

The Dark Art of Equivocation

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Announcement November 2016:

‘After much discussion, debate, and research, the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 is post-truth – an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.

In the Dictionaries Press Release, free-lance cultural commentator, Neil Midgley, observed that the word was chosen because it had ‘become associated with a particular noun, in the phrase post-truth politics’.

Aaah – politics! The noun, Truth, seldom accorded respect in politics, has now been grossly insulted, and hijacked into a hyphenated, composite adjective that participates in political language games. Post-truth is a buzzy buzzword busy buzzing, and as Winnie-the-Pooh observed, ‘That buzzing noise means something. You don’t get a buzzing noise like that, just buzzing and buzzing, without it meaning something’.

Pondering the meaning of ‘something’, claimants contesting the meaning of truth emerge – White Lie, Partial Truth and False News greet their younger sibling, Alternative Facts. They twitter and tweet and post a video clip of themselves waving their small, pudgy hands as they do the virtual celebrity post-truth political Buzzword Dance. It is ‘tremendous, sooo bootiful’.

On Naming

Language offers no certainties but when the 18th- century botanist, Carl Linnaeus, developed binomial nomenclature to classify living organisms, naming gained purposeful clarity. Without names, said Linnaeus, there can be no permanent knowledge. His taxonomy did not depend on adjectives to describe unstable appearances but on observable differences in plant structures. Evidence-based knowledge delivered scientific truth to botany.

Nota bene: In 1753 Linnaeus published *Species Plantarum*, now accepted as the starting point of modern taxonomy. It was followed in 1755 by Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*. Data and information do not equal knowledge; this comes from enLIGHTenment. The Age of Enlightenment thinkers observed, gathered evidence, cogitated, wrote, drew, and circulated their knowledge to uplift the human spirit and illuminate minds and lives. However, it is fair to say that the majority of Europe’s 18th-century peoples remained unenlightened. Mere survival offers dark days of desperation.

P is for Post

Once, twice and thrice upon a time, the prefix ‘post -’ referred to a period after, or a reaction against specified events. In 1910 Roger Fry, British art historian, critic,

painter and curator, was asked by a journalist to name the group of modern artists whose work he was exhibiting in London. In a moment of exasperation Fry responded, 'Oh, let's just call them Post-Impressionists; at any rate, they came after the Impressionists'. He set the precedent for the 20th century to deliver Post-Modernism (which became Postmodernism), Post-Structuralism (structures were deconstructed), Post-Feminism (dream on – another woman has a black eye and another has a face creased by acid), Post-Colonialism (now Postcolonialism in nations where corruption thrives), and Post-Apartheid (not yet Postapartheid). Such is the significance and equivocation of the hyphen dancing to the tune of 'post'.

NB: A post is also a stake driven into earth, and when wire is strung between posts a fence delineates territory, not time.

T is for Truth and True

Truth: The state of being true; in accordance with fact or reality.
But how shall I know what is true or false?

NB: The antonym for truth is LIE, swollen with malevolent intent. Lie lies easy on the ear and slithers off the tongue while truth requires breathe for utterance. Post-truth, a *noun*, is a euphemism for LIE.

LIES

Adolf Hitler: '[the masses] more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously' (*Mein Kampf*, 1925, vol. I, ch. X).

NB: Hitler's lesson has been well learnt by those who trumpet iterations of large-scale falsehoods and pay homage to the machinations of propaganda.

Definite and Indefinite Articles

The Truth; A truth.

NB: *The Truth* is the Truth but if there is a truth, there is another truth and another...

Oath, Affirmation, Promise

Sworn testimony: I (...) swear/affirm/promise that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

NB sotto voce: I may lie when promising ...

Enough of LIES. Rescue truth!

On Truth

Friedrich Nietzsche: 'We have art lest we perish from the truth' (unpublished remark in a notebook).

NB: a reference to creativity and imagination, but beware the slithering lie in the clothes of imagination subverting art to pose as truth.

Jane Austen: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife' (*Pride and Prejudice*).

NB: The inventiveness of fictive art, the elegant tone of pure irony deflating truth.

Thomas Stearns Eliot:

'We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive from where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Little Gidding from *The Four Quartets*, 1943)

NB: We seek truth; lies come unannounced, uninvited, unexpectedly.

Susan Sontag: 'The truth is always something that is told, not something that is known. If there were no speaking or writing, there would be no truth about anything. There would only be what is' (*The Benefactor*, 1963).

NB: in novels there is much wisdom.

Hannah Arendt:

'There may be truths beyond speech, and they may be of great relevance to man in the singular, that is, in so far as he is not a political being, whatever else he is. Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves' (Prologue to *The Human Condition*, 1958, p.4).

NB: *vita activa*.

Robert Frost:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.
(The Secret Sits, from *A Witness Tree*, 1942)

NB: Truth is a secret, protected, encircled.

Analogy

Truth being so elusive and difficult to define in words I summon Analogy to conjure up an image of Truth rather than use a provisional written definition subject to indecisions and revisions.

Picture this: a piece of pure carbon, the hardest naturally occurring substance, an abrasive, crystalline, almost colourless mineral. I look into its transparent depths and

at its faceted mirror-surface planes where I see reflected fragments of my spatial world. This is a diamond. It is a precious stone. Truth is precious. For truth-seekers, Truth reveals herself in fragments, caught in mirrors.

And so, ask not what truth is, but what it *does*.

