

Chapter 4: THAT QUIET, LEVEL VOICE George Orwell and *Homage to Catalonia*

If Turgenev was born ambivalent, George Orwell was born cantankerous. If reaction against Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* silenced her, reaction against Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* only made George Orwell more firmly resolved to expose "every smelly little orthodoxy." He was blocked in this effort over and over again by forces at opposite ends of the political spectrum. And those forces were aided by a literary form of the snobbery he rejected and fought against throughout his short life.

Orwell (Eric Blair) was born in 1903 in India, where his father worked as an officer of the British government in the Opium Department. His mother was part French; her family held business interests in Burma. When Eric was four, his mother brought him and his two sisters to England. His father followed four years later, just about the time Eric was sent away to boarding school. According to an essay published after Orwell/Blair's death, it was at school that he saw realities and formed attitudes that determined his life's work.

Cyril Connolly, who was Eric's friend in boarding school, also wrote about prep schools as the special hell of privileged males. In these institutions—referred to by Connolly as "that incubator of persecution mania"—boys were underfed terrible food and routinely humiliated and beaten by the masters and by the older boys while being crammed with material that would get them into a "good" school like Eton, then perhaps to Oxford. "It is one of the few tortures confined to the ruling classes and from which the workers are still free," Connolly later wrote. "I have never met anybody yet who could say he had been happy there. It can only be that our parents are determined to get rid of us!"

Connolly compares himself with his friend. "I was a stage rebel, Orwell a true one. Tall, pale, with his flaccid cheeks, large spatulate fingers, and supercilious voice, he was one of those boys who seem born old. . . . He saw through [St. Cyprian's], despised Sambo and hated Flip [Connolly's names for the male and female owners of the school] but was invaluable to them as scholarship fodder. . . . The remarkable thing about Orwell was that alone among the boys he was an intellectual and not a parrot, for he thought for himself . . . I remember a moment under a fig-tree in one of the inland boulevards of the seaside town, Orwell striding beside me and saying in his flat, ageless voice: 'You know, Connolly, there's only one remedy for all diseases.' I felt the usual guilty tremor when sex was mentioned and hazarded, 'You mean going to the lavatory?' 'No—I mean Death!'" The two boys might have been about thirteen at the time, and Orwell seems to have been more aware than other boys of his age of the meaning of the Great War that continued on and on. Connolly remembers him saying, "Whoever wins this war, we shall emerge a second rate nation."

At St. Cyprian's the boys were constantly nagged about their character—every fault or failure showed a boy's shameful lack of character. "Orwell proved to me that there existed an alternative to Character, Intelligence."

What Connolly evidently did not know at the time was that the Blair family had a good deal less money than his, and that the despised Sambo and Flip were constantly reminding Orwell of his fortunate status as a scholarship boy. There had at one time been

more money in the Blair family, even some titles a couple of generations back, but the family had sunk to what Orwell later called "lower upper-middle class." Lower upper-middle class in the England of those days was still a highly privileged position, but as a school boy Orwell didn't see it that way. Perhaps, in some ways, close proximity to the highly privileged is harder to bear than total removal from privilege.

In his posthumously published essay, "Such, Such Were the Joys," Orwell details how he "saw through" the pretenses of the school. Among other things he noticed that the rich boys were never beaten as were the "few underlings like myself, the sons of clergymen, Indian civil servants, struggling widows and the like." The "education" mercilessly beaten into him was nothing but a ceaseless cramming for the exams that would get him into a school like Eton. "We never, for example, read right through even a single book of a Greek or Latin author: we merely read short passages which were picked out because they were the kind of thing likely" to turn up on a test. "Your job was to learn exactly those things that would give an examiner the impression that you knew more than you did know . . ." The unspoken but clear lesson young Eric Blair learned at school was "that you were no good unless you had £100,000 . . . even if you climbed to the highest niche that was open to you, you could still only be an underling, a hanger-on of the people who really counted."

The fact that Orwell's outrage and pain were recalled so freshly when he wrote about it thirty years later shows how deeply his school experience affected his whole life. But, to judge from his other writing, the only memories that *ever* remained sharp to him were unpleasant ones—it seems he never met a memory he didn't hate. What saved Orwell's writing from becoming nothing but a bitter, vengeful rant of personal grudges was that his resentment eventually turned outward in protest against the abuse of others.

One writer who gave him an early nudge in this direction was Jack London. Orwell was a schoolboy when he read *People of the Abyss*, which described the slums of London about the time of Orwell's birth. London's book not only put Orwell's own resentment in perspective but became the model for his first book.

The immediate effect of his privileged prep-school education was that, once admitted to Eton, Orwell did as little as possible during his four years there and did not even apply to Oxford. In 1922, at age nineteen, he took the exams for the Indian Imperial Police, passed, and was sent to Burma. His parents were reasonably satisfied to have him follow in his father's footsteps—the financial burden on them even if he had won a university scholarship (his father was over sixty and living on a pension) would have been heavy.

In "Why I Write," Orwell tells us he wanted to be a writer from the age of five if not earlier. Yet during the five years he spent in various parts of Burma, he forced himself not to write. He later described the time in Burma as "five boring years with the sound of bugles." It was much worse than that. He was a young man, totally inexperienced, in a position of authority in a post-World-War-I colony where reaction against imperial authority was heating up. Of course, Orwell inwardly sided with the young Burmese rebels who might jeer at him or spit on him in the street. One of his best essays, a short, masterful indictment of being hopelessly enmeshed in the cruelties and injustice of imperialism, is "Shooting an Elephant," written in the early 1930s. It opens with the sentence, "In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of

people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me."

