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FEATURES:

Orwell's Instructive Errors

By Liam Julian

The edifying commentator is also a flawed one

Yes, orwell is still relevant. The particular manner in which he pierced worthless theory, faced facts and defended decency (with fluctuating success), and largely ignored the tradition of accumulated wisdom has rendered him a timeless teacher — one whose inadvertent lessons, while infrequently acknowledged, are just as valuable as his intended ones.

Those lessons are timeless but also timely, educative on the day's latest headlines. Subject the current political chieftains of either party to Orwell's lens and the wispiness of their rhetoric is laid plain. Start at the top. Regardless of one's political proclivities or whether or not one just happens to like the personable Barack Obama, it's clear that the president relishes the vague metaphor, adores the illogical argumentative sequence, and luxuriates in making words mean what only yesterday they didn't. He does not merely redefine words, in fact, but on occasion undefines them, wiping them of their meanings — say, by insisting that words such as conservative and liberal are insignificant. The liberal president surely knows better but, as Orwell wrote, "the great enemy of clear language is insincerity."

Obama's language is not clear. It is loopy and lofty and often lubricious, and is precisely the type that Orwell's famous edict "Good prose is like a window pane" sought to banish. Fortunately, two new collections of Orwell's essays, Facing Unpleasant Facts and All Art is Propaganda, edited by George Packer, were released late last year, just in time for Election Day; and on page 270 of the latter volume begins the piece "Politics and the English Language," as effective an inoculation as exists against Obamaspeak's hardier strains.

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It commences with an insistence that battling bad English is no "sentimental archaism" as is generally supposed. Language does not merely reflect but also shapes societies, and so Orwell writes that far from being futile or irrelevant, defending the integrity of English is indispensable for the right functioning of the society that speaks it. When people countenance vagueness in speech they welcome into the mix every sort of distortion and lie, which can't be spotted in the general haziness and so come off as facts. This is never truer than in politics, he writes: "Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder sound respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

How right. Do not today's politicians (and yesterday's) avoid clarity precisely to pseudo-solidify their windiest decisions and pronouncements? The president is on this count surely not alone in his culpability, but he is alone in his obscurative prowess and propensity. As to Orwell's warnings about verifying lies and prettifying murder, Obama's secretary of homeland security, in recent testimony before Congress, referred to cases of terrorist violence as "man-caused disasters," an intentionally anodyne lexical concoction. And while George W. Bush's "Global War on Terror" was a murky concept, Obama's substitution — the "Overseas Contingency Operation" — is even murkier.

"Such phraseology," Orwell wrote, "is needed if one wants to name things without calling up pictures of them." And if one wants to pretend that a warring nation isn't warring or that terrorists and terrorism aren't terrorizing. The lessons of "Politics and the English Language" are eminently applicable here, to Obama's penchant for smooth distortion of meaning and inclination to relabel things such that the new labels obscure rather than describe.

Orwell was not the first to document the relationship between bad English and bad thinking. Thomas Hobbes, another Englishman, wrote in 1651 in Leviathan that "metaphors, and senseless and ambiguous words, are like ignes fatui [delusions]; and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention, and sedition, or contempt." In Orwell's own time, in the Society for Pure English's Tract11 (1922), Arthur Clutton-Brock contributed a short essay called "Dead Metaphors," in which, after ravaging a portion of an article about Lloyd George (thus in a way adumbrating Orwell's own connection of politics and lousy language), he observed that "in the best sentences . . . the words seem new-born; like notes in music, they seem to be, not mere labels, but facts . . . But habitual metaphor prevents this process of relation; it is the intrusion of ready-made matter, with its own stale associations, into matter that should be new-made for its own particular purpose of expression."

In Orwell's writing, so much of it, the words seem "not mere labels, but facts." It's a major reason why his pieces are still anthologized, read, and commented upon: They eschew spineless language for clarity and force. Indeed, in "Politics and the English Language" Orwell includes a passage similar to Clutton-Brock's, titled Dying Metaphors. The metaphor that isn't fresh and doesn't evoke a "visual image" but has not yet "reverted to an ordinary word," he wrote, belongs to the "dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves."

