ON TELLING THE TRUTH

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A brief history of truth might go something like this. In pre-modern times, truth was by and large a phenomenon set apart from the lowly material world. It was loftier than everyday realities, dwelling in some Olympian sphere of its own; or alternatively it could be thought of as deeper than them, lurking elusively at the heart of things. Getting at the truth thus meant discarding the empirical shells of phenomena in order to pluck out their vital essences. This view of truth survives well into modernity, as Hegel among others would attest; but it is only with modernity proper that truth descends to earth on a dramatic scale, as the mind turns from religious or Platonic ideals and buckles itself in Baconian style to the actually existent.

Something similar occurs in literature. It is not until the celebrated rise of the novel in early-modern times that the ordinary workaday world is considered to be fit matter for literary treatment. Common-life characters had of course staged their appearance in earlier writing, but almost always as servants, foot soldiers, spear-carriers or buffoons. The idea that common-or-garden social experience might be worthy of investigation as precious in itself, rather than as exemplary of some higher truth, is a revolutionary one. As Charles Taylor has pointed out, it has its roots in Christianity; but it takes a long time for this demotic agenda to infiltrate the charmed domain of artistic culture. What is comic about the first great novelistic hero, Don Quixote, is just his nostalgic patrician refusal to embrace this brave new world of bourgeois realism.

It is impossible for us now to recreate the excitement and bemusement of the first readers of, say, Daniel Defoe, reared as many of them would have been on a diet of epic, pastoral, elegy and tragedy, at encountering a narrative which seemed to find everyday existence extraordinarily enthralling. What helped to make it so was the fact that it was early capitalist existence, in which frenetic change, sickening instability and the thrills and spills of survival in a predatory world were the name of the game. It also helped that, as a great deal of literature from Balzac to Brecht attests, the capitalist and the criminal are terrible twins, requiring much the same sorts of skills and aptitudes. Thanks
to the emergence of the capitalist market, it was now possible to write a fable of everyday life which had all the virtues of a gripping thriller.

Yet if the mind had buckled itself to the actual, it was only to soar above it. In the aesthetic sphere, this becomes known as the transcendence of art, the way it dips into the gutter only to elevate what it finds there to the stars. Art is an alchemical process, which takes the dross of daily experience and transmutes it into the gold of aesthetic form. It trades in the empirical; but in order to be art, rather than some mere documentary record, it must do so in a way which lays bare its ideality or typicality. As such, this aggressive new mode, known as realism, is still in line with the old idealising genres of pastoral, heroic, epic and the like, as the twentieth-century avant garde artists protest. Balzac’s ideality may be a more fleshly kind than Dante’s, but art’s relationship with the real is still an ambiguous one, embracing and refusing it in the same gesture.

There is a similar ambiguity in philosophy. Empiricism may conceive of a mind empty and inert enough to take the vivid impress of actual things; but this humility before the real is ultimately in the name of rising above it in order to master it, harnessing knowledge to the ends of political and technological dominion. If we examine the shape and texture of things with self-forgetful attentiveness, it is in order to uncover the underlying laws that govern their behaviour; and this, in turn, is with a view to intervening in them so as to turn them to our own benefit. The human subject who appears to John Locke and David Hume as little more than a welter of discrete sensations is also politically speaking the active, unified, sovereign self. In this sense, the epistemology of the Enlightenment, on the surface at least, is intriguingly at odds with its politics.

However snugly the mind presses up to the world, then, a gap must be maintained between them, one which allows us space to manipulate whatever it is we have in our cognitive sights. To this extent, the whole Enlightenment project contains the seeds of its own later postmodern subversion. For the more this gap allows the material world to be worked upon by human technologies, the more densely mediated that world becomes, until it becomes hard to catch a glimpse of the thing itself through the thick mesh of concepts and instrumental procedures which intrude between ourselves and it. Immanuel Kant’s ‘noumenal’ sphere is one name for this problem in high modernity. By the time of late modernity, we catch ourselves asking whether there is really anything out there at all, or whether the real is no more than a transient effect of our own ways of doing business. We have now subjugated our surroundings so thoroughly that we are left with nothing but our own technologies of domination to gaze anxiously or admiringly upon, the real world having meanwhile dwindled to nothing beneath their remorseless
operations. Power is meant to elicit truth, and so indeed it does: he with the largest research grant is most likely to stumble upon it. But it also occludes it, as the providers of the research grant discreetly hint that they would rather not have a result which discredits their commercial product. As our top-heavy technologies of truth come to shut out the world they mediate, the pre-modern gulf between truth and empirical reality returns in postmodern guise. It now takes the form of a social order cut off from the world by the very discourses which are supposed to open it up. The difference is that for the Platonists as for the X-Files, the truth is out there, beyond the realm of common experience, whereas for postmodernism the truth is in here.