His health—delicate from birth—began to suffer, and in 1927 he was given sick leave to return to his family, now living in Southwold, a seaside town. He waited until he had been home a few weeks before informing his parents that he had actually resigned his post and had decided to become a writer. He had saved a little money, enough for at least a year. With the typically naive assurance of a very young artist, he was sure that a year would be long enough to establish him as a writer.

He lived with his dismayed parents for several months, writing and making some secret visits to the "abyss" of East London described by Jack London. Then he went to Paris, moved into a slum district, and when he ran out of money worked as a dishwasher in elegant restaurants with filthy, vermin-infested kitchens. By 1930 he was back in his parents' home, doggedly writing until 1932. His first attempt to sell his own "abyss" book failed—the publisher said the book wasn't long enough and had too much Paris, not enough London, in it. He expanded the book, making more forays into the slums of London for material. Like Jack London, he kept a headquarters (in a friend's house) where he could change into his tramp's clothes or change out of them and get a shower and a good night's sleep, while his friend worried about what he was doing to his precarious health.

Orwell is sometimes compared to Simone Weil, his contemporary, whom he didn't know and whom he probably wouldn't have liked any more than he liked most women (not much). The voluntary degradation both writers pursued has often been called saintly—or masochistic. Weil also damaged her fragile health by her insistence on embracing what she imagined to be the life of the poor. Both fought briefly in Spain, leaving with injuries and with insights not popular on the Left. Both were well known for seeing through and despising cant, and both were most likely to see it among those of their own privileged class. Simone Weil once said that *King Lear* was Shakespeare's greatest play because Lear, once he has lost everything, "can afford to tell the truth." Perhaps a similar sentiment explains the attraction for Orwell of the down-and-out life. He saw colorful individuality only in the very poor. As soon as a lower-class person reached the level of, say, a waiter, Orwell would detect clear signs of snobbery, a form of lying that begins when, as Weil would have said, a person no longer has nothing left to lose.

Orwell submitted the enlarged book in 1931, and it was rejected again. Aside from a few published reviews and essays, five years of writing had come to nothing. He could no longer delay going to work. He found a job that was for him a special kind of hell—teaching in a prep school. He didn't give up writing, but he half-believed that those who rejected him were right. He gave the manuscript to a friend, Mabel Fierz, telling her to destroy it. Of course, he knew that she had an unshakable belief in his talent. And she had contacts. She took it to a friend who gave it to Victor Gollancz.

Down and Out in Paris and London was published by Gollancz in 1933 under the pen name George Orwell because, Blair said, he didn't think his parents would feel comfortable about the subject of his book, and he didn't really think it was any good. His reasons were actually more complex. He chose a name that sounded to him like that of a man of a lower class, a different person from the cultivated Eric Blair who was

publishing reviews. He seemed to want to add power to the book by implying that it wasn't written by a professional writer, but by a real down-and-outer.

Down and Out is so similar to Jack London's *People of the Abyss* that it would seem nothing much had changed for the London poor in thirty years. But there are clear differences in the experiences of the two writers. London, with his American accent and his experience as a seaman, could pass as a down-and-outer, while the moment Orwell opened his mouth, he was identified as a "gentleman" and received special treatment. London presents his story as a reporter, frankly telling the process by which he "researched" the life, and acknowledging the room he rented where he could bathe and rest and eat. Orwell fictionalized—an early reviewer said "falsified"—his narrator by presenting him not as a visiting observer but as an unemployed man with no choice. Of course, even when he was in Paris, Orwell could have gone to his aunt there for help. It's fair to call the book a novel. (Mary McCarthy called it his best novel.)

Strangely, Orwell did not include a chapter on the one experience in Paris in which he was genuinely trapped without an alternative. Much later in his life he wrote an essay, "How the Poor Die," describing the attack of pneumonia he had suffered. With a raging fever he staggered into a Paris charity hospital where, once admitted and helpless, he was subjected to torturing "treatments" (antibiotics had not yet been discovered) by indifferent or sadistic young interns. A nearby inmate in the vast, crowded ward counted off, day by day, the men who died and whose corpses were—eventually—carted off. Orwell was expected to die too, but he didn't, to no one's surprise or interest, and as soon as he could get out of bed, he left the hospital without any formal release. Like any horrifying experience in which one is truly a helpless victim, this one may simply have been too close for him to write about at the time.

Another reviewer complained that Orwell vividly described horrible conditions, but drew no conclusions and gave no background or suggestions for improvement. Jack London, of course, had filled in all such gaps with plenty of analysis, moving between direct description to political preaching. About the same age as Orwell when he wrote *Abyss*, London was a passionate socialist. However, he was also a passionate Social Darwinian, a passionate Nietzschean superman, and a passionately high liver whenever he could borrow enough on expected income to indulge himself and his friends. Like many young thinkers, London had faith in systems that could solve all problems and was blissfully unaware of contradictions among those he adopted.

Orwell's conclusion to his own visit to the abyss may not have satisfied reviewers, but from this distance it looks wise and modest for such a young man. "I can point to one or two things I have definitely learned by being hard up. I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy, nor subscribe to the Salvation Army, nor pawn my clothes, nor refuse a handbill, nor enjoy a meal at a smart restaurant. That is a beginning."

(The bit about a smart restaurant drew a letter of vehement protest and assertions of pristine sanitation from the owner of a luxury hotel in Paris. But I remember how hard it was, during my Depression childhood, *ever* to drag my father away from our kitchen table in San Francisco to a meal in a restaurant. During the flush 1920s, he had worked as a busboy in the finest hotel-restaurants of the city and never forgot kitchen floors and

tables slimy with filth, rats and cockroaches, angry cooks spitting on the food before it was served, and so on. Orwell's observations were correct on an international scale.)

Aside from these few complaints, the English critics reviewed *Down and Out* favorably and widely, admiring "that quiet, level voice of his." Sales and reviews were good enough to interest American publishers. The book was published by Harper in 1934 but sold poorly in the United States and was remaindered after a few months.

