Truth: Defenders, Debunkers, Despisers*

Cora Diamond

> I am neither author, or fautor of any sect. I will have no man addict himself to me; but if I have anything right, defend it as truth's, not mine (save as it conduceth to a common good). It profits not me to have any man fence, or fight for me, to flourish, or take a side. Stand for truth, and 'tis enough.
>
> Ben Jonson

I shall contrast, in this paper, two sorts of view about the value of truth. One sort of view is that of philosophical debunkers of the value of truth. The two debunkers I consider are Jane Heal and Richard Rorty. Their views of truth I contrast with some remarks of Peter Geach's and with what is explicit or implicit in some prose and some poetry—the prose of George Orwell, the poetry of Zbigniew Herbert, an excerpt from a memoir by Primo Levi, a slogan from wartime Poland, an aphorism of Ben Jonson's; that is, with writings which belong to literature or to its neighbors. Most of the paper is concerned with the contrast itself, with making clear what it is, not who is right or who is wrong. In the last two sections I draw some morals.

1. *Jane Heal and the Disinterested Search for Truth.* In a recent paper, Jane Heal argues against the traditional view of truth as itself a good.[1]

A. If there is anything of value in a situation, if there is anything good or worth seeking in an aim or project or action, we may, when we explain what is good about it, perhaps find ourselves referring to someone's reaching truth about something, or to someone's adherence to truth. But—and this is Jane Heal's point—in all cases in which truth seems in some such way to play a role in explaining what is good in a situation or project, "a closer look will always show us" that the good in question "can be better described in another way that does not involve the mention of truth" (97). "True," "truth," are not, she claims, genuinely evaluative terms, like "enjoyable," "delicious," "interesting," "just," "beautiful," and so on. Those terms can be used to help us see the point of some action, what it was that the agent at any rate saw in it. "True" cannot. Her view can thus be contrasted with that of Peter Geach, who wrote that "for a Christian, truth is God's truth; and for unbelievers too, truth is often found worth living and dying for."[2]

It is important to see how Geach's view is opposed to Jane Heal's. For she can allow that someone might devote his life to the propagation of some truth, and indeed might die rather than deny it. Her point would be that, to make clear the point of the person's way of life or his actions, we have to explain the significance to him of the *particular* truths that he wants to propagate, that he refuses to deny. The mere fact that what he goes around telling people is *true* plays no substantial role in the explanation. Thus, for example, it might be that without access to the truths he propagates human beings will be eternally damned, or so he thinks. So it is *to help them avoid damnation* that he gives his life to teaching these things. There we have redescribed his project: he wants to save people from damnation. The good he seeks is plain, and the spreading of *truth*, taken to be *in itself* a good, has no role in this improved description.

Geach's point, that for unbelievers as well as believers, truth may be found worth living and dying for, was not meant to apply only to truth taken as a means to some distinct worthwhile end. He mentions a wartime slogan in Poland: "*Walczymy za Prawdę Polskę*" (We fight for Truth and Poland); and he adds that it was "a slogan of which those who upheld logic and other learning at such peril in the underground Universities showed

themselves worthy" (234–35). We fight for Truth and Poland: Jane Heal would not deny that we may fight for Poland, but for truth? That, in some endeavor, we serve truth is never a justification for it, she believes (108); and academics are not in any special way devoted to truth. They may indeed want to pursue certain interesting lines of inquiry; but then the good they seek is that of finding out more about some particular interesting subject matter. *Truth as such* is not what they are interested in, what they are fighting for, what they are committed to. The only kind of commitment that there is to truth is the commitment that anyone has when doing anything: one needs "to get into focus what one is about and to do what one sees to be demanded by it" (108). That is as much required of a bank robber, who needs to find out where the sewer under the bank lies, if he and his fellow robbers are to be able to carry out their plans without detection (103), as it is of academic inquirers. Indeed, it is also required of the Nazi, whose aim is to shut down the underground universities, and who therefore needs to carry out appropriate inquiries into their meeting places. Failure by the Nazi, or the bank robber, to take good evidence into account would be a failure of the only sort of intellectual integrity Jane Heal recognizes. Intellectual integrity is a virtue like courage, that is "at the service of bad projects as well as good" (108); both virtues are a matter of keeping firmly in view one's own aims, and keeping down any tendencies in oneself that would make those aims less achievable.

So, in the only sense in which Jane Heal recognizes that there may be a virtue of attachment to truth, it is a kind of intellectual determination that the Nazi suppressors of the universities may have, as much as the Poles whose universities they are suppressing. If we accept her view, we cannot describe the underground universities as defending truth in the face of an attack on it by the Nazis; we cannot see the issue in terms of attachment to truth, commitment to truth, on one side, and despising of truth on the other. Truth, if not itself a value, is not a value that the Nazis can be thought of as trampling on.

Could Jane Heal, or any other debunker of the value of truth, redescribe the conflict between the Nazis and the upholders of learning as conflict over the value of free inquiry?

As an attack on free inquiry by the Nazis and a defense of it by the underground universities? I cannot give a full answer to that question. There is a choice, I think, for the debunker of the value of truth, in such cases: either to debunk, as well, the admirableness of upholding logic and other learning at the risk of one's life, or to explain what made the upholding of logic at such risk a greatly admirable thing—to explain *without* adverting in the explanation to the understanding of the upholders themselves, their understanding that what was at stake was a form of life in which love of truth and commitment to truth were central.

Jane Heal writes that "there is no goddess, Truth, of whom academics and researchers can regard themselves as priests or devotees and whose service must be accepted as some justification for any endeavour" (108). She seems, in that passage, to go some way towards debunking the admirableness of risking death to uphold logic. The vocabulary of *fidelity* towards truth (fidelity here understood as something distinct from efficiency in achieving the aims inspiring one's investigation) is important in an account of what was admirable in the Polish upholding of logic, but there is no place for that vocabulary if all that can be said for a line of inquiry is its usefulness or its engagingness (108).

