

of Orwell, the dangers he is seeking to describe, the assumptions his work entertains. Rorty's view that the postwar Orwell was "neither transparent nor simple" should prompt us to reexamine not only the Orwell myth but also crucial features of Orwell's prewar writing that this myth has obscured. Instead of a writer with uninspected ideas on the relation between truth, language and reality, what one discovers in the texts of the thirties is a writer unusually aware both of new ways in which social and political realities were being constructed within the interwar period, and the consequences that these new forms of construction held for the very views on "transparent" texts and "authentic" experience Orwell is commonly assumed to have held. This early attention is significant not only because of the insights it can generate into the new roles of artifice in the thirties, but also because it allows us to reconsider ideas about the "empiricist" strain in Orwell's work. And this is a strain that Rorty's discussion lets stand when, for instance, he argues that Orwell's best work challenges ideas, rooted in earlier work, such as the following:

The crucial opposition in Orwell's thought is the standard metaphysical one between contrived appearance and naked reality. The latter is obscured by bad, unnecessarily sophisticated theory. Once the dirt is rubbed off the windowpane, the truth about any moral or political situation will be clear. Only those who have allowed their own personality ... to cloud their vision will fail to grasp the plain moral facts. (173)

In what follows I shall argue that, by contrast, these texts of the thirties suggest that Orwell values the "window pane" text not because he is a prisoner of an uninspected empiricism, much less because he believes that some unmediated idea of truth is "out there" to be bumped into, but rather because of the *absence* of any such unmediated truth. Equally, inspection of these texts reveals crucial alternatives to the sense of political impotence that haunts *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, alternatives which can be understood as one of the most valuable of the legacies of Orwell's work in the period, and indeed of the period itself.

UNREADING ORWELL: ARTIFICE AND TRUTH IN *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA*

Orwell's reflective account of his experience during the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), is a key text for those seeking to understand how the representation of events had, in the thirties, become intensely problematic for even the most careful of observers. In this text the shifting

barrier between mythic and reliable representations of conflict is a casualty of war which Orwell hopes to diagnose and to heal. The narrator offers himself as a lonely truth-teller, dispelling myths about the conflict wherever possible, arguing for a proper understanding of the nature of “real” war, with its countless privations, its brutality and its carnage. Orwell’s task is all the more urgent because of his awareness that the Spanish war is an ideological battle, subject to the obfuscations and interpretations, not to say the deception, of ideological positions, which he hopes to untangle and question.

Yet as numerous critics have pointed out (Norris 1984, 243), a conscious effort to “speak the truth” is not, in itself, a guarantee that the truth can be told.² Indeed, this very effort at honesty may unwittingly disguise the fact that there is more to telling the truth than the conscious wish to avoid deceit. A notorious example concerns Orwell’s role as participant, rather than spectator, in violent exchanges, where, as Valentine Cunningham has noted, he “carefully minimizes the killing he is himself actually engaged in by playing up the farcicality of his ... unit. He presents himself and his comrades as badly armed, mere children, people who can’t shoot straight ... They’re a harmless joke,” where the war becomes a “comic opera with an occasional death,” a “bloody pantomime” (1988, 424). In this description Orwell finds his ethical status as truth-telling observer in conflict with that of combatant, and plainly it is the observer whose neutrality is compromised in the narrator’s attempt to limit the ethical consequences of his potentially lethal actions. Although one might reasonably claim that Orwell is fulfilling an ethical obligation in writing against myths of revolutionary heroism, it is also true that in viewing the Spanish war as a “comedy,” and as a “false” war, Orwell further undermines his neutral stance by invoking uninspected assumptions about what a “real” war might be like. Furthermore, his sense of the war as comic, rather than heroic, implies an opposition that is deeply mediated by Orwell’s own cultural background. Certainly this may not be a war of heroes, if any war is; it does not follow, though, that the war must be a comedy continually teetering on the brink of farce, or of meaninglessness.

It is plain, therefore, that Orwell does not meet his own standards of neutrality in his description of the Spanish conflict. What is interesting about his narrative, however, is how Orwell himself begins to recognize this failure, and briefly entertains the possibility that the criterion of neutrality is not simply a difficult one to live up to for even as strenuously an objective reporter as himself, but is in fact from the beginning an impossible goal. Urging his readers to distrust even his own account Orwell notes that: “I believe that on such an issue as this no one is or can be completely truthful. It is difficult to be certain about anything except what you have seen with your own eyes, and consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan” (230–31).

The expressed caution in these lines can be read as a kind of ideological ruse, where the narrator's disquiet about the possibilities of untruthfulness actually serve to increase the reader's confidence in his narration. Here, one might think, is an observer so scrupulous about the need for honesty that he urges caution even about his own story; here is an observer who can, therefore, be trusted. More interesting about this declaration, though, is what Orwell is prepared, and unprepared, to recognize about the conditions of truth that obtain in his narrative. He allows that everyone can be "unconsciously" influenced by one's partisanship in describing a particular state of affairs, yet also insists that one can be certain that some things are beyond distortion by this partisanship. One can be certain about "what you have seen with your own eyes." Obviously this statement is in a certain sense deceptive. It implies that one can witness events without selection or interpretation, and indeed that the very act of witnessing is not an act of selection to begin with, and that the act of selection is not itself an act of interpretation. Statements such as this underpin the icon of Orwell as simpleminded empiricist. Yet it is this kind of certainty, I would argue, that Orwell came to doubt, and that he sought to question in his writing that followed *Homage to Catalonia*. This doubt led not to a repudiation of any notion of certainty, but rather to an account of the ways in which one may and may not be certain of what one sees. This is not an account of how there can be no certainty, but rather an account of how by understanding the ways in which the kind of certainty expressed in the above statement is mistaken, and is actually linked to numerous other false certainties that characterize modernity, a more properly reasoned notion of certainty can be attained. Orwell's project becomes, then, not that of considering what one can be certain of, but of exploring what it is to be certain.

THE INCOMPLETE ANGLER: ERSATZ AND ARTIFICE
IN *COMING UP FOR AIR*

As Valentine Cunningham has noted (1988, 256), the world George Bowling inhabits in *Coming Up for Air* (1939), from "new false teeth" that open the novel to the pseudo-natural suburb of Pixie Glen that closes it, is dominated by the ersatz. This falseness seemingly militates against the possibility of adequate judgment that might form grounds for certainty. Like Conrad's Marlow, Bowling distinguishes himself from his fellows by his ability to discern and despise the fake, although his insights do not initially extend to ways of effectively resisting or of escaping from a modernity dominated by the counterfeit. His work in insurance, he states quite baldly, is an "open swindle," the suburban environment consists, despite appearances, of "a