Truth in these conditions is whatever we need in order to do what we want to do. In pragmatist fashion, you can resolve the contest between truth and power by more or less conflating the two. Truth becomes a matter of what we actually get up to – an alluringly practical, material hypothesis for radicals, though one at odds with their suspicion that truth generally turns out to be the opposite of what we get up to. Yet the realist conception of truth as whatever is the case is notoriously hard to banish. For one thing, if truth is about our needs, then we need to know what it is we need, which would appear to usher some realist notion in the back door again just as it has been unceremoniously booted on to the front porch. Much the same is true of the prescriptivist or Nietzschean claim that truth is what we legislate into being, a view which suffers from the defect that we must already know something of how it is with the world to avoid the embarrassment of positing situations which are plainly impossible. If truth is simply a function of power and interest, how do we know this? And does this claim describe what is the case, or is it itself a function of power and interest? A coherentist theory of truth, for which those propositions are true which rub shoulders amicably with the rest of our propositions, is dogged by something like the same inexorable return of realism: how can we know that one proposition fits in with others? Truth, which began as an exalted affair way out of our sublunary reach, has ended up in the present as altogether too close for comfort. It is a symptom of the fact that we late moderns are apparently incapable of getting outside our own heads.

The discerning reader may have noted that this history of truth has been a mite selective. Yet it serves to highlight a certain paradox of modernity, namely that the only way of finally mastering reality is to abolish it, in which case there is nothing left to master. You are left high and dry with your own lonely sovereignty, as the world itself slips through your fingers and leaves you grasping at thin air. Unless the material world offers some resistance to your designs upon it, it is impossible to know it at all, since it is a thing’s recalcitrance which signals that there is something there to be grasped. But
this resistance is also intolerable, since it signifies that your power is incomplete. What you must do is purge reality of its inherent meanings so as to reduce it to clay in your hands; but what virtue is there in manipulating a meaningless world? If truth is something you impose upon things, only to pull it out again in the process known as knowledge, is not this as pointlessly circular an action as that of the man in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* who passes money from one of his hands to the other in the belief that he is making a financial transaction?

You are left, then, with a Hobson’s choice between a real but intractable universe, and a docile but unknowable one. The more dominion you exert, the less you understand anything but your own project – a myopia which at present is known as United States foreign policy. It is those whose satellites can map every inch of the planet who tend to produce schoolchildren for whom Malawi is a Disney character. Those most ignorant of geography are those with their military bases in every quarter of the globe. In this scheme of things, power and truth cannot easily co-exist. The more you have of the former, the scarcer the latter commodity becomes.

Moreover, if there is nothing out there to rebuff your rule, the whole of reality having been long since battered into submission by the imperious will, there is nothing out there either to legitimate your own authority. You become, in Kierkegaardian phrase, a monarch without a country, with no curb on your whimsical fantasies. It is, so to speak, the Michael Jackson syndrome on a global scale. The only legitimation becomes self-legitimation; but how can the self be a source of validation if it has not itself been validated? There is no threat to your power only because there is nobody and nothing left to challenge it – in which case, since power lives only in the response it provokes, it begins gradually to implode. You cannot consolidate your identity by rolling over the rest of humanity, since identity, even in Washington DC, is a differential affair which requires the irrefragable existence of others. The ideal solution to this dilemma was the Marquis de Sade’s, who dreamed of a victim who would be submissive yet responsive, because he could be tortured indefinitely but never quite killed. As long as there is someone left to scream, you can rest assured that your sovereignty is not turning in a void.

At the very acme of his control, then, Enlightenment Man is plunged into a certain tragic impotence. There is no merit in bestriding a world which you have knocked the stuffing out of. Who esteems the recognition of slaves? Voluntarism, or the cult of the imperial will, is the other face of nihilism. Unless the Iraqis and their fellow victims of Western imperialism assent to your rule, your own sovereignty will simply be discredited, however much of their oil you may conveniently snatch in the meantime. Yet such hegem-
ony implies accurate knowledge, which is exactly what the psychotic fantasy
known as absolute power undermines. If such power acknowledges the truth
of its adversary, it ceases to be absolute; if it does not, it ceases to be effec-
tive.