B. How does Jane Heal argue for her view of truth? She starts by summarizing ways we use the word "true."

> "True" is used as a predicate of (a) utterances, (b) judgements or beliefs, (c) propositions, regarded as abstract objects which can be the content or object of (a) and (b). In any sense in which we can promote or bring about truth (c) is clearly not at issue. (98)

Her argument then focuses on the two questions: Is bringing it about that something true is uttered good and worth doing, in general and as such? Is increasing one's stock of true beliefs in general and as such valuable? It is easy for her then to show that the answers to those two questions is *No*. We can explain the point, the value, of saying something by noting, e.g., that it was a funny thing to say, but the mere fact that what one said was *true* does not by itself make plain what made one take it

to be worth saying. What is good about one's telling the truth, what is bad about lying, *always* depends on some good other than truth being (at least in intention) served or disserved by one's utterance; and similarly in the case of truth in belief. There is no value in the mere acquisition of a true belief: the value, if it is valuable, will always lie in the serving of some good distinct from the mere addition to one's own or one's community's stock of true beliefs.

We should note two features of Jane Heal's philosophical method.

First, her method is, in a sense, linguistic. That is, she organizes her discussion of the value of truth by turning to the question how the word "true" is used. But, although she looks at the use of words, she looks only at *some* uses, some kinds of use. For example, the use of the word "truth" in the quotation I have as the epigraph to this paper is not the sort of use she considers. Nor is the use of the word "truth" in the slogan "We fight for Truth and Poland." There are many contexts in which people speak of fidelity to truth; but these again are not uses of words of the sort she considers. So I want to characterize her method as not just "linguistic," but as a method that gives a special place to some selected group of uses and ignores others.

A second feature of her method is the place given to the view that truth itself is something valuable. The word "true," she says, is a predicate of three different kinds of thing; and there can be a question of promoting or bringing about truth only with the first two kinds of thing. We can bring it about that more true things are said, or fewer false things; we can promote the acquisition of true beliefs, the making of true judgments. If those aims are not as such intelligible, as Jane Heal argues, then truth as value will have been debunked. The idea there is that, if truth itself is of value, then that means it is something to be promoted or brought about, something that is a good thing for there to be more of, or that one might aim at having more of. (Compare the place of pleasure, or fulfilment of desires, in utilitarianism.) If there is anything else that might be meant by truth's being good, it is given no chance to appear.

The two features of Jane Heal's method fit together: if we were to consider uses of the words "true" or "truth" other than those she focuses on, what is meant by the goodness of truth might appear in some other way. That is, the effect of considering only some uses of words is to exclude all ways of understanding what kind of value truth might be thought to have other than that of something it is worthwhile to promote or to bring about.

In §4, I return to Jane Heal's argument.[3]

2. I turn now to a second debunker of truth, Richard Rorty. His debunking differs interestingly from Jane Heal's, although, as we shall see, *what* they are attacking is the same. She focuses on certain ways of using the word "true": using it of utterances, beliefs, judgments, and propositions; and she argues that if truth is itself good, its goodness will be the goodness of promoting true utterance or the goodness of having more true beliefs. Rorty starts with the recognition that truth is spoken of in other ways than those Jane Heal recognizes, and he directly attacks those ways of speaking. He attacks all ways of speaking in which truth is thought of as independent of us and as demanding respect from us, respect which we may then think is characteristic of some special type of intellectual activity—science or philosophy or poetry (or whatever activity we take to have this special significance).[4]

The wrong idea, in his view, is that assertings and thinkings on our part properly involve *respecting* the world, rather than just coping with it in a great variety of ways, none of which is specially privileged. If we debunk the idea of the world as something to be respected as well as coped with (in our sayings what is so), we shall also debunk the idea of finding sense in life through commitment to truth, through participating in an activity governed by ideals of the now debunked kind of respect.[5] Rorty sees in Western intellectual history an attempt "to substitute a love of truth for a love of God" (as well as a later attempt to replace the love of truth by a kind of love of our own "deep" nature); he would have us treat nothing, including truth, as a quasi-divinity (*CIS*, 22). Such a "de-divinization" of the world he takes to be called for by a Wittgensteinian approach to

language (CIS, 21).[6] By a different route, then, he arrives at very much the same place as Jane Heal, at something like her view that there is no goddess Truth whose service might be taken to be the justification for any endeavor of ours; like her, he particularly objects to the idea of any group of people as priests of this divinity.

To explain Jane Heal's debunking of truth, I presented her as opposed implicitly to Peter Geach and to those who thought of themselves as defending truth in wartime Poland. To show what is involved in Rorty's debunking of truth, I shall examine his view of George Orwell. Orwell the defender of truth I contrast with Rorty its debunker; but, in doing so, I am setting myself against Rorty's own view of Orwell as a supporter of Rorty's sort of liberalism. So Rorty's reading of Orwell as a Rortyan liberal is what I now turn to. What is involved in that reading?

For Rorty, a liberal is someone who believes that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (*CIS*, 173). There are, however, liberals and liberals; and a Rortyan type of liberal is a liberal who does not try to ground liberalism on foundations. Thus Kant, for example, although a supporter of the kind of democratic institutions favored by liberals, is not a Rortyan liberal; his condemnation of cruelty is grounded on a moral theory in which the only morally admirable motive for avoiding cruelty is respect for others as rational. Rorty criticizes Kant not just for resting morality on an unnecessary foundation, but also for making morality into "something distinct from the ability to notice and identify with pain and humiliation" (*CIS*, 192–93). Rorty's criticism of Kant is a criticism of any morality in which respect for truth or love of truth is given a central role; for that too would be morality distinct from the capacity to notice and identify with pain and humiliation.

