

Down and out in Aragon:

George Orwell's near-fatal wounding
in the Spanish Civil War



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No bomb that ever burst
Shatters the crystal spirit

— George Orwell¹

In a famous 1944 essay, George Orwell begins by remarking on a German plane sketching vapor trails in the placid sky far above him, imagining the bombardier as a civilized fellow who bears no ill will.² As Orwell knows, if the enemy is lucky, he will drop his bombs on the very place Orwell sits savoring his tea, but he cannot be resented merely for that. The enemy is a functionary, and he arouses no emotion because he possesses no human features. He is a bloodless cut-out who stands for the impersonality of warfare.

The details with which Orwell preserves the moment—the limpid blue of the sky, the distant summery hum of the plane’s motor—deliberately insulate the memory in a gauze of philosophical abstraction, as if war were an anonymous business waged by men who are much like their warplanes—killing automata forged of steel and rivets.

But, Orwell had other, tangible experiences of battle zones—experiences which he could not meet with equanimity and which point to a very different understanding of war. In 1936, a decade after returning from Burma, where he had been a reluctant sub-divisional policeman executing the “dirty work of empire,”² Orwell sold the family silver and traveled to Spain to join the fight against

General Franco’s Falangists. He was assigned to a ragtag regiment made up of 80 poorly nourished soldiers and “several dogs.”³

Weeks passed during which Orwell’s regiment was hunkered down in the sticky clay of Aragon, exchanging occasional pot shots with the enemy. The mosquitos, as Orwell languidly notes, were “becoming a nuisance.”³ The battle losses took on an element of farce. The first five casualties in Orwell’s unit had been shot by their compatriots when their weapons discharged accidentally. Soon ammunition grew scarce for both sides, and any vestigial political fervor was swallowed up by the unceasing misery and monotony of trench warfare.

Six months after his arrival in Spain, Orwell lay hidden in a muddy trench awaiting the start of another day of patience-testing calm. On May 20, 1937, at 5 a.m., he arose from the defensive posture in which he had spent the night, awkwardly unfolding his six-foot three-inch frame—an anomalous figure in a company of small men. His calculations had convinced him that the enemy snipers were comfortably out of range. With no menace afoot he shared a pleasant reminiscence of Paris with his adjunct. There was a sharp crack issued from the enemy lines, and a bullet caught him in the throat.

There is much of the physician’s temperament in Orwell’s approach to human affairs. One has only to read his diktat on the acceptable method of preparing tea (Orwell maintained there are 11 indispensable elements)⁴ to imagine him as a senior medical consultant striking fear in his quaking registrars. When he was wounded, his

sangfroid recalls the self-discipline of the medical investigator who infects himself with deadly pathogens and then meticulously records the vicissitudes of his illness. After dryly noting that “the whole experience of being hit by a bullet is very interesting,”³ Orwell continues:

Roughly speaking, it was the sensation of being at the center of an explosion. There seemed to be a loud bang and a blinding flash of light all around me, and I felt a tremendous shock—no pain, only a violent shock, such as you get from an electric terminal; with it a sense of utter weakness, a feeling of being stricken and shriveled up into nothing. The sandbags in front of me receded into the immense distance....All this happened in a space of time much less than a second. The next moment my knees crumpled up and I was falling, my head hitting the ground with a violent bang which, to my relief, did not hurt.³

The Orwell who writes “roughly speaking” seems to wish to apologize for the narrative lapse of the one who is not quite up to reportorial self-description while apparently bleeding to death. The prospect of dying, however, does not alter Orwell’s commitment to civility:

I thought of the man who had shot me...I could not feel any resentment against him. I reflected that as he was a Fascist I would have killed him if I could, but that if he had been taken prisoner and brought before me at this moment I would merely have congratulated him on his good shooting.³

An old Etonian, Orwell did not deny that for better or worse the English ruling class fought their battles the way they played cricket, a game that Orwell thought enshrined the English elevation of form over talent.⁵ On the cricket field, if one could not play well, one could at least play tenaciously. Orwell’s refusal to feel resentment for the man who shot him has the quality of the English sportsman, sidelined by injury, who feels that to be conveyed off the playing field is rather to let down one’s side.

