gone on, or through liberalism, into the communist party. He would probably accept the communist's ribald definition of a liberal as one who will wait forever in the hope that nothing will happen. From his mother, who is a German, he has inherited a continental rather than an English approach to international issues. Though he prides himself on having outgrown anything so juvenile as a national bias, the German strain in him is at least as strong as the English. Rilke is his favorite poet. He is the author of two slim volumes of poetry, a collection of short stories, a book of literary criticism, and a handbook on politics entitled *The Trial of a Judge*, in which the judge is depicted, quite characteristically, as an ineffective member of the liberal party who finally succumbs to pressure from the fascists.

Spender is not a prolific poet. It is difficult for him to write poetry, because he is always tortured by the idea that poetry does not necessarily serve the cause of justice, and he is too much of an artist to deflect poetry into the channels of propaganda. His artistic conscience is always at war with his political and economic *credo*. To quote his own words, "I do not want to make poetry the instrument of my own will, so I have tried to divide prose from poetry, not as two separate branches of an art, but more as two separate ways of exercising one's consciousness." In other words, prose and poetry spring from different elements in his nature. This inner antinomy, this endless struggle within himself, was solved temporarily at least by the Spanish War. It affected him just as the outbreak of the World War affected Rupert Brooke. "Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour..." Spender's introduction to *Poems for Spain* is nothing more than Rupert Brooke's heartfelt cry translated into quiet unspectacular prose. "Moreover, where the issues are so clear and direct in a world which has

accustomed us to confusion and obscurity, action itself may seem to be a kind of poetry to those who take part in it. Therefore these poems often seem like hasty transcriptions into words of an experience expressed not in words at all, but in deeds. 'All a poet can do to-day is to warn', the greatest of the English war poets, Wilfrid Owen, wrote in 1918. That is true always of poetry written in the midst of a great social upheaval; but the poets of the International Brigade have a different warning to give from that of the best poets of the Great War. It is a warning that it is necessary for civilization to defend and renew itself."

Among the many tragic aspects of war, none is more ironic than the belief honestly held by both sides that civilization depends on their victory. Hegel's theory of tragedy applies to war just as truly as it does to drama. The essence of tragedy lies in the conflict between two conceptions of Right, rather than in the conflict between Right and Wrong. Roy Campbell is just as convinced as Stephen Spender and the poets of the International Brigade that if there is to be any freedom, education or leisure in the world, it will be only through the victory of the cause for which he fights:

The Left possessed the all-compelling arms  
Which drove us from the factories and farms.  
Strike after strike was ordered and compelled  
And it was death if honesty rebelled.  
For they resented willingness and skill  
And that we could go fighting up the hill—  
As if a race of drones with guns and knives,  
Crazed with a creed that grudges and deprives,  
Can better men in whom the Faith survives  
Or clean the world before they clean their lives.  
The reformation of the whole world's sin  
Is not in other people, but within.  
They'll not tell you that the workers of the land  
Are not on Franco's side with heart and hand,  
And on "coercion" blame our eager toil  
To raise the ruined wall or till the soil.  
But of all bans the worst coercion still  
Is that which keeps the worker from his skill,  
All must that forced ineptitude refuse  
Which grudges prowess even to the thews,  
But in its hot intolerance more blind,  
Forbids the triumphs of the heart and mind.

That there is a splendid ideal latent in Campbell's satire is what Spender will never understand, and in the same way Roy

Campbell is blind to the possibility of a more equitable world implied in Herbert Read's *Song for the Spanish Anarchists*:

The golden lemon is not made  
but grows on a green tree:  
A strong man and his crystal eyes  
is a man born free.

The oxen pass under the yoke  
and the blind are led at will:  
But a man born free has a path of his own  
and a house on the hill.

And men are men who till the land  
and women are women who weave:  
Fifty men own the lemon grove  
and no man is a slave.

Towards the end of the World War, men like Wilfrid Owen came to accept the Germans as in a sense partners in a common struggle of which the issue was in the hands of God. No such attitude can be discerned in the poets on either side in the Spanish War. Civil wars are notoriously bitter, but nothing is more eloquent of the efficiency of propaganda than the inability not only of the Spaniards but even of foreigners to discern any ray of justice in the other side of the case.