Rorty's criticism of Kant helps us to see that there are (at least) three claims involved in taking Orwell (or Orwell in some significant writings) to be a Rortyan liberal: (1) Orwell thinks that cruelty, the infliction of pain and humiliation, is the worst thing we do; (2) Orwell is not committed to a morality in which respect for truth, love of truth, is central; (3) Orwell does not tie his moral views to suspect ideas, like the idea that truth is

independent of what we say and think, or the idea that simply by being human we have some common bond (*CIS*, 172–73, 177).

Orwell may have hated cruelty, but did he think it the worst thing we do? I shall leave that question temporarily and turn first to Rorty's attempt to find in Orwell a Rortyan liberal for whom the notion of objective truth is not really central.

Orwell is taken by everyone else to treat respect for truth as central in morality, and to hold that truth is independent of what we say or think, that truth is not changeable by us. That is surely the standard reading. So how can Orwell be a Rortyan liberal? Rorty knows that there are passages in Orwell's writings supporting the standard reading (*CIS*, 172). *His* reading is of Orwell's last writings, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, which he sees as constituting Orwell's "great practical contribution" (*CIS*, 171). But, even in *1984*, it will be said, Orwell shows himself to be committed to truth as a central value, truth as something worth defending in the face of the attack on it by the totalitarian state, worth defending in the face of the essential command of the Party, that adherence to truth be given up.

There is an important passage in *1984* in which Winston sets out the Party's command that, instead of adherence to truth, one should adhere to what the Party says, and in which he formulates his own opposed commitment. The passage ends with Winston's writing in his diary: "*Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.*"[7] Rorty reads that passage with another,[8] in which Orwell argues that under totalitarianism you cannot maintain an inner stronghold of freedom. In order to continue to think, you need to be able to share thoughts with others, you need freedom to *say* to others what you think. Rorty then argues that, in the famous passage in *1984* in which Winston writes about the significance of being able to say that 2 + 2 = 4, the *truth* of "2 + 2 = 4" drops out as irrelevant. What is important, Rorty says, is not whether "2 + 2 = 4" is true, or whether there is an external reality, outside what the Party says: what matters is *freedom*, freedom to say 2 + 2 = 4 *if that* is what you believe, *or* to say 2 + 2 = 5, if that is what you believe. Freedom matters, not the answerability of what we say to something outside human sayings (*CIS*, 176–77).[9]

Rorty's reading of Orwell turns *1984* upside down. The significance of freedom for Winston, in that central passage, is that freedom is necessary for one's hold on truth, for one to live in a world in which the very notion of objective truth can persist. Rorty's claim is that the notion of objective truth drops out, that it is only freedom that counts. But Orwell's nightmare, Winston's nightmare, was the success, the frightening possibility of the success, of the totalitarian *attack on truth*. "The really frightening thing about totalitarianism," he wrote, "is not that it commits 'atrocities' but that it attacks the concept of objective truth: it claims to control the past as well as the future" (*CEJL*, III: 88). If to be a liberal, according to Rorty, is to believe that cruelty is the worst thing we do, Orwell is no liberal: totalitarianism is most frightening in its destruction of truth, not in its cruelty.

Here we may turn to Rorty's reading of another central passage in *1984*, the breaking of Winston by O'Brien. O'Brien breaks Winston by making him believe that 2 + 2 = 5 and by making him betray Julia. Rorty argues that, in this passage too, truth as a value drops out as irrelevant. O'Brien's aim is to *humiliate* Winston, to cause him pain; one way he does this is to get Winston to renounce something he had taken to be true; but the actual truth of what is renounced is irrelevant to O'Brien's aim and to the effect on Winston (*CIS*, 178–89).

It is, I think, false that the point of the scene is the use of O'Brien's power to cause pain and humiliation, not the totalitarian threat to our hold on the very idea of objective truth. Rorty is right that the effect on Winston might have been achievable by breaking him of any firmly held belief, even if false. But that does not mean that truth thus drops out as irrelevant, as not a value significant in the story. Someone can be made to betray truth even in cases in which what he believes is false. But that takes us no way towards establishing what Rorty wants, namely, that O'Brien is evil as causer of pain and humiliation, not also as attacker of truth.

I have been trying to contrast Orwell's views with Rorty's, to argue that there is not, in Orwell's writings, a voice for Rortyan liberalism. But I do not want to suggest that Orwell is what Rorty calls a metaphysician, someone who thinks that our essential nature, or that of reality, or our nature together with

that of reality, will enable us to maintain our hold on some or other humanly significant notions, like that of objective truth (*CIS*, 184). Orwell thought that that notion *could* be destroyed. There were, he wrote, two safeguards against that notion's disappearance; but neither safeguard was, he believed, actually very safe.[10] The fact that truth goes on existing "behind your back" does not insure that human beings will inhabit a world other than that "shifting phantasmagoric world" in which the Party determines what is said and what is thought, determines the past as well as the future, without constraints from that external reality. External reality, however "there" it may remain, would no longer be anything for us (*CEJL*, II: 259).

3. In §1 of this paper, I contrasted Jane Heal's debunking of truth as value with the view of truth expressed in the Polish wartime slogan, "We fight for Truth and Poland"; and in §2 I contrasted Rorty's debunking of truth as value with Orwell's warning of the peril in which he thought the notion of objective truth stood. In both cases, the defenders of truth whom I chose for my contrast defended it in a particular sort of context: what was perceived as threat to truth were the activities and attitudes of Nazis or Communists or both.[11] In this section I look at some related examples.

A. *Chemistry and Truth.* Primo Levi, as a student in Fascist Italy in 1939, found in chemistry and physics not only "nourishments vital in themselves" but an antidote to Fascism, to its pollution of the air of Italy by its stinking lies. He tried to make clear to his closest friend "the new dignity and majesty" their studies had in being free of such pollution, in being sanctuaries, as it were, where truth could still survive.[12] This I would set alongside the story told me by a Rumanian chemist, of the shutting by the Communists of the libraries in Rumania when they took over. Even chemistry books, chemistry journals, were made inaccessible. Truth may have had a sanctuary in Italy in 1939 in the study of chemistry and physics, but the Communists, more thorough than the Italian Fascists, cut off access to the sanctuary when they took over.

