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Introduction

“The Decay of Lying”: Wilde’s Paradox in Earnest

Nathalie Jaëck

“Lying never was more widespread than today. Or more shameless, systematic, and constant.” Reading this sentence, one could feel that it was written quite recently, perhaps in Ralph Keyes’ book *The Post-Truth Era*, published in 2004, or even closer to the bone, crucially in 2016 when both the American presidential campaign and the Brexit referendum in Britain led to “post-truth” being elected “word of the year” by the Oxford Dictionaries.

And yet, this is an extract from Alexandre Koyré’s text, *Réflexions sur le Mensonge*,¹ which was translated as *The Political Function of the Modern Lie*, and appeared in the first issue of *The Renaissance Magazine* in New York in 1943. He then commented on what he called “the modern form of lying,” characterised by “an absolute and complete contempt for the truth. And even for mere verisimilitude” (Koyré 144), and linked that “modern” form of lying to totalitarianism, right in the middle of the second World War.

Twenty-six years later, in 1969, Hannah Arendt developed quite the same arguments about the Pentagon files, and commented on what she noticed—“the *sheer scope* of the intention to practise lying in political matters at the highest level of the executive”² (“l’ampleur prise par l’intention de pratiquer l’insincérité en matière politique au plus haut du gouvernement” [Arendt 8]). Though the difference was that it then occurred in a proclaimed democracy, Arendt described the event, like Koyré, as different in *nature* from the fact that after all, lying never ranked among political virtues and was always considered as a perfectly justified means in political matters.

We can thus wonder if things have really changed with the advent of the Post-Truth era, if that very striking denomination adequately describes a ground-breaking intellectual event or coup, a historical destitution of “the Truth” as the cardinal Western philosophical value, or if it is simply a cyclical return of the feeling that timeless Machiavellian lying has reached yet another shameless level. It does seem that a limit might indeed have been crossed, in the dialectical history of truth and lying.

¹ For the original French version, see: http://aejcpp.free.fr/articles/koyre_mensonge.htm

² All translations from French into English are mine.

There has explicitly been, for perhaps over a century, a collective interdisciplinary agreement that the truth was a rather elusive object to reach, but that it was still the professed desirable horizon, the intention of historical, scientific, philosophical and perhaps even artistic cognition. It was commonly agreed that there was a striving towards the truth, however evasive it might be, and that it remained the ideal reference. The Post-Truth era now crucially and barefacedly claims that objective facts are less influential, less useful in shaping political opinion than personal emotions or beliefs; and it has become possible for a Counsellor to the President of the United States to maintain a tight upper lip and rephrase “provable falsehoods” into “alternative facts,” as the television debate between Chuck Todd and Kellyanne Conway illustrated early in 2018, before it became totally viral.

It came as a sort of shock to me to think that the collective intellectual treatment of the truth, of “facts,” from the end of the 19th century up to now, might have had quite a lot to do with today’s ultimate fantasy that we could dispense with the notion of “the truth” altogether—to put it bluntly, that we might have had it coming.

Artists but also intellectuals, quite tellingly historians themselves, have insisted on the relativity of historical truth, on the crucial role of impressions and perceptions in stabilizing “a version” of the truth. Along with her indictment of State lies, Hannah Arendt still insists that reality is *contingent*, as she notes “the contingent nature of reality, a matter that does not convey intrinsic and intangible truth” (“une réalité contingente, une matière qui n’est pas porteuse d’une vérité intrinsèque et intangible” [Arendt 10]); in history, the theory of “relative objective truth” has marked “historical truth as a partial, incomplete, and in this sense, relative truth” (Schaff 253). The responsibility of fiction is even bigger in the key destitution of objective facts. The Modernist dismissal of facts as adequate epistemological tools is famously expressed by Marlow in *Lord Jim*: “They wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!” (Conrad 22). But nearly ten years earlier, in decadent Victorian *fin de siècle*, Wilde’s glittering provocation, in his essay “The Decay of Lying,” published in 1891, reads like a dazzling outrageous prophecy.

