

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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George Orwell

Although Orwell is best known for his political fable *Animal Farm* and his dystopian satire *1984*, his first books were autobiographical essays, journalism and fiction.

He was born Eric Blair, the son of a minor official in the Indian Civil Service, but after age four he was raised and educated in England. "George Orwell" was a pen name that he used on his first book, *Down and Out in London and Paris*. It was about his experiences as a dishwasher and in other menial jobs, and at the time it came out (1933) he had become a school teacher. It was followed by two novels and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), his personal examination of working class living conditions in depression-era England. *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) is based on his experience fighting for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. He was there only from late December, 1936, until being shot in the neck in June, 1937, and returning to England, but *Homage* is one of the most vivid and realistic books on that war.

What makes it so good is Orwell's very direct and unpretentious account of his own experiences and feelings. He did not go to Spain as just a reporter, as a great many other writers from America, England, and the rest of Europe did. He went to fight. He became a private and then corporal in the P.O.U.M. (Workers Party of Marxist Unification), which was one of the left-wing factions supporting the Spanish Republic against the Fascists and Colonel Franco, who eventually became the winner and dictator. So, although he was a reporter and kept a diary, he wrote not only as an eye-witness but as a human participant, registering his own aches and frustrations.

The language is simple and frank. "We were near the front line now, near enough to smell the characteristic smell of war—in my experience a smell of excrement and decaying food." (p.16) It is lucid. The first Fascists that he saw were far in the distance, "tiny as ants, dodging to and fro behind their parapet." And it is shockingly honest, as when eventually he shoots at one of the dot-like "ants." "The dot disappeared. I hoped it [the bullet] went near enough to make him jump. It was the first time in my life that I had fired a gun at a human being." (p. 21)

But he can also be very clear and impersonal in describing the many political factions which made up the rag-tag, badly armed and poorly organized Republican army. He must do this frequently, because they change and he moves among different units, but an example is the long introduction to them in the beginning of Chapter V. After ten or eleven pages of it, however, the first person "I" returns, as in "I found myself in the middle of a political discussion that practically never ended." The readers can now understand—and sympathize. They have had enough too! But Orwell is still objective. He does not take sides—until, a couple of pages later, he comes out. "It is easy to see why, at this time, I preferred the Communist viewpoint to that of the P.O.U.M....What clinched everything was that the Communists—so it seemed to me—were getting on with the war while we and the Anarchists were standing still." Later yet, he really speaks his mind, in attacking the propagandists back in England. "The people who write that kind of stuff never fight;... It is the same in all wars; the soldiers do the fighting, the journalists do the shouting, and no true patriot ever gets near the front-line trench, except on the briefest of propaganda-tours." (p. 66)

Even so, simple and direct as this seems, one must also keep in mind that Orwell was a kind of propagandist himself. He had a political position—anti-Stalinist Communist in Spain but working-class Laborite or Social Democrat in England—that he wanted to persuade his readers to support too, and to realize that Fascism must be defeated in Spain or it will have to be fought everywhere. Thus the voice or persona that he repeatedly returns to is a friendly, familiar one that for many of his readers would have brought back memories of the Great War, as when he describes life in the trenches –

In trench warfare five things are important: firewood, food, tobacco, candles and the enemy. In winter...they are important in that order, with the enemy a bad last. Except at night, when a surprise-attack was always conceivable,... (p. 23)

Or when he quotes old army songs—

There are rats, rats,
Rats as big as cats,
In the quartermaster's store! (p. 78)

This author may not be “George Orwell” but the underlying Eric Blair. Or, conversely, it may be the most persuasive George Orwell, who liked his pseudonym for the very reason that it sounded really round and English.

In any case, we hear this voice again and again when he refers to English stereotypes of Spain and Spanish culture – trains that don't run on time and a people who can't be disciplined. And we hear it loud and clear in the final chapters of *Homage to Catalonia* when, weary and recovering from the bullet in his neck, he is returning to England and “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.” (p. 232)

Questions for Further Study:

1. Do you think Orwell had read *Goodbye to All That*? Why or why not? In what ways is his book like Graves'?
2. Virginia Woolf and George Orwell both wrote with definite rhetorical purposes: they wanted to persuade readers of a cause. How are their techniques both similar and radically different?
4. How are the structures of conversion narratives and autobiographies of education similar to war stories? How are they not? Answer by writing about at least one religious conversion narrative (Kempe, Bunyan, or Newman), one “education” (Wordsworth, Mill, or Gosse) and one war autobiography (Graves, Brittain, or Orwell).
5. What are the uses of autobiography to the writer's own psychological health, education, or development? Choose four of the following autobiographers (Pepys, Boswell, Wordsworth, Graves, Woolf, and Brittain) and consider such matters as why they wrote, whether they published their books, and how they were or were not changed by the experience.
6. Several of the autobiographers you have read were already famous public figures at the time they wrote. For example: Kempe, Gibbon, Newman, Mill, and Gosse. Why did they write and what else do they have in common? Consider such matters as style, their self-images, and techniques of self-presentation.