

A Rhetoric of Decency: An Essay on Identification and Recursivity in George Orwell's Writings on Spain

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Abstract: *Theorists of writing have called for it “to be placed within the different practices that actualize the mental process” (Clark & Ivanić’93). In my presentation I will look at the writings of George Orwell to articulate a textual understanding of writing as placed within different practices that actualize the mental process. I will especially present an analysis of the term decency as occupying a central place in Orwell’s writings about Spain, shuttling between a concept descriptive naming the Spanish character enabling identification for his English audience in *Homage to Catalonia* to a critical-normative on which the writer argues for a form of socialism in “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War.” To make this argument I will look at Orwell’s two published writings on Spain in the context of literacy theory and writing studies scholarship, and situate his overall composition process in terms of the contextual information provided in the letters he wrote in connection to the two works. Subsequently, I will extrapolate my analysis of Orwell’s works to present the theory of literacy as “exquisite circumspection” (Ong) as a necessary corollary to the notion of “recursive thinking process” in writing in terms of a predisposition to continuously inquire and imaginatively translate ideas through the act of writing down based on context and newly emergent goals.*

Orwell’s continued cultural relevance is almost self-evident in the regularity with which the term Orwellian gets thrown about in the journalistic-punditry. But despite mass-media’s discursive running-into-the-ground of the term, Orwell’s work continues to be culturally relevant and one of its “salience” to the field of humanistic scholarship, I believe, can be found in the consistency of the author’s engagement with both totalitarianism and democratic socialism. Specifically, I contend, those of us in the humanities can productively extend our engagement with the author beyond the one or two essays we teach in our classes or the cursory discussions we have about *1984* or *Animal Farm* by thinking about how Orwell could say “every line of serious work that [he had] written since 1936 [was] written against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism” and not contradict himself (original emphasis, “Why I Write” 440).

In this paper, I read Orwell as a rhetorician and his writings on his experiences in Spain (*Homage to Catalonia* and “Looking Back on the Spanish War”)¹ as rhetoric. My argument understands decency – a term that reiterates itself continuously in Orwell’s oeuvre – as a site of identification and invention,

¹ I am taking both these texts from *Orwell in Spain*, an edited-compilation of his writings and letters relating to his time spent in Spain.

positing Orwell's representation of Spaniard as a form of what Kenneth Burke calls the "invitation to rhetoric" for his English readership. Within his account, Orwell's rhetoric of decency, I contend, has a double-meaning functionality. Decency, on the one hand, functions as a descriptive, representing the common Spaniards who people his narrative as characterized by "above all, their straightforwardness and generosity" (*Homage to Catalonia* 38). On the other hand, it signifies as a critical-normative or an ought, a rhetorical commonplace informed by his experiences and out of which every "serious work [he] had written since 1936... [is] directly against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism." Taken together the notion collapses the distinction between the is-ought, rhetorically presenting the decent life not as a utopian socialist-fiction, but an extension of lived human characteristics and how people actually are.

Decency as descriptive or Orwell's "invitation to rhetoric"

In *Rhetoric of Motives* Burke outlines the principle of identification as the most important distinction of contemporary rhetoric. Comparing his theory to the classical tradition of Aristotle and Quintilian, he spells out his oft-repeated rhetorical formula: "you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (original emphasis, 55). It is a formulation that not only prioritizes identification as a requirement for any act of persuasion, but the common ground as an a priori of communication. All writers, after all, must speak or write the same language as his/her reader and communicate "tonality, order, image, attitude, idea" so that whatever is exchanged through language is nuanced enough to represent the world of experience.

Burke also understood that words mean differently to different users and in different contexts, and so makes it clear in his deliberations that pure identification ("absolute communication") is an impossible ideal "partly embodied in material conditions and partly frustrated by these same conditions" (22). It is this gesture of ideal and absolute communication that makes language, in his opinion, as "the characteristic invitation to rhetoric" which puts "identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins" (25).

So what does this positioning of the "invitation to rhetoric" as putting "identification and division ambiguously together" do for providing a way to read decency in Orwell's writings about Spain? I contend Orwell's articulation of decency enables him to build off this sense of "identification and division" to develop a coherent critical-normative argument for democratic socialism based on a description of the Spanish people. To explain this point in detail let me start my analysis with decency as a descriptive and as common ground, or specifically Burke's point that "a terministic choice justified by the fact that identifications in the order of love are also characteristic of rhetorical expression" (Burke 20). At the beginning of *Homage*, when narrating his first impressions of the revolutionary city of Barcelona, Orwell writes: "[It] was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, and in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for" (*Homage to Catalonia* 33). I believe these sentiments exhibit Orwell's primary intention in writing his account of the Spanish Civil War. Orwell suspected that his audience – like him, English, literate, bourgeois – probably did not understand or "even like" a lot about the socialist and anarchist fighters. Therefore his project in writing *Homage* as a way to build support for the anarchist cause had to negotiate this aspect of difference by articulating an encomium his readers could hook onto. To this end decency, as a descriptive term in *Homage*, functions to bridge a potentially disabling division and facilitate common ground between his Spanish subjects and his English readership.