Orwell’s description of the moment of pure viscerally-felt implosion as the bullet tears through him, the tsunami of irresistible light, the reverse telescoping of space, is terrifyingly apt. In the instant of his collapse, time and space are obliterated. The most basic awareness of the nature of his injury is denied to him.

The bullet that struck him was discharged from a sniper’s rifle fired from a distance of 175 yards.⁶ It was a 25-gram copper-plated Spanish Mauser bullet with a seven mm bore,

and it arrived at its target with a velocity of about 2,300 feet per second. Orwell was mid-sentence (discussing on the brothels in Paris)⁷ when the bullet struck, passing through the scarf of his regimentals and entering his neck just below his larynx, a millimeter or two left of midline. It then made a clean exit in the rear. (Much later, in 2013, the scarf with its bloodstain and bullet hole was advertised as a relic, and sold for £4,500 at a London auction.⁸)

The bullet producing Orwell’s wound was encased in copperplate, known as a “full metal jacket.” Designed to ease feeding of the firing mechanism, it also prevents bullets from deforming during passage (the British Dum Dum arsenal near Calcutta took note of this flesh-sparing property and developed the eponymously named dum dum bullet with a soft or hollow tip that mushrooms on impact). The high velocity of the bullet striking Orwell reduced its tendency to tumble, thus curtailing its lethality. The key physical principle is that the kinetic energy of the bullet does not matter unless that energy is transferred to its target. Orwell’s survival owed much to elementary ballistics and to the false assumption of the munitions experts of that era that the fastest bullet did the most harm.⁹

An instant after the bullet passed through his neck, Orwell collapsed, landing on his back without losing consciousness. Stunned, he had no notion of the nature of his injury until he attempted to speak and produced only a faint squeak accompanied by “a lot of blood.”³ When he struggled to regain his feet, he found his right arm was paralyzed. It was not painful, however, a discovery that Orwell, in his understated way, received with “vague satisfaction.”³ His comrades then splashed his neck with alcohol, affixed a crude bandage to his wound, and brought him by stretcher to the field hospital in Sietamo, blood bubbling from his mouth all the way. Nine days later, resting in a military hospital in Tarragon, he was properly examined by a physician for the first time.

In Orwell’s wry account, his doctors were easily recognized—harried, genial, comically devoid of bedside manner. They exuded the hearty self-absorption of the physician who, untouched by illness himself, does not know when too much optimism crosses into callousness. Unfailingly upbeat, his doctors did not disguise their delight in caring for a patient who was voiceless, prostrate, and partially paralyzed.

“When shall I get my voice back?”³ Orwell inquired of his physician.

“Your voice? Oh, you’ll never get your voice back,” he was told cheerfully.³ He was also told that a one mm change in trajectory would have caused the bullet to sever



George Orwell, left, examining bayonette; right, in uniform during in the Spanish Civil War.

his carotid artery—with death to follow in minutes—but this, too, was worth a celebratory thump on the back.

Days later, a laryngologist at the Hospital General de Catalunya examined Orwell diagnosing “abrasion of the right-side larynx dilating nerve.”⁷ This was a reference to what we now call the recurrent laryngeal nerve, the branch of the vagus nerve supplying the larynx. At the time, the recurrent laryngeal nerve was thought to have separate dilating and constricting components, a view now discredited.

A present-day neurologist, after examining the medical record, has concluded that Orwell’s arm paralysis was the result of trauma to the lateral cord of the brachial plexus, the web-like ramification of spinal nerves that passes through a channel in the neck to the armpit.¹⁰

When it became clear that Orwell would not succumb to the blood loss or infection (spared, perhaps, by the cauterizing effect of a high velocity bullet), he was prescribed a series of galvanic treatments—bouts of electrical stimulation delivered via cutaneous electrodes to his arm and neck. Galvanic theory held that artificially stimulating slackened muscles helped to prepare them for later spontaneous re-energization. Orwell submitted to such treatments twice a week, documenting that his deadened muscles twitched and fasciculated in the prescribed manner. “A queer business,”³ was Orwell’s opinion. Orwell conceded that the treatments might be helping, but it was a verdict based on gratitude and hope. In the decades after Orwell, electric shock treatments were rigorously tested and were shown to be of no value in animating paralyzed muscle. The theory that electrical stimulation of muscles ought to strengthen them persists, however. Even today, it

is the rationale for several popular approaches to the treatment of musculoskeletal disorders.¹¹