Whether orwell mined for material in the work of Clutton-Brock is unknown; it is, however, indisputable that he borrowed from himself. In a 1944Tribune column on "perversion of the English language," he pronounced "sentence of death on the following expressions: Achilles' heel, jackboot, hydra-headed, ride roughshod over." An almost identical list appears in "Politics and the English Language." Certainly that essay's "preoccupation with euphemism and jargon," as the linguist W.F. Bolton calls it, is evident in Burmese Days, when Flory's servant says "I have done so" but truly means "I will do so"; and when Orwell writes that "Peace Bloc," "Peace Front," and "Democratic Front" are soothing phrases that in truth denote a militarized union; and in Animal Farm, when Squealer — "a brilliant talker" who could "turn black into white" — dubs as "readjustment" the reduction in rations for all animals save dogs and pigs.[1]

Orwell wrote volumes, which helps explain why his themes frequently overlapped. Imperialism was another favorite subject, the trappings and consequences of which he forcefully relayed. Its first major exposition came in "A Hanging" (1931), one of Orwell's earliest personal essays, which was published under his real name, E. A. (Eric Arthur) Blair. The short piece describes the execution of a Hindu man by several of Burma's British colonizers. On a drizzly morning, the condemned prisoner is marched from his cell through the yard to the gallows. Orwell follows and notices that "once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he [the prisoner] stepped slightly aside to avoid a

puddle on the path." With this minor action, avoiding a puddle, does "A Hanging" change from description to descriptive essay: "It is curious, but till that moment I had never realised what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man." The convict who had seemed to Orwell already dead — perhaps because he was soon to die, perhaps because he was anonymous and foreign and merely one Burmese inmate among many — becomes suddenly vivacious. "This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. . . His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned — reasoned even about puddles." Orwell suddenly finds the hanging, the purported enactment of justice, profoundly unjust.

Imperialism returns in "Shooting an Elephant" (1936). Unlike in "A Hanging," Orwell's character in "Shooting an Elephant" is developed. He is a police officer, detested by the local Burmese population which he, in turn, detests: "the greatest joy in the world," he thinks, "would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts." Yet he is simultaneously sickened by empire and imagines the "British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny" that stomps "upon the will of prostrate peoples." Conflicted feelings, Orwell writes, "are the normal by-products of imperialism."

These conflicted feelings are with him when, at the start of the rainy season, he learns that a once-tame elephant has "gone must," escaped its chains, and ravaged a village. It has killed one man. Orwell sets out to find the pachyderm and does, grazing in a paddy field some 80 yards from the road, peacefully plucking clumps of grass, beating them against its knee to clean them, and shoving the stalks into its mouth. He doesn't want to shoot the elephant, but a crowd has gathered behind him and expects him to put his rifle to use. He cannot show weakness, must appear resolute, and so, thrall to the brutalization that empire works, Orwell fires five shots into the animal, which falls and lays bleeding and gasping in the grass for half an hour before succumbing. Significantly, Orwell humanizes the dying beast by using the pronoun "he" rather than "it." Senseless death again occurs at empire's hands.

Powerful lessons, powerfully communicated. Yet, a problem arises: It is simply impossible to confirm that the events depicted in "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant" occurred exactly as Orwell depicted them. Jeffrey Meyers writes in his book on Orwell that "there is no question" Orwell based "A Hanging" on "close observation of an actual event"; but Bernard Crick, an earlier biographer, could verify no such event and was dubious, for instance, that the essay's seminal episode, the puddle-induced swerve, actually occurred.[2] Other Orwell scribes have their own theories: Stephen Ingle sees glimpses of "A Hanging" in Somerset Maugham's 1922 short story "The Vice-Consul," and D.J. Taylor, author of the definitive Orwell biography, finds traces of "A Hanging" in Thackeray's piece from 1840, "Going to See a Man Hanged" (perhaps not so startling a connection). Misgivings shroud "Shooting an Elephant," too, although faith in the story's veracity is doctrinal among at least some readers. When Crick, over dinner with Orwell's widow, Sonia, told her that certain bits of the essay were probably exaggerated and perhaps fabricated, she adamantly insisted that Orwell had indeed shot the animal and indignantly rebuked Crick for doubting her dead husband's word.

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Why scrutinize Orwell's accounts so? Two reasons are manifest. First, "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant," the latter considered one of his finest essays, are powerful precisely because they are presumed to be authentic. Orwell's contention that imperialism is a sordid, brutalizing enterprise rests wholly on his implicit claim that, as Packer puts it in his foreword to the new essay collections, I was there — I saw it — I know. Which is to say that Orwell does not in these essays attack empire by deploying ranks of data and logic; he attacks it by extracting lessons from experience. Nothing is theoretical; everything is actual. Packer quotes the critic Gordon Harvey: "Accounts of actual happenings cast a particular kind of narrative spell; they give a particular pleasure that fiction doesn't

give and that won't stand the suspicion of fictiveness, depending as the pleasure does on our perception of an effort being made to preserve the integrity of past experience, from both the assaults of subsequent experience and the temptations of art."

