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About Literary Wars

W

e sat at one of those high round tables at a neighborhood beer joint. At the bar, somebody commented on the wisdom of the war in Iraq. We glanced at each other and continued to swallow beer.

Then, from somewhere in our own circle, I heard the question. “So tell me, what’s your favorite literary war?”

“Can we go back to the Greeks?”

“Sure, the Greeks wrote some good wars. If you need to show off, you can use the Peloponnesian War.”

“Oh, first we have to decide. Both nonfiction and fiction? Cause if it includes nonfiction, the Civil War has a bushel basket bibliography. Without the Civil War, half the guys teaching American history would never have earned a pee-atch-dee.”

Next day, home and alone, I considered the question more seriously, and I restricted it to modern literature. My father, an immigrant in the early years of the twentieth century, had earned his American citizenship fighting in World War I. On a clean shelf in the basement, my mother had stored his army helmet, one of those round iron hats that I sometimes wore at a rakish tilt for rainy day make believe. But not long after such games, I had begun to read: *A Farewell to Arms*, of course, plus the war stories collected in Hemingway’s *The First Forty-Nine*, *Three Soldiers* by John Dos Passos, Remarque’s *All’s Quiet on the Western Front*. Some time later, I caught up with *The Good Soldier Svejk* by Jaroslav Hasek, still available in paperback and worth the read.

But my favorite literary war? I decided immediately that Tolstoy must be excluded. Nobody was going to beat *War and Peace*. And I also told myself to give up the nonsense and stop playing the literary boob. I spoke aloud the old Hemingway line, “War is a catastrophe which is best avoided.” But too late, for I had already begun to think about Spain.

During the thirties, immigrant families from Europe paid acute attention to any European disturbance. My father’s eldest brother had been the first to emigrate from Europe. After he got himself settled and had a job, he saved to bring the next

brother. Then the two brought a third—my father. And so forth. By the time I was born, seven had arrived here including three aunts, but the youngest brother and his family had yet to make it to America. For many families then, the rise of the Fascist powers in Germany and Italy was ominously more than a European disturbance. Letters stopped arriving, and people simply disappeared, never again to be found. At age eighty, I am the more disturbed by that loss than I was at age fifteen. Or perhaps vainly, I am revising my own small place in history. And so out of an old man's need to do so, I remind the readers of this journal—the very people who do not require reminders from me—what happened. Or more accurately put—what should never have happened.

The Spanish Civil War was a proving ground for the military of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy.¹ With the eager encouragement of General Francisco Franco, Fascist Europe had the real thing for its training maneuvers: Spain. The Luftwaffe and Italian air force flew "practice missions" that killed human beings and destroyed real buildings. The Russians also sent some aircraft to support the Loyalist cause, but for the most part whether we leaned left, right or stood straight, families like mine were grateful for the Russian intervention. Of course, as George Orwell had yet to show us, Soviet intentions in Spain probably had more to do with conflicts inside the international communist movement than in stopping the Axis powers. Unfortunately, the Fascists had no mixed motives. In addition to aircraft, the Italians also sent ground troops, and for Mussolini the war in Spain meant nothing less than the reestablishment of a twentieth-century Roman empire where Benito himself would reign as emperor. Only after his defeat in WWII could his ambitions be judged as absurdly grandiose. Franco had hoped more for a return to feudal Spain with dukes and duchesses and beautiful women descending palace staircases.

For many people in England but some here in the United States as well, there was no choice possible between the Loyalists and Franco. To support the Republican or Loyalist government was to side with Stalin. To support the rebels was to side with Hitler and Mussolini. For many people, neither side could be supported, and some people lumped Stalin in with Hitler and Mussolini to make a trio of despicable dictators. For many Spanish Catholics, to support the Loyalists was to sin against the church. Whether eagerly or reluctantly, many good Catholics backed Franco; even more, especially the middle class and wealthy, sat as silently as possible waiting for it to end. Depending on which side held the town, they changed everyday wearing apparel from work clothes to their more stylish modes of dress.