Wilde begins by lamenting “a morbid and unhealthy faculty of truth-telling,”¹ “the chilling touch of facts” everywhere, “our monstrous worship of facts,” and by praising the liar whose aim is “simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure”: “He is the very basis of civilized society, and without him a dinner party, even at the mansions of the great, is as dull as a lecture at the Royal Society, or a debate at the Incorporated Authors.” He specifically deplores the decay of lying among politicians: “Lying! I should have thought that our politicians kept up that habit:

¹ All the following references are to the electronic version of Wilde’s essay.

I assure you that they do not. They never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue.” He typically pushes the paradox by blaming the United States and, true, Georges Washington for the intellectual decline of the country:

The crude commercialism of America, its materialising spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man, who according to his own confession, was incapable of telling a lie, and it is not too much to say that the story of George Washington and the cherry-tree has done more harm, and in a shorter space of time, than any other moral tale in the whole of literature.

Confessing to being “bored by the tedious and improving conversation of those who have neither the wit to exaggerate nor the genius to romance,” Wilde craves for the return of him whom he calls “the true liar”: “How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind!” or again: “Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar.”

“Cultured” might be a stretch, but it seems that Wilde’s wildest dreams may have come true with the Post-Truth era, as there is hardly a day when President Trump’s brazen lies, as well as those of a whole series of unabashed adepts, are quoted with an unmistakable element of admiring awe, in the world’s press. The thing is that the freedom, actually *the duty*, to tamper with the facts was supposed to be the exclusive and fruitful propriety of fiction and art: “Besides what I am pleading for is Lying in art,” explicitly specified Wilde, making art a place apart, a sacred paradoxical space of fiction. Deleuze developed the same idea in his reformulation of Nietzsche’s position: “Art is the highest exponent of the false—it magnifies ‘the world as mistake,’ it sanctifies lying, it turns the desire to deceive into a noble ideal [...]” (“L’art est la plus haute puissance du faux, il magnifie ‘le monde en tant qu’erreur,’ il sanctifie le mensonge, il fait de la volonté de tromper un idéal supérieur [...]” [Deleuze 109]).

The expansion of the realm of seemingly legitimate lying in actual reality, under cover of the post-truth era, is perhaps the symptom of the fact that the very definitions of lying, the link between lying and the truth need to be re-assessed, actually re-ascertained—the continued use of the word “lying” depends upon maintaining a stable reference that needs to remain the truth. In his *Histoire du Mensonge*, Derrida comments on what he calls “the complications” of the concept of lying: “the mobile and fluid foldings of that complication” (“la pliure mobile et fluide de cette complication” [Derrida 25]). He insists on the fact that lying can easily be understated into something else, and the truth euphemized in order to negotiate the irreducible ethical dimension of lying, “the question of the connection between lying and its

doubles, the analogues and false friends it shelters within its folds” (“la question du rapport entre le mensonge et ses doubles, ses analogues, ses faux-frères qu’il pourrait abriter dans ses plis” [Derrida 12-13]), or as Montaigne put it much earlier: “If like the truth, lying only had one face, we would fare better. For we would take the opposite of what the liar says to be true. But the reverse of the truth takes on a hundred thousand shapes and has a limitless playing field” (“Si comme la vérité, le mensonge n’avait qu’un visage, nous serions en meilleurs termes. Car nous prendrions pour certain l’opposé de ce que dit le menteur. Mais le revers de la vérité a cent mille figures et un champ indéfini” [Montaigne 61])

Considering what we could call the contemporary constant morphing and proliferation of lying, its growing legitimacy and possible dissolution, it might be time to be slightly conservative in the method, and to return to what Derrida called “le franc-concept du mensonge”: “No matter how difficult it might be, we must retain something raw, broad, rigid, something stupidly sturdy for this concept, unless we are to allow it to dissolve, to evaporate in the torrential flux of undecidable half-shades that our experience is made of” (“C’est qu’il nous faut garder à ce concept, si difficile soit-il, quelque chose de brut, de carré, de rigide, de bêtement solide si on ne veut pas le dissoudre, c’est-à-dire le liquider dans le flux torrentiel de demi-teintes indécidables dont est faite notre expérience” [Derrida 24]). One of the aims of this collection of essays will be the opportunity to re-shape that definition, and to show that the concept of lying cannot easily be dispensed with, that it does correspond to an ethical imperative that should not be thoughtlessly liquidated.

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