

READING COMING UP FOR AIR AND NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR IN THE LIGHT OF ORWELL'S SPANISH EXPERIENCE

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1937 has been described as the "turning point" in Orwell's career as a writer and as a human being. His experience in Catalonia was the source of what he wrote after this date, although the influence does not seem clear or immediate in all cases, as in "Charles Dickens", "Politics and the English language", "The prevention of literature" or "Notes on Nationalism". The oppressive atmosphere of the persecution in Barcelona, which forced him to escape from Spain, made Orwell seek some "new air". The first attempt, after writing *Homage to Catalonia* and some essays, articles and reviews on the Spanish question, is a nostalgic journey back in time - *Coming Up for Air* - and the last stop is the apocalyptic world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Homage appears, then, as the frontier book, which separates the two periods in Orwell's literary career. The persona of the narrator of *Homage*, who deposits all his faith and confidence in the common man, replaces the pessimistic view of life and the world of the Orwellian antiheroes in *Burmese Days*, *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*. The happiness that radiates from *Homage*, in spite of the depressing outcome of the Spanish revolution is absent from his previous works. Laurence Brander characterized *Homage* as "the happiest and richest book he wrote"¹ In contrast, his later books, with the single exception of *Animal Farm*, which also depicts a betrayed revolution, abandon this cheerful line. I have shown, elsewhere, the close relation in spirit and in some details that exists between the Spanish book and the fable ² my purpose now is to pose some questions on the nature of the other two books and try to respond to them from the perspective of the writer's Spanish experience.

What memories of Spain (if any) make *Coming Up for Air* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* so depressing, in contrast to the lively atmosphere of

1.-L. Brander, *George Orwell* (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1954), p.21.

2.-Cf. my essay "La huella de España en *Animal Farm*" in *Homenaje a Esteban Pujals Fontrodona* (Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos, Universidad de Oviedo, 1981). See also my book *George Orwell y España* (Universidad de La Laguna, 1984), pp. 155-162.

Animal Farm? On the other hand, is there any suggested solution in these novels whose origin might be attributed to the positive achievements of the author in Spain? Why is it that in *Animal Farm* Orwell could introduce a character like Boxer, representing the meaningfulness of dignity, hard work and decency, whereas he did not create a parallel affirmation in George Bowling or Winston Smith? Additional questions could be asked about the exceptional nature of *Coming Up for Air*, a novel written in the first person, and one that abruptly breaks the characteristic development of Orwell's production, since the reader that approaches Orwell after the Spanish war encounters books and essays mainly political. What might be, then, the significance of a nostalgic lament for a past world emerging between apolitical and historical document (*Homage to Catalonia*) and a political satire against totalitarianism (*Animal Farm*)?

Of all Orwell's works *Coming Up for Air* has received an unusual number of contradictory judgments: the highly favourable reviews on its publication ³ contrast sharply with the plain description made by Wyndham Lewis: "Orwell's last published book before the war, *Coming Up for Air*, is I think his worst" ⁴. The interpretations are equally diverse. Jenni Calder, for example, says that this novel, together with *Homage*, constitutes the culmination of Orwell's happiness ⁵; and John Wain, on the other hand, sees it as his most depressing book ⁶.

The work is certainly ambiguous, and that is the obvious reason why critics can find evidence to support such divergent views. Bowling is constantly debating between fishing, which stands for the idyllic past of his childhood in Lower Binfield, and the bomb, the recurrent threat that represents the present and the future. The awareness of the impossibility of recovering the past and of the inevitability of the approaching war is the central conflict that makes the narrator so reminiscent of a lost world.

The knowledge that the Lower Binfield of his childhood is the only source of peace and happiness, but that it is also an unattainable goal, depresses Bowling to such an extent that the bomb is present everywhere in the novel, either physically or mentally in Bowling's obsession; the bomb is the symbol of the destruction of that ideal world. Its association with the end of *Homage to Catalonia* is apparent and has been frequently quoted:

3.-Cf. the following reviews: James Agate, "I Am the Answer to the Writer's Prayer", *Express*, 15th June 1939; and "Cracking World", in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 17th June 1939 (both collected in Michael Marland (ed.), *George Orwell (28 Documents)*, Times Newspapers Ltd., London, 1970).

4.-W. Lewis, *The Writer and the Absolute* (Methuen & Co., Ltd., London, 1952), p. 178.

5.-J. Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience. A Study of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler* (Secker & Warburg, London, 1968), p. 165.

6.-Cf. J. Wain, "In the Thirties", in Miriam Gross (ed.), *The World of George Orwell* (Widenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1971), pp. 80 and ff.

Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood: the railway-cutting smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen - all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs.⁷

This Orwellian prophecy is becoming fact for Bowling, who contemplates the bomb and the destruction of the old world as inevitable; man, ordinary man (represented here by Bowling), is powerless, incapable of avoiding the apocalypse. Robert J. Van Dellen has described this phenomenon clearly:

Orwell realizes that the abuse of power means the abuse of people. But he does not seem to have much desire for the powerless to become powerful. Power is the common denominator in corrupting people. Essentially, his faith in common man, in decency, in George Bowling, is a faith in the powerless. Whereas Orwell objects to the lack of any real choice in Bowling's life, he admires him precisely because he has no choice. This is Orwell's basic contradiction which makes political action virtually impossible. At the end of each of his novels, there is a profound sense of impotence, an acute awareness of powerlessness, a resigned acceptance of bourgeois sterility. Therefore, Orwell's political ideology, which is concerned with the distribution and use of power, is a negative politics - a politics of the powerless for whom political action is an unsuccessful route.⁸

This nihilistic vision can also be found in the novels of the early thirties, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, for example, but with much less force. The Spanish experience, then, seems to reassert Orwell's idea of chaos and destruction. It was probably the ineffectual result of the Spanish revolution that awakened in him the necessity to tackle the "real problem" of humanity. As he confessed in "Looking back on the Spanish War", his main preoccupation was "the decay of the belief in personal immortality", and he regretted that the material conditions of man has occupied him so much ("the belly comes before the soul, not in the scale of values but in point of

7.-G. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 221.

8.-R. J. Van Dellen, "George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*: The Politics of Powerlessness", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 21, 1 (Spring 1975), pp. 67-8.

time" is another well-known statement that conveys this feeling ⁹. *Coming up for Air* seems an effort in that direction: George Bowling is the attempt to tackle those questions relative to one's personal life, such as marriage, the past, perspectives on existence, inner feelings... It is probably a frustrated attempt because Orwell cannot cope with the exigences of the first person, but it remains a genuine attempt nevertheless ¹⁰. And on some occasions, when Orwell intrudes upon his character, we recognise the pessimistic outlook that reappears in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This is an example taken from *Coming Up for Air*:

I'll tell you what my stay in Lower Binfield had taught me, and it was this. It's all going to happen. All the things you've got at the back of your mind, the things you're terrified of, the things that you tell yourself are just a nightmare or only happen in foreign countries. The bombs, the food-queues, the rubber truncheons, the barbed wire, the coloured shirts, the slogans, the enormous faces, the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows. It's all going to happen. I know it --at any rate, I knew it then. There's no escape. Fight against it if you like, or look the other way and pretend not to notice, or grab your spanner and rush out to do a bit of face-smashing along with the others. But there's no way out. It's just something that's got to happen ¹¹.

It is in cases such as this one when the trace of the Spanish experience is most apparent; although only small details, they do reveal the writer's obsession. Brander, for instance, has shown how the description of the lecturer in the Left Book Club is a criticism of the kind of totalitarian attitudes that Orwell knew in Spain ¹². Jeffrey Meyers has also pointed to the similarities between the backyard of the Binifield butcher and the smells of battlefield in Spain, or the picture of a landscape of desolation and mud in Binfield and another of the Aragon front, or the wounds suffered by Bowling and Orwell, etc. ¹³ If we ignore these minor details, there is very little that associates this novel to *Homage* and Spain in a direct way. But there is much, I think, that relates it indirectly, and that prevents us from classifying

9.-Cf. G. Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War", *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (ed. by S. Orwell and I. Angus, Secker & Warburg, London, 1968), vol. II, pp. 265-6.

10.-Orwell himself confessed to Symons in letter in 1948: "Of course, you are perfectly right about my own character constantly intruding on that of the narrator. I am not a real novelist anyway, and that particular vice is inherent in writing a novel in the first person, which one should never do" (*Collected Essays...*, vol. IV, p. 422).

11.-G. Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 223-4.

12.-Cf. L. Brander, *George Orwell*, op. cit., p. 29

13.-Cf. J. Meyers, *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1975), p. 108. See also J. Meyers, "Orwell's Apocalypse: *Coming Up for Air*" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 21, 1 (Spring 1975), p. 76.

Coming Up for Air with the weak early novels, as Keith Alldritt has done¹⁴. Orwell was writing this novel with a deep sense of failure, much stronger than in the case of *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, a feeling that was not simply an exclusive product of his contact with the Spanish counter-revolution, because it had existed before.