The other reason to check and double-check the facts is that Orwell is, well, Orwell. In "Why I Write," he tells why he composes a book: "I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing." It's not that the reader asks Orwell for objectivity, but he does ask that Orwell describe scenarios truthfully. Orwell self-diagnosed a "power of facing unpleasant facts," and he was always quick to upbraid liars, euphemizers, and hypocrites. Certainly it is right to evaluate him by his own standard.

While the fine facts of his personal essays are not always provable, it is surely worth something that Orwell was there — that he put himself there to describe the scene for those not there. He was not only in Burma, where hangings occurred regularly and elephants were shot: He washed dishes in the bowels of a Paris hotel and moved across the English countryside with tramps, putting up at nights in the spikes; he was in Spain in the 1930s, fighting in the grubby trenches; he was in Marrakech in 1938, where fly-saturated funerals and starving Arabs were common; he was in India, in Wigan, and even in jail. He recorded all of it. About his observation that "people with brown skins are next door to invisible," Orwell characteristically wrote, in his essay "Marrakech," "I am not commenting, merely pointing to a fact."

Orwell is important here less for the topics he wrote about — although subjects such as poverty and oppression are obviously significant — than for the observational and anti-theoretical way in which he endeavored to write about them. Theory, as Orwell saw it, offers a convenient way to separate oneself from unpleasant facts, to rationalize bothersome actions or situations. And it degrades what he called decency. "To twentieth-century political theories," he wrote, "[the English] oppose not another theory of their own, but a moral quality which must be vaguely described as decency." Decency comes in his message to left-wing British intellectuals: "Don't imagine that for years on end you can make yourself the boot-licking propagandist of the Soviet régime, or any other régime, and then suddenly return to mental decency." And decency is at work in many of his other writings, including a review of Salvador Dalí's autobiography, which Orwell found an "unmistakable assault on sanity and decency."

What is decent to Orwell is that which reflects a natural moral order, an order illuminated by lucid language and veiled by vague, careless words — the type of words that predominate in theoretical discussion. Thus did Orwell avoid theory's entanglements. In the preface to Animal Farm, he wrote that his socialism grew "more out of disgust with the way the poorer section of the industrial workers were oppressed and neglected than out of any theoretical admiration for a planned society." Because he was beholden to no collectivist theory, Orwell could — rather, had to — vigorously deplore the atrocities of Stalinism. Those shackled to Soviet Communist theories could not and did not, content instead to either ignore or excuse the ussr's abrogation of "decency."

In a fine article titled "Orwell for Christians," Paul J. Griffiths examines several occasions in Orwell's writing when he depicts a blatant breach of the "natural moral order." In one column, Orwell describes the scene upon arrival in Colombo, the capital of what is today Sri Lanka, on his way to Burma: An Asian worker clumsily unloads the ship passengers' luggage, and a British policeman, disapproving of the laborer's ungainliness, serves him a swift kick to the bottom and sends him sprawling; the white onlookers nod in approval. Orwell obviously believes that the crowd approved only because the kick's dispenser was white and its recipient black. But, as Griffiths points out, "Orwell engages in no theoretical argument about the evils of racism. He simply depicts, and by depicting convicts of moral malformation, those who do not share his judgment that what he depicts is disordered and ought to be resisted."

Another instance of this reality-based morality comes when the protagonist of Orwell's novel Keep the Aspidistra Flying learns that a girl he has impregnated is considering an abortion:

> That pulled him up. For the first time he grasped, with the only kind of knowledge that matters, what they were really talking about. The words "a baby" took on a new significance. They did not mean any longer a mere abstract disaster, they meant a bud of flesh, a bit of himself, down there in her belly, alive and growing. . . . He knew then that it was a dreadful thing they were contemplating — a blasphemy, if that word had any meaning.

Compare this language with that used by today's pro-choice crowd and Orwell's discomfort with euphemizing and theorizing is made patent. On the websites of both Naral Pro-Choice America and the National Abortion Federation, under their main "About Abortion" sections, one will not once read the word "child" or "baby" or even "fetus" (let alone the words "bud of flesh, a bit of himself, down there in her belly"). Instead, one encounters the euphemistic phrases "end a pregnancy" and "unintended pregnancy" and, of course, the word "abortion." On both websites, theory dominates reality: The theoretical phrases "right to choose" and "right to safe, legal abortion" are ubiquitous.