A form of reason which can take in the whole world at a glance, rather
like some super-surveillance device of the future, must be abstract enough
to find particularity a problem. The Enlightenment threatens to deliver us
the kind of knowledge which is so general that it is unable to penetrate the
particular. There can be no science of an individual daisy or tadpole, as there
can be a science of the species as a whole. We are faced with the absurdity
of a form of truth-production so powerful that it is brought to its knees
by the sensuously specific. Reason is accordingly in need of a prosthesis, a
kind of sub- or pseudo-science which will grant it access to the uniquely
particular; and this is known as the aesthetic, which was invented in 1750 at
the heart of Enlightenment Europe. There could now be a science of the
concrete, which would later re-emerge as phenomenology and Lebensphiloso-
phie. Indeed, if there could not be such a science we would be in serious
political trouble, since how can reason hold sway over a citizenry of which it
has no inside knowledge? If coercion is to give way to hegemony, a sovereign
rationality must know the truth of the subject; and this is one function (there
are other, more subversive ones) of the novel in modern times, which as a
kind of dramatized sociology represents a knowledge more ‘lived’ and inward
than anything political science can provide.

This contest between truth and power comes to a head in modern times,
but it has pre-modern origins in the medieval theological debates between
realists and nominalists. Theological realists like Thomas Aquinas tend to hold
that the world is a particular way, and that even God must respect this fact.
It was he, after all, who decided to make it that way, and like the rest of us
he must live with his mistakes. For nominalists like Duns Scotus, by contrast,
God cannot be restricted by his own Creation, so that the way things are
must be purely arbitrary. God must surely be able to make 2 + 2 = 5, or turn
Dick Cheney into a drag queen, if he is to be omnipotent. For the nominal-
ists power trumps truth; and postmodern relativists, for whom the way the
world is, is either no way at all or entirely arbitrary, are their latter-day inheri-
tors. They are, so to speak, the modern dunces.

In this sense, that most fashionable of all postmodern doctrines – anti-
essentialism – has a spectacularly dubious political history. It is only because
postmodern theorists do not read such uncool authors as Scotus or Aquinas
that this fact has not come to light. For the medieval anti-realists, there was
no essential truth to things, since such essences would simply obstruct the
infinite power of the Almighty. For the postmodernists, rather similarly, the
world must be random, protean, diffuse and fuzzy at the edges if subjectivity (or, for the more cynical of the postmodern brigade, consumerism) is to be unfettered. But for ‘God’ in medieval debates one can always read the ‘United States’ in contemporary ones. Indeed, since America is such an egregiously godly nation, no parallel could be more appropriate. The more you strike essences from the world, the more you leave it clay in the hands of the all-mighty. There is no more devout anti-essentialist than absolute power. Truths must be constructed rather than inherent if they are not to act as a brake upon one’s projects. If a thing has no identity of its own, it will all the more compliantly take the impress of yours.

The latest postmodern assault on truth is known in the White House as faith-based politics. This is not quite, as it first appears, a matter of ignoring facts which do not chime with your political views, but of ignoring facts which do not fit in with certain other facts. As far as theories of truth go, then, it has a smack of coherentism about it, but also of constructivism. In fact, so-called faith-based politics simply presses some common-or-garden postmodern doctrine to a parodic extreme. It is a commonplace of the work of critics like Stanley Fish, for example, that facts are simply whatever our interpretative frameworks constrain us to define as such. Truth, in a word, is institutional. It is not that facts give rise to interpretations, but that institutionalized interpretations give birth to facts. What you count as a factual truth will be defined by your interests, beliefs, commitments and desires.

As for some Kuhnian philosophy of science, then, there cannot be argument over the facts, since conflicting interpretative communities will formulate the issues at stake in ways which leave no common ground of agreed facts for them to scrap over. There are no conflicts, simply incommensurabilities. What you adduce as evidence for your conservative view of the world will not constitute evidence for a radical like myself, since what counts as evidence is determined by our prior commitments and beliefs. It is always possible to say ‘But that’s not what I call a fact!’; in a kind of Nelson’s-eye epistemology. We can know the world is there because it resists us, but on this theory what counts as such resistance varies from one conceptual framework to another. The fact that a number of people in Washington as I write seem not to have noticed that there is widespread native resistance to their authority in Iraq, perceiving instead only a small handful of crazed foreign infiltrators, is a political version of this point.

Where, then, do those interests and beliefs hail from? The critique of ideology has traditionally had something to say on this question, but a post-ideological history is bound to be reduced to silence on this question. It will not do to suggest, as classical thinkers from Aristotle to Marx have claimed, that one’s interests, beliefs and desires arise from a reflection upon how it is
with the world. On the contrary, for this post-classical theory, this is to stand the matter on its head, since one’s view of how it is with the world arises from one’s interests, beliefs and desires. The traditional ethico-political question was always: what is to be done, given the facts of the matter? And this involved trying to steer a troublesome passage from fact to value, theory to practice. You could, it was supposed, work your way up from how it was to how it should be – from how things stood to how you should go to work on them. Truth in the empirical sense could generate true action in the moral or political sense.