One striking thing about chemistry in those two stories is its relation to Orwell's fear, to his sense of the threat posed to truth by totalitarianism. Levi's awareness of needing the study of chemistry as an antidote to the poisoned air of Italy, the Communists' recognition, in Rumania, that they did not want such antidotes available, and also the Polish slogan "We fight for Truth and Poland," all express the same idea of an opposition between truth and the totalitarian world. Levi's story should be considered with Jane Heal's ideas about why it may be worthwhile to find out truths belonging to some subject matter: either because of the subject's usefulness or because that particular subject is itself interesting (Heal, 107). That in the study of that subject you have access to capital-T Truth drops out. But Levi's point is that, *besides* his interest in the subject of chemistry, besides his interest in participating in the noble and ancient pursuit of knowledge of Matter, our Mother, the study of chemistry was important precisely because we need truth. Here was good clean testable truth, like good clear mountain water (38, 42).

If we see Levi's study of chemistry, in 1939, as motivated not only by interest in the subject but also by attachment to truth, by a sense of need for solid truth in a world of lies, we may ask what difference this complex motivation made. That is, Jane Heal allows us a picture of the spirit in which someone might study a subject he finds intrinsically interesting. He knows or should know that if he takes short-cuts, does not push his questions when he has doubts about some results, he will not achieve his own ends. Clarity about how to get what he wants can keep him from massaging the data. Levi gives us a picture of himself as someone who wanted not only to join those who had been for centuries investigating the great subject matter, Matter, but also as someone for whom chemistry is an antidote to the poison of lies. Why should the spirit in which he carries out his studies not differ from that of someone for whom such an issue does not arise? For Levi to massage the data means not just that he will not find out what he wants to find out; it means that he will have allied himself with those who would obliterate in the public world the distinction between truth and falsity, leaving only what the Party says. In the Italy in which he turns to the

study of chemistry as *truth in a world of lies*, the spirit in which he will see his work in chemistry is attachment to truth itself.

B. *Bearing Witness to Truth.* Truth is an important theme in the work of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert. Herbert's translators, John and Bogdana Carpenter, describe this theme as "the need to bear witness to truth."[13] But what sort of need is that? Jane Heal would object to the very idea that there is such a need. Bearing witness to what we have seen, Jane Heal would argue, cannot in itself be thought to be good, any more than the mere speaking of true sentences is in itself good. It may be valuable to bear witness to events that we have seen, if for some reason it is important that others be informed about those events. But, in Jane Heal's view, that means that it is not *truth* or *bearing witness* that itself has value; what is valuable is giving people information on some particular subjects. Truth as such drops out; *it* is not what is needed.

The Jane Heal type of argument is, I think, important and wrong; it helps us miss the significance that *bearing witness* has for writers like Herbert. I want to show that the significance of truth does not "drop out." That is, I want to show something like what I showed in the case of Levi and chemistry. In Levi's case, it did matter that he was working on a particular subject; but, in the Italy of "Fascist truth," pursuing *that* subject in a certain way expressed attachment to truth. Truth itself, as value, does not drop out there; and what I want to show is that truth does not "drop out" either, when we consider writing, like Herbert's, that expresses the imperative to bear witness.

Let me turn back, briefly, to Orwell. Orwell perceived a close connection between the totalitarian will to rewrite the past and the totalitarian attack on truth more generally. You can see that connection in a pair of sentences of his, giving what he took to be the essence of the totalitarian threat to truth, the creation of the "nightmare world" in which the Leader or the Party controls *the past*.

> If the Leader says of such and such an event, "It never happened"—well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five—well, two and two are five.[14]

Orwell's attempt to bear witness to the events he had participated in, the events he had seen, in Spain during the Civil War is given urgency by that nightmare sense of totalitarian power to destroy the notion of truth: bearing witness is resistance—so far as lies in one—to that power.

Herbert and Orwell write out of a sense of the importance of bearing witness.[15] Both make a striking further connection with the importance of our getting straight the *numbers* of the victims of inhuman power, and also with the appallingness of the disappearance of their *names*. Our moving in some ways closer to a world in which the notion of objective truth is fading is tied by Orwell to the fact that the casualties of the war going on while he writes cannot be estimated within several millions (*CEJL*, III: 88–89; for the importance of names, see II: 260). The alarmingness of such inaccuracy, of our ignorance of these numbers, is a theme of Herbert's great poem, "Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision." What is brought out by Orwell's and Herbert's expressions of alarm is that resistance to powers perceived as attacking truth is not merely a matter of staying honest oneself, of not oneself telling lies. One's own private honesty is not enough.

For neither Orwell nor Herbert are our obligations here obligations to help ensure that similar acts will not be carried out by those in power in the future. It may be that knowledge of the past would help prevent such recurrences; but it is not for the sake of the future victims of such crimes that bearing witness is enjoined. What then is the point?

The difference between 50 and 51. To see the point of the emphasis by Herbert and Orwell on keeping the accounts, consider a particular person. If, in a massacre, he or she is killed, the difference between the records of the massacre reading 50 dead and reading 51 dead is that person. The inaccuracy we tolerate is the inaccuracy of his or her disappearance from the historical account of what happened;[16] we collaborate, to the extent of our toleration, with those who would blur the accounts. Our ignorance, our indifference here are on the side of those who exercised inhuman power. "Approximately 50 dead," "it wasn't a massacre; there was some uncontrolled shooting," "never ordered by the government"; "there are two sides to the story,"

