

## **Autobiographical Content and Ideological Commitment in Sender's *Contraataque*: A Work of Propaganda from the Spanish Civil War**

Among the many books inspired by the Spanish Civil War, *Contraataque*, by Ramón J. Sender, allows us the opportunity of sharing the experiences of a young participant in this tremendous conflict. Together with his countrymen, Sender suddenly finds himself immersed in a cataclysmic event whose repercussions will tear apart his homeland and shatter millions of lives.

*Contraataque* attempts to convince the world<sup>1</sup> of the great danger posed by the Fascist threat while offering the contrasting model of the Communists who, for the author, embody the hope for a more just society. According to Sender, his own life-long concern for the problem of social injustice begins at the tender age of seven; as a child he witnesses the final agony of an expiring labourer who, after a life of arduous toil, dies in the most abject misery.<sup>2</sup> Greatly affected by the cruelty of such an injustice, the young Sender is thus set upon the path which will bring him to denounce injustice both in his books and throughout a journalistic career devoted to serving the people.

*Contraataque* exhibits a number of contradictions which are worthy of examination. Although the author's intention is to present a realistic portrayal of events, there are passages which are undeniably the product of pure invention. As he enumerates the forces comprising the ranks of the enemy, Sender includes the Church while at the same time manifesting an ambiguity of attitude towards this Institution, doubtless the result of his inability to shake off the lasting effects of his upbringing.

This work supposedly documents several crucial months in Sender's life, but to what extent is *Contraataque* truly autobiographical

and to what degree are the facts distorted in order to enhance the performance of the author/protagonist? Indeed, it is virtually impossible to overlook the arrogance of a man who makes no mention of his own fears yet dwells on the fear shown by others.

Given that *Contraataque* offers many points of interest, it is rather disconcerting that so many critics have neglected the task of doing an in-depth study of this book. It generally receives no more than a brief mention, a few paltry lines dismissing it as mere propaganda. No doubt it came as a disappointment to those who had found themselves in awe of the potential displayed by the young author of *Imán* (1930), *Siete domingos rojos* (1932) and *Viaje a la aldea del crimen* (1934). In any case, there is a persistent tendency to not recognize the significance of this work's ideological and biographical content; perhaps this is an unconscious reproach aimed at an author who might have given the world "the great book of the Spanish Civil War."<sup>3</sup>

*Contraataque* is actually a curious hybrid of several genres, and perhaps for this reason it has been hung with a variety of labels: "report," "chronicle," "testimonial," "historical document," etc. Most critics, with little or no explanation, tend to classify it as a "testimonial" and, above all, as "propaganda." King, in his study of Sender, includes *Contraataque* among the author's journalistic works, claiming that it is "a personal narrative of the author's experiences and observations as an active combatant with the Loyalist forces."<sup>4</sup> Carasquer describes it as "destined to serve as propaganda abroad,"<sup>5</sup> although Rodríguez Monegal assures us that it has been written "for the very explicit purpose of boosting the morale of the Republicans."<sup>6</sup> For Ponce de León it is "simply a work of propaganda destined for the foreign market,"<sup>7</sup> an opinion shared by Nonoyama, who adds that "there are short, personal narrations, episodes of the war lived by Sender himself, with reflections generally of a moral nature."<sup>8</sup> Only Max Aub believes that *Contraataque* is a "novel," though "with neither soul nor spirit."<sup>9</sup> In his brief Introduction to the English version, *The War in Spain* (July, 1937), P. Chalmers Mitchell, a translator and friend of Sender's, displays his own propensity to create propaganda when he summarizes the book in the following manner:

His is a personal narrative of what he saw with his own eyes. It is the work of a great writer, a poet and psychologist who is a man of extreme

personal bravery and a passionate admirer of a people fighting for bread and freedom and in defence of the liberties they thought they had won by peaceful and democratic means.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Rafael Bosch, evidently impervious to the book's emotional outbursts, demonstrates that it is really a question of one's point of view when he informs us that "During the war, Sender publishes his thoughtful and moderate *Contraataque*."<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, *Contraataque* is difficult to classify. Sender, novelist and journalist, allows these two occupations, related yet distinct, to merge, situating him in a literary limbo "between aesthetics and History."<sup>12</sup> On one hand he tries to create an atmosphere of reality by adopting the tone of a "report" but, at the same time, he does not renounce the use of novelistic techniques such as the introduction of letters about whose existence the reader really must entertain serious doubts.<sup>13</sup> Given this ambiguity, Resson is quite correct in asserting that *Contraataque* is "novelistic material in the rough...direct testimony, in which the story's protagonist is identified with the author himself."<sup>14</sup>

*Contraataque* is undoubtedly a work of propaganda, but it must be pointed out that the terms "propaganda" and "truth" are not mutually exclusive. Here, the term "propaganda" is not used with the pejorative connotation which it has been unable to shake off since its extensive use during the World Wars.<sup>15</sup> The Royal Academy of Spanish Language offers the following definition: "action or effect of making something known with the objective of attracting followers or buyers."<sup>16</sup>

The general consensus with regard to the appropriateness of the qualifying term "propagandistic" suggests an implicit recognition of the notion that the narrator and Sender share a single point of view and that they are, in effect, one and the same person. Given the intention of the author, there is no room for divergent opinions in *Contraataque*; consequently, using an autobiographical base as a starting point, it is Sender himself, as he relates his experiences, who becomes the advocate of the message he wishes to propagate. One can better appreciate the extent of the autobiographical content of *Contraataque* if one considers the author's clarification with regard to the book's title: "*Contraataque*" (or *Counter-attack*), "referred not so much to a military operation as to a personal reaction to

attacks which had also been of a personal nature."<sup>17</sup>

For some critics, *Contraataque* fails to satisfy the prerequisites (which are highly debatable) necessary to be admitted to the genre of the autobiography; nevertheless, due to its obvious autobiographical content, neither may it be entirely excluded.