This point can be specifically understood by looking at Orwell's use of the term at one moment towards the end of his account in *Homage*. In the last chapter of the book, in typically lucid and affective language, Orwell ruminates on the things he learned from his experiences in Spain. Despite the horrible events he witnesses², Orwell concludes a basic ethicality about people. "Curiously enough," he writes, "the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings . . . [but] beware my partisanship, my mistakes of fact and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events" (*Homage to Catalonia* 168).

² Orwell narrative records the purges, the imprisonment and execution of friends and the personal tribulations he undergoes – nearly dying when he gets shot through the neck, having to sleep on the streets to avoid a police-force hunting down anyone affiliated with the POUM – stating that his Spanish experience "left him with memories that are mostly evil" (*Homage to Catalonia* 167).

I contend the notion works³ in his Spanish writings in a narrower rhetorical frame, specifically as a common characteristic, as “a mediatory ground that makes . . . communication possible” between Orwell’s representation of his Spaniard subjects and his English readership (Burke 25). *Homage* repeatedly paints the Spaniards as possessing “an essential decency,” gregarious in their straightforwardness and generosity (*Homage to Catalonia* 38). “A Spaniard’s generosity,” he writes in the first chapter, “in the ordinary sense of the word, is at times almost embarrassing . . . And beyond this there is generosity in a deeper sense, a real largeness of spirit, which I have met with again and again in the most unpromising of circumstances.”

Orwell encounters Spaniards of both characteristics – though mostly in the form of men – during his time in Catalonia. The first takes the form of the common soldiers who show him everyday acts of kindness. These are the types he describes meeting during his stay at the hospital after getting shot. These are the two soldiers, “kids of about eighteen,” who show their sympathies by giving Orwell “all the tobacco out of their pockets,” and then leaving before he can return it. “How typically Spanish!” explains Orwell about their openhandedness. “I discovered afterwards that you could not buy tobacco anywhere in town and what they had given me was a week’s ration” (*Homage to Catalonia* 134).

Generosity “in a deeper sense, a real largeness of spirit” is illustrated through his representation of an officer in Barcelona towards the end of his time in Spain. Orwell, in hiding from the police and preparing to leave the country, ignores these dangers and decides to look for a letter from the Ministry of War – from the office of the Chief of Police – to help his friend and superior officer, Jorge Kopp, who had been arrested for his connection to the POUM⁴. His search for this letter leads Orwell to meet a secretary of a colonel, “a little slip of an officer in smart uniform, with large and squinting eyes” (*Homage to Catalonia* 159).

The officer interviews him about the particulars of the letter when he first meets Orwell and in the process finds out the writer had served in the outlawed militia. This disclosure makes Orwell begin fearing for his own safety and by the time the two of them arrive at the Chief of Police’s office, where the little officer might request the letter, he is terrified about getting “arrested, just to add another Trotskyist to the bag” (*Homage to Catalonia* 160). But his fears prove unfounded and making no further mention of the banned faction the colonel’s secretary comes out of the station with the letter, promises to deliver it to the proper authorities, and hesitating “a moment, then step[s] across and [shakes] hands with [Orwell]” (*Homage to Catalonia* 161). It is a gesture which deeply touches the writer. He elucidates, “standing outside the Chief of Police’s office, in front of that filthy gang of tale-bearers and ‘agent’ provocateurs, any of whom might know [he] was ‘wanted’ by the police,” it takes courage and character to shake hands with Orwell. “It was like publically shaking hands with a German during the Great War,” he explains to his English audience, “it was good of him to shake hands.”

Two distinct iterations of the “essential decency” are articulated through these representations. The first is a small act of altruism, the second a basic display of courage. In the first case the two soldiers present a material gift despite the fact that tobacco is scarce and valuable – soldiers smoked it to keep warm in the trenches. In the second case the “little slip of an officer” risks personal freedom to show Orwell basic civility. It would have been more prudent for him to turn Orwell in to the police, but he does not. Rather, he shows Orwell decency in the form of his silence on the matter of the POUM and the courtesy of shaking a man’s hand when saying goodbye.