England and the United States, far from being ready to take on Hitler, asserted their neutrality though some members of England's intellectual elite

openly supported Franco, Evelyn Waugh among them. Hillaire Belloc stated openly that the war “is a trial of strength between Jewish Communism and our traditional Christian civilization.” I mention this here to remind Europe and England, currently so critical (and from my perspective rightly so) of the Bush administration as being a Christian Corporation, that they have a short memory of their own twentieth-century example. Of course, of the Franco supporters, Ezra Pound was the worst. For Pound, “Spain is an emotional luxury to a gang of sap-headed dilettantes.”² Others more properly brought up, those upper-class English who were anti-Semitic, confined their anti-Semitism to snide writing or comments made at a safe London club where they agreed that Loyalist Spain had the support of Jewish Communists in Europe and the United States as well as England.

That accusation is true enough and would be the more damning if such Jewish Communists had been alone in their opposition to Franco. My father, a registered Republican in our small Ohio town and a member of both the American Legion and the VFW, reported that his World War I comrades supported the Loyalist cause. I think that was particularly true of the VFW or maybe my father simply went there more often not for political reasons but for better poker games. Put more squarely, irrespective of their religious affiliation, people—especially the veterans of World War I—recognized that Hitler’s Germany was a more immediate and frightening danger than Stalin’s Soviet Union. If one were counting pro-Loyalist supporters or merely those who despised Franco, Hillaire Belloc’s band of dangerous Jewish Communists would be a group too small for concern.

True, the Comintern (Communist International) did form the Abraham Lincoln Brigade which was part of seven international battalions put together by the Soviets. All of Europe then contributed volunteers to serve the Loyalist cause. And yes, most of the Americans serving in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were communists. If their top leadership was politically savvy, most of the volunteers were kids, many of them college students, idealistic in their goals to thwart Franco but also politically ingenuous, ineptly trained and utterly inexperienced in warfare. A second American Brigade, the George Washington Brigade, was formed, but the casualties were so high for both that the two were merged. As time passed and the American casualties grew ever higher, volunteers from other countries joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade including numbers from Ireland, the sort of good Irishmen ever willing to make the right fight for the right reasons and much preferring to serve with the Americans than the English. Of the 2800 Americans who volunteered for Spain, 900 died in action. By 1938, the number of Spaniards in the Abraham Lincoln outnumbered Americans three to one.³

Many letters of the American volunteers have now been published.⁴ A letter by a Canute Frankson is idealistic but tough-minded. Writing to “My Dear Friend,” Frankson joins his cause as an American Black to the struggle against tyranny in Spain.

... Since this is a war between whites who for centuries have held us in slavery, and have heaped every kind of insult upon us, segregated and jim-crowed us; why I, a Negro, who have fought through these years for the rights of my people, am here in Spain today? . . . Because, my dear, we have joined with, and become an active part of, a great progressive force, on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of saving human civilization from the planned destruction of a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power. Because if we crush Fascism here we'll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world from the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's Fascist heels.

Fighting in Spain, Canute Frankson understood that he was also trying to save my aunt and uncle and three cousins in Europe. I wish I knew more about him and very much hope that he survived the war.⁵

A Toby Jensky, an American nurse, reminds us of what we still need to be told: the consequences of war on little kids.

A little girl was brought in here yesterday—all shot full of holes—both her eyes blown out. It seems that she and a few others found a hand grenade and decided to play with it. Her brother died soon after he was brought in. 3 other kids were slightly hurt and she if she makes it will be blind and all scarred. . . . She's got plenty of guts and certainly can take it—you never hear a whimper out of her. She's about ten years old.

I digress here only to say that what happened to this ten-year-old child, her brother and friends, too often gets lost in war reporting. Neither do I respond favorably to being told that in taking some hunk of territory, we lost “only seven people.” I suggest that we cut the word “only.” My reaction is strong and holds fast to my first time pulling crash crew duty in Nadzab, New Guinea. Newly arrived, my airdrome squadron was getting itself set up and waiting for engineers

to finish building our control tower and paving some hard-stands. Our weapons carrier was parked beside an ambulance awaiting the return of a mission to Hollandia in northern New Guinea. The very first day working the strip, we sped behind the ambulance to a just landed but damaged B-25. As I was getting a fire extinguisher out of the truck, I heard a medic call, "Just bring a body bag." That's the moment I got rid of the word *only* as in "we lost *only* seven people."