In 1968, Stephen Shapiro felt that the autobiography still deserved the designation of "dark continent of literature,"<sup>18</sup> but during the last two decades it seems to have emerged from this obscurity. At this point there is still much to be debated and, needless to say, it is not the purpose of this study to examine the numerous arguments presented in the ongoing quest for a definitive definition of this genre. In the past, critics generally agreed that an autobiographical work "had to offer an at least ostensibly factual account of the writer's own life—that it had to be, in short, a self-written biography."<sup>19</sup> Nowadays, however, the autobiography, "the most elusive of literary documents,"<sup>20</sup> embraces, according to many experts, anything ranging from the prefaces of Henry James' books to poetry. James Olney tells us that Paul Valéry "claimed that *La Jeune Parque*, the longest of his poems and one of the most obscure, was his true autobiography and I, for one, believe him."<sup>21</sup> Poetry and prefaces would seem to be rather remote from the simple definition which is popularly accepted: "The life story of a person written by himself,"<sup>22</sup> but because they reveal something of the author's inner life, of his thoughts and personal philosophy and feelings, they *are* indisputably autobiographical in nature. In this sense *Contraataque*, to a certain degree, is also autobiographical.

This book, so difficult to define, is a product of the terrible crisis brought on by the war and reflects the personal sociopolitical views of the author, who consistently claims to act independently of any political entity. When Sender writes *Contraataque*, he expresses what for him, at that moment, constitutes the absolute truth. At times, the dogged adherence to this personal truth detracts from the book's powers of persuasion, causing it to provoke mixed reactions. Nevertheless, in spite of its defects, *Contraataque* deserves our attention for so clearly manifesting one of our author's most significant facets—his sincere and irrevocable commitment to "the people," to the proletariat, whose welfare is his greatest concern.

A survey of Sender's early years reveals the making of "a man

of action," always prepared to run risks for his ideals. He never fails to throw himself into the thick of events while simultaneously remaining on the periphery of all that is strictly political, and he never ceases to reiterate his independence: "I do not belong, nor have I ever belonged, to any political organization."<sup>23</sup> Víctor Fuentes takes note of this attitude, so typical of our author:

The novels of Sender, who, between 1929 and 1933, militates in the cause of anarchosyndicalism, identify with this group's ideological creed while adopting a critical attitude of pessimistic reserve with regard to anarchistic strategy and tactics.<sup>24</sup>

The same scholar points out that in Sender's novel *O. P. (Orden Público)*, a jailed anarchist leader, known as "el Cojo," mutters to himself: "my companions will take me for a Communist. . . . But I think one must rationalize anarquism, free it from dogma and give it a flexibility which will augment its effectiveness."<sup>25</sup> This character is undoubtedly spokesman for Sender's own position since the author's true commitment lies in the ideal and ultimate goal of social justice, always portrayed as a far worthier objective than committing oneself body and soul to any political organization.

In *Contraataque* too, one can see how the narrator insists upon his non-affiliation and, with this in mind, at a moment when the various components of the patrol come together, he observes that "we were a living proof of the effectiveness of the Popular Front. A young Galician represented the Left republicans, four were communists, two were anarcho-syndicalists, and I and the driver . . . belonged to none of the parties."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps, when considering his options, Sender had drawn the same conclusion as Raymond Williams:

what is the point, at any time, of a demand for commitment? Is not this always a demand to write from one point of view rather than from others, and in this sense a demand for affiliation, conversion, or even obedience? . . . Commitment, if it means anything, is surely conscious, active, and open: a *choice* of position.<sup>27</sup>

Sender abstains from carrying the card of any party, hoping thus to avoid the danger of having his autonomy annulled by a clear alignment.

Despite his reticence with regard to the question of political af-

filiation, Sender, from his days as a young collaborator on leftist newspapers, manifests a keen interest in the cause of social justice and tirelessly pursues this ideal. As King writes: "Sender's quixotic opposition to oppression, wherever he finds it, is a constant in all of his life and work."<sup>28</sup> Sender himself admits that "a writer cannot ignore social reality. To remain insensitive to social problems in our times one must be either a rogue or an imbecile."<sup>29</sup>

Sender's attitude, far from being unusual, is typical of a time (the thirties) when many writers, in search of a more just society, find themselves drawn to an ideology which appears to provide solutions. Glicksberg explains that "many intellectuals were attracted to Marxism because of its humanistic content, its moral appeal, its vision of a just society in which men were no longer objects to be exploited."<sup>30</sup>

When Sender's novel *Imán* is translated and published in Russia in 1932, he is apparently pleased that in Moscow he is considered a "proletarian writer." Notwithstanding the compliment, however, our author wishes to stress the difference between proletarian literature within the Soviet Union and beyond its borders. He distinguishes between what it ought to be and what it necessarily *is* in Spain:

The basis of a dawning, blossoming proletarian art must be the song in praise of work which, once the bourgeoisie has been defeated, will redeem us all. . . . In countries like ours, proletarian art can only allow itself to describe the struggle against capitalism and—this it can do—contribute to the fusion of the new revolutionary tendencies, of the . . . groups, . . . let us unite in the realm of emotion and sensitivity. Outside of Russia this is all that we can do.<sup>31</sup>

In this way Sender establishes his independence with regard to his Russian colleagues and explains what he sees as his possible contribution to the fight for the just cause. But despite this declaration of independence, Sender, like other intellectuals of his day, puts his faith in the Soviet Union, experiencing a sense of solidarity with its people. As Collard notes, "when Ramón Sender, in the thirties, speaks of literature, or of culture in general, the terms 'revolution,' 'reaction,' 'proletariat,' or 'bourgeoisie' are never far off."<sup>32</sup> It is in May of 1936, scant months before the outbreak of war, that Sender, in his article "El novelista y las masas," celebrates the fact that the bourgeoisie chooses to identify the so-called "social" literature with revolution, a circumstance which leads him to counter that a liter-

ature produced by a bourgeois society (read "sick" society) can be nothing other than "anti-social."<sup>33</sup>