Despite good reviews in England the book didn't earn enough income for Orwell to quit his teaching job. He went on teaching and started working on the sort of book that could win better sales and build a literary reputation—a novel. Hardy had played by that rule and had won. When Hardy wrote poetry that didn't sell, he tried novels with not enough plot, then too much plot, then with plenty of local color. On his fifth try, he found the right combination in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, which made him enough money to write full-time and more truly to his tortured view of reality.

Orwell tried just as hard but never succeeded in making himself a literary novelist. From 1933 to 1936 he determinedly ground out three novels, the effort making him ill with pneumonia again. He left teaching, recovered, then went to London where he wrote reviews while working in a used bookstore, often thought of as a perfect job by and for young literary types. Orwell's "quiet, level voice" hilariously demolished that illusion in his 1936 essay "Bookshop Memories." He describes how "I lost my love of books," dealing with the vague, haggling, paranoid people "of the kind who would be a nuisance anywhere but have special opportunities in a bookshop."

The best of these first three novels is *Burmese Days*. Again, the reader can see in it other men's books—Forster, Conrad, Somerset Maugham—but also quite a bit of Orwell during his five years in Burma. While not literally autobiographical, the main character of Flory resembles Orwell. Tall, sallow, reserved Flory secretly hates the imperialist machine he is part of and sees corruption of humanity on all sides, rulers and ruled. The strength of *Burmese Days* lies, not in plot or complexities of character, but in the vividly nasty images of colonials and colonized, of everyone affected by imperialism, starting with the gross Burmese magistrate on the first page.

Complicating Flory's horror at being part of the corruption visited upon a land he has come to love passionately, is his equally hopeless, doomed love for Elizabeth. Some critics faulted Orwell for making Elizabeth such an odious character—the seemingly fresh English girl who in reality has nothing, in mind or soul, but the potential for becoming the most nasty, tyrannical "burra memsahib." But Elizabeth is no more odious than nearly all the other characters in the book—English or Burmese. In fact, for a man so often accused of disliking women, Orwell shows sharp understanding of Elizabeth's truly desperate and quite realistic plight. A penniless target for rape by employers and by her own uncle, Elizabeth must marry as fast and as well as possible for a girl with nothing but quickly perishable good looks. The book seems to say what Orwell must have said to himself when he fled Burma after five years—another ten years here and I'll shoot myself (as Flory does).

While trying to get *Burmese Days* published (there was some worry about libel suits, his characters so closely resembling his associates in Burma), he plunged into *A Clergyman's Daughter*, which is one of those ideas that wants to be a short story and refuses to be anything longer. Chapter One stands alone as an agonizingly funny and sad story. It presents a day in the life of Dorothy Hare, daughter of a selfish, lazy, tyrannical

rector. Dorothy is a pious, overworked, undervalued spinster in a small, stifling English town—rather like Southwold, where Orwell had lived with his parents after returning from Burma. The picture of the townspeople is deliciously spiteful. Dorothy is Orwell in Burma all over again, secretly more and more alienated from everyone around her but powerless to make any change. But she is also an authentic English type, already delineated by George Gissing, whom Orwell admired. The trouble is that one day in the life of Dorothy is what every succeeding day will be, and it's very difficult to make—or for a writer like Orwell to make—a whole novel of it. But he pushed on, using the author's most abjectly desperate device, amnesia, to force a change in Dorothy's life. Then he recycled some of his down-and-out experience—an episode of hop-picking, a night spent sleeping among tramps in Trafalgar Square—and threw in a furiously spiteful episode of teaching in a prep school, with grains of truth swollen to incredibility. Finally Dorothy returns to her old life, more alienated and defeated than ever. "I made a muck of it," Orwell said later, and it's hard to disagree with his conclusion that, "at that time I simply hadn't a book in me"—just what could have been a superb short story.

Nevertheless Gollancz published it in March of 1935. It was reviewed widely, justly called "patchy." Some critics called the Trafalgar Square sequence brilliant; others declared it merely aped James Joyce. Meanwhile, *Burmese Days* had been published in the United States with disappointing sales but no libel suits, so Victor Gollancz decided to risk publishing it in England in 1936. It sold better there, but the reviews were mostly negative, except for the one by Cyril Connolly, who had just discovered that his old schoolmate Eric Blair was the writer George Orwell. They picked up their friendship again, and Orwell pushed on, writing another novel, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.

This time Orwell succeeded in writing a unified novel whose protagonist Gordon Comstock works in a bookstore (like the one Orwell was still working in) and imagines himself a writer. He actually does less writing than obsessing about money, class, and the culture of advertising, selling, and buying that surrounds him. Obviously Gordon craves all the features of privilege that so profoundly disgust him. Eventually the commercial imperatives of survival exhaust him, and he collapses into hateful middle-class conformity at the end, dumping all his manuscripts and artistic yearnings into a sewer. It seems again that, as in *Burmese Days*, Orwell is saying, another ten years of this life—eking out a living while writing books that earn only a few good reviews and a few pounds a year—and that's what I'll be like. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* might have been good therapy for Orwell (who later hated it even more than he did *Clergyman's Daughter*) but as a work of art it was a dead end, reducing Gordon to a mean spirited whiner. Nevertheless, Victor Gollancz accepted it, which meant Orwell was acquiring some recognition as a serious writer.

The more Orwell tried to write the sort of book he had little talent for, the more his chronic indignation turned inward and personal, small and neurotic. Fortunately, Gollancz saved him from another attempt. He paid him a £500 advance to go to the northern coal mining towns and write about depression conditions there. The book would be a selection for the Left Book Club, membership nearly 40,000.