Postmodernism decisively severs this bond, but in a novel kind of way. Now, no amount of investigation of the way things are will tell you how to act – not, however, as some previous thinkers considered, because it is hard to see how you can move from the one domain to the other, but because ‘the way things are’ is in any case constructed by your values and desires. There are not really two distinct spheres here at all, which is why the question of how to negotiate a passage from one to the other becomes irrelevant.

Postmodernism dissolves the so-called naturalistic fallacy, however, only at an immense price. For interests, beliefs and desires are now left hanging in the air, bereft of any foundation in factual truth. They are the primordial bedrock which one cannot dig beneath, since what you found there if you did would itself be determined by them. And this conveniently seals such beliefs from critical inquiry. One is lumbered with one’s beliefs rather as one might be afflicted by typhoid. Reason is no court of appeal here, since your interests and beliefs will determine what counts as reasonable in the first place. Whereas truth was once an absolute perched sublimely above empirical history, now it is desires and interests which are absolute. You cannot get behind them, any more than you can get behind the Almighty. A pragmatic age has landed itself with a new kind of transcendentalism.

In fact, if you are to have a candidate for the absolute at all, truth is a far more plausible one than interests, beliefs and desires. These latter are self-evidently empirical and historical, whereas truth is historical in a rather more ambiguous kind of way. There are, to be sure, all kinds of different truths in different situations; but it would be hard to imagine a human culture which lacked the concept of something being the case, and still lived to tell the tale. Perhaps this is what makes the difference between a historical and a historicist view of truth. We should not imagine that all timeless truths are exalted: some truths are unchanging because they are sub-historical rather than supra-historical, pertinent to the kind of material animals that we are. In the end, it is our bodies which give us an objective world. There is objectivity for a tiger, one which overlaps with our own version of it; but it is not entirely our sort of objectivity, since our bodies, and thus our material forms
of life, are so different. Perhaps this is what Wittgenstein had in mind when he remarked in the *Philosophical Investigations* that if a lion could speak, we would not be able to understand what it said.

Besides, if modes of truth-production are undeniably historical, the product itself is less obviously so. This, perhaps, is the kernel of truth to be rescued from rationalism. States of affairs are historically shifting, but true statements about them are not. If it is true today that capitalism is an unjust form of life, then the claim will still be valid long after the system has passed away. It has not ceased to be true that Ireland entered into a union with Britain in 1800 simply because it is no longer 1800. One can contrast this with aesthetic judgements. It may well be that the judgement that Shakespeare is an inferior writer was true for some critics in 1750 but was not true in 1950. What is beautiful in Tonga is probably not what is beautiful in Toronto. Claims about truth and falsehood, however, outlive their historical moments, a fact which historicist theories of truth generally fail to take account of. Whether moral claims are more like factual or aesthetic ones in this respect is a matter of ferocious contention. If slavery is wrong in 2005, was it therefore wrong in 50 BC?

There is a sense, then, in which faith-based politics is postmodern theory in action, however distasteful both parties might find the affinity. Paul Wolfowitz might be surprised to hear that he is in some sense in the same camp as a bunch of long-haired moral relativists who delight in Robert Mapplethorpe. But the fact that postmodernism is largely irreligious should not obscure the parallel between the two positions. Faith-based politics, like the Bush White House in general, is a curious mixture of mean-minded pragmatism and visionary idealism, since if you treat truth as purely instrumental it can play no cognitive role in restraining your vainglorious fantasies. For both creeds, there is something called belief which goes all the way down, and with which there is finally no arguing. Foundational truths go out of the window, then, but only to leave you with a different kind of dogmatism.

Taken together, these beliefs and commitments, along with their associated practices, make up what we call a culture. What is now absolute, in the sense of immune from fundamental rational inquiry, is not some Platonic Idea, Christian God or Spinozist Substance but, ironically enough, the everyday, variable stuff of a specific way of life. It is here, as Wittgenstein would say, that one’s theoretical spade hits rock bottom, and one is forced to bring argument to a close with the wry acknowledgement: ‘This is just the kind of thing we do’. Truth is a product of cultural convention. Of course there are still true or false judgements to be passed on this or that question; but what falls outside their scope is the deep cultural grammar which allows us to identify such issues and pass such judgements in the first place. This grammar
cannot itself be spoken of as true or false, any more than one could claim that Hindi is grammatically superior to Hungarian. This cultural logic is now as much immune to critique as the most lofty forms of classical Reason. Culture becomes the transcendental condition of truth.