Sender's obsessive attachment to all that is Soviet is evident long before the appearance of *Contraataque*. This enthusiasm is already at a high pitch in *Madrid-Moscú: Notas de Viaje* (1934) in which the author also exhibits an unfortunate tendency to assume the air of "a humble man," as if he wished to experience the novelty of playing at being just another proletarian. In spite of the fact that the Soviet Union has a system which recognizes (and assuredly recognized at that time) that a writer, like a farmer or a soldier, has his own way of serving the state, Sender finds it necessary to beg pardon for his profession, probably because subconsciously he is incapable of suppressing an innate sense of superiority. In the most absurd manner he explains that

I can assure you that I am no man of letters, that I write books and articles because I do not know how to mix lime and sand, or cure leather, or drive a street-car, or even how to efficiently do sums in an office. Because it's all I know how to do to make a living.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of these words, we do not see our proud Aragonese abandoning his writing to sign up for training in some humble occupation and it is quite possible that this obvious desire to "belong" does nothing more than sharpen the skepticism felt by front line Communists who already have ample reason to suspect the fervour (too often ephemeral) of the intellectuals. The fact is, Communist leaders did entertain serious reservations regarding their intellectual "comrades" because they well knew, from experience, that their individualism was wont to be incorrigible.<sup>35</sup> According to Glicksberg:

They were held up to ridicule and derision as flighty, unstable, irresolute . . . Lenin was cognizant of the negative traits of the intellectuals: their anarchistic leanings, their unwillingness to follow directives. When Stalin gained control of the Communist movement, the campaign against the feckless intellectual was intensified.<sup>36</sup>

Even if one takes into account the historical moment and the targeted reading public of *Madrid-Moscú*, it becomes evident that any reader of even average intelligence must have suppressed a smile as he read the passage in which Sender laments being nothing more than a writer. But it is above all the non-Soviets, the non-partisans, those

who open the book expecting that a serious attempt will be made to sway them—in short, it is all of these who cannot have helped but perceive the condescension implicit in this apparent affectation on Sender's part. And we say "apparent" because it is likely that Sender does neither more nor less than express the truth as he sees it at that stage of his ideological evolution. In reality, Sender never does betray his commitment to "the people" because he never turns against the proletariat; on the contrary, years later he can only pity them.<sup>37</sup> What he does vehemently reject is the *modus operandi* of the Soviet leadership.

*Madrid-Moscú* does no more than pave the way for *Contraataque*, a work in which we observe the same unbridled admiration for everything Soviet. A typical example from the chapter "Aeroplanes over Madrid" follows:

but there is one country in the world, a great country, whose engineers think about more than simply earning a living; whose proletariat, when they work, know that they are helping to liberate the world, not with dreams, but through the tenacity of their efforts and through their intelligence.<sup>38</sup>

In the first place, for the contemporary reader, emotionally remote from the historical context of *Contraataque*, it is difficult that such passages be seen as anything but utterly naïve, particularly if one recalls that Sender, at this time, was no inexperienced, impressionable youngster but, on the contrary, a mature man of thirty-six. If one accepts that the book's principal objective is to attract sympathizers from abroad and boost the morale of his comrades-in-arms, then Sender fails on both counts. It is more probable that these goals are actually jeopardized by his constant praise of the Soviets and their State, a less than propitious tactic for cultivating support in the West and lifting the spirits of the diverse anarchist factions. It may be taken for granted that readers outside of Spain were more than willing to hear any vituperation of the Fascists, but the exaggerated praise lavished on the Communists constitutes an intrusive element. Worse yet, and just as the author had foreseen, the book provokes "a furious reaction among the anarchists due to the strong sympathy shown . . . towards the Communists."<sup>39</sup>

Why, then, does Sender persist in expressing himself with a frankness which is frequently counterproductive? His stubborn individ-

ualism no doubt impels him to speak out. Sender cares little if he angers his anarchist companions, for his commitment is to the people, to the urgent necessity of seeing them saved from the Fascist threat and able to start along the road to a more just society. For this reason he does not hesitate to criticise the deficiencies of his own forces, particularly the frustrating lack of coherent command which contrasts so unfavourably with the admirable orderliness displayed by the Soviets, representatives of that "great country" which will help to liberate the world, including Spain.

Faced with this dilemma of the troops' lack of direction, Sender allows his frustration to overwhelm any pretext of diplomacy when dealing with the commanding officers. He shares the anguish of those who "tear their hair"<sup>40</sup> in exasperation, a circumstance which leads him to proclaim the truth of the situation at the front:

And the command? Where was the command? Why were we there without leaders? . . . the accomplished fact could only be the victory of Franco. In the enemy camp not a soldier moved except under the direct orders of his officers. All that we had to oppose to that discipline were the enthusiasm and free initiative of the working mason, the business clerk, the labourer and the out-of-work journeyman, . . . 'What are we doing now? Are we advancing? Are we to stay here . . . ? Who can tell us if this line is the best?'<sup>41</sup>

An examination of the strategies followed during the Civil War confirms the gravity of this problem: "For the Left, with no political, economic, diplomatic, tactical or strategic plan, the Civil War was practically lost from the outset. The inactivity of the Left gave the generals in revolt . . . the time needed to pull together their fronts."<sup>42</sup>

This chaotic and indeed dangerous situation partially explains why Sender consistently stresses the efficiency of the Communist forces—an example deserving of emulation if the war is to be won. Set upon following the dictates of his own conscience, Sender disregards a fundamental precept of propaganda theory—*suppressio veri*<sup>43</sup>—by revealing what must have been demoralizing for his camp and heartening for the enemy. With regard to his efforts to garner support from abroad, it is quite possible that such candid admissions inspired serious doubts as to the wisdom of subscribing to what already appeared to be a lost cause. Despite the risk of adverse repercussions, Sender firmly believes that his first duty is to point out what is hindering

his side's capacity to resist the enemy.