Orwell’s own reflections on the care he received do not include any criticism of his physicians who labored tirelessly and made the most of limited resources. But he astutely observed two shortcomings of battlefield medicine that he estimates must have cost thousands of lives. The first was that no treatment was available on the frontlines. Regardless of the severity of their injuries, injured soldiers underwent a rapid survey of their wounds, followed perhaps by a dose of morphine. Triage meant mummifying the untreated wound in a casing of plaster of Paris on which was scrawled in pencil a description of the wound. Soldiers were then transported by truck to a hospital miles away, often over churned-up roads so rough that intra-abdominal wounds that had been only partly stabilized began to bleed once again. Orwell was typical in receiving his first actual treatment eight or nine days after being wounded.

The second shortcoming was the lack of trained nurses. Rudimentary tasks such as the washing of wounds, the changing of bandages, and the dispensing of analgesics were performed irregularly, if at all. Arriving at a dressing station close to the front, gagging on the blood issuing from his ravaged throat, Orwell was both revolted and amused when his nurse insisted he must eat the regulation meal of eggs and greasy stew.

The threat of imminent death compelled Orwell to come to grips with his view of warfare and of human affairs. In Orwell’s journalistic essays the reader encounters innumerable variations of phrases like “poor old wretch” (*How the Poor Die*),¹² “poor drudge” (*The Road to Wigan Pier*),¹³ “poor devil” (*Homage to Catalonia*).³ Its characters



Illustration by Jim M'Guinness

are evoked with an empathic poignancy that can be almost unbearable. When Orwell describes the hanging of a scrawny, half-naked Burmese native, we never learn what the man is guilty of.¹⁴ Instead, Orwell devotes his attention to the prosaic detail that renders the condemned man recognizably human—the way, for example, he alters his step to avoid a puddle on the way to the gallows. True evil-doers for Orwell are remote and shadowy figures; it is the “poor brutes” who are flesh-and-blood who arouse a sense of shared suffering regardless of how tarnished they are by their sins.

This sensibility—marked by a repugnance for privilege and a kinship with the “down and out”—took root in Orwell after his anguished years as a colonial policeman, and it continued to govern his responses during the Spanish civil war. In a telling account of that war, he describes leaving his comrades in the predawn hours hoping to snare a fascist caught outside the enemy trenches.¹ Alarmed by the buzzing of aircraft overhead, a man does materialize, running panic-stricken across the parapet. Orwell raises his rifle, then resignedly lowers it. The enemy in his panic has bolted from the trenches half-dressed, dodging bullets while trying—and failing—to keep his pants up. It is this image, and not the image of the robotic bombardier, that encapsulates Orwell’s true vision of the battlefield. War lays bare the abject wretchedness that weighs everywhere upon the world and transforms it into a place where the defense of decency requires the killing of persons much like ourselves.

Orwell was first and last a novelist, and a novelist is by nature a portraitist. He cannot help imagining his mortal enemy as a vivid character with a life of his own. Even as he lay a bloodied casualty of war, Orwell’s hatred was reserved for the invisible enemy, the power-seekers remote in their ministries and boardrooms, the *übermenschen* who had erected the remorseless profit-making machine that was methodically grinding up human lives.

It is often said that “true” historical accounts, if they are closely examined, are as fanciful as novels, allegories with a little scholarly window-dressing. To the extent this is true, historical events can seem to have been plotted as heavy-handedly as a medieval morality play. The account provided here of Orwell’s injury and his gradual recovery has most of the elements of sentimental melodrama. And yet, it is all factual. It is a story of moral vindication. A devoted guardian of the English language is wounded in the throat, and his vocal apparatus is paralyzed. Censorship has been dispensed, violently, from the barrel of a gun. The writer suffers cruelly, and the cause for which he suffers falls to defeat.

But for Orwell, the man who had been so grievously wounded emerges as a spirited foe of the league of tyrants rising to wage war on humanity and on objective truth. Faced with this threat, the basic decency of the man is never compromised. And though the natural voice remained for some time only a *sotto voce* squeak, the literary voice grew in strength. It rings forth from the admonitory novels and the humanely rational prose of his great essays.

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