Culture is a popular idea with postmodernism for all kinds of reasons, but one of them is that it seems to confute the realms of fact and value, a move which, as we have seen already, is typical of postmodern thought. It is both a descriptive term and a normative one, a distinctive way of doing things and an implicit commendation of this condition. It is not only a fact that particular groups of people do things in their own unique way, but somehow commendable that they do so. The very fact of diverse cultures is also a value. Plurality is always preferable to homogeneity – so that a range of politically diverse societies, a few of them with neo-fascist leanings, would on this reasoning be preferable to a dreary continuum of socialist-feminist ones. As with most liberals and some adolescents, what is valuable is not so much what I do as the fact that I choose to do it, in my uniquely self-expressive way.

Noam Chomsky remarks somewhere that the conception of an intellectual as one who speaks truth to power is mistaken on two counts. For one thing, power knows the truth already; and for another thing, it is not power, but its victims, who need the truth most urgently. It comes as no surprise that most of those who are cavalier about the idea of truth these days have no pressing political need for it. It is not an insistent political imperative for Stanford professors, as it might be for Malaysian sweatshop workers. But one might amplify Chomsky’s point by adding that power does not need to be told the truth because it is in some ways irrelevant to it. Not, to be sure, in every way: Western capitalism holds sincerely to such moral truths as the beneficial nature of free markets or the ennobling character of liberal democracy. In practice, however, such large moral truths are supposed to interfere with the system’s operations as little as possible. If postmodernism tends to collapse facts and values, the capitalist system itself continues to hold them as rigorously apart as any dedicated Kantian. Moral truths are like alcohol: it is when they start interfering with your everyday life that it is time to give them up.

Take, for example, George Bush’s talk of freedom, or – as he sometimes calls it to prove that he is not semantically impoverished – liberty. Freedom is a wonderfully convenient concept for Western politicians, because it has both a high-minded spiritual and a low-minded material sense, and one can seem to be meaning the former while in fact intending the latter. Freedom is what the lost souls of Guantanamo Bay thirst for, and what piles Iraqi hospitals high with mutilated bodies. It is what inspires Saudi dissidents and bank-
rupts small farmers. It is one of the few languages in which archbishops and chief executives, oilmen and Oxford philosophers, are equally fluent. One can point, naturally, to the contradictions between Bush’s talk of freedom and his squalid support for right-wing autocracies. But this is not quite the point. For this is to assume that such high-pitched rhetorical talk is actually intended to hook directly on to practical affairs; and this would be a kind of category mistake, rather as if one were to take the sob-choked platitudes of an Oscar winner as some incisively analytic discourse, to be scribbled down and assiduously checked for its scientific veracity.

Ideology is indeed intended to legitimate your behaviour, but in a way which is no more intended to withstand too literal or intent a scrutiny than one’s perfunctory inquiry after the health of a colleague’s cousin. High moral truths and low empirical facts belong to different genres, so to speak, which move at different levels and are governed by different protocols. Bush’s talk of freedom is certainly in earnest, but so is a fine performance of Macbeth. High-pitched moral truths are constructed to accommodate a fair amount of ambiguity and inconsistency. It belongs to our values to regret that we that we do not always live up to our values. ‘Let freedom light a million fires in the hearts of men!’, or some such inanity, is not meant to be sheer humbug, but neither is it meant to have the same status as ‘I could just fancy a Melton Mowbray pork pie’. One should not, in the technical jargon of linguistic theory, take the performative language of ideology in too constative a spirit.

This is one reason why the postmodern idea that an assault on truth is somehow radical is so mistaken. The fact is that those who run the present system are not much interested in truth at all; but the postmodernists fail to see this because they take them at their word when they spout about eternal verities. They imagine that advanced capitalism still needs essences, absolutes and unchanging ideals, and that to deconstruct these things is therefore to undermine the system. It is true that the United States is at present touting a virulently metaphysical version of the free market, which could certainly do with a spot of deconstruction. But this is untypical of capitalist states, most of which are secular, pragmatic and disenchanted, and which are forced to be so by virtue of their own material operations. Ideology usually has a more high-pitched, hand-on-heart, metaphysical ring to it in the USA, given the nation’s peculiar religious background. But it is not beyond question that capitalism in general could easily survive the death of metaphysics, even if it is true that God, in Johnsonian phrase, has been an unconscionable time a-dying ever since Nietzsche issued his somewhat premature obituary notice for him. What will help to keep God and metaphysics alive for the present, no doubt, is the fact that the West is fighting a full-bloodedly metaphysical
adversary. The fact that they speak of Allah and Mohammed means that you must counter them with your own native gods, Freedom and Democracy.

