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Martin Hurcombe, *France and the Spanish Civil War: Cultural Representations of the War Next Door*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011. 245 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-2082-8.

Review by Jessica Wardhaugh, University of Warwick, UK.

The French *écrivain engagé* is the subject of a long and lively historiography, with the interwar period richly documented in this respect. From earnest socialists such as Jean Guéhenno, whose commitment spanned essays, journalism, and involvement in Popular Front associations, to the controversial Robert Brasillach, whose aesthetic attraction to the apparent dynamism of Nazism mired him in collaborationism and led to his execution, these figures have continued to fascinate, their lives and writings subjected to both literary and historical scrutiny. Studies of Communist fellow travellers, of right-wing “intellectuals”—although the term had originally been conceived as an insult to the left—and more recently of the “forgotten engagements” of female activists have ensured a buoyant discussion of the personal, political, and literary challenges entailed in this particular form of public involvement. [1]

Drawing on the breadth of this field, Martin Hurcombe’s latest monograph offers an appropriately wide-ranging consideration of the impact of the Spanish Civil War on French writers in the 1930s and 1940s. Though the commitment and writing of some of his subjects is well known—he includes such familiar figures as Charles Maurras, Robert Brasillach, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, André Malraux, and Georges Bernanos—others will be new discoveries for the reader: the once popular novelist Henri Pollès (near-winner of the *Prix Goncourt* in 1945), or Lucien Maulvault, whose 1937 novel *El Requeté* was the first piece of French fiction to narrate the Spanish Civil War. A number of these writers were considered in Maryse Bertrand de Muñoz’s 1972 study of French literature and the Spanish Civil War, but Hurcombe’s claim to originality is to move beyond her conclusions and chronology, deliberately examining “canonic representations alongside the more ephemeral and overtly propagandistic” (p. 3). In particular—and this is the theme that unites his book—his concern is to illuminate more clearly the nature and variety of utopian hopes nourished by this generation of intellectuals, and (more problematically) the ways in which utopian ideas and writings impacted on real political choices and behaviour, not only for the authors themselves but also for their wider readership. Hurcombe’s theoretical framework is explicitly indebted to Gramscian thought, and he also draws closely on Karl Mannheim’s sociological study of utopia, explicitly adopting Mannheim’s four-part typology, and seeking to counter the latter’s fears of the decline of utopian thought in the interwar period (had Mannheim lived beyond 1947 and into the 1960s, he might of course have changed his mind). Following Mannheim, Hurcombe contends that “culture more generally constitutes, alongside the economic and political domains, an essential terrain for political transformation” (p. 17), and that utopian ideology offers not so much a negative distortion of reality as a positive and effective means of forging the future.

French reactions to the Spanish Civil War certainly offer a fruitful field for the exploration of literary and political idealism in this period. Although journalistic reports and fictionalized accounts of the war could and did draw French writers out of a familiar context, both mentally and physically, their engagement could also paradoxically be a profoundly introspective experience. In Hurcombe’s analysis, the Spanish Civil War is not so much a window as a mirror in which French writers might glimpse, albeit darkly, the distorted or idealized reflections of their own political preoccupations. Given the nature of the civil war itself, and the European alignments that it prompted or reinforced,

the “war next door” inevitably held premonitions of future international conflict; but it also served as a theatre in which the battles staged by antagonists of left and right might offer striking parallels to political conflicts in neighbouring countries. French observers, depending on their sympathies, could identify the nationalists as model fascists or traditionalists, or discover in the beleaguered republicans a Popular Front more fraternal and revolutionary than its French counterpart.

France and the Spanish Civil War is therefore divided into a number of discrete studies that consider literary or journalistic accounts of the Spanish conflict specifically within their French political contexts. Each chapter, with the exception of the last, focuses either on the left or on the right. The potential convergence of themes explored across the political spectrum is treated somewhat cautiously (“an uncanny mirroring across the political divide”, as Hurcombe describes it on p. 143), and he prefers to depict political struggle (whether in France or in Spain) as a more straightforward opposition between ‘the forces of progress’ and the ‘forces of reaction’ (for example on p. 14). His more pressing concern, in fact, is to delineate the particular and contrasting utopias imagined by partisan groups on each side of the barricade. The first chapter, for example, offers an overview of extreme-right reactions to the war within the circles of influence of Action Française. Here, Hurcombe explores a selection of essays and reportage, including *Visite aux Espagnols* (1937) by the académicien Claude Farrère, and *Au Pays de Franco, notre frère latin* (1937) by the sculptor Maxime Réal del Sarte, better known for his involvement with the youth branch of Action Française in the earlier years of the century. Such works sought in the Spanish context the image and even realization of a “restorationist” utopia: the triumph of traditionalism and, more symbolically, the triumph of “Latin” values over the oriental lure of Communism.

