

Goodbye To Barcelona

by Samuel Hux (September 2016)



I never actually met Robert Graves. He lived in Deyá and I in Puerto de Andraitx, but I was too shy to just look him up. I saw him once from the distance of a room: a very tall man with a wide-brimmed flat sombrero walked into the Iberia offices in Palma de Mallorca as I was arranging a flight, asked a clerk a question and quickly left; a man behind me whispered “el poeta Roberto Graves” (*Graves* pronounced in two syllables, *Grá-ves*, as if a Spanish name), the man speaking Castilian (Spanish, that is to say) instead of *mallorquín*, the Catalan of Mallorca (an apparently irrelevant detail back then). But we had a brief literary correspondence (this must have been a year or two before his death in 1985) in which he confided apropos of nothing that he was having trouble with his feet. (Now there’s a small contribution to literary history!) But my thoughts are only tangentially about Graves. His *Goodbye to All That*—to England, that is—was a great deal larger than my good-bye is. . . as Old Blighty is larger than Barcelona.

Spain means essentially two things to me (why is a long story): the Spanish Civil War and Antonio Gaudí. With all due reverence to the Loyalist defense of Madrid, the battle of the Ebro, the Nationalist defense of the Alcázar in Toledo, *y otros*, when I think of the war I think mostly of Barcelona, primarily because of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*—and that book because I once years ago spent a day using it as a guide as I tried, physically, to follow the footsteps of Orwell during the mini-Civil War of May 1937 between the Stalinist-controlled official Left on one side and the anarchists and nominal Trotskyists on Orwell's. Elsewhere in Barcelona—my favorite of all cities, bar none—was and is Antonio Gaudí: the fantastic Park Güell, Casa Milá, Casa Batlló, and, especially, so very especially, *El Templo Expiatorio de la Sagrada Familia*, the finest thing ever to have been or ever to be in Spain. It has no rival.

I am painfully aware that these memories of what I confess make Spain to me *Spain* are attached to Barcelona. . . . in Catalonia. . . . that is to say the city and the region which are—apparently—now most intent on rejecting Spain! I have little to say about the politics of the Catalan independence movement. It is extraordinarily difficult to read the percentages of who is and who is not in favor of independence from Spain: the numbers change with each referendum, but always hovering just this side or that side of 50 percent, depending upon whether one is talking about the preference of actual citizens or the stated agenda of the parties represented in the regional government. All that can be clear on any day when the casual observer (I am not an historian of Spain!) reflects upon the issue is that it is about as hot as an issue can be. Perhaps it would be better for Catalonia to separate from Spain. Perhaps not. Perhaps it would be better for Spain were it rid once and for all of its restless northeastern region. Perhaps not. What can be said with no *perhaps* about it is that Catalonia has long been one of the glories of the Iberian peninsula. While Catalan adventurers once dominated Sardinia and for sixty-five years of the fourteenth century held Athens (!) as a Catalan duchy, Catalonia's history is nothing if not Spanish history: and to imagine Spain's history with little attention to its most dynamic region is rather like writing American history focusing on Washington, D.C., and ignoring New York.

Nonetheless, Spain—that is to say Madrid—has not always appreciated or been kind to Catalonia, especially during the Franco years. On the other hand, it has not always been disrespectful of its proud and resistant partner, so that Catalonia

has been awarded special conditions, such as a stronger than normal regional government—the *Generalitat*—much like what Scotland has enjoyed in the United Kingdom (and in 2014 wisely chose to preserve—although that’s no longer a certainty given Scottish reaction to the British exit from the EU). History here is really a mixed picture. And the independence movement is understandable given the fact that “Madrid’s” greatest injustice toward Catalonia has always been its attempt to “Castilianize” speech in Catalonia, which reached its greatest—but not historically exclusive—degree of insanity during the Franco years, when public use of Catalan was more or less proscribed. But even if the Catalan linguistic nationalist has a kind of justice on his side, his position is nonetheless as stupid as linguistic nationalisms generally are: the English in Canada who prefer to know no French, the French speakers in Belgium who choose ignorance of Flemish, that familiar kind of story. Such nationalists could learn something from the Celtic speakers of the British Isles (Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Manx, Cornish), who know that English must remain their first tongue. No, on second thought, I suppose they cannot learn that lesson.

But let’s face it, there is something perverse in the Catalan nationalist’s attempt to marginalize Spanish. And whether Catalonia successfully secedes from Spain, or whether it retains its present position as an extraordinarily privileged region, there is no evidence at all, zilch, to suggest that the attempt to marginalize Castilian will not continue. “Perverse,” I have said. Spanish is after all a universal tongue, spoken not only in Europe but in North, Central, and South America—and even in the Pacific if only in the drastically altered form of Philippine *Tagalog*, where *como está* becomes *kumusta*. Catalan, on the other hand, travels only as far as Valencia, a sliver of Aragon, the Balearic Islands, and, outside Spain, Andorra, a small part of southern France, and a town in Sardinia. I am eternally grateful that my native language is not Latvian. The argument to follow is, then, rather than political, cultural-linguistic. And, I cannot disguise it, personal.