Orwell spent February and March of 1936 in Wigan, Barnsley, and Sheffield. Helped by contacts arranged by Gollancz, he was able to live among and descend into the mines with the workers, keeping a diary of his experiences and observations. The first half of the book describes these experiences. It begins in a repellent, filthy household

where he lived during the first week (later Wigan readers called his description accurate in regard to that house, but not typical of Wigan houses). The book ends with an idealized memory of some working-class homes he had seen as a child. But sandwiched between the opening and closing of this first section is Orwell writing once again in his best "quiet, level," and utterly convincing voice. There are unforgettable descriptions of what it meant to be shot down hundreds of feet into a mine and then to "travel" in a running crouch for a mile or more to hot, coal-dust-choked work sites; what it meant to live in the collapsing hovels of miners' families dependent on their much-docked wages or on the dole when the men were unemployed; what it meant to endure, in every aspect of life, delays and insults designed to kill any spirit of rebellion in these exploited workers upon whose product every modern activity depended. In a few inspired pages he offers lists of how the workers' pay or the dole is spent. The itemized budget of one family on the dole is a vivid statement of deprivation.

In the middle of working on *Wigan Pier* Orwell married Eileen O'Shaunessey, a woman said to be literary and witty like Orwell, but as cheerful as he was dour. They moved to a little country town where he wrote "Shooting an Elephant." This essay/story—with the economy of a poem—is as powerful an indictment of imperialism as *Burmese Days* (some call it a more powerful condemnation). If the rules regarding what was "literary" had not been so stuck in worship of The Novel, "Shooting an Elephant" would have been hailed as a perfect miniature, and Orwell would have been encouraged on his true path.

In his new rural home, he went on to finish *Wigan Pier*.

The second half of the book is hard to describe. Is it about the ineradicability of class lines because of an upper class perception that "the poor smell"? Is it about how the poor actually do smell because of lacking of washing and bathing facilities? Is it a confession of his own snobbery as a boy and of his serving imperialism in Burma? Is it his frantic call for unified action against fascism ("As I write this the Spanish Fascist forces are bombarding Madrid . . .")? Is it about his own struggle to define socialism, which is "such elementary common sense that I am sometimes amazed that it has not established itself already"? Does it say that the reason such "elementary good sense" has not established itself is that socialists are such cranks, the movement infected by "fruit juice drinkers, pacifists, hygienists, Quakers, feminists, nudists, sex maniacs, Nature Cure quacks, vegetarians, and contraception advocates."?

The second half of the book reads like an attack on the audience for the book—those 40,000 middle-class members of the Left Book Club. Orwell accuses well-meaning middle-class liberals of calling themselves socialists without having any idea what they mean, while remaining unconsciously committed to habits and privileges they could not enjoy under socialism. The message often was and is a valid one. Unfortunately it goes out of control, dredging up Orwell's crankiness even as he calls socialists cranks, lashing out at things like—contraception? (Orwell was sterile and could easily adopt D. H. Lawrence's horror of "artificial" sex, never having had to deal with complicated questions of paternity, let alone overpopulation.)

Orwell rushed to finish his book so he could go to Spain. He wrote like an intoxicated man, zestfully tossing insults at his friends. Socialism was great—it was socialists he couldn't stand. They didn't even know what they meant by socialism—but

judging from Orwell's lame conclusion, he wasn't sure what he meant by the word either. (His later comments, after fighting in Spain, confirm his uncertainty at the time.)

He turned the unrevised manuscript over to Gollancz in December. Then he pawned his share of the family silver to raise travel expenses and went to join in the defense of the elected government of Spain against Franco's fascists. An uneasy Gollancz published the book in March 1937, prefaced by a statement that Orwell's scattershot attack on everything from fruit juice to feminists did not represent the publishers of the Left Book Club. He needn't have worried. The book made Orwell talked about on the Left—but not seriously abused. Left-leaning liberals often take abuse quietly, even gratefully, sometimes out of a commitment to free speech (a virtue often lacking in more radical activists), sometimes out of guilt at being comparatively privileged (the guilt Turgenev felt, and probably Orwell himself suffered from). Some readers even praised Orwell, who "enrages even the most pacific among us, and then we sit up and sharpen our brains so as to refute his erroneous notions." There were some hostile reviews that Orwell didn't see until he returned from Spain, but there were also many personal letters thanking Orwell for making the correspondent more aware of the real conditions of the poor and more determined to do something constructive.

Orwell had left for Spain at the end of December 1936. His wife Eileen soon followed. She worked as a nurse and secretary in Barcelona while Orwell served with a POUM (anarchist) brigade. Altogether, they were in Spain about six months. Once back in England Orwell began immediately to write *Homage to Catalonia*.

The opening chapter presents Barcelona as a city run by the workers, with class lines obliterated. "Or so it seemed." Orwell was completely charmed by it, but that didn't stop him from describing the Republican/Anarchist stronghold as a sadly laughable staging and training center—unequipped, inefficient, filthy, and led by men totally ignorant of fighting. This is like the opening in the filthy house in *Wigan*, or on the verandah of the repulsive and evil U Po Kyin of *Burmese Days*, or the first page of *Down and Out* with the landlady screaming at someone not to squash the bugs on the wallpaper but "throw them out the window like everyone else." It is as if Orwell wants to tell the reader, look, I'm not going to lie to you, I'm showing you the ugly reality. Now if you think you can trust me, come along with me to see the complex, and occasionally wonderful, deeper reality.

The next eighty pages of the book give a picture of trench warfare in what might be any winter war on any inactive European front: the cold, the mud, the rats, the smell of excrement, the shortage of food, tobacco, candles, the endless rumors and delays, the boredom, and the longing for action. However, Orwell points out that in this "democratic" militia, officer's "orders" were suggested to men who were, in keeping with revolutionary ideals, their equals. And this seeming lack of discipline actually worked.