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Theorizing hides the reality of other issues of immediate pertinence. On March 9, President Obama issued an executive order allowing tax dollars to fund scientific research that destroys human embryos. Rather than speak frankly that day about the legitimate disagreement over stem cells — namely, whether an embryo is a life and whether destroying it for scientific research is morally acceptable — Obama instead theorized on the process of scientific investigation. He said that "promoting science isn't just about providing resources — it is also about protecting free and open inquiry. It is about letting scientists like those here today do their jobs, free from manipulation or coercion, and listening to what they tell us, even when it's inconvenient — especially when it's inconvenient."

Empty sentences. Obviously scientists should be free from coercion and their results from manipulation, and obviously societies should face the unpleasant facts that science reveals. This theorizing has, however, nothing to do with the fundamental stem-cell question, which Obama never addressed.

The destruction of embryos may not elicit the same revulsion as seeing a black man kicked by a white one or contemplating a baby murdered, but perhaps it would were the act not wrapped in impenetrable scientific jargon and couched in soothing but irrelevant theory. Orwell knew that not every deplorable act is obviously so — many are far removed from people's lives and therefore easily hidden beneath knotty language and postulating. Most of those who have picked up Orwell's essay "How the Poor Die," had they not, would never have known about the squalid conditions of certain French public hospitals at a certain period of time. Most readers of "The Spike," had they not taken in that piece or Orwell's subsequent book Down and Out in Paris and London, would never have experienced pangs of indignation about the English tramp's itinerant life because they would never have known about it. That which troubles common decency, Orwell understood, seeks obscurity — which is precisely why he endeavored to find the facts and present them clearly. The facts of the stem-cell debate are not clear (even Bill Clinton is confused about what is and is not an embryo). Would Obama's executive order garner sizable support if the matter were plainly presented?

It is, certainly, not only denizens of the left who theorize and euphemize their way out of inconvenient situations. The staunchest apologists for the worst elements of British Empire were conservatives, and now, as in Orwell's time, it is conservatives who lean most heavily on theory to explain away

indigence and squalor as inevitable in a free society and thereby rid themselves of responsibility to alleviate the burdens of the impoverished. Certainly America's foremost racists are found on the right, and they have all sorts of theories. And yet such justifications — whether of racism, imperialism, neglect of the poor, or even creationism — currently have but parochial appeal. The left is in power now, and so it is that today's most influential and worrisome euphemizing comes from the left.

To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle," Orwell reminds us, and while that is surely true, it is also true that different people perceive differently that which is in their purview. Over this point, Orwell staggers; he does not realize, or does not care, that his own reportage, his relation of those things he calls "facts," is often colored by opinion and occasionally is completely opinion.[3] Orwell's sentences, powerful and crisp, naturally carry the clarity and force of fact, and this is good. But their uncompromising tone can go too far, and his words can be ill-considered, affected, and inappropriate.

In "How the Poor Die," for instance, Orwell relates the setup of his room in a public ward. Near him is "a handsome old man with a white imperial, round whose bed, at all hours when visiting was allowed, four elderly female relatives dressed in all black sat exactly like crows, obviously scheming for some pitiful legacy." Obviously? One wonders. Might not these women — whom Orwell analogizes to "crows" awaiting their carrion — actually care deeply for the man around whose bed they sit? In the same essay Orwell writes, "No doubt English nurses are dumb enough, they may tell fortunes with tealeaves, wear Union Jack badges and keep photographs of the Queen on their mantelpieces, but at least they don't let you lie unwashed and constipated on an unmade bed, out of sheer laziness." A backhanded compliment, for sure, and a nasty one. Is there really no doubt that all English nurses are so dumb?

It is difficult to reconcile the Orwell of such sweeping and fatuous declarations with Orwell the reputed fact-finder and truth-teller. The best tack is to remember that Orwell's ideas ostensibly came from observation and experience, so if he encountered only the dim-witted variety of English nurse, it is evident why he thought all English nurses that way. Which doesn't excuse it. Quite the contrary, in fact, because Orwell detested precisely this type of shoddy thinking in other people. His writings brim with condemnation of racists (and those Orwell supposed to be such), but mightn't a racist justify his noxious beliefs by appealing to personal experience, insular and unrepresentative though it is? The racist is ignorant; the same is true of Orwell's comments on English nurses.