Other letters from members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade are typical of those from any and all APO addresses: *should have written sooner, tried to have a party last Saturday, sorry to tell you about Jimmy*. In late November of 1938, a Mary Rolfe writes a long letter about a trip to Barcelona, the charm of the city, how she managed to buy some trinkets despite an air raid. This letter ends with her recalling a visit by Ernest Hemingway. "He's terrific—not only tall but big—in head, body, hands." Before he left, Rolfe writes, "he gave us the remainder of his provisions—not in a gesture. Just gave them to us because he knew we needed them and because he wanted to give them to us. I'm still a little awed by the size of him—he's really an awfully big guy!"⁵

Hemingway also told them that all the previous winter in Key West, he had studied Marx. " 'Otherwise,' he said, 'you're a sucker—you don't know a thing until you study Marx.' " On first reading, I was taken aback. First of all, I would have assumed that most members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade had already read Marx, that such a reading was a principal reason for their being there. From the letter, I infer that this Mary Rolfe and many of her friends had never read Marx. But what astonished me is her apparent assumption that Hemingway agreed with what Marx had to say, and that simply is not the case as members of the Brigade would discover two years later when they read *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway can, however, be called a political liberal. Indeed, Edmund Wilson moves him farther to the left making him one of a trio with Malraux and Dos Passos "for whom the international socialist movement has opened a door to hope and provided a stimulus to action."⁶ In contemporary America where the reigning political party apparently thinks FDR's liberal decencies threaten democracy, Wilson's comment may sound like left wing radicalism, but such is not the case. None of these writers was a danger. Quite the contrary. You've read the books and know that most writers of the twentieth century were political liberals and that includes Ernest Hemingway.

As high school seniors or college freshmen, many of us met Hemingway when we read "The Killers." In that story, Nick Adams must be twelve to fourteen years old. He is in George's diner when two hired killers come in waiting to murder an ex-boxer named Ole Andreson. They terrify the cook, thoroughly intimidate George who runs the place, and frighten Nick who has a towel

stuck into his mouth. When Andreson fails to appear, Nick and the others are released, and George tells Nick to go to Mrs. Hirsch's boarding house and warn the intended victim. Unfortunately, nothing works out as Nick hoped. When Nick asks the intended victim if he can save himself some way, the man replies that he can do nothing. Sooner or later, he must go outside where he will be murdered. Back at the diner, Nick reports to George that Ole can do nothing. Nick says, "I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful." To which George replies, "Well, you better not think about it."

Our teachers hoped we would see what they called the theme of the story, that for Hemingway, a force of evil exists that must be reckoned with but cannot be defeated. When Ole Andreson leaves his room, he will die, and that force of evil will prevail. For Nick Adams then, a discovery has been made. Put another way, an illusion about the nature of reality has been unalterably changed for him. As young readers, like Nick Adams, we were to learn that the world is not the good and benign place we thought that we'd find; killing forces exist which we cannot overcome. Some comparable discovery is made in virtually every Nick Adams story; the lessons learned are cruel, but if we are tough minded when facing such reality, we shall improve our chances to survive though not to conquer. Or put still another way, every victory has its losses. At best then, in Hemingway's fiction, the protagonist is a tragic hero. That is why for Hemingway the bullfight was not a sport but a drama—a drama that he as a writer called tragedy and as a twentieth century man felt compelled to watch. Sooner or later, the matador (who knew the risks) would be gored. Meanwhile, he must fight the bull to dramatize the lesson for all and always in a style appropriate to what could be his ultimate occasion. Call it hogwash if you need to do so though such denigrations come more easily the farther you get from the page.

And so—no—the Spanish Civil War was not being fought to advance a Marxist cause. Not for Ernest Hemingway and not for the protagonist of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In fighting for the Loyalists, Robert Jordan, is not interested in the victory of a left wing ideology or any ideology. Jordan's cause is Spain itself, the Spain which Hemingway loved and where he lived. As for Hemingway himself, Robert Jordan's Spain can also be found in *Death in the Afternoon*, *The Fifth Column*, *The Sun Also Rises* and a number of superbly written short stories.

A casual reading of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (FWBT) would indicate that its author is following a well established pattern. There's a war, a brave protagonist, a love affair, and the death of either the protagonist or the beloved. Robert Jordan, an American college instructor of Spanish, has joined the Loyalist cause as a behind-the-lines guerrilla. His mission is to destroy a bridge, a vital need

for the Loyalist offensive which is to follow. To do this, Jordan must work with a guerrilla force operating in the mountains of the Sierra de Guadarramas, a point in Fascist territory some sixty miles from Madrid. The Republican partisans are drawn from every part of Spain and allow Hemingway to use his vast knowledge of the country and people. Despite Jordan's own apprehensions, the defection of Pablo—the guerrilla leader, the poorly organized Republican forces, Jordan's love for Maria, the bridge is destroyed on schedule. In the escape following their success, Jordan breaks a leg, and the novel ends with his waiting for the rebels to kill him.