Walter Ong argues that the writer’s audience is always a fiction within the “game of literacy” for at least two functional reasons. The first is that in the act of writing the writer must construct his/her audience in “some sort of role – entertainment seeker, reflective sharers of experience . . . , inhabitants of a lost and remembered world

³ Margery Sabin, in her reading of Orwell’s nonfictional work from the 1930s, analyzes this moment and concludes Orwell extracts such a positive takeaway through an articulation of decency as a shared human value. She writes that in the face of the violent political realities evoked by the book “[decency] comes to designate a shared physical and emotional humanity distinct from politics and propaganda – all that is not ‘official’, in the sense that every form of politics soon becomes” (56). The answer, according to her, is a common humanity between those living through events as opposed to the over-determining political formulations of how such moments are officially interpreted, framed, and deployed. It is true that Orwell qualifies his interpretations of his time in the trenches and in Barcelona as subjective and “partisan”; even full of “mistakes of fact and distortion inevitably caused by having seen only one corner of events.” Nonetheless, the key to understanding his memoir on his Spanish experience, I contend, is his affirmative point that “the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings.”

⁴ At that point in the internal-Republican conflict, the government had successfully initiated a reign of terror on the city, occupying it with its communist-backed Popular Army, and arresting anyone remotely connected to anarchists or Trotskyist factions

of prepubertal latency..., and so on” (“The Writer Audience is Always a Fiction” 60). The second is that the reader “has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of his life.” This literacy game can take many genre forms – as Ong shows through his exposition of Hemingway, Chaucer, and Charlotte Brontë – but the particular form that applies to Orwell’s writings is journalism, which is about getting the story across quickly so a camaraderie between the narration and the reader can be easily established. “The reader is close enough temporarily and photographically to the event,” writes Ong, “for him to feel like a vicarious participant.”

Orwell’s opening statement about Barcelona is about this establishment of camaraderie and about providing contextual information about an event the reader⁵ is interested in learning about. Decency, as a concept of appeal, is a part of this functionality. But it is also more: it is a coordinate of a role that the reader has to play, a modality of character not corresponding to how the readers actually live. “It is the reader’s responses that Orwell has in view all of the time,” writes William Cain about Orwell’s distinctly lucid prose style, “he anticipates them and coaxes and coerces adjustments in our pathways through them. Orwell writes sentences that reveal his thoughts and feelings and that prove acts of analysis and reflection in us” (80).

Decency as Critical Normative or Orwell’s Recursive Invention

Decency, building of its descriptive functionality, enables the argument Orwell makes for “his own eccentric brand of socialism” effective (Rossi and Rodden 3). Orwell’s depiction of life in Barcelona concludes that “true socialism was possible” and therefore its “formal principle” functions as a critical-normative, an ought, in comparison to which he judges and interprets the events making up his accounts (Rossi and Rodden 5). In his own words: “If you had asked me why I had joined the militia I should have answered: ‘To fight *against* Fascism,’ and if you had asked me what I was fighting *for* [sic], I should have answered: ‘Common decency’” (*Homage to Catalonia* 169).

To understand what Orwell’s “eccentric brand of socialism” is and to see it in terms of the principle of “common decency,” it is important to situate it as the site of invention for his arguments “*against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism.” This is illustrated by Orwell’s commentary on encountering an Italian militiaman and his significance to Orwell upon subsequent reflection. Orwell begins his narrative (literally the first line in the work) talking about seeing an “Italian militiaman standing in front of the officer’s table” (*Orwell in Spain* 31). He says he likes the man immediately and, though they spend only a few moments with him, the image of the militiaman becomes a permanent memory. Orwell writes:

With his shabby uniform and fierce pathetic face he typifies for me the special atmosphere of that time. He is bound up with all my memories of that period of the war – the red flags of Barcelona, the gaunt trains full of shabby soldiers creeping to the front, the grey war-stricken towns further up the line, the muddy, ice-cold trenches in the mountains.

On first impression this take strikes the reader as simply good writing; it is what Raymond Williams calls Orwell’s organizational style of positing a “first, representative experience,” which “shapes and organizes what happened to produce a particular effect, based on experience but then created out of it” (59). Within such a reading

⁵ As John Rossi and John Rodden argue, Orwell was singularly critical of the British socialists because of their elitism and hypocrisy: “[in *Road to Wigan Pier*] Orwell argued socialism [in England] attracted a strange type of intellectual cut off from the people – in a celebrated passage he labeled them an unhealthy amalgam of fruit juice drinkers, nature cure quacks and nudists” (4). Furthermore, the scholars point out, Orwell’s aggressive criticism of the socialists “embarrassed” his publisher, the left wing socialist Victor Gollancz, whose readership were the very parties the writer was so critical of. It is also important to note that it was his “political opinions” on the socialists which played a large part in Gollancz rejecting *Homage* even though he had a contract for it.