But the Fascists and a deficient command are not the only obstacles in the path to victory. In *Contraataque*, Sender does not overlook any component of the enemy forces; we read that "We had not been considering the Church as a serious enemy. That was one of our mistakes."<sup>44</sup> Sender, who as a youngster had attended a school run by friars, is convinced that a religious education, from the first moment, has a pernicious influence on the bourgeoisie, instilling a "cynical class prejudice which is the chief support of fascism."<sup>45</sup> To bolster this assertion and stimulate anticlerical sentiment, the author reproduces a supposed dialogue between a priest and a seven-year-old boy, overheard "by chance":

'Are the brains of sparrows eaten?'

The Priest answered without thinking:

'Yes.'

'And ducks' brains?'

'Of course.'

'And those of lambs?'

'Certainly.'

The little boy stopped for a moment and then asked more anxiously:

'And human brains?'

The priest started.

'What nonsense!'

But the boy hurried to explain—

'I don't mean the brains of people like you or papa,' and added with contempt, pointing his slim finger to a poorly dressed workman on a bench in the sun: 'I meant the brains of that sort.'

The priest began to laugh and patted the boy's cheek without answering.<sup>46</sup>

By offering this verbal vignette, Sender hopes to illustrate how the clergy carries out a systematic brainwashing of the new generation. This will not be the only occasion on which we encounter a conversation repeated *verbatim*; throughout *Contraataque* Sender makes use of his talents as a novelist to recreate the past, or a hypothetical past, in order to further his arguments. Although this practice would appear to be a sacrifice of the desired verisimilitude, Sender does not stray far from the essence of reality when he utilizes truly autobiographical material, his first-hand memories. As Gusdorf notes: "Experience is the prime matter of all creation, which is an elaboration of elements borrowed from lived reality. One can only exercise

imagination by starting from what one is."<sup>47</sup>

When a militiaman is stabbed to death for the folly of having trusted a priest, Sender uses this death to return to the same anticlerical theme, although in this case his attack acquires a jocular tone. A rather eccentric bumpkin remarks that "Priests . . . are inhuman by nature. They begin by not marrying, which is not decent . . . The priest is the only animal who sings when one of his kind dies."<sup>48</sup>

On another occasion we are entertained by the classic stereotype of the lascivious man of the cloth: "The priest was almost a monster of commonness, and as I watched the 'niece' [lover] I was moved once more by the capacity of women for love and pity. For she was rather nice. He was scarcely human."<sup>49</sup> Although the lovelorn priest is suspected of having taken a shot at Sender and his men, the quite viable option of executing him is not even mentioned. Far from being portrayed as a menace to be eradicated, the priest is depicted as an absurd figure, rendered pathetic by his terror.

The author is well aware that it is difficult for the people to turn against the clergy because the Church has always played such a major role in their lives. By Sender's own treatment of this segment of society we are led to suspect that even he, having been brought up in a typical bourgeois family, experiences difficulty in overcoming his own social conditioning. Projecting his own view of the situation, Sender assures us that "there was no risk involved in the mere fact of being a priest,"<sup>50</sup> but the truth is that the Church, a very visible and defenseless institution, was an easy target for rampant hostility.<sup>51</sup> There is also extensive documentation of the atrocities committed against men and women in the service of the Church, including the torture and execution of priests and the rape and murder of nuns.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, although the clergy rarely pull the trigger personally, it cannot be denied that their reputation as traitors and informers has a certain basis in truth.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Sender will reserve the most acid of his venom for Fascist military figures. Unlike certain extremist elements of his band, Sender wishes not to exterminate but to discredit the Church and to ridicule its representatives. The nature of his attacks, however, would indicate a moderate attitude.

In his continued efforts (of varying success) to sustain a realistic atmosphere, Sender endeavours to limit himself to the description of

plausible events and characters and, consequently, throughout *Contraataque* we encounter "types" which, if they never lived as individuals (something only the author knows), at least must have existed in the generic sense. Sender, in his role as "witness," does not attempt to delve into their psychology, letting each individual's behaviour and comments speak for themselves. There is, for example, Turkovich, who "had rather a mystic belief in man,"<sup>54</sup> and Vicente, "a comrade who never hid his fears, but all the same went everywhere and did his duty like anyone else."<sup>55</sup> The narrator also strikes up a friendship with Lieutenant P. of Artillery, a realistic young man: "That battalion of steel,' he said, but without any venom, 'would be better called a battalion of straw.'<sup>56</sup> But, in fact, our acquaintance with these individuals remains superficial, for they are akin to what E. M. Forster denominates "flat" characters<sup>57</sup>; it is up to the reader to "round them out" according to his familiarity with similar types. This is truly a disadvantage from the propagandistic point of view because the absence of a sense of affinity with these characters leaves us frankly indifferent to their fate.

In contrast, when it comes to impressing the reader with an image of what the enemy represents, Sender gives free rein to his imagination. There is an original use of dialogue between the city of Madrid, victim of an air raid, and "talking" aircraft, war machines that act as mouthpieces for Fascist savagery. We read that

The Heinckel and Junker and the Capronni aeroplanes spoke to sharply listening ears from the blue skies of Madrid . . . 'Kill children? Yes . . . It amuses us to see the dead children and their fathers putting down their rifles to weep over them . . . we amuse ourselves over the sorrow of others . . . The few who survive shall obey us . . . Ha! Ha! Ha!<sup>58</sup>

But Madrid offers a different kind of message:

We lack that will to power but have the will to live together in love and peace and liberty . . . We ourselves believe in the creative activity of the sentiment of liberty . . . and we also believe in the grandeur of human dignity.<sup>59</sup>

This strong image of the opponents' respective attitudes is very effective, for it touches the reader on an emotional level, inspiring indignation and compassion. This technique is in keeping with El-lul's claim that propaganda "cannot operate with simple arguments

pro and con. It must . . . create an image to act as a motive force. This image must have an emotional character."<sup>60</sup>

Obviously Sender did not elaborate such a polished dialogue as he witnessed the attack on Madrid; long after the fact, he reflects, creates and presents these hypothetical speeches, reproducing not the reality of the bombing but rather his own interpretation of two ideologies which are head to head in a struggle for victory.