"alleged massacre," and the incident becomes "a vague unfortunate mishap."[17] Our resistance, what we are called on to do, is to take pains to keep the accounts, to keep the names of those who have perished. Herbert puts the demand this way, in the thoughts of "Mr. Cogito":

how difficult it is to establish the names
of all those who perished
in the struggle with inhuman power

the official statistics
reduce their number
once again pitilessly
they decimate those who have died a violent death
and their bodies disappear
in abysmal cellars
of huge police buildings

eyewitnesses
blinded by gas
deafened by salvoes
by fear and despair
are inclined toward exaggeration

accidental observers
give doubtful figures
accompanied by the shameful
word 'about'

and yet in these matters
accuracy is essential
we must not be wrong
even by a single one

we are despite everything
the guardians of our brothers

ignorance about those who have disappeared
undermines the reality of the world

it thrusts into the hell of appearances
the devilish net of dialectics
proclaiming there is no difference
between the substance and the specter

therefore we have to know
to count exactly

call by the first name
provide for a journey

in a bowl of clay
millet poppy seeds
a bone comb
arrowheads
and a ring of faithfulness

amulets[18]

Suppose someone were to tell, confidently, a single lie about something to do with you, something in your past. This in itself may be felt as unsettling. For a moment you may experience a sense of the reality of that event in your past melting away, no longer there. His version swims before your eyes, so does yours, neither is solid. But there are records, there are other people's memories, he is only a *liar*, in a world in which the distinction between truth and lies has not been undone. He is only a liar, but *his being* only a liar is not something which under all and any circumstances you would be able to hold onto; the ground of your assurance could be eroded, could be dug away.[19] We are dependent on each other for the continuing of a world in which we can even think of lies as *only lies*. The care and protection of that world, if it is seen to be under threat, may then be understood as task.

When I spoke about Primo Levi, I said that in that Italy, Italy 1939, he had two different motives for studying chemistry: the desire to participate in the age-long study of Matter, and the need for Truth. There are then two distinct goods we can see him aiming at. When we read Orwell or Herbert, we should see them as aware of two distinct sorts of evil in the exercise of totalitarian power. There is the will to do evil to human beings, and there is a will to destroy that world of recognition of truth within which the acts of those in power stink and within which human memory and human records preserve the reality of the men and women and children they have destroyed. The exercisers of such power would if they could be masters even of truth; they would not have it survive. Just as a spirit of love of truth might perhaps be perceived in someone's work in chemistry, Levi's in 1939, so may a spirit of hatred of truth be perceived in the activities, the thoughts, the aims, of Fascists or Communists or others. In Levi's

case, truth is understood as a good he wants and needs. But, if one perceives a spirit of hatred of truth in those who exercise power, truth may appear, not as for Levi a good one wants for oneself, but as a good one is called upon to defend, and, at the very least, not to betray. "Go. . . . you have little time you must give testimony."[20] We need that world of truth within which a lie is merely a lie, within which there are records, within which the reality of each of us is entrusted to the rest, within which the destruction of human lives is not erasable. There is then an imperative to resist those whose actions have in them the spirit of hatred of truth: against them, to uphold truth, and, in particular, to keep hold of the truth about those who have been their victims, to keep hold of it and to tell it, to say what one has seen and what one knows.

I cannot go into details about how the issues here are as much political as philosophical, but shall simply mention a case which brings out the connections between the philosophical and the political. Recently in Uruguay, the question arose, after a period of political repression, of torture, secret imprisonment, and disappearances, whether the re-establishment of democracy required a public *telling of the truth*.[21] Amnesty for the torturers, without truthtelling, it was argued, would be collaborating with those who would, if they could, erase the records. And Herbert's lines, reminding us of the imperative to defend truth, were quoted to the president of Uruguay, who himself was committed to a policy of "selective" memory, of forgetting. The president took a Rortyan view: if we are going to have a stable democracy in Uruguay, what we need is that people should be convinced that it is a better system than anything else we are likely to come up with; people need assurance that they will be able to exercise their rights. There is no need that the country be one which, in its official life, stands for truth about what went on before. And he showed his own willingness to lie about the past, to fudge the inconvenient facts (*MU*, 188–95). Interestingly, those in Uruguay who supported having a public truthtelling were far angrier at the politicians who favored public amnesia than they were at the torturers and generals of the previous regime (*MU*, 198). The need was for truth; the objection was to the dissociation between the institutions of the new democracy and the public good of

truth, or—putting it another way—to the association of those public institutions with those whose interests lay in amnesia.[22]

4. *More about whether truth drops out.* I turn back now to an argument, touched on earlier, for the view that truth as itself a good drops out in all the cases I have described. For they are all cases in which we think of ourselves as serving truth or needing truth or defending truth, but in which we are concerned with truths bearing on a *particular subject*. The good we are interested in is not truth itself, the argument goes, for truth itself would as well be promoted or defended by our repeating or recording or keeping hold of truths about *any* subject whatever. Thus, e.g., if it is said to be important for the new democracy in Uruguay that the truth be publicly told about the previous regime, that goes no way at all towards showing that people recognize a need for *truth*. For such a need would be satisfied by any truths, by lists, e.g., of parking offenders or of the names of those who had birthdays in the first half of April. Or, again, the argument goes that if Levi felt a need for truth in Fascist Italy, he could have satisfied *that* need by counting the cars on his street in Turin. If Levi's need could not have been satisfied as well by counting cars or by recording the barks of his neighbors' dogs as by doing chemistry, then the need was not a need for truth but some more particular need.

That objection is essentially Jane Heal's. She puts it so: if truth is of value in itself, then "any instance of truth is, merely in virtue of being true, worth having" (105). Let me go back here to her fundamental method. She wants to find out whether truth is of value; so she looks at what things we call true, and then asks whether getting more of these true things, promoting these true things, can be thought to be good. We first make clear what truth is by an explanation of what it is to pick out instances of true things, then we ask whether having these true things is good. *What truth is* is to be explained first, and entirely independently of the actual thought of people who might seem to be placing a high value on truth itself. That is, her method expresses a rejection of the idea that you might come to awareness of what truth is in part through entering into the thought of people like Levi, finding an antidote to Fascist truth in chemistry, or through

entering the thought of Orwell, threatened by the nightmare of the Fascist or Communist attack on the notion of truth, or through entering the thought of Herbert, tying the great word "truth" to the need to bear witness.