Sounds like typical Hemingway territory? Yes, there are no victories without wounds, physical and emotional. But this novel is different, very different, and perhaps the better way to set forth that difference is to read the Donne head-note. I quote just as the language appears in the book.

No man is an Iland, intire of itself; every man is
a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a
Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse,
as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor
of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans
death diminishes me, because I am in-
volved in Mankinde: And therefore
never send to know for
whom the bell tolls; It
tolls for thee.

What is different here? Robert Jordan has a commitment or purpose that precedes any action. Something is to come of it all beyond his being there, beyond his participating on the right side of an adventure or generational experience. Donne's word is the difference: *involved*. In Jordan, a conversion has occurred; he realizes that the sinister machinations of Franco are a threat to all of mankind, and while he is there to save the Spanish earth, he is also there because he knows For Whom the Bell Tolls. "It tolls for thee."

If Ernest Hemingway and André Malraux had met in Barcelona to share a bottle of wine and enjoy an argument about bragging rights, Hemingway would have had to pick up the tab. While it's difficult to believe, for WWI Hemingway had failed the physical—something about his eyes. You will recall that his WWI wound—real enough—came when he served as a volunteer in an ambulance corps. In the years (and wars) to follow, Hemingway frequently stood on dangerous ground but as a keen observer, not a fighter. Malraux was

fourteen years old at the beginning of World War I, but in the years following he was more the adventurer and participant.

Malraux's father, a rich stock broker and an even more successful lady's man, left the family when Malraux was a boy. Brought up by his mother and grandmother, André was a whiz kid in school and specialized in oriental languages, but he didn't bother to graduate even from high school, hence becoming a school drop-out who ended his literary career writing extraordinary books about art. Possibly, his initial swing to the far left was in part a reaction to his father's occupation, but until his alliance with General de Gaulle, his novels served his own left wing ideology.⁷ In what follows, you will see that he behaved bravely and ran real dangers. Put it this way, no matter his being an intellectual on the left, whether fighting in a war or a street brawl, you'd choose Malraux to be on your side.

In his late teens and early twenties, he worked with book dealers and publishers but found that insufficiently compelling. At age twenty-one and already married to Clara Goldsmidt, herself a writer, he and his wife went to Cambodia where Malraux thought he would discover certain statues. Different versions exist about what happened, but in fact Malraux was arrested for taking bas-reliefs from a temple. I am persuaded by those who think the French government set him up because he had supported independence movements among the Vietnamese. How his three-year prison sentence got voided remains a mystery, but it did make the papers. As a consequence of the trial and release, Malraux was something of a celebrity in France; still in his twenties he had a public before he'd published his first book.

Neither did his trouble with the cops bring him home. He stayed on in Saigon where he edited a newspaper with an editorial slant that couldn't have pleased the French government there or in Paris. Common understanding has it that Malraux was a member of the Young Annam League. Put plainly, if he was not one of the organizers of the Viet Minh, he certainly gave them more than editorial support. What followed Saigon is uncertain. On the basis of the novels, it seems more than likely that he spent time in China, but whether he did and just what he did there remains uncertain. Given Malraux's genius brilliance, he may have written *The Temptation of the West* (1926) and *The Conquerors* (1928) out of general experience in Asia, but having read *Man's Fate* (1933), I think he must have spent some time in China.

Home in France, Malraux worked as an art editor for Gallimard Publishing but also continued his archeological expeditions in Iran and Afghanistan.⁸ He also won the Goncourt Prize for *Man's Fate*, the book which firmly established his international reputation and began the translations in the United States. Most of us who read him early began with *Man's Fate* and then worked back to the earlier

novels. Now, he used his fame and ability to raise money to support anti-Fascist and pro-leftist causes. By the mid-thirties, he was also raising money for Spain, but he couldn't stay out of it. In 1936, two days after the fighting began, Malraux left for Spain where he founded an international air squadron—Escadre España but later renamed Escadre Malraux. I don't what kind of bomber he flew though I've a hunch it was a two-engine aircraft, something closer to a B-26 or B-25 than a B-24 or B-17. Some sources say he flew the airplane; others that he sometimes did the flying and still others that he crewed as a gunner. As an old WWII Army Air Corps three-striper, I hope it's the last. I'd be pleased to think that a full colonel with his own small air force named for him was flying as a waist gunner. He was twice wounded and flew sixty-five missions, more than enough in my day to buy rotation home.

