

**To:** Dr. Mason Pellegrini

**From:** Stone Fields

**Subject:** George Orwell's Style in "Homage to Catalonia"

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During the summer, I read the novel *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell. I read 1984 previously and hold it in high regard. Also, I am interested in the history of the Spanish Civil War and Catalonia in particular, so I took it as a necessity for me to read this book. When I read this book, though, I was surprised to find that this book was historically analytic, journalistic and incredibly profound. Though this book was abstract at times and would utilize techniques from creative writing, this book is non-fictitious, making it an apt candidate for style analysis. The aspects George Orwell employed are -

- Diction
- Concrete language (showing, not telling)
- Simple sentence structure

- which are stylistic choices that I believe constitute very effective writing, especially in this context. Orwell is using these techniques to create an island of reasonableness in the midst of revolutionary chaos.

## 1 Diction

Merriam Webster dictionary defines diction as

Choice of words especially with regard to correctness, clearness, or effectiveness.

Orwell was very attentive to diction throughout *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell described what being in Anarchist forces was like in the small picture (i.e. interacting with people, living in the trenches) in comparison with the large picture (i.e. politics between rivaling communist factions, how commanding officers took advantage of people). Having simple diction in this context is important because Orwell is attempting to give nuanced historical discourse while maintaining journalistic clarity.

As Glaser says, "The first two things to get straight in your mind before you begin to write are your audience (more on that in a few pages) and your purpose, the requirements of the task at hand" (Pg. 21, Glaser) A mistake that a significant amount of journalists or non-fictitious writers make is having too much flourish or even too little - there exists a compromise in attention to style. Grand lofty language can be bombastic and muddying for the reader's experience, but no one wants to read something bland. Orwell strikes this balance perfectly; simple diction allows Orwell to remain nuanced without bogging down the reader with unnecessary jargon and details. Concrete language assists in this process: by relying less on abstract language and playing on the imagery of war, this allows the reader to form their own ideas,

unbounded by the confines of jargon. Orwell does not use authorspeak to people, saving guidance when needed for the bigger picture. Simple sentence structure is the third member of this trifecta, with the sentence structure really simplifying a lot of the historical minutia.

To begin -

"It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Church bells were being melted down for brass. Down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town where crowds of people streamed constantly to and fro, the loudspeakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night." (Ch. 1, Orwell)

- The quotes "every wall was scrawled with the hammer..." and "almost every church had been gutted and its images burned..." display this simple, concrete language to communicate ideas that are more abstract and overarching to the Spanish war. Walls being scrawled with hammers shows how communists were in control and the church bells being melted demonstrates the tearing down of religious institutions. Orwell's diction allows the events to speak for itself. This choice in style is fitting for history and journalism because it allows Orwell to talk about complex topics such as separation of church and state without using too much jargon. It also details some of the core beliefs of the Anarchists: abolition of hierarchy, the church, and the camaraderie of the revolution without directly referring to them.

These sentences are also very concise. There are many different subtopics being covered, but they all blend together, creating a very cohesive description. Orwell's use of semi-colons in tandem with these concise sentences manages to create passages that blend seamlessly together; the information is dense yet digestible, which is of the utmost importance in a historical novel. The tone created by these techniques is very matter of fact and direct. Orwell's intent in creating this novel was to really depict the fact that the fighting in the Spanish Civil War was just as fervent behind allied lines, so it is incredibly important to have a sharp, sensible tone while discussing these topics which are very prone to emotional interference.

Continuing -

"It is always hateful to be shot at in the dark—every rifle-flash seems to be pointed straight at yourself—but it was the bombs that were the worst. You cannot conceive the horror of these things till you have seen one burst close to you in darkness; in the daytime there is only the crash of the explosion, in the darkness there is the blinding red glare as well. I had flung myself down at the first volley. All this while I was lying on my side in the greasy mud, wrestling savagely with the pin of a bomb." (Ch. 7, Orwell)

- Here (and throughout other passages) Orwell uses concrete language to great effect. Simply showing that they are in immediate danger illustrates much more than saying the battlefield was chaotic. Another subtlety is that his use of words shows that the force he faces is in some sense non-human. He does not mention that people were shooting at him, or that people were firing mortars. His words make it seem like he is fighting against something more abstract than people - he is fighting for his life in the cold embrace of war. This is the power of showing: it completely negates the need for using abstract language and over exposition. Though telling is necessary, especially in these contexts, showing allows historical or journalistic works to transcend simply being informative, often lending to more compelling narratives. These sentences are simple and matter of fact - he is being shot at, the battlefield is raining hell

upon him, and he is waiting. There's no need for complex cluster sentences, action is urgent, and the poignancy of this sentence indicates this. Again, the ambient tone of this sentence contributes greatly to Orwell displaying how terrifying war is.

The final example -

"First of all, what actually happened?

For some time past there had been tension throughout Catalonia. In earlier chapters of this book I have given some account of the struggle between Communists and Anarchists. By May 1937 things had reached a point at which some kind of violent outbreak could be regarded as inevitable. The immediate cause of friction was the Government's order to surrender all private weapons, coinciding with the decision to build up a heavily-armed 'non-political' police-force from which trade union members were to be excluded. The meaning of this was obvious to everyone; and it was also obvious that the next move would be the taking over of some of the key industries controlled by the C.N.T. In addition there was a certain amount of resentment among the working classes because of the growing contrast of wealth and poverty and a general vague feeling that the revolution had been sabotaged. Many people were agreeably surprised when there was no rioting. On 3 May the Government decided to take over the Telephone Exchange, which had been operated since the beginning of the war mainly by C.N.T. workers; it was alleged that it was badly run and that official calls were being tapped. Salas, the Chief of Police (who may or may not have been exceeding his orders), sent three lorry-loads of armed Civil Guards to seize the building, while the streets outside were cleared by armed police in civilian clothes. " (Chapter 11, Orwell)

- Simple, clean diction is in full use here. One of the grander things that was happening in this war was that the POUM (Orwell's regiment) was being rounded up and persecuted. One of the strategies to facilitate this was cutting off the POUM's communications. It was also found out later by Orwell that they cut off the communications of the POUM at the front; the soldiers would come home to be arrested immediately. This simple diction details this persecution in all contexts. This clear diction also shows how absurd the war is, Orwell is very clear and matter of fact in this instance. Orwell's diction allows him to be transparent in his presentation of the infighting amongst these groups. Orwell avoids being "deadwood" and really does an amazing job pruning away unnecessary information, saving these clusters of information for the appendices. Here too, Orwell's use of simple sentence structure is on full-display. In some sense, Orwell's simple sentence structure forgoes the necessity for transitional devices, because he bridges quotes with semi-colons. By using semi-colons, he really trims down the fluff of the sentence and creates something very fluid. The tone here is still matter-of-fact but also displays Orwell's place in a very strange war, where people are fighting in the streets to control the telephones.

## 2 Bibliography

- Glaser, J. (2016). Understanding style: Practical ways to improve your writing. Oxford University Press.
- Orwell, G. (1938). Homage to Catalonia. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/orwell/1938/homage-catalonia.htm>