It was the British intelligentsia and socialists who represented Orwell’s readership, and it is telling that his criticism of the English leftists for their whitewashing of the Republican purges in Barcelona was a step too far. Despite relatively good reviews and even though *Road to Wigan Pier*, his previous book, sold extremely well, *Homage* sold only “683 of a modest run of 1,500 in its first month” and there were still unsold copies from the primary printing at the time of Orwell’s death in 1950 (Buchanan 303). It had to sell “poorly in the Popular Front atmosphere of the late 1930s, but it cemented Orwell’s reputation as an arch-foe of communism” (Rossi and Rodden, 6). It was this same reputation that meant the 1952 edition “elevated Orwell to the rank of a secular saint” (Buchanan 308).

⁶ This section was originally part of Chapter V, with its macro-political analyses of the situation in Catalonia, in the first edition *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell, towards the end of his life, requested that the newer edition of *Homage* to remove sections of macro-political analyses to make the narrative more coherent reading. But his requests for these changes were only accommodated in the Complete Works of George Orwell, published in 1986. In *Orwell in Spain*, Chapter V of the original text is moved to Appendix I.

Orwell's preparatory listing of the trenches, the cold-mountains, the train full of soldiers indexes all the significant events that follow logically and emotionally. If it were a linear narrative, Orwell would not talk about things he has not yet experienced. But he does not do that: instead he foregrounds what is to come.

I contend it is equally important to see that Orwell never explicitly lists the militiaman in the series of the red flag, the train full of men, etc. Rather, he talks about the militiaman before listing these images, stating "his shabby uniform and fierce pathetic face . . . typifies . . . for me the special atmosphere of that time." While it might be easy to dismiss this linguistic organization as simply discursive happenstance, I believe it would overlook a more accurate reading of the militiaman as typifying, or in Williams' words, being a representational experience, and how it works under decency as a site of invention in the era of literacy.

Ong explicates the revolution in discourse that was literacy in terms of its directive for "exquisite circumspection" in writing:

To make yourself clear without gesture, without facial expression, without intonation, without a real hearer, you have to foresee circumspectly all possible meanings a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation, and you have to make your language work so as to come clear all by itself, with no existential context. The need for this exquisite circumspection makes writing the agonizing work it commonly is. (*Orality and Literacy* 103)

Orwell certainly understood this need to delimit the interpretation of what is written down. He repeatedly called for maintaining specificity in language, and it is arguably this reason for controlling the meaning "a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation" which was the basis for such statements: "I will only say that of late years I have tried to write less picturesquely and more exactly" ("Why I Write" 441). It is this same reason that is the rationale for Orwell to detail an account of war with vivid notations of "the look and feel of mundane human experience even in quite extraordinary circumstances – war as well as poverty" (Sabin 52). "A louse is a louse and a bomb is a bomb," he writes as he conflates the specifically horrific living conditions the soldiers lived in as they fought the enemy, "even though the cause you are fighting for happens to be just" ("Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War" 344).

Furthermore it is this aspect of "exquisite circumspection" that causes Orwell to tell his literary executor to relegate sections of general information about "the Spanish political scene to two appendixes. The consequence is a smoother text, but also one that engages far less overtly with the internecine debates of the period" (Buchanan 310). Having written down and published his experience in Spain, Orwell felt compelled to make corrections to the text with "reflective selectivity that invests thoughts and words with new discriminatory powers" (Ong 103).

Cain says reading Orwell's essays (in general) is "special – bracing illuminating, invigorating" and his essays from the 40s "is one of the major achievements of modern literature" (76-77). "Looking Back on the Spanish War" certainly fits both categories. Its style is Orwell at his finest and most lucid, and its greatest vigor lies in the succinctness with which he is able to ruminate on issues of significance such as propaganda, fascism, the fight of the common man for "what the world owed them and was able to give them," the hypocrisy of the intelligentsia and others that "preach against [working class] 'materialism,'" and the need for "neutral facts on which neither [political] sides would challenge the other" ("Looking Back on the Spanish War" 354-357). It is the basic fact of "exquisite circumspection" of literacy, which enables and forces Orwell to reflect on the events of the war illustrated in his memoir with "the heightened political consciousness of retrospection" into a reiteration of his experience in the form of a critical-normative argument based on "common decency" and signified by the Italian militiaman who burns himself into his memory.