He writes about a bookshop, a seemingly innocuous topic, and still manages to uncork a cuvée of cussedness.

For that matter, the same is true of Orwell's comments on any number of people, places, and things, which are, among their other flaws, significantly more condemnatory than their subjects warrant. He writes about a bookshop, a seemingly innocuous topic, and still manages to uncork a cuvée of cussedness. A bookshop is typically "pictured, if you don't work in one, as a kind of paradise where charming old gentlemen browse eternally among calf-bound folios." Orwell did work in one, though, and it was frequented by snobs, nuisances, petty thieves, and "unmistakable paranoiacs," "moth-eaten and aimless," who demanded rare books be ordered and placed on hold and then never turned up to claim them. Moreover, the store was allegedly dingy, dusty, and cold — just a downright treacherous and terrible place. One wonders which of Orwell's sentences about this little shop of horrors are jokes, which are opinions, which are facts, and which are creative inventions? The same questions arise upon finishing "Confessions of a Book Reviewer," an essay that depicts a glabrous critic, "a crushed figure," whose craft is thankless, soulless, and fundamentally dishonest, "pouring his immortal spirit down the drain, half a pint at a time."

Perhaps the best-known of Orwell's dour experiential essays is "Such, Such Were the Joys," a disturbing recollection of his years at St. Cyprian's preparatory school never published in his lifetime for fear of libel. Chilly, slimy bathwater, beatings, lousy food doled out in insufficient quantities, homoerotic relations, class hierarchy, and omnipresent guilt — it's all here. But was the real reality as bad as Orwell's created reality? Julian Barnes writes that Orwell's account of St. Cyprian's "is much harsher than that of anyone else who wrote about the school." He asks:

> was Orwell's account so unremitting because he saw more truth than all the others, because time had not sentimentalized him, because with hindsight he could see exactly how that kind of education system perverted young minds and spirits to the wider purposes of the British establishment and Empire? Or was his thumb propagandistically on the scale?

Probably the bathwater at St. Cyprian's really was cold and unclean, but when Orwell writes that he cannot recall his schooldays "without seeming to breathe in a whiff of something cold and evil-smelling — a sort of compound of sweaty stockings, dirty towels, faecal smells blowing along corridors" etc., he's abandoned facts and entered the realm of sensation, what Harvey called the "temptations of art." How big, really, was the elephant you shot?

This fault is instructive. It shows that observation can take a person only so far. It is right to indict flowery language and complicated theory, both of which open chasms between people and facts, but it is also right that even those recorders of facts who are declared assiduous and disinterested accent their observations with opinion. What's more, facts are not always discerned merely by seeing what's in front of one's nose; sometimes they're more complicated than that. And facing facts isn't the terminus, either, because once you've faced the facts you need to be able to do something with them or about them. On this count Orwell struggled because his hostility to tradition deprived him of a way of ordering the situations he encountered and concocting lessons from them. He was too beholden to the visceral: His emotive reactions dictated his predictions and proposed solutions and even biased him against accurately rendering the facts he saw.

So his predictions and prescriptions suffered. "Only revolution can save England," Orwell wrote in 1940, "that has been obvious for years, but now the revolution has started, and it may proceed quite quickly if only we can keep Hitler out. Within two years, maybe a year, if only we can hang on, we shall see changes that will surprise the idiots who have no foresight. I dare say the London gutters will have to run with blood. All right, let them, if it is necessary." The "idiots" were correct: London gutters did not have to run with blood, nor did they (incidentally, how does Orwell's approval of sanguine streets jibe with his defense of decency?). Nor did the war "wipe out most of the existing class privileges," as Orwell predicted in 1941: "The Stock Exchange will be pulled down, the horse plough will give way to the tractor, the country houses will be turned into children's holiday camps, the Eton and Harrow match will be forgotten." As Barnes wittily put it, "One out of four on the vision thing; and tractors were hardly a difficult pick." In another 1941 essay, a particularly off-the-mark piece called "The English Revolution," Orwell flaunted his confusion of fact and opinion:

> We know very well that with its present social structure England cannot survive, and we have got to make other people see that fact and act upon it. We cannot win the war without introducing Socialism, nor establish Socialism without winning the war. At such a time it is possible, as it was not in the peaceful years, to be both revolutionary and realistic [my italics].

His fact is what facts cannot be — namely, incorrect.

Orwell's hostility to tradition deprived him of a way of ordering the situations he encountered.