Others on the extreme right were attracted to the Nationalist cause not so much for its promise of restored tradition as for its romantic fusion of principle and action. Young novelists such as Pierre Frondaie and Lucien Maulvault, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle and Robert Brasillach expressed in their works an admiration for the heroism and sacrifice of the Nationalists, and for the potential transformation of the individual within a fraternal, combatant community. With this chapter, Hurcombe contributes to an abiding interest in the “aesthetic” dimension of political commitment for the young right (especially Brasillach), while also contending that Brasillach’s *Les Sept Couleurs* and Drieu la Rochelle’s *Gilles* constitute a right-wing response fully matching that of Malraux’s *L’Espoir* in polemical force.[2]

This detailed exploration of right-wing reactions to the Spanish Civil War is balanced by an equally wide-ranging consideration of the left. Influenced by the Gramscian art historian Simon Dell, whose recent work on press photography offers a lively contribution to the cultural history of the Popular Front, Hurcombe focuses on left-wing writers whose revolutionary hopes were dashed by a French Popular Front government more concerned with national unity and stability than with political transformation.[3] For such intellectuals—among them Jean-Richard Bloch, André Chamson, Marguerite Jouve, and Simone Téry—the Spanish republicans served as an inspiring example, “the image of a community engaged in the radical reformulation of Spanish society, a community that [drew] on a long humanist and revolutionary tradition” (p. 118). Yet the Spanish experience was by no means easy to interpret—and Hurcombe details with engaging sensitivity the personal and literary challenges posed by the development of rival authorial personae: the anguished spectator of wartime atrocities, and the committed writer desirous that these events might be recorded, as Jean-Richard Bloch explained, “[non] pour me servir, mais pour servir” (p. 121).

The following two chapters, both of which focus on André Malraux, continue the exploration of this literary dilemma. The first considers his canonic novel *L’Espoir*, and Malraux’s efforts to grapple with the problem of how defend human dignity through a violent conflict that would necessarily lead to its violation. The second, focusing on the related film *L’Espoir: Sierra de Teruel*, charts Malraux’s shift in emphasis to a spirit of resistance, prefiguring his later political commitment. In the final, comparative chapter, Hurcombe chooses two pieces of writing from 1939 that might seem initially to counter the utopian character of the earlier works considered: Henri Pollès’s *Toute Guerre se fait la nuit*, and Georges Bernanos’s *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune*. Pollès’s novel is a mordant satire on the Spanish Republic (and also, curiously, its swansong); Bernanos’s essay a searing

criticism of the Nationalists for their treatment of the Spanish people. Yet both, Hurcombe contends, “contain within them the seeds of a utopian vision” (p. 216), and his final contention is that these representations of the Spanish Civil War demonstrate the persistence of utopian thought, quite contrary to Mannheim’s contemporary pessimism on the matter.

As this summary suggests, one the major strengths of this monograph is the range of writers considered, and the conscious decision to include lesser-known authors such as Pollès, Frondaie, or Maulvault alongside more familiar names. Notwithstanding this breadth of vision, Hurcombe also succeeds in conveying the particular character of individual responses to a conflict that was emotionally and morally—as well as politically—challenging. The chapter on utopian left-wing responses to the Frente Popular is particularly engaging, interweaving the consideration of political reactions with an emphasis on the literary difficulties that an analysis of the Spanish conflict could present. Similarly striking is the intertextual study of how assimilation of the themes and structure of Cornelian tragedy might shape the representation of the Spanish Civil War by extreme-right authors such as Brasillach (in his case very explicitly). Hurcombe is persistently modest about the originality of this work—even though some of the authors he considers are now little known—and offers only occasional criticism of existing secondary literature. Yet there is no doubt that, particularly as a work of synthesis, this book offers a valuable contribution to the study of intellectual commitment in the 1930s, and a sustained reflection on the utopian quality of engaged writing.

