
BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ DERGİSİ

GEORGE ORWELL AND STEPHEN SPENDER - VISIONS OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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ABSTRACT

George Orwell and Stephen Spender, two writers who participated in the Spanish Civil War give voice to two different but complementary visions of the war. While Orwell records his experience with objective detachment and detailed realism, Spender cries out in anguished emotion against all war.

George Orwell charms his reader in his **Homage to Catalonia** with his directness of style and frankness of statement. He immediately takes the reader into his confidence and starts to narrate his experiences while fighting in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republicans. The dominant first person singular pronoun is not at all inappropriate, for, together with the "I" comes an extreme modesty, reassuring us over and over again that this is what he in his narrow experience observed, that the overall issues and complications are far beyond him to make generalizations about or draw conclusions from. Because of his immediate laying down of cards and the obvious friendliness displayed, the reader is willingly engulfed in Orwell's easy flowing and factual narrative.

We follow Orwell after being put straight as to his motive for joining the Loyalist cause — simply and loftily "to fight against Fascism... for common decency"¹ — through the disillusioning process of his gradual realization of the many non-idealistic and extremely complex conditions of the Spanish Civil War.

The first illusion he loses is his preconceived idea or ideal of the actual fighting — the completely disorganized militia system, the lack of rifles and ammunition, the inadequacy of the training, the bleak hilltop trench hundreds of yards away from the

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nearest Fascist, occasional, unmotivated shots across the mountains, boredom, cold, dirt, discomfort and none of the fire and enthusiasm of a unifying cause or of a direct attack on the Fascists. "Often I used to gaze round the wintry landscape and marvel at the futility of it all. The inconclusiveness of such a kind of war,"² he writes.

Yet despite this strong voicing of opinion Orwell just as frankly shows the things he definitely liked about the trench warfare. The ideal classless arrangement of the militia, this being in his opinion "the nearest approach to perfect equality that I had ever seen or would have thought conceivable in time of war,"³ the wonderful generosity and the robust friendliness of the Spaniards and the extremely amusing instances in warfare springing out again and again from the Spanish character are obviously dealt with with great sympathy. Of special amusement is the verbal battle which goes on between the two opposing posts, the "cold war" taking place through the use of megaphones bringing forth yelled messages varying from "Go home you English. We don't want foreigners here"⁴ to "We're just sitting down to buttered toast over here! Lovely slices of buttered toast!"⁵ Again highly amusing are the incidents of Spanish marksmanship or the lack of it, as for instance the near death of the militiaman who, confused about the password, gives its synonym instead, "However the sentry missed him. In this war everyone always did miss everyone else when it was humanly possible."⁶ Even the lack and the inadequacy of the ammunition is treated with some what of an attachment to the Spaniards, "There was said to be one old shell with a nickname of its own which travelled daily to and fro, never exploding."⁷

Together with the humour and the sympathy, however, growing disappointment is reflected in *Homage to Catalonia*. In addition to the dullness and the lack of action (continuing throughout the three different posts Alcubierre, Monte Oscuro, Huesca), the many discomforts of trench life are described in exact physical detail:

Everything was running short, books, clothes, tobacco, soap, candles, matches, olive oil... All of us were lousy by that time... the human louse resembles a tiny lobster and he lives chiefly in your trousers... we kept the brutes down by burning the eggs and by bathing as often as we could face it... In the great courtyard where the cooks ladled out the rations the litter of rusty tins, mud, mule dung and decaying food was revolting.⁸

These horrifying physical descriptions never ring the tone of strong complaint and do not reach the form of a cry. *Homage to Catalonia* rather than becoming an emotional appeal against war and its horrors remains an objective narrative of Orwell's experiences in the fighting. Orwell calmly addresses the reader saying, "Look - these took place... I witnessed them."