The entire narration is strewn with judgments of situations and people in such a way as to keep the reader under a continual barrage. The author launches a series of blistering attacks on major figures of the opposing camp, such as: "Thinking about Mola, I said to myself: 'He may have a great military reputation, and yet be a fool' "<sup>61</sup> or "there is something not only vile but also grotesque; the figure of Franco, a soldier of moderate ability, ambitious and fantastic, as stupid as his brother Ramón."<sup>62</sup>

It is interesting to note the marked contrast between the dispassionate presentation of the facts and the explicitly propagandistic moments which irrupt into the narrative stream. These brief halts are used to bombard the reader with strong messages alternating between diatribes against the enemy and praise for his own band. Let us see an example which contrasts the two sides: "our republican good faith, our clean morality and our respect for the law would have to face the lawlessness, insolence, cynicism and gangsterism of our enemies."<sup>63</sup>

In spite of its obvious subjectivity, *Contraataque* is of considerable importance as an historical document since it offers the researcher a well-defined point of view, representative of a certain component of the anti-national forces. With regard to the author, the subjectivity patent in this work has its own value in that it provides us with autobiographical information. Rockwell points out that "the bias is part of the information. If we know what the writer's bias is, we can place him in relation to the theme he has chosen, whatever he himself claims."<sup>64</sup> Consequently, this lack of objectivity or exactitude does not jeopardize our objective of gaining greater insight into the Sender of 1937; on the contrary, it permits us to glimpse, indirectly, a particular facet of his inner life. In the case of *Contraataque*, the Sender in the throes of a full-blown propagandistic frenzy, although unpleasant, is quite fascinating, affording us a rare

look into his psyche which, to use the curious analogy of Stephen Spender, is rather like seeing "the inside . . . of a sofa,"<sup>65</sup> i.e., what we would never ordinarily see.

When it comes to telling us something of his personal life, Sender appears to feel inhibited, perhaps because, as he confesses to the reader, "We Spaniards have an exaggerated sentimental modesty."<sup>66</sup> He allows us to share his thoughts on death or fear, but these constitute just one aspect of his inner life. Only in the last few pages of *Contraataque* will he cease trying to avoid what touches him most closely. Although Sender may consciously attempt to exclude the personal, he does recognize that it is virtually impossible to prevent certain elements of his existence from manifesting themselves in his work:

Always in my writing I have avoided autobiography. We put too much of ourselves in our books to give the readers anecdotes as well. But perhaps this is not right in my case . . . In defending popular liberties, I have given so much that I have no right to withhold the truth however cruel it is.<sup>67</sup>

In *Contraataque*, this attitude determines the manner in which the author communicates his most painful experiences. Due to his reticence, Sender relegates his propaganda mission to the background by choosing not to exploit the emotional potential of his own personal suffering. It is a decision which must have been particularly disappointing to the foreign reading public, hungry for sensationalist details and always eager to pry into an open wound. This omission, however, is in keeping with the spirit of a book which seeks to portray the heroism and sacrifice of a people (not of an individual) in their struggle against "the Beast."<sup>68</sup> Given the enormous loss of life occasioned by the war—"A million dead."<sup>69</sup>—Sender no doubt considered it incongruous to dwell on his personal anguish. In reference to the deaths of his wife, Amparo, and brother, Manuel (mayor of Huesca), Sender declares: "I have not the right to be silent about anything,"<sup>70</sup> but he prefers to relate these tragedies in "the fewest possible words; I shall give only the bare facts."<sup>71</sup> With regard to these anecdotes—"only two like thousands of others"<sup>72</sup>—P. Chalmers Mitchell, who prepared the Introduction to the English version of *Contraataque*, explains that the author

has begged me not to add a word of comment . . . He was very unwilling even to mention his personal tragedy, but he came to think of it as his

duty, in a few reticent lines to open the sorrow of his own heart as an instance of the sadistic cruelties brought on Spain by the rebels.<sup>73</sup>

Sender, in accordance with his temperament, limits himself to a show of solidarity with those who have suffered as he has, offering his case as just one more, representative of the many which will remain anonymous. After giving a brief sketch of the circumstances surrounding his wife's arrest, he says simply: "A month after her arrest, they brought a priest who confessed her, and then took her to the cemetery, where they shot her . . ." <sup>74</sup> For the sensitive reader, this sentence, for its very brevity, holds a more profound significance than would have been possible in a more extensive explanation. Nevertheless, from the pragmatic point of view (that which scrutinizes the nature of the reading public), the reserve shown by the author detracts from *Contraataque's* impact as a work of propaganda. By giving priority to his need to silence what is most intimate, Sender loses his last opportunity to win public sympathy and make gains on the propagandistic front. Due to the impersonal tone which prevails throughout the book, the news of Amparo's death provokes little reaction in the reader; "it is nothing more than an additional piece of information."<sup>75</sup> And this is perhaps the book's greatest weakness, for, as Ressayre observes, "Sender's narrative does not move us. Although the reader may theoretically be in direct contact with reality, he experiences no feeling of solidarity; on the contrary, he remains on the sidelines of the story."<sup>76</sup>