Most pre-modern civilizations would no doubt have found extraordinary the idea that one could conduct one's political or economic affairs other than in the context of moral and cultural norms. Socialism is an attempt to revive this notion for the modern age. If the truth in its ethico-political sense is largely irrelevant to late capitalism, it is among other reasons because there is something embarrassingly amateur about it in a thoroughly technologized world. There are no technical qualifications in moral indignation. In a tightly stratified, professionalized society, anything that anyone can do, such as tying a child's shoelaces or objecting to the destruction of the planet, is bound to be devalued. The humanities, which specialize in moral truth, are thus bound to seem rather quaint in this context. Confronted with such hard-nosed professionalism, they must decide whether to beat it or join it – whether to launch a humanistic critique of its soulless procedures, or whether to imitate those procedures by going positivist or scientistic themselves. Marxism has been viewed at different times in both lights, as both a moral critique of scientism and a scientistic critique of morality.

The problem with trying to beat your adversary is irrelevance. Since late capitalism, as we have seen, does not in practice lose much sleep over moral truth, your critique is bound to move at a different level from its target. The problem with seeking to join the system, of which behaviourist psychology or high structuralism are examples, is that you win accreditation only at the risk of losing your identity. Along with beating and joining there is also trumping, of which post-structuralism, hermeneutics and the later philosophy of Wittgenstein may serve as examples. The point here is to claim that scientific and technological truth are simply specialized versions of everyday knowledge, much more like moral or artistic discourse than is commonly recognized. This tends to work splendidly in universities, but not so splendidly in government ministries or corporation boardrooms. It also tends to land you with some rather embarrassing right-wing allies.

Caught in this dilemma, the humanities can always make a meta-move, taking as their object of critique the very fact that the prevailing system is largely impervious to moral critique. But this does not resolve the conflict between an ‘amateur’ ethical humanism and the technical or professional system it seeks to criticize. What is needed is a discourse which is both technical and humane, ethical and analytical, and it is this which characterizes all the most interesting moments of literary criticism. By far the most ancient form of such criticism, rhetoric, concerns itself with both the rigorous analysis of language and the practice of moral or political persuasion. Each dimension, moreover, is viewed in terms of the other. In the twentieth
century, the so-called Cambridge school of criticism (the Leavises, Empson, I.A. Richards, L.C. Knights and their colleagues) saw an internal relation between rigorous verbal discrimination and the spiritual health of an entire civilization.

George Orwell lent this view a more radical inflection, while the Russian Formalists, the European avant gardes and (with a different political colour) the American New Criticism were likewise alert to the bonds between technical linguistic analysis and political critique. The most distinguished of all British twentieth-century cultural critics, Raymond Williams, was bred in this ‘Cambridge’ lineage, while the great European philologists from Bakhtin and Auerbach to Curtius and Spitzer yoked the most formidable professional erudition to a generously humanistic vision. What the literary work shares in common with the culture around it is language, which provides the vital link between the two; and this is also a link between the delicately particularized and the ambitiously abstract. At its worst, literary criticism has been a parody of both, linking a vacuous moral universalism to a myopic cult of the particular.

Such universalism, however, has been increasingly on the defensive in a period of militant particularism. There are no longer universal truths, simply claims about the world which cannot be abstracted from their political origins and effects. This is a misleading opposition, since in the militant epoch of the middle class, the doctrine of universal truth was itself closely bound up with a revolutionary politics. Once that revolution was accomplished, however, and the bourgeoisie no longer needed to pitch their struggle in such grandly totalising terms, postmodern particularism becomes the order of the day. Universalism and internationalism give way to those rather different animals, globalization and cosmopolitanism.

In the writing of neo-Nietzscheans like Michel Foucault, a suspicion of truth is part of a well-nigh pathological aversion to the whole notion of subjectivity. For there clearly can be no truths without human subjects; and human subjects are simply those bodies in which power has scooped out a hollow known as personal inwardness or psychological interiority, so that it might subjugate them all the more effectively. Creatures without truth are creatures without chains, and the whole notion of emancipatory knowledge comes to seem like a contradiction in terms. Self-reflection is not the first step towards freedom, but a thickening and refining of the very subjective stuff in whose folds power secretes itself, while craftily fostering in us the illusion that our inwardness is a value rather than a form of bondage. There is an echo of the Schopenhaurian Will in this gloomy scenario – indeed, Schopenhauer stands to Hegel rather as Foucault stands to Marx. Both of them give a pessimistic twist to Enlightenment thought, regarding the human
autonomy it values so highly as the ruse of a power or Reason which has turned malevolent.