Sandwiched in the middle of these combat (rather, waiting-for-combat) chapters is Chapter V, in which he analyses the political infighting that "began to force itself upon my attention," although he preferred to believe that everyone on the Republican side was simply fighting fascism. "If you are not interested in the horrors of party politics, please skip," but, of course, if you skip his explanation of the "plague of initials" designating various parties and trade unions, you will miss the point of the book.

For various reasons, Orwell had ended up in the POUM, an anarchist militia, although he would rather have been in the PSUC, affiliated with the communists. The anarchists aimed at a complete socialist revolution along with the fight against Franco, while the communist line seemed a more pragmatic one—to win against Franco first, then work for socialism. Throughout those three months on the Aragon front, Orwell argued against his comrades' anarchist position, but he came eventually to believe that the difference was not so simple. The communist PSUC was supplied with arms from the Soviet Union, the only country (besides Mexico) that sent any help at all to the Loyalists. The Soviet Union was going to need the help of capitalist countries against Hitler, and these countries would be hostile toward a socialist government. What Orwell saw convinced him that the Soviet Union—and perforce, the communist forces they supplied—aimed to restore to power the upper class and the Church, which meant weakening or destroying their anarchist comrades. Little by little the resources and power of the trade unions and anarchists were being taken away. Arms supplied by the Soviets were withheld from anarchist brigades, "a deliberate destruction of the egalitarian spirit of the first few months of the revolution." Constant propaganda from the communists assured everyone that the socialists and anarchists were playing into the hands of the fascists. Orwell was sick of the infighting and the rhetoric. The next three chapters describe 115 days at the front, days that seemed "the most futile of my whole life."

Chapter IX tells of Orwell's return to Barcelona on leave for the rest period allotted to all men after three months at the front. He fully intended to transfer to one of the communist brigades, simply because they had the guns and were stationed in Madrid, where the fighting was. The Barcelona he entered on April 26 was transformed. Elegantly dressed middle-class people, including tourists, filled the streets. The black market flourished. "If you had enough money there was nothing that you could not get . . . the open contrast of wealth and poverty would have been impossible a few months earlier." Propaganda against the socialist and anarchist militias was constant and poisonous. The tension between the communists and anarchists had reached such a pitch that the traditional May Day parade was canceled for fear of violence.

On the third of May (Chapter X) government forces tried to take over the telephone exchange, which was operated by anarchists, who beat them back. Street fighting began. Orwell found that, instead of getting the rest he so badly needed, he was stationed with a rifle on a rooftop, again waiting for nothing to happen. No one, on either side, was anxious to shoot anyone or be shot at in return. After a few days, government assault troops arrived from Valencia and took control. The official version in the newspapers (and quickly spreading throughout the world) was that the POUM was "a disguised Fascist organization." It was portrayed in cartoons as a figure "slipping off a mask marked with the hammer and sickle and revealing a hideous maniacal face marked with the swastika." When invited to join a communist fighting unit, Orwell retorted bitterly, "Your papers are saying I'm a Fascist." There ended his idea of leaving the POUM unit. People were being thrown into prison. Barcelona had become a nightmare city of "fear, suspicion, hatred, censored newspapers, crammed jails, enormous food-queues and prowling gangs of armed men." Orwell, of course, would remain associated with those who were the most despised and maligned. He even wished now that he had actually joined the POUM party.

Of the next chapter (Chapter XI) he again says "please skip . . . if you are not interested in political controversy." In later years some critics and publishers took this suggestion. There is a 1986 edition of *Homage* with both Chapters V and XI removed and printed as appendixes at the end. But designating either of these chapters as optional reading is ridiculous. Whether read before, after, or during the reading of the rest of the book, they are essential to understanding the events recounted and, even more, to understanding the passion that fueled the writing of this book and most of what Orwell wrote during the rest of his life.

In Chapter XI Orwell's "quiet, level voice" rises in outrage. His detailed quotations from articles with titles like "Spanish Trotskyists Plot With Franco" are wearying, as is the painstaking repetition of the contrary facts he knew from experience. But the weariness does not come from boredom; it comes from identification with Orwell's exasperation and sense of urgency. After all, while he was writing *Homage*, there was still hope that Franco might be defeated, still some hope that Hitler might be stopped. He believed that in the long run, "libels and press-campaigns of this kind, and the habits of mind they indicate, are capable of doing the most deadly damage to the anti-Fascist cause."

In the next chapter he takes up his action—or non-action—story again. Three days after the fighting in Barcelona, he returned to the still quiet Aragon front where he was shot through the neck by a Fascist sniper. His quiet, level voice returns with the super-understated, "The whole experience of being hit by a bullet is very interesting and I think it is worth describing in detail." He coolly describes his thoughts while waiting to die. But by some miracle, the bullet has passed through his neck, leaving him alive, if a bit hoarse. He endures nightmarish delays in unequipped field hospitals, transport on roads rough enough to finish off some of his fellow-wounded. Reaching Barcelona, he finds an even worse nightmare. Everyone even slightly associated with the POUM is being thrown into dungeon-like prisons, unlikely to emerge alive. He describes sleeping on the streets at night and sitting during the day in posh restaurants with Eileen, where they pose as British tourists. In one scene they take terrible risks trying unsuccessfully to get a friend out of prison. Then, with help from the British Consul, they escape across the French border to safety.

The book ends with two warnings to the reader: "beware of my partisanship, my mistakes of fact and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events. And beware of exactly the same things when you read any other book on this period of the Spanish war." In the final words of the book he describes peaceful London on his return in July 1937: ". . . 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."

Orwell left Spain injured and angry but not disillusioned. On the train he wrote to Cyril Connolly, "I have seen wonderful things and at last really believe in Socialism, which I never did before."