Although this is a wide-ranging work, its subtitle (“Cultural representations of the war next door”) nonetheless suggests still greater breadth. One can appreciate the rationale for the choice of wording: Hurcombe’s sources include literary works, but also journalism and a film. Yet readers might perhaps expect to find some consideration of the wider cultural context within which French writers and their audiences articulated and encountered representations of the Spanish conflict, an area only briefly hinted at in Hurcombe’s work. His chapter on utopian republican reactions includes, for example, some discussion of Simone Téry’s writings on photography, and mentions her own efforts to photograph the effects of the war. However, the only photograph in this book is the striking image on the dust jacket, and the analysis would certainly have been enriched by some reproductions of the magazine photographs referred to in the text, such as the centrepiece of *Regards* on 11 November 1936 (p. 125). Illustrated magazines—together with the newsreels of air attacks that returned to haunt viewers such as Marc Bloch at the outbreak of the Second World War—surely offered some of the most vivid and widely available cultural representations of the Spanish Civil War for the reading and viewing public.^[4] And Robert Capa’s war photography, or Picasso’s painting of *Guernica* (1937) are probably the cultural representations of the Spanish conflict that would spring most readily to the minds of potential readers of this book.

Thus there remains, in my opinion, some unrealized potential for a cultural contextualization that would contribute to the overall strength of this study. Particularly valuable—given the theme and argument of the work—would be some detailed consideration of readership and reception. Hurcombe is emphatic about the “actual, concrete social and political consequences” of literary utopias (p. 115), yet it is precisely this difficult question of how novels or films impacted on the “real” that remains tantalizingly unanswered in its broader context. There is, for example, some consideration of how the works in focus illuminate the political trajectories of their authors: Brasillach’s and Drieu’s novels offer clear evidence of the attraction to fascism that will shape their paths into eventual collaborationism; Malraux’s shifting emphasis from the novel to the film of *Espoir* adumbrates his conversion to Gaullism. Hurcombe also insists, however, that the three primary functions of utopia are “a compensation of present inadequacies, a criticism of these and ‘the expression or education of desire’ that all aim to shape the readership’s desire for an elsewhere and an otherwise.” (p. 147) Yet if readers (and viewers) are important to his argument, they remain conspicuously absent from the text: there are no sales figures for the novels or discussion of their critical reception in the press, which might in turn have given some indication of whether these utopian visions inspired, reassured, antagonized, or perplexed their readers. Notwithstanding the difficulties of analysing such reception, it would, I feel, add a further dimension to this study, as well as offering more detailed support for the central argument.

Conversely, it could also be argued that this latent anxiety surrounding the impact of literature, and the determination to underline the real, transformative effects of its utopias offers a highly appropriate tribute to the subjects of this book. In July 1937, Jean-Richard Bloch delivered a speech to the Second International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture. One of his themes was the particular dilemma posed by the Spanish Civil War to the status of writing as an effective and morally defensible form of action. Returning through France by train after his visit to Spain's sites of violence and mourning, Bloch had been struck by the placidity of the bucolic scenes outside his window: men calming fishing while the Spanish were fighting and dying just across the Pyrenees. Of course, he said, there were volunteers who had offered their lives in the International Brigades and there were writers who had offered their literary services: these, too, had fought for Spain. But was writing really enough? Was it right that ordinary people should die in defence of a "civilized" order in which writers might flourish? Wasn't this sufficient to challenge the very justification for the writer's existence, "donner à l'intellectuel le sentiment qu'il est un débiteur perpétuel et qu'il ne paye jamais assez ?"[5] The question was a troubling and a pertinent one. Hurcombe's book offers a fascinating glimpse into the minds of those for whom it was never quite resolved.

NOTES

[1] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectuals and the French Communist Party. Disillusion and Decline* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Jeannine Verdès-Leroux, "The intellectual extreme right in the thirties", Edward Arnold (ed.), *The Development of the Radical Right in France* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 119–32; Angela Kershaw, *Forgotten Engagements: Women, Literature, and the Left in 1930s France* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

[2] For example Luc Ranson, *Littérature et fascisme. Les romans de Robert Brasillach* (Paris: Minard, 1991).

[3] Simon Dell, *The Image of the Popular Front: The Masses and the Media in Interwar France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

[4] Marc Bloch, *L'Étrange défaite* (Paris: Editions Franc-tireur, 1946), p. 148.

[5] Jean-Richard Bloch, "Ecrire des histoires, ou faire de l'histoire?", *Europe, revue mensuelle* (Paris: Rieder), 15 August 1937.

Jessica Wardhaugh
University of Warwick, UK
J.Wardhaugh@warwick.ac.uk

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