A Digression into History to Witness the Performance of Truth Emerging to Combat Lies and Silences: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a drama in many acts written as a Report that collated Facts and generated Art

In 1994, after decades of repressive white nationalist rule, the Republic of South Africa held its first universal franchise election and the African National Congress (ANC) came to power under the presidency of Nelson Mandela. The Interim Constitution contained a clause requiring Parliament to effect reconciliation and reconstruction in the new nation.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was promulgated in 1995. Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC was tasked with conducting investigations into gross human rights violations committed between 1960-1990. People requesting amnesty had to make full disclosure of deeds associated with political objectives. In 1996 public hearings began, the broad aim being to seek *the truth* of what happened in apartheid South Africa to countless victims. The Human Rights Violations Committee of the TRC gathered 21 296 statements during the course of its work and heard two thousand testimonies. The Report was finalised in 1998.

To know about the work of the TRC Commission there is the official Report (<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/index.htm>) and there is Art - novels, poems, images, theatre, films - responding to the words and photographic records of the public hearings. Pictures and words: what do they prompt us to make of truth?

Each story heard by the TRC commissioners was painful to tell and painful to hear. One story in a lengthy testimony about multiple abusive incidents yielded factual oral information and a demonstration of torture recorded photographically. The words and photos from Captain Jeffrey T. Benzien's Amnesty Hearing in July 1997 seared the imagination of those at the hearing and those who read newspapers.

Benzién received permission to make an introductory statement in which he apologised for one killing and for persons he had harmed through torture. He explained that he had used 'the wet method, whereby a wet bag is placed over the suspect's head to disorientate him and to make him think that he is being suffocated'.

During Benzien's testimony six victims asked if the Committee would allow them to put some questions to Benzien. Granted permission the first questioner was Tony Yengeni, by then an ANC Member of Parliament. He asked about the circumstances of his arrest and what happened when he was taken to the Culemborg police station. Benzien admitted to using the wet bag torture method and stated that he was able to extract information from his victim within thirty minutes. Yengeni then asked,

What kind of man that uses a method like this one of the wet bag, to people, to other human beings, repeatedly and listening to those moans and cries and groans and taking each of those people very near to their deaths, what kind of man are you? What kind of man is that, that can do that kind of, what kind of human being is that Mr Benzien?

To help him understand what had happened to him, Yengeni asked for an explanation of the torture. He then requested a demonstration. The request was granted and a member of the public volunteered to 'play victim'.

Responding to Benzien's factual account of what he did and to press photographs of the re-enacted torture scene, artist Sue Williamson created an interactive art piece, *Tony Yengeni – 'Wet Bag' Torture – Jeff Benzien* (1998) and a video, *Can't Forget; Can't Remember* (1998). I produced a large drawing, *Red Data: The Tyranny of Language* (1999).



Marion Arnold, *Red Data: The Tyranny of Language*, (1999), mixed media on paper, 120 x 150cms. Collection: Durban Art Gallery. (Photo: Roy Reed)

In 1998 Antjie Krog who, as Antjie Samuel had reported on the TRC hearings for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, published *Country of my Skull*. Both accurate reportage and personal narrative, her text crosses fiction/non-fiction boundaries. Her notes of Yengeni's speech, made on the spot, capture the man's emotional state in contrast to the official Report's objective facticity:

' ... What kind of man ... uhm ... that uses a method like this one with the wet bag to people ... to other human beings ... repeatedly ... and listening to those moans and cries and groans ... and taking each of those people very near to their deaths ... what kind of man are you, what kind of man is that, that

can do ... what kind of human being can do that Mr Benzien? ... I'm talking now about the man behind the wet bag?

Remembering the torture demonstration she witnessed, Krog comments, 'The sight of this bluntly built white man squatting on the back of a black victim, who lies face down on the floor, and pulling a blue bag over his head will remain one of the most loaded and disturbing images of the life of the Truth commission'. She then recalls that after the demonstration Benzien offered a retaliatory comment of his own to the ANC Member of Parliament, 'Do you remember, Mr Yengeni, that within thirty minutes you betrayed Jennifer Schreiner? Do you remember pointing out Bongani Jonas to us on the highway?'

Ingrid de Kok turned to poetry to express her response to the Benzien-Yengeni encounter in 'What kind of man?'

II
'What kind of man mounts another
in deadly erotic mimicry,
then puts a wet bag over his head
to suffocate him for 'the truth'?

...

V
the hand with its thumb intact, its active fingers;
and the apparently depressed, possibly sedated,
shuffling lumbering cumbersome body
which then helpfully and earnestly
performs in slow motion with perfect memory
its training, its function: a tantric posture with wet bag
that just for a moment is so unbelievable
it looks like a pillow fight between brothers.

(from 'What kind of man?' in *Terrestrial Things*, 2000)

One truth, another truth, ... and facts, spoken by one, confirmed by another, colliding with other versions of events, all drawn from damaged memories. But the smothering silence of the past is shattered.

Postscript: A Cherished Gift

I was given an ammonite approximately 195 million years old.

Name: Etoderoceras obesum

Age: Jurassic, Low Lias, Raricostatum Zone

Size of Ammonite: 47mm, surrounded by 'bubble' pyrite

Location: Stonebarrow, Charmouth, Dorset, UK

Weight: 467gms

Post-ammonite, I belong to *Homo sapiens*. In my human hands I hold and encircle ancient evidence of life evolving. This fossil provides facts about evolution. It is a tangible, visible truth about life. We still seek Truth.