In one respect Roy Campbell is better qualified to speak of the issues involved than the various authors of *Poems for Spain*, because he lived in Spain for some time under the republican regime. Furthermore, he knew Spain not as a tourist or as a journalist, but as a breaker of horses. The poets of the Left Wing dismiss him as a talking bronco or a fake cowboy, but the fact that he earned his living in Spain lends a certain significance to his opinions. Once we accustom ourselves to his tendency to write at the top of his lungs, the sheer vitality of the man sweeps us off our feet. The first thing to remember about Roy Campbell is that he was born and brought up in South Africa, and that consequently the problems of an urban civilization have never come home to him as they have to Spender and other English poets brought up in cities. A boy who grows up on the veldt of South Africa develops a very different set of standards from the boy who grows up in the suburbs of London. As a child, he learned how to ride and how to shoot, and apparently very little else. From his autobiography we gather that he found this system of education

perfectly satisfactory. He insists that shooting is an art as fine as drawing, in that it requires the same beautiful, instinctive alliance of hand and eye; and "this early training with rifles and horses is responsible for any visual accuracy or drive that may be found in my work, and for the strength of my eyes used to stroking whole hillsides for the least flicker of a buck's tail."

His family sent him over to England at the age of 18, intending him to go to Oxford, but the university authorities decided that his marksmanship, however excellent, was not the equivalent of a knowledge of Greek, and accordingly he was not admitted. For a few years he led a hand-to-mouth existence in England, at one time even working in a circus as an acrobat. He married when he was nineteen, since when he has lived in Sussex, in Provence, and in Spain, where up to the beginning of the war he combined the writing of poetry with bull-fighting and herding cattle. As we would expect from a man who has lived all his life out-of-doors, who owns a fleet of fishing boats and wins prizes for steer throwing, he has small respect for *literati* and politicians. Up to the outbreak of the war in Spain he cared nothing for causes. He was hardly aware of the dislocation of the times, of class struggles and social injustice. The things that moved him to expression were long days in the sun, "an old unquenched, unsmotherable heat", the sierras "white with crimson crests, stained with sunset", "the snorting fillies of the sea", and what he calls "the red squadron of my dreams". It is easy enough to understand why he thinks that the engine of poetry can be driven only by the red fires of love and hate. He is a poet of extremes; that is his strength and weakness. He is in love with life, and also with death. Of a toreador, killed in the arena he can write:

He was the bee, with danger for his rose!  
He died the sudden violence of Kings,  
And from the bullring to the Virgin goes  
Floating his cape. He has no need for wings.

His love of bull fighting is thoroughly characteristic. It is the supreme example of physical dexterity, danger, and cruelty which he accepts as an essential part in the pattern of life. A good deal of his poetry is insensitive and bombastic, but if we scratch the surface, we come upon an ecstacy, an intensity of emotion, and above all upon a sense that life is tremendously

exciting, which has disappeared from the verse of his more sophisticated contemporaries.

War has a sobering effect upon most men, but it has not sobered Roy Campbell. It has not compelled him, as it does most men, to go back and examine afresh the standards by which he lives. He is like the jurymen who refuse to listen to the other side of the case, because he has made up his mind. He hates the Marxian conception of life with a deadly hatred, and he has convinced himself that the International Brigade and its Left Wing sympathizers in England are the most contemptible of men. Religion was certainly one of the issues at stake in the Spanish war, but it was not the only issue, and Mr. Campbell makes the mistake of writing as if the angels were all on one side and the devils on the other. From a polemical point of view, *Flowering Rifle* is a failure. Campbell is too much of a Hotspur to make a good advocate. Nor is he the kind of man to lure the wavering into his camp; he relies on crushing the reader into submission. In the long run, even those who agree with him will find the steady torrent of abuse monotonous. The defence of Alcazar, the miraculous march of General Franco to Toledo, these descriptions stand out like oases in a vast desert of invective. The satire is often telling, but a long satiric poem, however clever the satire may be, ends by wearying the reader. Only a real devotee of the eighteenth century can read the *Dunciad* with any pleasure, and Roy Campbell is not the artist in satire that Pope was.