Somehow, he also finished writing *Man's Hope*. How he managed to fly missions, raise money and get a novel written is mind boggling, but the book was published in 1938 a year before the end of the war, and two years before Scribner's published Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In style and concentration, the two books could not be more different. As is typical of his writing, Hemingway's technical point of view is the technique of the central intelligence, the literary legacy of Henry James. Using this technique, the author writes not only about the major character but through that character. It is as if Jordan himself is doing the writing. Hence, in this novel, we see and experience the war only as Robert Jordan sees and experiences it, and Jordan is the only character who engages in any introspection.

By contrast, in *Man's Hope* Malraux is all over the place. He is the author omniscient with delegations to other characters and settings as he finds it useful for his purposes. In the opening pages, we are apprised of the confusion of it all. Who is speaking? Who is on which side? For those who chose sides not on the basis of Spain's future but one's social standing, Franco was frightening if more appealing. As mentioned earlier, perhaps most of the middle class Spanish dressed either as peasants or wore their own customary high style clothing depending on which side held what town at what moment in the war. The Loyalist side was declassé: peasants, farmers, workers, and a variety of anarchists. In reading the Malraux novel in the current political climate, one may need to be reminded that the leadership to maintain the Spanish government came from the syndicalists—those trade union officials being the government's stabilizing force. Under Franco, the revolution was waged by the Fascists against a liberal and only moderately left wing government, a government not all that different from the one in present day Spain.

Hemingway's Spanish war is—how to say it, about killing?—a cleaner war, a neater war. By contrast, what we see in *Man's Hope* is the dirt and spoilage that wars bring to heavily populated areas. In the cities, we see barricades made of house furniture, mattresses, clothing, counter tops and goods stolen from stores. To those fighting on the Loyalist side, the institution of the Church was clearly on Franco's side, and some of the barricades contained church benches and confessionals. Malraux makes it clear that he approves of that spoilage though typically enough he urged that the churches be ruined only after the art had been removed and stored safely somewhere.

What we also see in Malraux are the conflicts within the Loyalist cause. If the syndicalists were not totally unsympathetic to the farmers, their interests were not all that similar. The local police forces were more apt to side with the Loyalists. They had some weapons and knew how to fire them, and they could provide some badly needed military know-how. But here is another instance where the police did not identify their own hopes for Spain and themselves with those who should have been brothers-in-arms. Malraux makes clear that in addition to the dislikes within each group, the groups themselves did not much care for each other. If for Malraux, Spain must be saved and the Loyalist cause must be joined, much the better to have one's own small air force, Escadre Malraux. Off the streets and away from the barricades, flying above a war's debris, one reads another and different Malraux.

But at the first rift in the clouds—too small for observation—the instinct of the bird of prey came uppermost again. Like a circling hawk the plane swung round and round, prospecting for a larger opening, the gaze of all on board set vigilantly earthwards. It seemed to them that they themselves were stationary and the clouds and peaks were wheeling slowly round them on a far-flung orbit. Suddenly, at the fringe of a cloud-rift, the earth came into view, and two hundred yards or so away a little puff-ball floated past; the Alcazar had opened fire.⁹

Indeed, it is in flying a life-or-death combat mission that one finds the better Malraux. In other passages, one admires such sardonic whimsy as the comparison of a pomegranate and a hand grenade. But for me, the strongest line in the book is an unexpected pronouncement. Malraux writes: "Christ...was an anarchist who succeeded. The only one." Is Malraux being jealous or respectful of his subject?

Rather than speculate on Malraux's purpose with that pronouncement, I'll move to my third writer about the war in Spain.

George Orwell is one of the all-time classic cases of the kid who didn't fit in.¹⁰ His maternal grandfather had failed as a teak merchant in Burma. A representative of the British government, his own father had some kind of minor administrative job in the Indian civil service. The family was well enough placed in India to be considered sahibs by the Indians, but they were broke. It was Orwell the adult who coined the phrase "the landless gentry." As a boy in Burma, he wanted to know Indian kids as playmates, but that was not allowed by either side. And among the English, Orwell's father was not highly enough placed or the family wealthy enough to be socially acceptable. This situation worsened after their return to England.