The Irish novelist Colm Tóibín spent many years in Barcelona and published in 1990 (revised 2002) his excellent memoir-commentary *Homage to Barcelona*. (Nice title!) He taught himself Catalan in order to be able to converse with friends. I never had this problem on Mallorca. There the natives were happy to speak *español* with tourists or expats; indeed they preferred it that way, and obviously wanted Catalan as their private tongue among themselves. Had I tried

(although I never could) to speak *mallorquín* (the local Catalan) to the grocer or bartender it would have been resented as a violation of privacy. Mallorca was truly a bi-lingual society, each of its two tongues having a special function. These were some of the happiest times of my life. Now (actually by the mid '80s at latest) a tourist or expat in Barcelona would have to know Catalan not just to talk to friends but to read street signs and menus and enjoy local TV, and to avoid the contempt of Catalan nationalists and the occasional ideologue disguised as a waiter—this in spite of the fact that roughly half, and maybe more than that (!), of Catalonia's citizens have emigrated from other areas of Spain with Castilian their tongue. Since the death of Franco a cultural revolution has been going on in Catalonia. . . . excuse me, in *Catalunya*.

And Catalan culture is indeed an impressive affair. Touching only the recognizable surface, consider the fact of—besides Gaudí—Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Pablo Casals, and by adoption since he spent his teens in Barcelona although born in Málaga, Pablo Picasso (whose early work graces a museum near the Ramblas, the center of the city). If he could have had his way with his own birth, we could add Federico García Lorca: but he was only a visitor. If I were to add the name of the poet Joan Maragall, you would rightly say “Who?” And you would recognize that I am struggling to find an artist whose art depended directly upon the Catalan tongue. For the simple fact is that Catalan culture is primarily visual and musical, not literary. Mail me the names of world-class Catalan poets, novelists, dramatists, or historians. Of course there was a philosopher who had a profound influence on Gottfried Leibniz, but the Mallorcan polymath Ramón Llull died in 1315. Since poetry is the profoundest test of a language's force, subtlety, flexibility, expressiveness, and music—and since Catalan poetry simply does not measure up to verse in Spanish (truly, there is no competition), this has to say something about *Catalunya's* tongue which the nationalists would privilege to the exclusion or relegation of Spain's international tongue. Some sober considerations:

Catalan (or *català*) is of course a member of the Romance language clan. Among the others (dialects excluded):

I have never heard Rumanian spoken—nor the Romansch of a tiny minority in Switzerland.

Probably a majority of listeners would account French the loveliest of the clan.

When I hear it I hear, primarily because of all the elisions, what I might call, with no disrespect meant, a kind of elegant slurring.

Italian and Spanish sound equally melodious to my ear, differences (diction aside) primarily a matter of national and regional accents. The Spanish "*Quisiera salir para Madrid en el primer avión*" and the Italian "*Vorrei partire col primo aeroplano per Roma*" each sound like poetic yearning instead of mere travel agendas.

Portuguese to my hearing is simply an incomprehensible but lovely Spanish with a lot of *sh-* and *zh-* sounds characteristic of French.

Catalan I find hard to recognize as a Romance tongue. Anyone who mistakenly thinks it a dialect of Spanish simply has no ear. *Quiero* is Spanish for "I wish"; in Catalan it's *vull*. *Hablado* is "spoken" in Spanish; in Catalan it's *parlat*. *Unificado*–*Unificat*. *Partido*–*Partit*. In Castile one might live in *La Casa de Whatever*; on Mallorca in *C'an Whichever*. If you see some visual similarities, you will not hear them. Spanish mostly glides from stressed syllable to unstressed: *-ado*, *-ido*; Catalan almost barks: *-at*, *-it*. When Spanish occasionally ends a word on the last syllable–*unificación*–that closing syllable drones. I believe–*creo*–that what I have said above is true; but in Catalan *creo* becomes the one syllable crash of *crec (!)*. Catalan is all harsh sharps and gutturals. It is clear the native speakers are proud of it, may even find it pleasing. Perhaps Catalonian lovers can utter sweet nothings in each other's ears, but I doubt they can *coo* them. Given that I've never heard Rumanian and Romansch, it is the least poetic of the Romance tongues I *have* heard. Let me put that a little less diplomatically. Catalan is to this foreign ear an ugly language. Maybe that's too harsh, so I will amend that to "an unpleasant tongue" (while lying in my teeth).

If the Catalonians were wise they would embrace the "bi-lingualism" I admired in Mallorca years ago, with two tongues serving different functions. Let them keep their *català* (big hearted of me!), but let them not think they can do without the vastly more poetic *castellano*.

Well, perhaps they *can* do without it, for I am wondering if it is unprecedented for a people to choose quite deliberately to become narrow, trivial, parochial. I suppose not, but there's little comfort in that. In any case, *what saddens me*

is that I—by choice—will probably never visit my favorite city again: Goodbye to Barcelona.

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