

of wood. It was rather worse than sleeping on a table, because the bed was not six feet long, and very narrow, and the mattress was convex, so that one had to hold on to avoid falling out. The sheets stank so horribly of sweat that I could not bear them near my nose. Also, the bedclothes only consisted of the sheets and a cotton counterpane, so that though stuffy it was none too warm. Several noises recurred throughout the night. About once in an hour the man on my left—a sailor, I think—woke up, swore vilely, and lighted a cigarette ... [other noises] ... Once when [the man in the corner] struck a match I saw that he was a very old man, with a grey, sunken face like that of a corpse, and he was wearing his trousers wrapped round his head as a nightcap, a thing which for some reason disgusted me very much. (*Down and Out*, pp. 131–2)

Like the other passages discussed, this one conveys a range of sensory impressions, with a strong emphasis on their effect on the narrator—here, a consistent and powerful sense of physical disgust, unrelieved by any comedy or symbolism such as is found in the other extracts. We will see below that ‘realistic’ representation in Orwell is very much something experienced in the senses and feelings rather than coldly observed and recorded. There is always a very emotive tone: involvement and opinion are never far away when Orwell writes of the life of the poor. The impression of realism coexisting with the thread of judgement and feeling comes from an insistence on particularity of reference: here, the measurements of the room, the count of eight beds and six lodgers in them, the bed ‘not six feet long’, the texture and geometry of objects—‘lumpy shapes’, ‘hard as a board’, ‘cylinder’, ‘narrow’, ‘convex’, ‘sunken face’, and so on. Orwell is also fond of material arrangements that the reader has to work at to visualise: ‘his trousers wrapped round his head as a nightcap’, a precise, grotesque and defamiliarising image.¹⁴

NATURALISM IN *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA*

In the next section of this chapter I will discuss some heightened versions of ‘realistic’ writing, and the way they carry social and political judgement. But before moving on from the subject of naturalism or ‘sordid realism’, it is appropriate to refer to its place in the third of the ‘mixed genre’ books that Orwell wrote in the 1930s, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). In December 1936, Orwell ‘had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do’ (*Catalonia*, p. 8).

Catalonia is his record of the time and the atmosphere (a word which recurs in the book), of his very physical experiences of warfare in the trenches and of violent turmoil in Barcelona; and his discussion of the politics of the various parties involved in the Spanish Civil War, and of British responses to the War.

Orwell was conscious that Spain, like Wigan, Paris, Burma and the London of the destitute, was unknown territory to his middle-class English reader. In this book, Spain in civil war has to be communicated physically to those who have not had his privilege of direct experience, and discussed politically for those who may be misled by foreign commentators who have not observed directly. We are concerned with the former aspect of the work, the communication of material conditions and atmosphere. He writes:

I wish I could convey to you the atmosphere of that time. I hope I have done so, a little, in the earlier chapters of this book. It is all bound up in my mind with the winter cold, the ragged uniforms of militiamen, the oval Spanish faces, the morse-like tapping of machine-guns, the smells of urine and rotting bread, the tinny taste of bean-stews wolfed hurriedly out of unclean pannikins. (*Catalonia*, p. 103)

These phrases are shorthands or mnemonics for scenes and topics that are detailed earlier in the book. Orwell conveys the squalid physical experience of the trenches, the filth and cold and deprivation, in considerable detail; also the devastation of the areas around the front, and of the villages and buildings touched by the War. Here is one such piece of naturalistic description:

[Alcubierre had] ... the peculiar squalid misery of the Aragonese villages. They are built like fortresses, a mass of mean little houses of mud and stone huddling round the church, and even in spring you see hardly a flower anywhere; the houses have no gardens, only back-yards where ragged fowls skate over the beds of mule-dung. It was vile weather, with alternate mist and rain. The narrow earth roads had been churned into a sea of mud, in places two feet deep, through which the lorries struggled with racing wheels and the peasants led their clumsy carts which were pulled by strings of mules, sometimes as many as six in a string, always pulling tandem. The constant come-and-go of troops had reduced the village to a state of unspeakable filth. It did not possess and never had possessed such a thing as a lavatory or a drain of any kind, and there was not a square yard anywhere

where you could tread without watching your step. The church had long been used as a latrine; so had all the fields for a quarter of a mile around. I never think of my first two months at war without thinking of wintry stubble fields whose edges are crusted with dung. (Ibid., p. 19)

The hallmarks of naturalism are here as they are in many passages of the book: references to mundane or unpleasant things, 'mud', 'mule-dung', 'lavatory', 'drain', 'latrine', 'dung'; negative adjectives, 'squalid', 'mean little', 'ragged', 'vile', 'clumsy', etc.; an almost exaggerated judgement as in 'peculiar', 'a mass of', 'even', 'unspeakable'. This kind of naturalism is a prominent style in the early parts of *Homage to Catalonia*: the accounts of life in the trenches offer a strong and repulsive physical evocation, with great particularity, and are a strength of a book that has been much admired.

REALISM, JUDGEMENT AND SYMBOLISM IN *THE ROAD TO WIGAN PIER*

Although the passages from *Down and Out* and *Catalonia* just quoted are naturalistic in technique, heightened in tone, and convey, as so often in Orwell, repulsion, they are at least 'concrete' and 'objective' in their detailing of shape, texture, measurement and the narrator's sensory perceptions. In relation to this concreteness, we may recall Orwell's later reflection that 'So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to ... love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects' (cf. Chapter 3, p. 19 above). In *Wigan Pier* there are more passages of naturalistic description of this kind: based in objective observation but emphasising squalor and his response to it:

There were generally four of us in the bedroom, and a beastly place it was, with that defiled impermanent look of rooms that were not serving their rightful purpose ... We were therefore sleeping in what was still recognisably a drawing-room. Hanging from the ceiling there was a heavy glass chandelier on which the dust was so thick that it was like fur. And covering most of one wall there was a huge hideous piece of junk, something between a sideboard and a hall-stand, with lots of carving and little drawers and strips of looking-glass, and there was a once-gaudy carpet ringed by the slop-pails of years, and two gilt chairs with burst seats, and one of those old-fashioned horsehair armchairs which you slide off when you try to sit on them. The room had been