Reaction to *Homage to Catalonia* had been orchestrated before it was published, in fact, before Orwell started the book, before he left Spain, even before he was wounded. The communist media version of the suppression of the POUM had been widely printed and accepted before he crossed the French border and instantly contacted the *New Statesman*. Yes, they wanted to see an article on his experiences. When he sent the

article, it was rejected, but the editor Kingsley Martin sent him another book on the war to review. Of course, Orwell's review referred to his own experience. The review also was rejected because, according to Martin's revealing letter, "it too far controverts the political policy of the paper . . . and implies that our Spanish correspondents are all wrong." (The resulting bitterness Orwell felt toward Martin never abated although, thanks to the efforts of V.S. Pritchett, pieces by and about Orwell continued to appear in the *New Statesman*.)

As soon as Orwell reached home, he contacted Victor Gollancz, saying that he planned to write a book about Spain. Gollancz held option rights on Orwell's next three books, but he had seen Orwell's rejected review (published in the *New Leader*) and refused whatever Orwell might write about Spain. The reason? Gollancz stated that he had no interest in publishing a book that could only "harm the fight against Fascism."

Orwell noticed that the *Daily Worker* had mentioned him in three separate articles, misquoting from *Wigan Pier* to prove that Orwell despised the poor. Knowing he would write about Spain, the communist paper was trying to discredit him beforehand. Orwell wrote some irate letters, and the abuse of him eased off a bit. But he was stymied—how to get a publisher for his book about Spain?

Then he got a letter from Fredric Warburg, of Secker and Warburg, a small leftist but non-Stalinist publishing firm. Warburg too had seen his review, and he was interested in seeing whatever Orwell might write about Spain. They met on July 8, 1937, came to an agreement, and Orwell went home and started to write. He finished the book about six months later, in January 1938, and it was published in April.

There was one glowing review in the *Observer*, where Desmond Flower, discussing *Homage* with three other books on the Spanish War, called Orwell's "the giant of the four" and Orwell himself "a great writer." A few other respectful but brief reviews appeared in *Time and Tide*, *New Leader*, *New English Weekly*, and the *Manchester Guardian*. That was about it for favorable comment.

The *Daily Worker* (quoted at length in Chapter XI of *Homage*) printed a short, venomous dismissal. Their lead was followed by the smaller left-wing journals. Again and again *Homage* was labeled a defense of "Trotskyites and anarchists who betrayed the Republican cause." *The Listener* called Orwell "muddle-headed" in defending the "treachery" of the Trotskyists "who formed a part of the Fifth Column of whom General Franco has so constantly boasted." Orwell's letter of protest only elicited another statement that the POUM were "aiding the enemy." Fredric Warburg had hoped that conflict and debate in the press would stimulate interest and sales. The debate didn't happen. The book was usually sandwiched into a group review in the back pages, perhaps hardly noticed.

It's not hard to imagine how Orwell must have felt by this time. He had written a book that told (among other things) how he barely escaped being killed by the fascist enemy only to be almost murdered by his allies against fascism—and he was either called a liar or ignored. V. S. Pritchett was friendly and admiring writing in the *New Statesman*, but, he said, Orwell's indignation about the "raw deal" dealt out to the POUM, was "wrongheaded when he carries the defense into the field of high politics and strategy." Orwell's book unintentionally presented "a strong argument for keeping creative writers out of politics." Calling Orwell a man who "sees the ideal become the equivocal," is better than calling him a liar. Yet Pritchett writes as if the question is only one of

different political philosophies, while Orwell had written of life-threatening suppression of dissenting opinion.

Ultimately, it was the center-right mainstream press that possessed and used the big weapon, silence—the silence that can kill a book. Why? Didn't the corporate capitalist press take every opportunity to slam Russia and the communists? Not any more. War had appeared on the horizon, and every ally against Hitler would be needed. Even the short-lived non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler was only a minor glitch (except to some stunned leftists like Gollancz) in the metamorphosis of Stalin into "Uncle Joe," champion of democracy.

Media silence is not hard to impose when the author is what Orwell was in 1938—a little-known journalist who had written a few ignored novels. In writing, as in other professions, status as an important voice must come before most people will listen—especially if the voice contradicts a generally agreed-upon and comforting view. A relatively few, determined people can silence the dissenting voice if aided by the inertia or indifference of majority opinion. In 1938, if the Left kept its head in the sand regarding the behavior of the communists, the vast middle wanted to keep its head in the sand regarding not only communists but the true intent of the fascists, and the looming certainty of another world war more terrible than the first one. As for those who would do most of the dying in the coming war—the poor—most of them were still struggling to dig their way out of the Great Depression. So, why pay attention to this writer, this Orwell, whoever he is?

Still, there was the liberal intellectual press, those small-circulation but influential journals whose ideas trickle down through teachers and other mediators of serious thought. Why didn't they fill this silence?

In the American edition of *Homage* that finally appeared fourteen years later—in 1952, when Orwell was famous and dead—Lionel Trilling gives two reasons why these journals ignored what had happened to the anarchists and Trotskyists in Spain. First of all, statements like Orwell's were of no interest because, "In New York and in London the intelligentsia [already] knew what had happened." That is, they had swallowed and spread the communist version. What Orwell described "is now, I believe, accepted as the essential truth by everyone whose judgment is worth regarding." However, "It would have been very difficult to learn anything of this in New York or London. Those periodicals which guided the thought of left-liberal intellectuals knew nothing of it, and had no wish to

learn . . . if one searches the liberal periodicals, which have made the cause of civil liberties their own, one can find no mention of this terror. They were committed not to the fact but to the abstraction." They exemplified exactly what Orwell had begun to fear, "that the commitment to abstract ideas would be far more maleficent than the commitment to the gross materiality of property had ever been."