The opposing point of view would be roughly this: writings like those of Levi, Orwell, and Herbert, which come from within a human world in which truth is of value, help us see what is meant when truth is said to be a good. The idea, contrasted with Jane Heal's, is that you cannot first see what truth is, and then work out in the abstract, from that, what attachment to truth *would have to be*. You cannot say "I know in advance that attachment to truth, valuing truth, would have to be a placing of a high value on every instance of true sayings, or on every case of the acquisition of true belief." Against Jane Heal's view, I am suggesting that we come to understand what attachment to truth is by such things as following Levi's story (and that understanding what attachment to truth is, is part of knowing what truth is).

I have chosen examples that come from a single kind of context, responses to totalitarianism. The writers I have quoted, and the anonymous author of the Polish slogan, "We fight for Truth and Poland," are not writing about truth conceived simply as something that sentences or beliefs or propositions exemplify; they are calling on words to help them understand and respond to evil, to help them articulate the kind of evil they take their world, our world, to be threatened by. They call on the word "truth" in that context; they make sense of that context through seeing in totalitarianism a will to erase the past, seeing in it a hatred of truth.

When we learn to talk about truth and falsity, we do not just learn to call sentences and beliefs true or false. We come into a great range of thought about truth, attitudes to truth, connections between recognizing what is true and accepting that things are not always as we want them to be in the world or as we think they are, understandings of what lying is, what sorts of will there may be in the telling of a lie or the blurring of the truth. Think of Levi, self-consciously entering into the great intellectual-cum-moral tradition of chemistry, a tradition in which one is on guard against taking things to have turned out

as one wanted or expected them to, a tradition of speaking what is truth's, not one's own.[23] In the context of that particular history of human meanings, and in the context of the rejection, by the Italian Fascists, of limitations on their power, an expression like "attachment to truth" can be used of the spirit in which Levi studies chemistry.

In recognizing and giving a name to hatred of truth, one may come to awareness of what truth means, or what it means to one. What then may constitute opposition to a spirit of hatred or contempt for truth depends on the circumstances and what one is able to make of them, what sense one can find or make under pressure. There are circumstances in which one might oppose the world of lies by removing from the window of a shop, from among the onions and carrots, the sign "Workers of the World, Unite!"[24]; in other circumstances one might oppose that world as Levi did, in the pursuit of chemistry; in still others one might oppose it and defend truth by defending a quite trivial truth, of no importance beyond its simply being true.[25]

What philosophy cannot establish is that, if Levi were really *attached to truth*, he could satisfy his need for truth as readily by conscientiously counting parked cars as by chemistry. Philosophers do not have access to what *attachment to truth* would really have to be, so that they can say that if it were really *truth* that you were attached to, any bit of it would satisfy your needs as well as any other.

My arguments apply as much to Richard Rorty's views as they do to Jane Heal's. A clear statement of the view of his with which I am disagreeing is "there is no pragmatic difference [i.e., no difference that he as a pragmatist thinks makes any difference] between the nature of truth and the test of truth"—where the test of truth is whatever exactly we happen to use in telling what statements to assert.[26] What I object to is the idea that we can see the nature of truth while attending to nothing of what it is in human life, except its use of statements that we treat as assertible. For the Rortyan pragmatist, the nature of truth is not shown in Primo Levi's experience of need for it; it is shown in the criteria Levi uses to accept statements in chemistry, the criteria he uses to reject Fascist propaganda, or again in the criteria he would use in telling whether a rumor of approaching

Germans, say, should be treated seriously. Rorty treats the possibility of a felt need for truth as not relevant to its nature; he also treats the possibility of turning, in the context of such needs, to certain pursuits, like that of chemistry, as not relevant to the nature of truth.

Rorty believes that talk about truth as demanding fidelity, or talk about truth which takes it to be a need fillable in some special way by chemistry or physics (say), must be based on the philosophical confusion of trying to make something more of truth than a property of sentences, sentences constructed in vocabularies made by human beings (*CIS*, 21). He knows, without looking at the ways lives may have in them love of truth, that what there is for truth to be is: a property of sentences. And hence he thinks that recognition of that point can undercut talk of truth in terms of "service," "fidelity," and so on. If such talk were based merely on philosophical confusion, perhaps it could be undercut by philosophical clarity.[27]

But such talk belongs to a world of thought about good and evil in human life, to ways of understanding possibilities of good and evil, and possibilities of response to good and evil. Rorty and Jane Heal wish to reject such ways of thinking; that wish is expressed in their sarcastic treatment of truth as divinity. The wish is indeed explicit in Rorty: what he calls the de-divinization of the world, which he wants to see, includes the giving up of such ways of talking (*CIS*, 21–22). Fine, that is what they want. My argument in this section has been that their philosophical method appears to give them arguments against such ways of talking, appears—and falsely—to show that such ways of talking are confused. For each of them, truth can be seen as what it is when we consider people calling sentences or beliefs or utterances or judgments (or, in Jane Heal's case, propositions) true. Once we see that that is all truth is, we shall see other ways of talking of truth as confused. The assumption of the method is that we do not see what truth is by looking at the *other* uses; we see what truth is by abstracting a narrow class of uses from all that truth is in people's thought, and that class of uses is then treated as a base for combating the rest, for debunking such modes of thought about truth.

5. *Literature and its neighbors.* The significance of the Polish slogan, of Levi's memoir, of Orwell's fiction and essays, of Herbert's poetry, and Jonson's aphorism is that—precisely—they are not about truth as a property of sentences but are people's making sense of life, calling on words like "truth" and "lies" and '"witness" and "ignorance." These uses are people's making something of truth. The impetus to make of truth a notion of importance in our lives, to make it a notion of something of great value, something we may be called on to defend or serve, something which we may reveal ourselves as hating, is greatly strengthened by totalitarianism, which is why I have focused on these particular cases. They help us to see that no philosophical confusion need underlie the idea of truth as a great good.