Orwell saw villains and their villainy everywhere. The whites aboard his ship in Colombo were racist, the bedside mourners in the hospital were avaricious, the bookshop customers were liars, and so on. Capitalism was a particularly persevering villain. His renowned distaste for the economic scheme was likely garnered, in the same manner as his attraction to socialism, by observing the poor and extrapolating that their toilsome lives were products of an unjust capitalistic system. In his writing, therefore, Orwell gives the impression that he, the solemn recorder of discernible facts, discerned not one of capitalism's positive consequences, which is laughably untrue. Orwell was simply biased against capitalism (and against the United States, homosexuals, etc.) and decided to ignore those observations which would have demanded that he write about it less disparagingly. And so he was ever attacking an economic structure that he did not fully understand; outrage based on ill-considered experience and bias produced overbroad salvos. "Laissez-faire capitalism is passing away," Orwell wrote in 1944. He later wrote in Partisan Review, "I don't need to indicate to you the various features of capitalism that make democracy unworkable." And then there's this dubious (current bailouts notwithstanding) bit, from Orwell's 1944 review of The Road to Serfdom:

> The trouble with competitions is that somebody wins them. Professor Hayek denies that free capitalism necessarily leads to monopoly, but in practice that is where it has led, and since the vast majority of people would far rather have State regimentation than slumps and unemployment, the drift towards collectivism is bound to continue if popular opinion has any say in the matter.

Orwell, to put it kindly, does not win the Nostradamus award for prescience. Nor does he win an award for enlightened public policy. At one point, he pressed for capping individual incomes in Britain such that no person would earn more than ten times the salary of the lowest-paid worker. An unworkable plan, obviously, and that Orwell would suggest it betrays an ignorance of politics, policy, and human nature. It also betrays an ignorance of Frédéric Bastiat's wisdom about the relationship between liberty and equality — viz, that mandating the latter will always destroy the former. Orwell advocated nationalizing not a few things, too: all major industry, all agricultural land, and all privately run schools. It is striking that the author of 1984 would write, approvingly, that at "the moment that all productive goods have been declared the property of the State, the common people will feel, as they cannot feel now, that the State is themselves."

It is tempting to believe that societal improvement will occur once people undertake unbiased observation of their surroundings. Yet Orwell reminds us, through his errors, that such an approach is insufficient, not simply because people process situations differently, selectively blur the line between fact and fiction, and are frequently incurably prejudiced, but also because it repudiates the accumulated wisdom that lets humans order their observations. This accumulated wisdom is not one among the assorted, bungling theories that Orwell so despised, nor is it a "system" like socialism or capitalism or environmentalism. It is, rather, the agglomeration of history's records, thousands of years of humans seeing what is in front of their noses, and the distillation from that surfeit of data of overarching lessons that govern the way of the world. Though Orwell claimed to believe in unvarying rules of right and wrong, he nonetheless found little appeal in tempering his limited personal perceptions with those of the billions who came before him. Had he so modulated his pronouncements, they would surely have been less hasty and more prudent and accurate.

Still, much of Orwell's writing is undeniably strong and sound. The best of his pieces guard against deception, are direct and preach directness, and instruct that not people nor institutions nor customs should be permitted to change meanings and definitions and, like Squealer, to turn black into white.

And in his mistakes, in the worst of his work, useful lessons resound: Bias exists even in the most self-righteously self-proclaimed unbiased people, and individual observations, unguided by accumulated wisdom, are but assorted bits that lack cohesion. It is worth remembering that facts can be dangerous, for when they are unmoored, untethered to past experience and a larger worldview,

they can bolster the very theories and systems that violate decency. Did Lenin, for one, not undermine political freedom precisely by pointing to the observable fact of the hungry masses?

Orwell was not always right, not even close — he was not even always logical or sensible. Good for him that his assets were singular and his faults enlightening. For those reasons he abides.

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[1] W.F. Bolton, “Sources and Non-Sources: ‘Politics and the English Language’” College Literature, 11:1 (1984).

[2] Jeffrey Meyers, Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation(Norton, 2000), 69, and Stephen Ingle, George Orwell: A Political Life (Manchester Univ., 1993), 11.

[3] This deficiency is not directly related to the inability of modern-day scholars to determine the veracity of every detail of Orwell’s essays, but Orwell’s penchant for passing off as factual those observations which are clearly conjectural does bring him closer to the realm of fabrication — perhaps he didn’t shoot an elephant?