In spite of this reticence, there are moments in which the narrator shares intimate details as to how the war is affecting him. On one occasion we are told: "Between our position and the first houses I saw more than fifteen abandoned human bodies. . . . I saw all that with an indifference so great that it surprised even me, and I kept on my way down."<sup>77</sup> Although he finds it odd that such a macabre scene should make so little impression on him, he is not yet so saturated with horror that he fails to notice how his sensitivity is becoming numbed. This brief observation suffices to illustrate a singular consequence of the war: the fact that daily exposure to death eventually brings about a psychological change. This phenomenon also takes place in our author; he feels himself slipping towards the emotional abyss of those who wear "the front line look."<sup>78</sup>

Among the author's introspective digressions there is one which

reveals an internal struggle to resist the pull of his intellectual formation. Evidently Sender wishes to cleanse himself of his spiritual contamination and start anew:

Although I am nothing if not an intellectual, I have tried to forget my reading and the effects of culture, and sometimes have managed to reach a point of perfection which in my view is that in which my thought is influenced by nothing but instinctive, natural and simple facts; but intellectual theories often pursue me, and when they take me by surprise, try to impose themselves on material reality and undo it.<sup>79</sup>

In spite of this clear desire to act only in accordance with his "unadulterated" impulses, Sender obviously has his own doubts with respect to the probability of being able to shed his sociocultural baggage.

When Sender sets out to write *Contraataque* he has no interest in documenting his participation in the war for the purpose of preparing an autobiography. The autobiographical content is merely a byproduct of his true intent—the creation of a work of propaganda which, on a personal level, also permits the author to unburden himself of his experiences by sharing them. Ernst Fischer writes of this impulse which compels an individual to find his place in the world, to attain a sense of fulfillment, "to unite his limited 'I' in art with a communal existence; to make his individuality *social*."<sup>80</sup>

Although *Contraataque* does not pretend to be even a partial autobiography, Sender, as he recounts his experiences, inevitably partakes of certain characteristics which are typical of the autobiographer, such as that of distorting reality in order to present a more flattering image of oneself. This phenomenon need not be premeditated; as Maurois explains:

L'autobiographie ne déforme pas seulement par oubli. Elle déforme aussi par l'effet de cette naturelle censure qu'exerce l'esprit sur ce qui est désagréable. . . . Nous nous souvenons des faits quand nous désirons nous en souvenir."<sup>81</sup>

It cannot be denied that there are autobiographers who, for whatever the reason, endeavour to mislead the public, though we reject the position of extremists like Bernard Shaw who insists that "All autobiographies are lies . . . I mean deliberate lies."<sup>82</sup> It is more a question of certain mental processes which become operative as the autobiographer attempts to recreate the past.

In Sender's case, the desire to "come out looking good" leads him

to exhibit one of the autobiographer's more forgivable weaknesses— "[l']impossibilité de ne pas déformer volontairement."<sup>83</sup> According to Líster, a general with the Fifth Regiment, Sender (with the rank of Chief of Staff), "showed . . . a lack of warmth, of humanity, of camaraderie with the men around him."<sup>84</sup> Even more interesting, Líster makes a serious charge which might very well explain the mystery of how Sender lost his command, a circumstance which his biographers have never succeeded in explaining satisfactorily.<sup>85</sup> There is no reason to doubt the general as a credible source of information; his *Nuestra Guerra (Our War)*, from 1966, is a book whose tone denotes the crusty old military man but, when writing of Sender, he expresses indignation rather than any malicious intent. It is also worth noting that in *Contraataque* Sender himself includes Líster among the "notable leaders"<sup>86</sup> and considers him "a heroic communist leader."<sup>87</sup> Although our author does not normally hesitate to refute any criticism which he deems unacceptable, this case is markedly different, for Sender never denies the general's charge. What he does do is create a parody of Líster (the character of Verin in *Los cinco libros de Ariadna*<sup>88</sup>), an act which might be attributed to one of human nature's little perversions—the fact that one tends to harbour an irrational resentment of those who have caught us *in flagrante delicto*.

It is interesting that *Contraataque* displays certain attributes characteristic of those autobiographies whose authors are relatively young. These precocious autobiographers are in a position to describe only their limited progress in life, providing an incomplete picture and, given that everything changes with time, a perspective which lacks stability. But one of the great advantages of *Contraataque* is precisely the fact that it was written within close temporal proximity of the events it relates, when the author was still reeling from the emotional impact of his experience. The book's vitality emanates from a profound horror of the enemy juxtaposed with the heroism of those who defend the just cause, all of this projected onto a backdrop of urgency. Thus, by avoiding "the distorting prism of hindsight,"<sup>89</sup> the intensity remains fixed in the text, safe from the erosive effects of time. Roy Pascal suggests that "life is a sort of graph linking the experiences. But the movement oscillates."<sup>90</sup> If we imagine Sender's life in graphic form then the time period spanned by *Contraataque*

must be visualized as a brief but violent oscillation in the thread of his existence. The book encapsulates a compact but crucial episode in our author's life and so reflects the psychological moment of the Sender of that time.

Needless to say, years later Sender would have been quite incapable of producing the same kind of book. It is obvious that the author of *Los cinco libros de Ariadna* (1957), which also deals with the theme of war, is no longer the same man as twenty years earlier. As Olney points out:

When 'is' has been transformed into 'was,' when the unique moment of the present slips into the huge abyss of the past, if it remains in any sense real at all, then it must be within a new and entirely different order of reality from that informing the present.<sup>91</sup>

In *Ariadna*, the dramatic change in Sender's perception of the Communists has its roots in the time period corresponding to *Contraataque*. Many writers discover that their ideals clash violently with the pragmatic reality of naked politics and that they are unable to reconcile their artistic integrity with party dogma. This crisis was only to be expected if one takes into account that "imbued with the intellectual's respect for independence of thought and speech, they resented the scarcely hidden forces which tried to keep them to the 'party lines.'"<sup>92</sup> The fact is, many intellectuals do not manage or do not want to stifle the spontaneity of their creative impulses and consequently proceed with their accustomed task of analyzing, asking, doubting, and finally, criticising.