A very bright student, Orwell won a scholarship to Eton, probably the best prep school in England. Aldous Huxley was one of his teachers there, and it was here that Orwell began to write for various school papers. But the writing won him no friends and didn't move him one rung up the social ladder. Apparently having had enough rejection, he turned down university scholarship offers and instead went to Burma as an assistant superintendent in the Indian Imperial Police where he served in a number of backwoods country stations. The Burmese communicated clearly to him that they despised being ruled by the British, and typical of his character he felt ashamed of his role as a colonial police officer. But he was also compelled by his desire—make that his need—to write. Surely this need, urgently felt since his boyhood, can be explained in psychological terms—loneliness, the hope of his finally being recognized or acknowledged, his own improvement in England's rigid social structure. I think it's simpler; he wanted to be a writer.

On leave in England, he decided to be done with it and resigned from the imperial police force. Now he took a step that his readers will recognize as basic to his character and the writing to come. Still bothered and feeling guilty that the rules of caste had prevented his becoming friends with the people of Burma, he now sought to identify with the deprived and impoverished of England and Europe. Critics have called his dressing poor in ragged clothes a matter of conscience. During this period he lived in cheap lodging houses in East End London where he came to know the downtrodden and working poor, some of whom kept themselves alive as beggars. He also walked the rural roads of England with vagrants who occasionally labored in the hop fields of Kent. In Paris, he worked as a dishwasher in restaurants.

These are the experiences re-lived in *Down and Out in London and Paris* (1933). His output during the next three years astounds: *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936). In *The Road to*

Wigan Pier (1937), he deals with the impoverished miners in northern England, another experience that Orwell chose to share with them. By the time this book was published, Orwell had already arrived in Spain. For most people, the Spanish Civil War had the usual two sides: the good guys and the bad guys. Franco, endorsed by the Fascist powers, was the bad guy. Aware or ignorant of Soviet machinations, most people believed that after Franco was defeated the good guys would solve their differences as free people living in a democratic government. Orwell believed just that and intended to write about the war from just that point of view. In this sense, he was typical of other writers from free Europe and the United States. But no one who had read his books, his need to share the travail, will be astonished to learn that for Orwell, just writing about the war, was an insufficient response. Shortly after his arrival, he enlisted. And he saw the sort of action that only a front line soldier can see.

Most of his fighting was done on the Aragon and Teruel fronts. He served as a corporal almost from the start, rising soon to the rank of second lieutenant. As the fighting continued and his rank allowed him to see the political mess on the Loyalist side, he became more and more disillusioned though he continued to fight.

I knew there was a war on, but I had no notion what kind of a war. 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, I should have answered: "Common decency."¹¹

The Loyalist military didn't so much consist of an army as a variety of fighting groups. With the proper letters of introduction from likeminded friends in England, fellow members of a left wing labor party known as the ILP, Orwell joined a group known as the Party of Marxist Unification or POUM. That turned out to have been a mistake. He writes: "As for the kaleidoscope of political parties and trade unions, with their tiresome names—P.S.U.C., P.O.U.M., F.A.L., C.N.T., U.G.T., J.C.I., J.S.U., A.I.T.—they merely exasperated me." The POUM was considered to be a Trotskyite group and severely disapproved by the Russian Communist Party. According to Lionel Trilling, Orwell's sympathies lay with the established communist party. Before the end of the war, however, Orwell had no use for either faction and was in as much danger of being killed by the left as by Franco's right. After the war, safely home in England and despite his continuing strong liberal-left convictions, he opposed Soviet Communism with intensity and purpose. And he did so for the rest of his life.

Orwell reports his disillusionment early in the book. So why didn't he just pull out of it? Why continue to risk his life? Despite his disgust with the factions, despite his being bored with the arguments, he saw Spain as the first (if unlikely) sensible and determined response to the Axis powers.