According to his publisher, he succeeds in making live poetry out of economics and agriculture. That claim seems rather far-fetched, for there is nothing in the poem that the economist or the farmer would find particularly illuminating; but Campbell does succeed in presenting with great force a certain point of view that is to-day more than ever unpopular. Our sympathies are always ready to flow out to the individualists, to the rebels against society, whereas to Roy Campbell there is a more genuine romance in the achievements of organization. General Franco appeals to him as the leader of what must have seemed for a long time a losing battle against chaos. To those who have lived in a country given over to anarchy, the institution and defence of law and order must seem infinitely the most important, as well as the most romantic, thing in the world. The great heroes of antiquity, Theseus and Hercules, King Arthur and Charlemagne, spent their lives going up and down the land warring against devouring monsters, evil customs and

every kind of lawlessness and injustice. Roy Campbell sees in General Franco another heroic champion of order. The poets of the Left see in him nothing but a ruthless enemy of individual freedom. These two conceptions are not as irreconcilable as they sound, but until they are reconciled, until the spirit of hatred and mutual contempt is purged, any poetry that comes out of Spain will be dangerously close to propaganda. What is perhaps of more importance to the average man, the peace itself will be dangerously insecure.

*Poems for Spain*, containing as it does the work of some thirty different poets, offers the reader a greater variety of interest than he will find in Roy Campbell's one long poem. Unfortunately the abuse of the other side, for no other reason than that it is the other side, is just as prevalent. Messrs. Spender and Campbell might have saved themselves, their printers and their public, no little trouble if they had read each other's manuscripts before going to press, and agreed to cancel all passages of hysterical denunciation. If the vituperation of Italy by the Left, and of Russia by the Right, could have been blue-pencilled by some dispassionate editor, the cause of poetry, and incidentally the cause of truth, would have been well served. Edgell Rickword's would-be satiric poem, *To the Wife of Any Non-Intervention Statesman*, induces respect for the wife rather than contempt, once we have read Roy Campbell's diatribes upon those statesmen for their shameful failure to support Franco. The reader instinctively cries "A plague on both your houses". Rex Warner's *Arms in Spain* forms another companion piece to Campbell's innumerable outbursts against Jews and Reds:

So that the drunken General and the Christian millionaire  
might continue blindly to rule in complete darkness,  
that on rape and ruin order might be founded firm,  
these guns were sent to save civilization.

Rubbish of this kind, of which Roy Campbell is equally guilty, might well be censored on the ground that it degrades poetry to the level of propaganda. To compare such writing with even one of the lesser known poems of the World War, Charles Sorley's sonnet *To Germany*, is to realize the difference between what is tragic and what is merely bad-tempered:

When it is peace, then we may view again  
With new-won eyes each other's truer form  
And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm



We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain  
 When it is peace. But until peace, the storm,  
 The darkness and the thunder and the rain.

In the World War men learned to fight without rancor, and their ability to rise above the passion of battle is a measure of the quality they had as poets. Behind the lines, in the fashionable clubs of London and Paris, feeling may have run very high, but not among the combatants themselves. Hatred is always sterile, and poetry produced in an atmosphere of hatred is bound to be ephemeral. Only occasionally have the poets in Mr. Spender's collection lifted the conflict on to the creative level attained by Charles Sorley.

W. H. Auden's *Spain* is one of the few poems in which the author grapples with the significance of the struggle to spectators outside Spain. Instead of merely recording his emotions, as countless other men have done, he has fashioned something new out of those emotions. In poetry there are architects as well as contractors, men who know how to design as well as men who know how to collect materials. In this poem Auden designs a brave new world, which he hopes will rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of the war. Naturally he starts from a hypothesis which the other side would indignantly reject. The Spanish revolutionaries are taken to represent all the forces of progress, and they are depicted as struggling against picturesque customs and superstitions which have outlived whatever usefulness they may once have had:

Yesterday the abolition of fairies and giants,  
 The fortress like a motionless eagle eyeing the valley,  
 The chapel built in the forest;  
 Yesterday the carving of angels and alarming gargoyles, . . .