Naturally, Sender is among those who have no intention of conforming. With reference to his break with the Communists, he explains that

the basis of our discrepancies were not political, the difference was in our manner of understanding what is human. I understood it in my way and they didn't understand it at all.<sup>93</sup>

As usual, Sender's most outstanding trait, his individualism, comes to the forefront as he makes the following observation: "I believe that I am unable to see or feel politically. I am incapable of joining the line of circus dogs who bark on cue and carry the master's stick in their mouths."<sup>94</sup>

Sender is very indignant when he discovers, through a Russian

translator, that the Soviets have altered the text of his books "when they have not met the needs of their propaganda."<sup>95</sup> As for *Contraataque* (which was not published in Russia<sup>96</sup>), Sender accuses the publishing house of *Nuestro Pueblo* of having changed a few significant lines; the result is that the narrator seems to affirm that he is a Communist.<sup>97</sup>

Always jealous of his independence, Sender is anxious to make it clear that only the most pressing circumstances could have obliged him to remain silent. He meticulously enumerates what would have been the disastrous consequences of a complaint:

a) I wouldn't have gotten out of the country and would have been denied a passport; b) my children would have been left helpless; c) if I were far away I could do nothing for them since I was on Stalin's *black list* along with others who disappeared a short time later. In short, I had to tolerate that change in those two lines of my book so that my children wouldn't starve to death.<sup>98</sup>

*Contraataque* corresponds to a period in Sender's life when he sees Communism as a solution to the world's social ills, but his personal ethics will not allow even his fondest dream to justify brutality as a means to that end. Although he is soon free from any illusions he might have entertained with respect to the Soviets, his personal commitment remains constant throughout his life.

At the time of his greatest personal crisis, Sender seems unable to give his best as a writer. *Contraataque* displays a series of weaknesses which contribute to its failure on all fronts. On an emotional level the book is ineffectual because although a number of easily recognizable stereotypes are introduced, they are so superficially sketched that the reader is not inclined to identify with them. As a piece of propaganda, *Contraataque* falls short of the desired objective due to its tendency to project an image of divided and disoriented forces.

Notwithstanding Sender's undeniable perspicacity, he elects to ignore the potentially prejudicial effects which certain of his observations could precipitate, especially those in reference to the superiority of the Soviets; it is almost as if he scorns all those who lack the discipline and efficiency which he so much admires. Neither does Sender make any attempt to suppress the dictates of his individualism and, consequently, his ego (consciously or not) drives him to give priority

to the expression of his own particular ideas. Indeed, it is ironic that Sender should have ever adhered to a political ideology (the Marxist) which by its very precepts necessarily implies the sacrifice of that same independence of thought which is so dear to his heart.

For such a proud man it must have been a terrible blow to be obliged to flee and begin a life of exile far from his beloved "little homeland" of Aragon. But in spite of this deeply painful experience, Sender never renounces his ideal of a better world, which is why, in 1978, forty years after the war, he is able to say:

I am still a man of the people. . . . I am the same as I was then. The same as always, a little more shaped by experience. . . . I am not a politician, but I will always stand by those who love freedom and are honest in what they do, whether they are monarchists, republicans, socialists or even communists, if they truly are.<sup>99</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 The translations of *Contraataque*, all published in 1937, are as follows: *The War in Spain* (London); *Counter-attack in Spain* (Boston); *Contre-attaque en Espagne* (Paris).
- 2 Marcelino C. Peñuelas, *Conversaciones con Ramón J. Sender* (Madrid: Editorial Magisterio Español, 1970) 199–200.
- 3 Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Tres testigos españoles de la guerra civil* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1971) 40.
- 4 Charles L. King, *Ramón J. Sender* (New York: Twayne, 1974) 163.
- 5 Francisco Carrasquer, "Iman" y la novela histórica de Sender (London: Tamesis Books, 1970) 6.
- 6 Rodríguez Monegal 32.
- 7 José Luis S. Ponce de León, *La novela española de la guerra civil (1936–1939)* (Madrid: Insula, 1971) 63.
- 8 Michiko Nonoyama, *El anarquismo en las obras de Ramón J. Sender* (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1979) 34.
- 9 Max Aub, "Discurso de la novela española," 104, cited in Ponce de León, 62–63.
- 10 P. Chalmers Mitchell, trans., introduction, *The War in Spain*, by Ramón J. Sender (London: Faber & Faber, 1937) vii.
- 11 Rafael Bosch, *La novela española del siglo XX* (New York: las Américas Publishing Co., 1970) 1:41.
- 12 Jean Pierre Ressay, "De Sender a Malraux" in *In Memoriam*, ed. José Carlos Mainer (Zaragoza: Diputación General de Zaragoza, Ayuntamiento de Zaragoza et al., 1983) 338.
- 13 Ramón J. Sender, *The War in Spain*. Sender includes a letter supposedly

written by a duchess, in which the woman reveals her susceptibility to what Sender calls "the fascist calumnies" (6). The letter concludes in the following manner: "I forgot to tell you that your little nephew Miguel, who is still in his ninth year, said yesterday to the porter's son, who had greeted him with the fist held up, that if he saw him making the socialist salute again, he would kill him. When Irene told me about it, I nearly wept with emotion. See what a religious education does for one!" (7).