Even though the Spanish experience intensified Orwell's pessimistic proclivity, one observes, in addition, after 1937, that the writer is asserting his confidence in man with a firmness completely new to him. He says that only basic decency, the kind of human dignity he discovered in the Italian militiaman he met in Barcelona, may resolve the "real problem". And this is, as well, the final answer Orwell offers us when he says in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "If there is hope, it lies in the proles". It is true that this means a 'negative politics', as Van Dellen explains, but it is the only way out Orwell could find. This humanistic solution is a result of his Spanish experience, and that is why Dorothy Hare and Gordon Comstock cannot share it with George Bowling or Winston Smith. All of them return, at the end, to their ordinary lives, but the antiheroes of *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* do it in an automatic and almost inexplicable way, while Bowling and Wilson have been 'enlightened', that is, although they cannot change reality, they are aware of the "crucial problem" and make the reader perceive it with a greater clarity.

Much has been written on the picture of the totalitarian state of Oceania. Whether this state is a direct reflection of the Communist system, as many critics have seen it, or the image of a Fascist state, as Raymond Williams has said¹⁵, is something I shall not discuss. What is certain, and has been indicated by numerous critics, is that Spain is in the background¹⁶. Let me accept this assumption, then, without further evidence, though some details could be added to reinforce the current opinions¹⁷, and go on directly to one final point.

14.-Cf. K. Alldritt, *The Making of George Orwell. An Essay in Literary History* (Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., London, 1969).

15.-Cf. R. Williams, *Orwell* (Fontana / Collins, London, 1971), p.61.

16.-Cf. L. Brander, *George Orwell*, op. cit., p. 196; George Woodcock, 24 The Crystal Spirit. A Study of George Orwell (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 53; I. Deutscher, "1984--The Mysticism of Cruelty", in R. Williams (ed.), *George Orwell. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, n.J., 1974), p. 127; John Atkins, *George Orwell. A Literary Study* (Calder & Boyars, London, 1971, new and rev. ed.,), p. 243; R. Williams, *Orwell*, op. cit., p. 61; Bernard Crick, *George Orwell. A Life* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 313-352; and also more recent publications in Spain. Miquel Berga, *Mil nou-cents vuitanta-quatre: radiografia d'un malson* (Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1984), pp. 67-97; Luis Alberto Lázaro Lafuente, *Pensamiento y obra de George Orwell* (Universidad de Valladolid, 1987), pp. 79-97 passim; and my own book cited in note 2 above.

17.-Compare, for example, p. 152 of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1954), where the treatment to which prisoners are subjected is described, and Orwell's impressions in

Nineteen Eighty-Four is Orwell's only novel where hope and optimism are completely absent, since in all the others one can always find some sparks of light. Even Winston, who is the last man, the survivor in a generation of alienated and corrupted Party men, yields and abandons all hope. Orwell, as in *Coming Up for Air* and unlike in the early novels, is faithful to the logical evolution of the situation and the characters. Gordon Comstock is miles away from Winston, and even the "human decency" that Bowling finds in the past is lacking here: O'Brien, who possesses all the means to be decent, is absolutely corrupted, and Winston and Julia are mere toys within the system. The panorama, then, cannot be darker.

As I said before, the only suggestion of hope in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is outside the Party, far away from power and the main characters; it resides in the primitive people, the proles who, obviously, will not be able to change society. In this sense, the situation is similar to the one encountered in *Coming Up for Air*: we are in front of an empty hope. In the same way as the past is an unattainable goal and the bombs are falling, so the capacity of the proles to act and save us from chaos is null.

A final return to *Homage to Catalonia*, to Orwell's experience of 1937, may offer additional light. He writes: "I have the most evil memories of Spain, but I have very few bad memories of Spaniards"¹⁸ and "curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings"¹⁹. These apparently contradictory remarks may help us to understand these two novels. He seems to be telling us: 'the future is dark, black, and we cannot do anything to stop it, I've seen it in Spain; the return to the glorious past of our childhood is impossible; the only hope lies in recovering the moral values of our lost civilization: truth, dignity, respect for others, etc., virtues I found in Spaniards'. The ultimate conclusion is, then, the picture of Spain as a premonition of the apocalypse (the bombs in *Coming Up for Air*, and Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), and the portrait of the decency of the underlings as the spiritual salvation (learnt, as he says, from Spaniards). Orwell was finally tackling "the real problem of humanity" in his last novels, and the kind of spiritual answer that he gives in them --so unOrwellian in the traditional sense of the word-- is probably what makes him of general and everlasting interest, or, as John Wain has written: "Orwell put the claim of his fellow-men consistently before his own, and the paradox is that it is this spirit, rather than any specifically literary quality, that will keep his work alive"²⁰.

"Notes on the Spanish Militias" about similar behaviour (*Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. I, p. 327).

18.-G. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 213.

19.-G. Orwell, *ibid.*, p. 220.

20.J. Wain, "George Orwell as a Writer of Polemic", in R. Williams (ed.), *George Orwell. A Collection of Critical Essays*, op. cit., p. 102.