Foucault’s aversion to subjectivity is in part a structuralist hostility to consciousness as such, one he inherits from his mentor Louis Althusser. He is not even prepared to speak of ideology, a term with too subject-centred a resonance, and prefers to discuss ‘technologies’ instead. Althusser does not himself censor the term as ‘humanistic’; but his celebrated essay on the topic sails close to a kind of social behaviourism, one for which ideology is more or less identical to the performance of certain practices. There is a touch of the renegade Roman Catholic in this: the Catholic church has always insisted in its quasi-materialist way on faith as a matter of ritual and codified conduct, not of some jealously preserved Protestant inwardness. Grab them by their behaviour and their minds and hearts will follow is a venerable papist precept. For Althusser, it is ideology which opens up that illusory inner sanctum known as autonomous subjectivity, in order to build itself a home there. It is, so to speak, a parasite which creates its own host. Once again, then, subjectivity is contaminated from the outset, and truth along with it. This is why Althusser must split off truth from subjectivity, in that knowledge-without-a-subject which is science or theory.

Theory for Althusser can provide a critique of society because, like Spinozist Reason, it can inspect it as though from the outside, sealed off from the vicissitudes of history in some windless enclosure of its own. Ideology, by contrast, cannot provide a basis for such critique, since it is not really a matter of consciousness at all but of unreflective everyday practice. In this sense, the opposite ends of our brief history of truth come together in Althusser’s work: ideas are both elevated above history and too bound up with the world to gain a critical purchase upon it. Foucault, for his part, certainly wants such a critical perspective; but it is one which can only be implicit in his historical researches, since he rejects Althusser’s Theory and presents a reworked version of his notion of ideology. Ideas are so bound up with historical formations, so pre-eminently practical and material, that they would seem unable to establish the kind of distance from their contexts which might allow them to reflect critically upon them. And this must logically apply to Foucault himself. It is here that his adroitly affect-less literary style rides to the rescue, insinuating in its dispassionate hauteur a kind of critical distance from the materials he presents which cannot, in fact, be theoretically justified.

What would appear to be missing here, crushed out of existence between truths which are too ideal and truths which are too pragmatic, is the fact that critical reflection is part of the way we inhabit our history, not a way of standing disinterestedly apart from it. Getting some critical distance from our contexts is part of the peculiar way we are bound up with them. As self-
transcending (which is to say, historical) beings, we are never either wholly inside or wholly outside a situation, but cusped perpetually between the two. It is this which allows us to act and simultaneously to reflect on our action. The pragmatists and neo-Nietzscheans, by contrast, draw from the fact that ideas are always materially ‘situated’ the false conclusion that overall critique is thereby impossible. In a move which is astonishing to those for whom critique and materialism are intimately allied, the critical function of knowledge is sacrificed to its material character.

These thinkers are so eager to combat idealist notions of truth, by insisting (quite properly) on the historical, institutional, socially interested nature of knowledge, that they fail to notice that they have just deprived themselves of all critical vantage-point on the status quo. In their view, to stand back from ourselves that far means falling over the epistemological edge. To subject our way of life to such full-blooded criticism, we would need to leap out of our own skins, gazing upon ourselves with the estranging eyes of a Venusian. They do not see that situatedness and radical critique belong together. One must be, as they say, in a position to know – which is why, say, women or poor peasants or the victims of Western imperialism know more of the truth of their condition than their masters. If they were standing nowhere at all, which is what some mistakenly take objectivity to mean, they would know nothing whatsoever. Nothing is as blind as a God’s eye view. Not everyone is so situated as to be capable of objective judgements. One can usually tell those who are not from the way they place the term objectivity in scare quotes.

Nietzsche taught us to see truth in quasi-biological terms, as bound up with the struggle of the species for mastery over its natural environment. Our faculty of cognition has itself evolved; and one precious development of it, ironically enough, is that refusal to grant too grandiose a role to consciousness which Nietzsche himself shares with Marx and Freud. For the most fertile currents of modern philosophy, there is always something prior to thought – something which puts it in place but partially evades its grasp, whether one calls it labour or being-in-the-world, difference or the Other, power, the unconscious or the pre-reflective. Yet though Nietzsche seeks to dethrone consciousness in this materialist way, he is strikingly unconcerned with the social or institutional basis of truth, a project which is taken up by some of his successors.