Can appeal to these cases do more? Consider an argument of Rorty's (from the letter referred to in note 6). Literature, he points out, is not of one mind about the value of truth. He puts it so: "For every Clough ('It gratifies my soul to know/that though I perish, truth is so') there is a Whitman or a Nietzsche." Because lots of literary works can be cited on either side, an appeal to literature can show nothing one way or the other about the dispensability of "objective truth."

Certainly, a view expressed in a poem or novel counts for no more than one expressed in a philosophical work. But (besides whatever views it expresses) any piece of writing may exhibit or fail to exhibit the power of the mode of thought it exemplifies, and in that way may be relevant to the "dispensability" of that mode of thought. The line from Clough, cited by Rorty, expresses a view about the value of truth, but entirely fails to exhibit the power of the vocabulary of truth-as-value. The remarks from Levi's memoirs, about what truth meant to him, may be considered *not* as a view about the value of truth, as opposed to other possible views. Writing like his or Herbert's or Orwell's may, that is, be thought of, not as expressing the view "We should go on thinking of truth as a good," but as itself exhibiting the power of a mode of thought, a way of responding with words to the events of our glorious century. If we stop using the word "truth" in certain ways, we are unable to *do* something I can show you Levi doing, namely, rendering the experience of life under Fascism through the use of

words including "need for truth." *That* we cannot do, and *that* we may want to do.

Nietzsche, it might be said, showed the power of a vocabulary that does not invoke truth as value. But Nietzsche cannot show us whether we want or need to see our own century as one in which truth has been under siege, contemned, as one in which attachment to truth has been in some cases even a heroic motive. Works of literature may help us to recognize that we want to go on seeing hatred of truth and love of truth, the task of bearing witness, the task of attending to those who bear witness, as figuring in the history of this century and our appropriation of it. This is a matter, not of conceiving those works of literature as taking a view on one side or another of a philosophical controversy,[28] but of what we want to be able to mean. In literature and its neighbors, we may see the making of what Seamus Heaney speaks of as "wise and true meanings," as language is used in the "intelligent disposition and inquisition of human experience."[29]

Philosophy needs literature and its neighbors. We need them, not just so that we can see what *others* have made of truth; we need them in order to see more clearly what we ourselves want. Perhaps Jane Heal and Richard Rorty really do want a world in which no one speaks of truth any more except as a property of sentences or utterances or beliefs. But their approach to philosophy itself precludes their finding out whether that is really what they want, because of the limits it sets in advance to what we can learn from literature and its neighbors.

NOTES

*A version of this paper was read at the Center for Literary Studies of the Hebrew University, as part of their project on Literature and Moral Philosophy. I am very grateful to the center and its members, to its director Sanford Budick, and especially to Leona Toker, for the invitation itself and the opportunity to discuss the paper with them in Jerusalem, and to Eddy Zemach, for his very stimulating reply to the paper on that occasion. I have also had very helpful comments and suggestions from Richard Rorty, Edward Blatnick, James Conant, Garry Dobbins, Patrick Francken, Peter Geach, Peter Winch, Rai Gaita, and Anthony Woozley. The paper itself developed out of discussions in my ethics seminar at the University of Virginia in 1990, and from thinking about W. A. Hart's "Speaking the Truth," *Haltwhistle Quarterly* #7 (Spring 1979): 1–15.

1. Jane Heal, "The Disinterested Search for Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 88 (1987–88): 97–108. Page references in the text are to this paper.

2. P.T. Geach, "Kinds of Statement," in *Intention and Intentionality: Essays in Honour of G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. C. Diamond and J. Teichman (Brighton, 1979), p. 234.

3. I do not discuss all the questions that can be raised about her views. Peter Geach has drawn to my attention the importance in her argument of the identification of "true" as a predicate; it is, he believes, an error to treat it as a predicate of statements or beliefs or even Fregean "thoughts." These issues he has discussed in a lecture in Cambridge in honor of the fiftieth volume of *Analysis*; see also Thomas G. Ricketts, "Generality, Meaning, and Sense in Frege," [*Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1986): 172–195] on ineliminable uses of "true" as a predicate.

4. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 21. Cited as *CIS* hereafter.

5. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 21–34. Rorty argues in that paper (as the title suggests) that solidarity and commitment to truth are *alternatives;* see pp. 21 and 24. For a contrasting view, emphasizing the compatibility of the two aims in poetry like that of Wilfrid Owen, see Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London, 1988), p. xvi. Heaney describes the figure he calls the "poet as witness," who is "any figure in whom the truth-telling urge and the compulsion to identify with the oppressed becomes necessarily integral with the act of writing itself." See also Arthur E. Lane, *An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfrid Owen & Siegried Sassoon* (Detroit, 1972), a book which one might describe as entirely about the relation between solidarity and objectivity in the poetry of Owen and Sassoon.

6. Contrast Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. vol. 30 (1956): *passim*, especially 55–58. Iris Murdoch argues that a wish for the "de-

divinization" of the world is a moral attitude, and that no particular moral attitude is supported by a Wittgensteinian approach to moral thought. In a recent letter, Rorty has written that he should not have suggested that the recognition that truth is a property only of sentences and of sentence-shaped entities like beliefs might serve as a ground for his desire that the social world be de-divinized. It is rather the other way around, he says: the ground for restricting "true" to sentences and quasi-sentences is that doing so aids in the project of de-divinization.

7. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 68.

8. George Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (London, 1968), III: 132–3. Cited as *CEJL* hereafter.

9. In Rorty's reading of Orwell, there is thus a parallel to the line I suggested that Jane Heal might wish to take in connection with Poland and the defense of truth. I said that, if one claims that truth as such is not something to be fought for, one might describe the battle in Poland as over *free inquiry*. The debunker of truth will I think in many cases try to substitute the vocabulary of defense of freedom of inquiry or of freedom of speech for the vocabulary of defense of truth. See also note 17 below.