Many intellectuals on the Left disagreed with Trilling, like Herbert Matthews who, writing in the *Nation*, in 1952, described Orwell's account as written "in a white heat about a confused, unimportant, and obscure incident in the Spanish Civil War." If Orwell had still been alive, we can imagine his pointing out that a truth, however obscure, is never unimportant. All of his writing tells us again and again that it is those small betrayals—suppressed for the good of the Great Cause—that form the seeds of corruption poisoning and killing the larger cause.

Trilling himself embodies the second reason for the failure of *Homage* to get much attention. He delivers an oddly denigrating tribute to Orwell. "He was not a genius," but had the ability "of fronting the world with nothing more than one's simple, direct, undeceived intelligence . . . he is not a genius—what a relief! What an encouragement. For he communicates to us the sense that what he has done, any one of us could do." Is this a put-down or an overly-subtle tribute or both? Did Trilling really believe that Orwell's style just happened, was not consciously chosen and painstakingly refined? Or that "undeceived intelligence" does not constitute a form of genius? Trilling genuinely and deeply admired Orwell (too naively and too much, some writers said). Yet in those words he himself displays the devaluation of Orwell by literary critics, who, even if not swayed by political abstractions, simply could not consider a journalistic, eye-witness account "literature."

Orwell felt that the mundane reality of commercial publishing didn't help either. "The trouble is that as soon as anything like the Spanish civil war happens, hundreds of journalists immediately produce rubbishy books which they put together with scissors and paste, and then later when the serious books come along people are sick of the subject." And, of course, Secker and Warburg could not wage a media campaign to revive interest. It takes money to do that, and S&W was a small press, "a midget firm, fragile as bone china," said Warburg.

Only 700 books were sold. Orwell was stunned at the indifference. It was worse than he could have imagined. Not only had the Stalinist left gotten him "written off before hand as a liar," but no one seemed to care anyway. Now the year of war, terror, injury, media abuse, and non-stop writing caught up with him. He collapsed and had the first of the tubercular hemorrhages that were to weaken and finally kill him twelve years later.

Fredric Warburg believed that the reason for Orwell's collapse was "not merely the physical wound of a bullet through his throat or the cold and wearisome nights on the Teruel front. These were serious enough and surely led to his collapse with the lung lesion eight months later. But the spiritual and intellectual damage was as great or greater. In Catalonia Orwell learned at first hand in his own person that what he had feared and had somewhat tentatively sketched in *Wigan Pier* was irrefutably true. Workers could be and were shot down by communist police agents—the reputations of the enemies of the Communist Party were deliberately blackened by false accusations—political opponents were arrested and often murdered without trial—the true history of the past was falsified. . . . so tremendous a re-formation in the personality of an intellectually sensitive artist demanded an effort almost too great to be borne."

Orwell survived this collapse with new determination and firm direction. In his words, "The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. 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."

Meanwhile, still in recovery, he made one more try at a proper literary novel. *Coming Up For Air* takes off from his last words in *Homage* about the "deep, deep sleep of England . . ." His protagonist and namesake George is as far from Orwell as he could imagine—a fat, low-brow insurance salesman haunted by his childhood memories of a

vanished rural England and by prophetic nightmares of bombs suddenly raining down—to destroy a present life in which there is little or nothing he cares for. The great accomplishment of this novel is Orwell's willingness to sympathize with the suburbanites who clung to a place a notch above the miserable manual workers. By using first person, he almost succeeds in creating sympathy for this "Willy Loman" a quarter century ahead of *Death of a Salesman*. However, the first person voice keeps slipping, and we hear too often the voice of Orwell himself in this fictional character, who, like Orwell, loves rural walks and fishing. The most interesting thing about *Coming Up For Air* is the chapter in which "George" attends a nasty, boring meeting of the Left Book Club. The chapter seems to have been inserted mainly to irritate Gollancz, who, by his option rights, would get first crack at publishing the book. What is fascinating about this chapter is the way the harangue of the speaker foreshadows the "Two Minute Hate" sessions that became a feature of Orwell's last novel, *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

Irritated or not, Gollancz did publish the novel in June 1939. By the time the reviews (pretty good) and the first sales reports (better than his other novels) were in, England was at war.

Rejected, of course, for military service, Orwell tried to do his bit by writing news and commentary for the BBC. He was still struggling to make a living by writing essays, reviews, and journalism wherever he could get published. His output from the beginning of the war through the ten years left to him is extraordinary. It includes the much anthologized "Politics and the English Language," Orwell's manifesto on the immorality of writing pretentiously and carelessly, and the absolute evil of using euphemisms to "defend the indefensible." This essay was eventually reprinted in college Freshman English anthologies used all over the English-speaking world. But during the 1940s, gems like this were printed here and there, hardly noticed, for small fees.

He was determined to break through the silence that had swallowed *Homage*. On the way home from Spain he had begun to wrack his brain for a means of "exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone and which could be easily translated into other languages. However, the actual details of the story did not come to me for some time until one day . . . I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn." This was the seed that grew into *Animal Farm*, a short, simple allegory of the betrayal of the socialist revolution in Russia. He wrote it—with help from Eileen—in only a few months in 1943.

Getting it published was another struggle. Some publishers thought it was a children's story. Others—like T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber—entirely missed the point of it. Other publishers, no matter where they stood politically, were unwilling to offend Stalin while he was an ally against Hitler. Secker and Warburg agreed to publish it, but then came delay after delay. Was it the paper shortage, as Warburg said, or politics? Whatever the reason, *Animal Farm* didn't come out until after the war in Europe ended—in the same month as the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan, both events marking the start of the Cold War.