But the clue to the poem lies in his conception of progress:

To-morrow, perhaps the future. The research on fatigue  
 And the movements of packers; the gradual exploring of all the  
 octaves of radiation;  
 To-morrow the enlarging of consciousness by diet and breathing.

Mankind has fought for all sorts of things, for liberty, for land, for trade and for prestige, but to fight for the "enlarging of consciousness by diet and breathing", to fight for a world which will ensure "the research on fatigue and the movements of packers", whatever that may mean, seems to us utterly incomprehensible.

Auden has a way of jumping from the esoteric to the familiar, even to the trivial, so that we are not surprised when he suddenly discloses a very different aspect of the future:

To-morrow the rediscovery of romantic love,  
The photographing of ravens; all the fun under  
Liberty's masterful shadow;  
To-morrow the hour of the pageant-master and the musician,

The beautiful roar of the chorus under the dome;  
To-morrow the exchanging of tips on the breeding of terriers,  
The eager election of chairmen  
By the sudden forest of hands. But to-day the struggle.

To-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,  
The walks by the lake, the weeks of perfect communion;  
To-morrow the bicycle races  
Through the suburbs on summer evenings. But to-day the  
struggle.

Auden's choice of amusements is very English and very significant. When he discarded religion as a motive force in men's minds—God is airily disposed of as "a dove or a furious papa or a mild engineer"—he was hard put to it to find a substitute. The best he can offer is a future of scientific progress, enlivened by the typical amusements of any English industrial community.

This conception of the future is echoed by all the poets in Mr. Spender's anthology. For them Spain is merely the arena where the fate of liberty and communism must finally be settled. John Cornford, one of the younger poets killed in the war, states the issue very clearly:

Freedom is an easily spoken word,  
But facts are stubborn things. Here, too, in Spain  
Our fight's not won till the workers of all the world  
Stand by our guard on Huesca's plain,  
Swear that our dead fought not in vain,  
Raise the red flag triumphantly  
For Communism and for liberty.

Freedom is one of those chameleon words which is forever changing its meaning. To the romantic poets of the 19th century, to Browning and Swinburne as well as to Byron and Shelley, freedom was synonymous with nationalism. They dreamed of a free Italy, by which they meant a unified Italy. Roy Campbell belongs to the same tradition; Spain excites him just as the word "Italy" excited Browning. A Spaniard, even a Spanish

radical, will feel at home in Roy Campbell's world, however much he may deplore it, but unless he has lived in Birmingham, Mr. Auden's Spain will seem strangely unfamiliar.

To one who clings tenaciously to the middle of the road, there is little to choose between the fanaticism of Spender's bellicose pacifists and the ferocity of Roy Campbell's nationalism. To say, as Philip Henderson does in his new book, *The Poet and Society*, that John Cornford was killed fighting for democratic government in Spain is absurd. He cared no more for democratic government than does Stalin. Now that Communists and Nazis have suddenly become blood brothers, the futile sacrifice of the men who died fighting in the International Brigade is more than ever evident. Spender was wrong when he said that the issues in Spain were clear and direct. On the contrary, they were peculiarly involved, but the quality of poetry written in the stress of war does not depend on the justice of the poet's cause, or upon the magnitude of the war itself.

To-day the world is involved in a much greater struggle, compared to which the Spanish war dwindles into insignificance, but the Spanish War did English poetry a good turn. It rescued it from a waste land, where it was dying of inanition. . . War does not necessarily produce great poetry, but the poetry written by men fighting in a cause which they believe to be sacred is more likely to be genuine than the poetry that results from reading Karl Marx and Dr. Freud. One of the compensations of war, perhaps the only one, is that it increases the range, sensitiveness and depth of our emotions, and the safety valve for this increased emotion we usually call poetry.