When the fighting broke out on 18 July it is probable that every anti-Fascist in Europe felt a thrill of hope. For here, at last, apparently, was democracy standing up to Fascism. For years past the so-called democratic countries had been surrendering to Fascism at every step. The Japanese had been allowed to do as they liked in Manchuria. Hitler had walked into power and proceeded to massacre political opponents of all shades. Mussolini had bombed the Abyssinians while fifty-three nations . . . made pious noises 'off.' But when Franco tried to overthrow a mildly Left-wing government the Spanish people, against all expectation, had risen against him. It seemed—possibly, it was—the turning of the tide.¹²

As for the several often conflicting sides within the Loyalist military, their differences in approach, and even their varying hopes for post-revolutionary Spain, they did agree that Franco should be defeated. For himself, Orwell puts it simply. Calling it a depressing situation, he writes that "it did not follow that the Government was not worth fighting for as against the more naked and developed Fascism of Franco and Hitler. Whatever faults the post-war Government might have, Franco's regime would be worse." To this I add only that Orwell was the sort to stick it out and do his best to see it through. He did just that, and he paid a heavy price for doing so.

The politics of the war continue, but Orwell now places his emphasis on the fighting itself. We learn about the weaponry including the fact that the two sides had the same make of guns both small and large. Unexploded shells were somehow reconditioned and fired back. Patrols were sent out "to listen." Boots, clothes, food, soap, tobacco were in short supply. Also olive oil. Orwell got a poisoned hand and managed some sick leave. His wife, Eileen, working now for the ILP, came to Barcelona for longer than what might be called a visit, and later after heavy fighting did begin, Orwell frequently put in a day to a week of fighting and then somehow managed to get into Barcelona to spend a bit of time with her and also learn any scuttlebutt she had managed to pick up. One learns that numbers of Italians and Germans were fighting for the Loyalists. Some of them mistaken as the enemy were killed by the Loyalists themselves, but then as

the Italians have recently learned—with our help—such “unfortunate mistakes” sometimes happen in a war.

Orwell’s descriptions of the fighting are both modest and compelling. He has no illusions that he possesses some grand, strategic overview, a fact that Trilling emphasizes in his introduction. Orwell claims to being a dreadful rifle shot and tells us without the slightest qualm of conscience that what he most wants to do is kill Fascists. Finally, in a skirmish that he admits was of no great importance, he thought he had managed to hit the enemy. Then he writes: “However, it was the dog that died—a Fascist sniper got me instead.” First and ever the writer, he tells us that “being hit by a bullet is very interesting,” and he writes several pages of description. I found that I could not compress this description without ruining its effect, and it is too long to quote here. Understandably enough, Orwell renders the scene as though it were happening, and one is persuaded. Still, for all its effectiveness, it is a scene written after the fact. As a writer, Orwell was modest and did not make claims for himself. In fact, in the war passages, he is more apt to be self-denigrating than boastful.

As for the wound, you must read it for yourself. I’ll simply sum it up. He was in the trenches near Huesca. A tall man, he often could be seen, his head being visible above the parapet. On May 20th, 1937, a sniper fired a shot that hit him in the throat. The bullet passed through his neck somehow missing the areas that would have killed him. In that sense, he had what is called a clean wound, good luck if so you wish to call it. In a convalescent hospital in Barcelona, he heard the hostility expressed toward the anarchists. Tired, disillusioned and sick, he applied for a medical discharge. He never fully recovered the use of his voice and spoke in what might be called a whisper loud enough to hear. When he returned from having a discharge document signed, Eileen stopped him in the lobby of the hotel. The POUM with whom he had fought had been declared illegal, and the police were arresting its members. With Eileen, he somehow managed to escape to France.

Put it this way. If you were teaching a course called “How to Lose a War,” you might for your principal text choose *Homage to Catalonia*.

For Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* extended his fame and made him more money than any of his other books. With this novel, he got rich. While he continued to publish, most would agree that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is the last of the great novels. His WWII literary efforts simply fall short. No point here in saying more about his last sad years.

Malraux fought in WWII where he met and became the friend and confidante of General de Gaulle. One wag put it this way: The General would prefer to say as little as possible about anything; Malraux will explain more than you wanted to

know about everything. When de Gaulle came to power, he appointed Malraux as his Minister of Culture, a position that allowed for pronouncements and even artistic edicts. Malraux also began to write his controversial books on art, books that infuriated the academics. Artists themselves didn't feel that way. When Picasso was painting what may well have been his masterpiece, *Guernica*, his own "treatise" on the Spanish Civil War, only Malraux was permitted inside the studio where Picasso was working. For me, Malraux's book on art, the highly personalized *Voices of Silence* may well be the best of his books, fiction and nonfiction.