10. It is interesting that this argument, which is made by Orwell twice (*CEJL*, II: 259, *1984*, 159–60) is misread by Rorty. The argument is that such truths as that 2 + 2 = 4 must be recognized by a totalitarian regime only so long as there are genuine military threats to the regime. While military necessity does require continued recognition of some truths, military necessity itself ceases to exist in some imaginable futures. "Efficiency, even military efficiency, is no longer needed." Rorty takes a part of this argument, namely, that military necessity requires continued recognition that 2 + 2 = 4, as if it were an argument that the *Party in 1984* still really recognizes some truths, those that are necessary to the making of guns that will fire (*CIS*, 178). But making military equipment that will actually work is, Orwell thought, not necessary in the conditions he described, when war has become continuous. As far as military necessity is concerned, 2 + 2 = 4 can be ignored by the Party or replaced by 2 + 2 = 5.

11. Orwell's case is complicated; the threat to truth lies not only in totalitarianism but also in certain tendencies in democratic countries. An example of what he had in mind in democratic countries is the recent removal by the U.S. State Department from the official record of foreign policy (i.e., from the 1952–1954 volume of the official documentary series, published in 1989) of all documents implicating the C.I.A. in the overthrow of Mossadegh; see *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 4, 1990): A6 and A12.

12. Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* (New York, 1984), p. 42. Cf. also p. 38 and pp. 51–53.

13. J. Carpenter and B. Carpenter, Introduction, in Zbigniew Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City* (New York, 1985), p. x.

14. Orwell, *CEJL*, II: 259.

15. The connection between Orwell and Herbert on the significance of bearing witness comes out strikingly in their use of repetitions of "I saw," in Orwell's "Looking Back on the Spanish War" (*CEJL*, II: 256–57) and Herbert's "What I Saw" (in *Report*, p. 3). We have to keep saying "I saw"; it is what little we have to counter the spell of lies.

16. See, e.g., the description, by Milan Kundera, of the disappearance from history of the Czech Foreign Minister, Clementis; *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York, 1980), Part I. (This example was suggested to me by James Conant.)

17. See T. Des Pres, "On Governing Narratives: the Turkish-Armenian Case," *Yale Review* (Summer 1986): 517–31. His essay also makes clear that we cannot in general substitute the vocabulary of the defense of free inquiry or free speech for the vocabulary of the defense of truth. The issue of the attack on truth in contemporary American political and intellectual life, discussed by Des Pres, is not redescribable in terms of limits on free inquiry or free speech. Des Pres brings out that such a redescription fails to take seriously the power of "official versions" to determine what is remembered, to supplant the truth. I am grateful to Aline Kalbian for telling me of Des Pres's essay.

18. Part 3 of "Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision," in Zbigniew Herbert, *Report*, pp. 64–68. On saving the names of the dead, saving the dead from obliteration, see Czeslaw Milosz, Lecture IV, of "Six Lectures in Verse," in *The Collected Poems, 1931–1987* (New York, 1988), pp. 488–89. Herbert's insistence on accuracy marks a distance from Tennyson: the figure "six hundred" in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" was chosen by Tennyson (who knew the number was inaccurate, and considered rounding instead to seven hundred) for metrical reasons. Shuli Barzilai drew this case to my attention. In "Mrs. Woolf Resites Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Cowper: The Ideology of Quotation in *To the Lighthouse*" (in Vara Neverow, ed., *When Laughing Matters: Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Humor*, forthcoming), she discusses Tennyson's choice and the contrast between Virginia Woolf and Tennyson on the import of approximations: "twenty or thirty dead."

19. See Orwell, *CEJL*, III: 258–59. Orwell is concerned with the disappearance of the shared world in which we can distinguish truth from falsity; but there are also cases in which a single individual's capacity to distinguish truth from falsity is systematically attacked by someone else in a position to exercise what amounts to tyrannical power. The 1944 version of the film *Gaslight* presents such an attack, as James Conant has pointed out to me. A friend has described to me a similar attack on him when he was an adolescent, by his alcoholic father.

20. Zbigniew Herbert, "The Envoy of Mr. Cogito," in *Selected Poems* (Oxford, 1977), p. 79.

21. My account is based on that of L. Weschler, *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers* (New York, 1990). Cited as *MU*.

22. Cf. Des Pres, "On Governing Narratives."

23. On the moral character of such intellectual traditions as chemistry, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981), chapter 14.

24. See Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in Havel et al., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Eastern Europe* (London, 1985), pp. 23–96, especially pp. 30–31, 39. (I am grateful to Peter Winch for recommending Havel's essay.) Havel brings out the variety of actions which may reveal that the totalitarian world is a system of lies, as well as the cost of such actions; see also Heaney (*The Government of the Tongue*, pp. xix–xx, 97).

25. Consider the situation (described in note 19) in which someone, in a position to exercise tyrannical power over another person, surrounds the other with a tissue of lies, even about quite trivial matters, and thus threatens to destroy the capacity of the other person to hold on to anything as true. The friend I spoke of in note 19 writes: "In my attempt to combat [my father's] tyranny of lies, I found myself affirming and defending quite trivial truths. For in defending them, I was defending truthfulness itself—in defending them, I was satisfying my need for truth."

26. R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, 1982), p. xxix. Rorty's statement should not be thought of as an "analysis" of "true" or any kind of attempt to find the essence of truth.

27. But see also note 6 above.

28. Rorty's choice of the line from Clough reflects, I think, a misleading conception of what literature can and cannot do. The quoted line may be read as expressing a metaphysical view of truth; and the choice of example thus reinforces the suggestion in Rorty's writings that a philosophical view of truth underlies the idea of truth as a great good.

29. Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 115, echoing p. 109. See also p. 128, on the possibility of poetry in which "the universal shock suffered by mankind in the twentieth century" can sound forth in language.