If the timing had been bad for *Homage*, it was perfect for *Animal Farm*. The book not only sold in the millions, it was praised by respected literary critics like Edmund Wilson, who compare Orwell to Swift. Orwell was suddenly so famous that anything he wrote was sure to be published and to sell widely.

Orwell had accomplished his purpose—"To write an anti-totalitarian story that could be easily understood by almost anyone and could be easily translated into other languages." Or had he? Allegory is tricky, easily misunderstood. The simple message could be twisted clear around. It surely was for many American school children, who for the next forty years were assigned *Animal Farm* as a warning against socialism. Orwell protested in a letter to Dwight MacDonald that *Animal Farm* was not meant to defend the economic status quo. "I meant the moral to be that revolutions only effect a radical improvement when the masses are alert . . . The turning-point of the story was supposed to be when the pigs kept the milk and apples for themselves . . . If the other animals had had the sense to put their foot down then, it would have been all right."

Whatever the danger of misreadings, Orwell had found the kind of fiction that a political essayist could write successfully. The fantasy/allegory/utopian novel does not require delineation of complexities of character or vivid recreation of actual settings or a plot in which events inevitably grow out of both, as we find in the stories of Hardy or Chopin. It makes its effect by exaggeration, humor, terror, or a combination of all three. It is not given deeper meaning by open-minded ambivalence like that of Turgenev. A fantasy utopia or dystopia is a disguised lecture or sermon intended to put across ideas and opinions passionately held by its author. Taken on its own terms, it can succeed brilliantly in showing readers the tendencies that lie "in front of our noses."

Shortly after Orwell finished *Animal Farm*, his wife died and his own health declined sharply. His response was typical; he pushed himself even harder, writing dozens of essays and reviews and working on a new, futuristic dystopia, *The Last Man in Europe*. It was published in 1949, after he had agreed to change the title to *Nineteen Eighty-four*. It was an instant best-seller. A year later he was dead.

In *Nineteen Eighty-four* unrelentingly ugly scenes dramatize the management of thought and action in a nightmare world of totalitarian control. Orwell called the novel a "satire," but if it is, it may be the only satire without one—even deeply bitter—laugh. The great accomplishment of *Nineteen Eighty-four* is that it dramatizes the political use of euphemism, making it vividly meaningful for people who never would have read "Politics and the English Language." The words Big Brother, Newspeak, hate session, and doublethink were added to the English language. Half a century later these words are still used—and misused—by people who have never read *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Even Orwell's adopted name has become an adjective; we know what a person means when he describes a word or a situation as "Orwellian." (Or we think we do, for this term also tends to be thrown around too freely, sometimes to "prove" the opposite of what *Nineteen Eighty-four* meant.)

It is really too bad, though, that Orwell allowed the change of title. Calling the book *Nineteen Eighty-four* (a simple reversal of 1948, the year it was completed) gave the impression that Orwell was describing a soul-destroying hell thirty-five years off. When the year 1984 came, there were pointless discussions and debates on whether Orwell's "prophecies" had come to pass. Many people in many countries complacently declared that, since these "predictions" had not literally been fulfilled, Orwell was wrong and we were safe. In the Soviet Union, articles were written claiming that *Nineteen Eighty-four* had come to the United States in the administration of Ronald Reagan. Those people who pointed out that Orwell's intent was to warn against ever-present dangers were drowned out in thoughtless answers to silly questions.

The misunderstandings had begun even before the book was published, when Frederic Warburg summed up the book for his staff as a pessimistic prophecy. The first reviews carried the misunderstanding further, lavishly praising 1984 as an attack on socialism. In his last months Orwell was tormented by knowing that his best-selling final statement was being misinterpreted—used yet again by the agents of Big Brother. In a letter that was excerpted in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, he wrote

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else, and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere.

A cruel irony surrounded Orwell's death at only forty-six. He was world famous. He had found the literary form for his avowed mission—his weapon in his fight "against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it." He had fired a shot heard round the world, but it had wounded his friends while barely nicking the true enemy recognized by his more careful readers. In fact, his weapon had been picked up and used by that enemy, which soon found *Homage* worth resurrecting as another weapon in the Cold War.

Nevertheless, as biographers William Abrahams and Peter Stansky maintain, the living and writing of the events in *Homage to Catalonia*—including the attacks on the writing—liberated Orwell into his full creativity, not only of the best-selling *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, but of the essays he continued to pour out. It is ironic that Orwell finally won instant fame with two fantasy novels that not only were misunderstood, but were nowhere near the standard of his best work. And yet—and yet—had these two books not established him as an important voice, his other, better work might be long out of print and forgotten.

Orwell's best work is found in *Homage to Catalonia*, in parts of *Wigan Pier* and *Down and Out*, and in his extraordinary essays, reviews, and letters. The 1968 collection made up four volumes. The complete collection, published in 1998, fills twenty volumes. These short prose pieces were taken pretty much for granted as they came out one by one over the years, almost until the day he died. They remain largely ignored, except by critics and historians who often quote an eloquent and prescient passage from a fifty-year-old Orwell essay to clarify a complex problem of today. Even the classic essay, "Politics and the English Language," more relevant than ever as we experience the proliferation of terms invented to "defend the indefensible," can no longer be counted upon to turn up in Freshman English anthologies.

Homage was rejected or ignored on both literary and political grounds by the liberal lit-crit establishment whose very reason for existence is to direct readers toward literature outside the mass media which so often conceals vital truths and promotes outright fantasies. It took another quarter century before applying the literary skills of fiction to factual events by Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*) and Norman Mailer ("Armies of the Night") earned these writers high praise as pioneers of the "New Journalism." In other words, the most intelligent readers of Orwell's time had been unable to see beyond their vague political leanings and literary labels ("literature vs. journalism") to value *Homage* as a book that had burst out of their categories.

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