Once this happens, however, there is always a danger of conflating the two kinds of inquiry. For what does it mean to claim that ideas are driven by interests? It can mean, for example, that we have the kind of conceptual world we do because of an arduous evolutionary struggle, in which our senses evolve in ways necessary for certain species-specific kinds of activity.
This, if you like, is a sort of pragmatism; but it is a ‘deep’, quasi-anthropological variety, pitched in flagrantly unRortyan fashion at the level of the material species itself. But it can then be easily run together with a less ontological, more ideological sense of the interest-driven nature of knowledge, such as the drug companies’ suborning of medical research. Since both are instances of ‘interested’ knowledge, a certain kind of postmodern cynic can argue that the latter sort of thing is really quite as inevitable as the former. Those who object to the suborning of medical research or the denial of global warming can thus be mocked as pathetically old-fashioned champions of the myth of disinterestedness.

In a similar way, the Wittgensteinian appeal to ‘forms of life’ hovers ambiguously between the anthropological and the political. When we say ‘this is just the kind of thing we do’, do we mean such things as imagining time moving forwards, counting in a certain style or distinguishing between the animate and inanimate, or do we mean failing to donate mosquito nets to Africa because we are too stingy? How far down do forms of life go? The fact that what counts as disinterested inquiry is determined by criteria deeply embedded in our culture is not to say that there is no such thing. What else could it possibly be? Wittgenstein himself did not believe in some idea of truth quite independent of our species-being or deep cultural grammar; but this did not mean that he endorsed the politics of his own culture. It did not stop him from referring scornfully to the British Cabinet as a lot of wealthy old men, or running off to Moscow in the depth of the Stalinist terror in the hope of being trained as a doctor there.

One way of distinguishing between radicals and others is that radicals suspect that the truth is usually unpleasant. In this sense, it resembles the inevitable. Leftists tend to practise a hermeneutic of suspicion: the truth, they believe, is usually uglier and more discreditable than the general consensus imagines. The truth may be precious, but it is not on the whole congenial. This is not cynicism: on the contrary, it arises from radicals’ lack of trust in the present political system, which arises in turn from their faith in the human capacities which it stifles. Even so, it is difficult to distrust a great deal of what is said around you without becoming sardonic and hardboiled, qualities which are at odds with the political faith which leads you to such distrust in the first place. It is true that scepticism and faith are not in the end at loggerheads, since a realist ethics maintains that only in confronting the worst can you hope to overcome it. In this sense, it has much in common with the tragic vision. In anything less than the long term, however, it is hard to be sceptical of much that passes for truth without turning into the kind of person you least want in any decent civilization of the future. ‘I wouldn’t want to be part of a society that included the likes of me’ is the socialist...
version of Groucho’s joke. Those who fight hard and bitterly for justice are often compelled to be least exemplary of the social order they prefigure.

There is, however, a rather less downbeat perspective as well. The truth, like diamonds, is valuable partly because it is hard to get at. Marx thought that if the truth was spontaneously available on the surface of things, there would be no need for science. It is because there is a gap between how things are and how they appear that science is necessary. It looks as though the sun is coming up, but actually the earth is going down. The truth for Marx is what goes on behind our backs. It belongs to the truth, as Martin Heidegger argued, that it withdraws or conceals itself; and this concealment is built into it, not just some regrettable accident. That phenomena do not spontaneously divulge the truth of themselves is part of that truth.

This, in turn, means that knowledge and virtue are closely allied. For if the truth is not self-evident, then establishing it involves such moral qualities as patience, humility, tenacity, selflessness, self-discipline, self-criticism, clear-sightedness, a nose for humbug and the like. And since the truth, as we have suggested, is generally rebarbative, it also involves honesty, courage and a readiness to break ranks. The Platonists may be mistaken to see a link between truth and beauty, though mathematicians and astrophysicists may beg to differ; but they are surely not wrong to see a connection between truth and goodness. So though truth and virtue may be in conflict when it comes to the hermeneutic of suspicion, this is one sense in which they are on intimate terms with one another.

Freud is only one of a mighty lineage of thinkers to have taught us that the mind’s capacity for self-deception is well-nigh bottomless; but he is unduly reticent when it comes to the other story that must be told – that the human longing for truth, even quite useless truth, has the ferocious persistence of a biological drive, and like hunger or sexual desire is not easily suppressed. Even so, though we need the truth in order to thrive, it is not what we live for. Nietzsche thought that to love truth at all costs was a kind of madness. If truth is indispensable to justice and compassion, it is not as important as they are. Those who find themselves living for the truth – who spend their time, for example, fighting some gross deception on the part of the state – are admirable, but they are not a model of how to live, as they themselves might be the first to acknowledge. In a decent society, they would not need to campaign in this way. If postmodernism generally undervalues truth, it is partly because some of its modernistic predecessors made a fetish out of it. Perhaps it is when we come to need the truth less urgently that we will realize that our political emancipation is complete.
NOTES


3  See, for example, Stanley Fish, Doing What Comes Naturally, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