Orwell simply ran out of luck. Home in England, he wanted to fight for the English in WWII but was turned down for health reasons. And no wonder. He came back from Spain wounded, in pain, struggling to speak. He worked as a "talks producer" for the BBC. These were also the years when he wrote *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, books that made him a bit of money. But his wife, Eileen died suddenly and unexpectedly, and Orwell's own health rapidly declined from continuing bouts of bronchitis to tuberculosis. Publishers at first resisted *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but finally printed it. An immediate success, the book sold more than 265,000 copies the first six months following publication. Orwell didn't live long enough to enjoy the money. Soon after publication, he died when a tubercular lung hemorrhaged.

At the conclusion of his *The Spanish Civil War*, Hugh Thomas provides us with a twenty-five page bibliography, and he calls it only a selected bibliography. There are categories: Documents, Leading Memoirs plus a list called "Other Memoirs." There are pages of what he calls "Leading Contemporary Pamphlets and Polemics, Etc" by which he means writing done during the years of the war. Naturally enough, that category is followed by a list of "Later Accounts." Finally he gets to "Novels" which is subtitled "A Short Selection." I do hope if only for his own health that Thomas himself did not read everything he lists in this bibliography.

Hemingway, Malraux and Orwell can be used as both a start and an ending. In a sense, the least complicated of these books is *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway was perfectly aware of the political complications. That is why he admonished the young Americans to read Marx. Meanwhile, he chose as his strongest character in the novel, the woman—Pilar. It is she who holds it together and sees it through. Never mind the politics of it. Pilar is the country.

But enough. To do more with the subject, I suggest that we meet at some neighborhood bar, a bar with no juke box, no TV hanging down with afternoon soap operas showing. The bar should be polished, not glistening—just polished, and it could and maybe should have a scar or two. We'll have a beer, a pitcher if they sell such. I'll buy. And with the second glass, I'll ask you the question. "So tell me now, partner, what's your favorite literary war? Mine is Spain."

Notes

1. I've used two books to refresh my memory of the war. Both are titled *The Spanish Civil War*. The first is by Hugh Thomas, a Harper Colophon Book. The second was written by Antony Beevor and is published by Penguin. Both these writers are English, and their work was published in England years earlier.
2. Beevor, p. 177. Beevor was educated at Winchester and Sandhurst and served five years in the 11th Hussars. A first rate military historian, he is better known as the author of *Stalingrad* and *The Fall of Berlin*. A fair portion of his active duty was in Germany. He is also a prize winning novelist.
3. These data are from my online version of the 1994-2000 *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
4. The letters from which I'm about to quote were reprinted in *Modern American Poetry* to be found online at www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/scw/letters.htm. MAP reprinted the letters from Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, eds., Madrid, 1937: *Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*, Routledge, 1966. Some members of the Brigade referred to their unit as The Battalion, but I've followed Nelson and Jefferson in calling it a brigade.
5. Neither was Frankson the only Black American to write about his experiences serving in Spain. See James Yates, *Mississippi to Madrid, Memoir of a Black American in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, Open Hand Publishing, Seattle, 1989.
6. For those of you interested in reading more about the volunteers, their adventures and misadventures, see *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, Peter N. Carroll, Stanford University Press, 1994. I am also impressed by the date of publication. The Spanish Civil War continues to compel interest and scholarship.
7. *A Literary Chronicle: 1920-1950*, Edmund Wilson, Doubleday, 1956.
8. I first began to read Malraux more than sixty years ago. Some of what I write here is probably from sources long ago forgotten. A fair hunk of it is mine. I found some facts and data online to refresh my memory and have also taken a quick look at *Malraux, A Collection of Critical Essays*, R.W.B. Lewis (ed), Prentice Hall, 1964.
9. Notice those locations, please. I have never been certain whether these trips were for more than an archeological dig.
10. *Man's Hope*, Random House, p. 145, Stuart Gilbert and Alastair MacDonald, translators.
11. Born Eric Blair in Bengal, India, Orwell took his pseudonym from the River Orwell in East Anglia. I shall refer to him only as Orwell. The biographical data has been culled from a variety of sources including the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, various reviews, and mostly from Orwell's own autobiographical writing.
12. *Homage to Catalonia*, p 47. The edition I'm using is a Harcourt Brace paperback published in 1952 with a first rate introduction by Lionel Trilling. The first publication of the book was in 1938.
13. *Homage*, pp. 48-9.

ALFRED KERN'S best known novel is *Made in USA*. He is a World War II veteran.