But this calmness is not constant throughout. Even though he accepts the lack of efficiency at the front, the political situation, the split within the Republican side greatly disturbs him. There are long sections of *Homage to Catalonia* written specifically to explain this split between the leftist P.O.U.M. and the anarchist C.N.T. on one side, and the rightist, U.S.S.R. supported P.S.U.C. on the other, this latter standing for bourgeois democracy — not much different from capitalism. Much more

is devoted to these political party differences and long defences of the P.O.U.M. cause than to the general effects of the war. This could be explained in two ways — in the first place, *Homage to Catalonia* is written within the immediate six-month period of Orwell's living through the experience. And in the second place, the extremeness of this disillusionment at falling from one ideal cause to petty fights *within* the Loyalist side, to a civil war *within* the civil war cannot but leave its effect on his writing.

Thus, his coming back from the front on leave to find what he thought were the beginnings of a society of working class equality taken over by the dominance of the bourgeoisie, the suppression of the P.O.U.M. (In Russia's eagerness to avoid a revolution for its own interests) cause much more bitterness in him than the rats crawling on his "bed" or his wounded throat or the unsanitary hospital conditions. He feels much more horror at the distortion of the news or the swift and systematized persecution of the anarchists and socialists by the communists than he does at the dying people around him. It is easy to see the startings of his 1964 in passages like

All the P.O.U.M.'s offices, book-stalls, sanatoria, Red Aid centers were seized... the police were arresting everyone they could lay hands on who was known to have any connection with the P.O.U.M.... There was no way of discovering of how many people were arrested... In some cases the police had gone to the length of dragging the wounded militiamen out of the hospitals,⁹ or

This was not a round up of criminals, it was a reign of terror.¹⁰

Modesty may have caused Orwell's comparative calmness in the face of physical war as opposed to his strong voicings of opinion on politics. Another reason for the greater emphasis on political issues rather than an overall reaction to the *concept* of war could be, as stated before, Orwell's nearness to the happenings at the time he wrote *Homage to Catalonia*. We see much more of a detachment in his essay *Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War* written after a lapse of years. Even though this essay keeps the directness to the reader with words like "Well" or "You should not think thus and thus" and so on, there still is an attempt at generalization — quite an unsuccessful one. Especially the poem with which this essay is concluded, *not* being based on the *realness* of Orwell's initial experience but drawn from the remnants of it, repels rather than appeals to the emotions in its feeble attempt to show the evils of war through this vaguely painted encounter.

Stephen Spender's outlook on the Spanish Civil War is quite different from Orwell's as reflected in his *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell's work is an almost day to day description of a militiaman's feelings and thoughts. As discussed above, Orwell never ventures to actually *discourage* war, nor encourage it; in his *Homage to Catalonia* — he only keeps what seems to be a diary recording like a camera (with more success than Isterwood in his *Goodbye to Berlin*) the exact details of trench life. For Spender, on the other hand, the Spanish Civil War symbolizes All-War, the hardships stand for the universal hardships of any war — thus the smallest ugly picture he sees or the most casual incident he hears about send him into

strong emotional meditations on the horrors of war, of its effects on humanity or, more specifically, its destructiveness on the individual soldier. He deals with war in much more general terms than Orwell does in trying to point out its injustices, yet the very specific details that Orwell sticks to make his war much more horrible and believable because of the starkness of the experience they relate. Thus, paradoxically enough, even though Spender is the one who is trying to reach the reader's emotions, the reader is moved much more by Orwell's intellectual narration. Spender's bringing in a word like "hate" and giving an attitude to the fighting men, as in the lines,

All have become so nervous and so cold
That each man hates the cause and distant words
Which brought him here more terribly the bullets.¹¹

is much less effective than Orwell's complete avoidance of bringing forth the militiamen's emotions in the face of the conditions they endured.

In his effort to move his reader as much as he himself is moved, Spender brings in bold exaggerations about the hunger, the cold and the extreme discipline the men were subjected to. Orwell is much more easy-going; he deliberately goes out of his way to explain that the reader should keep in mind that even though the cold was unendurable they had plenty of food. So, taken in by this display of confidence the reader believes in and is affected by the rest of the miseries he describes.