Orwell likes the Italian militiaman straight away and, more so, the man becomes an image "bound up in [his] memories." But strangely Orwell, showing uncharacteristic reticence, does not say much more about the man and never comes back to him in *Homage*. He goes on to elucidate his experiences in Barcelona, the trenches, etc. in vivid and evocative detail. The Italian militiaman is seemingly overlooked. However, the fact is Orwell never really forgets, but also he could not immediately understand without a "reflective selectivity" enabled by the written word the significance of the militiaman. The meaning of the Italian militiaman had to be understood

slowly, and functions as the site of recursive invention on which “arguments, or the substance of a message, are discovered or devised” (Crowley 6). It is only upon looking back on the war six years later that he is able to voice and consciously “discover” the deep structures and realities hiding behind the image of his memory of the soldier. Finally, understanding the true “substance of the message” of the war and all that happens subsequently, Orwell articulates a poignant argument for his reasons for supporting the war. He writes: “When I remember – oh, how vividly! – his shabby uniform and fierce, pathetic innocent face, the complex side – issues of the war seem to fade away and I see clearly that there was at any rate no doubt as to who was in the right. In spite of power politics and journalistic lying, the central issue of the war was the attempt of people like this to win the decent life” (“Looking Back on the Spanish War” 360).

It is in this moment that we see decency functioning as a site of invention for a critical normative argument. For in the following section presenting a powerful explication behind the systematic exploitation of the working class by the status quo, Orwell points out the working-class demands only “the indispensable minimum” (“Looking Back on the Spanish War” 361). He explains, with the knowledge of several years of hindsight, the Spanish Civil War was not about fighting Fascism or a warm-up to World War II. It was about common working classes winning a decent life, which he states as:

Enough to eat, freedom from the haunting terror of unemployment, the knowledge that your children will get a fair chance, a bath a day, clean linen reasonably often, a roof that doesn't leak, and short enough working hours to leave you with a little energy when the day is done ... That was the real issue of the Spanish War, and of the last war, and perhaps of other wars yet to come. (“Looking Back at the Spanish War” 361)

It is a definition of life that he otherwise states as only possible under democratic socialism at that historical moment in Europe. While it might seem Orwell is using this view of how life ought to be to criticize the actual conditions, we also have to remember that decency is a descriptive in his writings as well. Decency is the way individual people actually are: it is the character of the Spanish soldiers and the officer. As such Orwell's representations show that his view of how life ought to be is actually a normalization of the individual's “one of the right ways of living.”

Conclusion

Decency in Orwell's rhetoric describes and promulgates. In the former functionality, it enables a bridge that is an “invitation to rhetoric” for his English readership. Orwell's careful prose forces the bourgeois reader to “make adjustments” to make the representations of the Spaniards that is part of the communicative act successful, and in the process are “acts of analysis and reflection in [the readers themselves].”

Subsequent arguments, in “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” about the real significance of the Spanish War as the fight of the working class for material gains thereby become not excessive demands, but legitimate ways of living. Their call for material benefits that was “technically possible” becomes an iteration of decency as a critical normative that is a moral obligation to support for the English literate classes. It is a sagacious practice of rhetorical invention because it draws on “persuasive potential that exists within language ... [to] invent culturally effective arguments” (Crowley 168). “Who, after all would dispute the claims of decency?” writes Lang on Orwell, “Who before that, would bother to mention them? In this appeal to something resembling moral intuition, furthermore, we undoubtedly hear an echo of the code of values to English upper-class character”(431).

Furthermore, his reevaluation of his Spanish experience in his essay and his defining of democratic socialism as a program of common decency also shows how the literacy enacts a transformation in both the modality and the meaning of a message. Prominent writing scholars Linda Flower and John Hayes conclude their study of expert writers: “Writers themselves create the problem they solve. The reader is not the writer's only fiction” (468). It is important to understand that Orwell does indeed create a different problem to address in his essay than the one he tackles in his memoir. In the latter, one of his major goals was to bear witness to the purges in Barcelona and thereby put to lie the discourse in England at the time that there was no revolution in Spain at the time and it was only about protecting the elected Republican side from the aggrandizements of the Fascist Franco. However, in his essay, Orwell uses the same experiences and the same key vocabulary to articulate a validation of workers'

rights for material benefits. When he concludes his essay saying the working classes “are right to realize that the real belly comes before the soul, not in the scale of values but in point of time” it recursively functions to reinterpret the meaning of the memoir as well because the text of that experience is transformed by this articulation by the author (“Looking Back on the Spanish War” 361). The meaning of both texts change because the problem Orwell creates in these acts of writing on the Spanish experiences changes in his various engagements with those experiences, and his notion of “common decency” turns from function of character into a political program.

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