- 14 Ressot 337.
- 15 Leonard W. Doob, *Public Opinion and Propaganda* (New York: Henry Holt, 1948) 231-232.
- 16 *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 19th ed. (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1970) 1072.
- 17 Sender, introduction to *Contraataque* (Salamanca: Almar, 1978) 18.
- 18 Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) 4. Gunn makes reference to Shapiro's article, "The Dark Continent of Literature."
- 19 William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) xi.
- 20 James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction" in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 3.
- 21 Olney 5.
- 22 *Diccionario* 144.
- 23 Ramón J. Sender, *Madrid-Moscú: Notas de Viaje (1933-1934)* (Madrid: Pueyo, 1934) 88.
- 24 Víctor Fuentes, "La novela social española (1931-36): Temas y significación ideológica," *Insula* 288 (Nov. 1970) 4.
- 25 Fuentes 4.
- 26 Sender, *The War in Spain* 128.
- 27 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977) 199-200.
- 28 King 21.
- 29 Ramón J. Sender, prologue, *Los cinco libros de Ariadna*, by Ramón J. Sender (New York: Ibérica Publishing Co., 1957) viii.
- 30 Charles Irving Glicksberg, *The Literature of Commitment* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1976) 29.
- 31 Ramón J. Sender, "Literatura proletaria" (*Orto* 3, May 1932) in *Los novelistas sociales españoles (1928-1936)*, eds. José Esteban and Gonzalo Santonja (Madrid: Ayuso, 1977) 113.
- 32 Patrick Collard, *Ramón J. Sender en los años 1930-1936* (Ghent: n.p., 1980) 14.
- 33 Ramón J. Sender, "El novelista y las masas" (*Leviatán*, May 1936) in Esteban and Santonja 162.
- 34 Sender, *Madrid-Moscú* 89.

- 35 In the Introduction to *Ariadna* (xi), Sender declares that "the anarchists are those who, individually, seem closest to what I am."
- 36 Glicksberg 14.
- 37 Sender, prologue to *Ariadna* viii.
- 38 Sender, *Contraataque* 292.
- 39 Nonoyama 34.
- 40 Sender, *Contraataque* 175.
- 41 Sender, *The War in Spain* 56-67.
- 42 Abraham Guillén, *El error militar de las "Izquierdas"* (Barcelona: Ricou, 1980) 15-16.
- 43 A. P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda* (New York: Methuen, 1983) 9.
- 44 Sender, *The War in Spain* 8.
- 45 Sender, *The War in Spain* 10.
- 46 Sender, *The War in Spain* 9.
- 47 Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," Olney 45.
- 48 Sender, *The War in Spain* 109.
- 49 Sender, *The War in Spain* 47.
- 50 Sender, *Contraataque* 380.
- 51 Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), see 227-228.
- 52 Thomas 228-232 passim.
- 53 Gabriel Jackson, *Aproximación a la España contemporánea: 1898-1975* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1980) 105.
- 54 Sender, *The War in Spain* 130.
- 55 Sender, *The War in Spain* 121.
- 56 Sender, *The War in Spain* 119.
- 57 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Penguin, 1978) 73-77.
- 58 Sender, *The War in Spain* 219-220.
- 59 Sender, *The War in Spain* 221-222.
- 60 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) 243.
- 61 Sender, *The War in Spain* 27.
- 62 Sender, *The War in Spain* 271.
- 63 Sender, *The War in Spain* 6.
- 64 Joan Rockwell, *Fact in Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 121.
- 65 Stephen Spender, "Confessions and Autobiography," Olney 119.
- 66 Sender, *The War in Spain* 149.
- 67 Sender, *The War in Spain* 149.
- 68 Sender, *The War in Spain* 302.
- 69 Sender, *The War in Spain* 151.
- 70 Sender, *The War in Spain* 302.
- 71 Sender, *The War in Spain* 302-303.
- 72 Sender, *The War in Spain* 303.

- 73 Mitchell vi.
- 74 Sender, *The War in Spain* 305.
- 75 Ressayt 338.
- 76 Ressayt 337–338.
- 77 Sender, *The War in Spain* 63.
- 78 Sender, *The War in Spain* 63.
- 79 Sender, *The War in Spain* 132.
- 80 Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964) 8.
- 81 André Maurois, *Aspects de la biographie* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1928) 138–139.
- 82 Bernard Shaw, cited in Arthur Melville Clark, *Autobiography: Its Genesis and Phases* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1935) 14.
- 83 Maurois 145.
- 84 Enrique Lister, *Nuestra Guerra* (Paris: Colección Ebro, 1966) 82.
- 85 Lister 82–83. Lister describes Sender's behaviour in the following way: "Sender, thinking that I'd never survive the enemy's attempt to surround us at the time when he 'fell back' to Madrid, went off . . . and after a night's rest, showed up the next day at the 5th Regiment's Headquarters wearing a commander's insignia which, so he said, I had given him before my death. He was stripped of his rank on the spot, which was the least he deserved, and so his military career was abruptly terminated. . . . he 'withstood' the rest of the war there [in Paris], where he wrote his book, *Contraataque*, in which he describes events and his personal performance . . . portraying himself in the most advantageous light."
- 86 Sender, *The War in Spain* 163.
- 87 Sender, *The War in Spain* 287.
- 88 Peter Turton, "Los cinco libros de Ariadna: La puntilla al minotauro comunista," Mainer 463.
- 89 Francis West, *Biography as History* (Sydney: Sydney UP, 1973) 14.
- 90 Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960) 17.
- 91 James Olney, "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bias: The Ontology of Autobiography," Olney 237.
- 92 George Woodcock, *The Writer and Politics* (London: The Porcupine Press, 1948) 12.
- 93 Sender, prologue to *Ariadna* vii.
- 94 Sender, prologue to *Ariadna* viii.
- 95 Sender, introduction to *Contraataque* 11–12.
- 96 Sender, introduction to *Contraataque* 14.
- 97 Sender, introduction to *Contraataque* 12. Sender is no doubt referring to the following lines in *The War in Spain* (19), in which the narrator, during a conversation with General Queipo de Llano, comments: "Thinking that I was a communist, and I have very often been taken for one, and there would be

nothing much in that, as I am one. . . .”

98 Sender, introduction to *Contraataque* 14.

99 Sender, introduction to *Contraataque* 16–17.