Spender is much more serious in his work than Orwell is. The robust sense of humour that breaks into *Homage to Catalonia* on and off is not seen in his poems. Even such aspects of the war as the confused and confusing training school for the militiamen or the furious battle of words across the trenches, painted with a great deal of fun on Orwell's part, are referred to with words like

... discipline drilled once in an Iron school¹²

and

The furlous words and minerals which kill life.¹³

Spender is quite successful, however, in achieving what he sets out to do — in shaking the reader into thinking about the injustice of war when he concentrates on the fate of the individual involved in war. A poem like "Ultimo Ratio Regum" ending with

Ask. Was so much expenditure justified
On the death of one so young and silly
Lying under the olive tress. O world, O death.¹⁴

or "The War Photograph" (not a detached one), culminating in

My corpse to be covered with the snows of December
And roots push through skin's silent drum
When the years and fields forget but the whitened bones remember.¹⁵

are extremely moving indeed. These poems depict the individual soldier's emotions, magnified against "War," "Death" or "World."

The same thing is true of "The Coward" where we see the coward in war, face to face with death,

Flesh bone, muscles and eyes
Assembled in a tower of lies
Were scattered in an icy breeze
When the deceiving Past betrayed
All their perceptions in one instant
And his true gaze, the sum of present
Saw his guts lie beneath the trees.¹⁶

Again the individual, again caught in a crystallized moment of war is depicted in "A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map,"

But another who lives on
Wears within his heart forever
The space split open by a bullet¹⁷

The poems of Spender, even though they may have been inspired by the Spanish Civil War, do not in their attempt at universality carry the extent of specific, direct relationship to Spain that is shown in Orwell's work. Even when he gets as precise as to express his opinions about the lost cause of the particular war, he addresses a "you," that is Spain as an entire country rather than this party or that organization. From Spender's autobiography *World Within World* it is easy to see that, unlike Orwell, it is not necessarily the observation of a definite incident which provides his writing material. Even a piece of "real" description such as "Two Armies" springs into existence quite out of context. He himself relates the creation of some lines of this poem, "In broad daylight the train arrived. I stared out of the carriage window, in a state of mind when fatigue seems to open a door upon a further awakening, or an involuntary awareness of the darkest movements of thought within the mind. Lines suddenly ran into my mind, as though gliding with the movement of the train,

Clean silence drops at night when a little walk
Divides the sleeping armies, each
Huddled in linen woven by remote hands,
When the machines are stilled, a common suffering
Whitens the air with breath and makes both one,
As though these enemies slept in each other's arms."¹⁸

Both the precise detail of Orwell and the disturbed cry of Spender are necessary in creating a fuller impression of the Spanish Civil War.

NOTES

- 1 George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London : Sacker and Warburg, 1951), p. 47.
- 2 Ibid., p. 23.
- 3 Ibid., p. 27.
- 4 Ibid., p. 42.
- 5 Ibid., p. 43.
- 6 Ibid., p. 37.
- 7 Ibid., p. 76.
- 8 Ibid., pp. 79; 82.
- 9 Ibid., p. 220.
- 10 Ibid., p. 226.
- 11 Stephen Spender, *The Still Centre* (London : Faber and Faber Ltd., 1939), p. 55.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p. 58.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 59-60.
- 15 Ibid., p. 61.
- 16 Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (London : Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p. 228.

GEORGE ORWELL VE STEPHEN SPENDER.
İSPANYA İÇ SAVAŞI ÜZERİNE İKİ GÖRÜŞ

ÖZET

İspanya İç Savaşına katılan iki yazar, George Orwell ve Stephen Spender, savaş hakkında iki ayrı fakat birbirini tamamlayan görüşü dile getirmekteler. Orwell, savaşta yaşadıklarını, olaya dışarıdan bakabilen bir nesnellikle ve ayrıntılı bir gerçekçilikle anlatırken, Spender, tüm savaşlara karşı acı dolu bir duygusallıkla bağırıyor.