

## TRUTH AND TROTH, FACT AND FAITH : ACCURACY TO THE WORLD AND FIDELITY TO VISION \*

MURRAY KRIEGER

“**W**hat is truth ? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.”

The story of education and of letters and science is the story of those who stayed for an answer, the story of those who, in their search for truth, honored it as did Sir Francis Bacon, who opened his essay, “Of Truth,” with the sentence I have just quoted. In that essay, however, Bacon reveals that his devotion is to a truth conceived too simply and singly and absolutely. It is because he had unquestioning confidence in the firm singleness of that truth and its accessibility to us that he rejected a more skeptical outlook. Thus his irritation with Pontius Pilate’s contemptuous suggestion that truth is indefinable, unknowable. Next to such an austere and fixed sense of truth as Bacon’s, even the poet’s imaginative flights are found not altogether trustworthy by him in that essay. This attitude should perhaps not surprise us when we think of Bacon’s devotion to empiricism, the doctrine that truth can be derived wholly from generalizations drawn from the raw data of our sensory experience. From such a perspective the poet as imaginative fiction-maker can be seen as a downright liar; and this is about what Bacon suggests.

But let us look at a poet’s less confident, if perhaps more human and complex, attitude toward truth as he seeks to be more than just a teller of lies. One of Bacon’s contemporaries—in fact, some misguided souls think Bacon wrote the works we attribute to this poet—wrote the following commentary on truth: Shakespeare’s Sonnet 113. In it two truths are at war: the truth of the world and the truth of the mind, or put otherwise—the truths sponsored by fact and by faith.

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Since I left you, mine eye is in my mind ;  
 And that which governs me to go about  
 Doth part his function and is partly blind,  
 Seems seeing, but effectually is out ;  
 For it no form delivers to the heart  
 Of bird, of flow'r, or shape which it doth latch ;  
 Of his quick objects hath the mind no part,  
 Nor his own vision holds what it doth catch ;  
 For if it see the rud'st or gentlest sight,  
 The most sweet favour or deformed'st creature,  
 The mountain or the sea, the day or night,  
 The crow or dove, it shapes them to your feature.

Incapable of more, replete with you,  
 My most true mind thus mak'th mine eye untrue.

The final line ("My most true mind thus mak'th mine eye untrue") couples the two kinds of truth, and they are mutually incompatible. Only one of them would satisfy Bacon, whose commitment to inductive knowledge riveted his interest to empirical reality, to the exclusion of anything less tangible and unambiguous. The speaker in the sonnet has yielded up the usual truth of the eye—or rather his eye sees a truth other than what is presumably there to be seen—seen neutrally, that is, as if it were independent of our idiosyncratic vision. The objects of our daily experience are thus being seen by the speaker not as what they are, but as what the mind, filled with love and with the sole object of that love, must have them be. So the eye, though it "seems seeing", "effectually is out", having abandoned its place and retreated to the mind. But it has abandoned its role along with its place. Its truths are no longer those of sight, but those of thought. Yet the eye still "*seems* seeing", still appearing to capture birds and flowers and the rest of common experience. But it now sees those things only by means of—under the aegis of—the vision and love of his beloved.

All objects of sight, however imperfect, are adapted to the perfection of the beloved. In effect, all has been collapsed into love's vision of goodness, a vision suddenly become the poet's sole reality. Hence the variety of the world, and its many differing values as we move through the stages from the worst to the best it has to offer, all are reduced to that single perfection.

For if it [the eye] see the rud'st or gentlest sight,  
 The most sweet favour of deformed'st creature,

The mountain or the sea, the day or night,  
The crow or dove, it shapes them to your feature.

All the world's oppositions, its good and evil, are merged into one sublimity as all the world's objects are equally shaped to the one set of features. Everything is seen through the one lens which reads the world as if beauty were the only reality. Oppositions like the crow and the dove melt into the oneness of a vision regulated only by love's fidelity. The Manichaeian reality, which splits the good and evil of the mixed world we all know, dissolves into the one flawless reality which the poet's mind permits the poet's eye to see.

At the same time, the poet makes it clear that the opposed dualisms still exist in the empirical world, however he may read them. Filled only with his friend's goodness so that he can see nothing else, the poet yet acknowledges the untruth of that vision fostered by being "true" to the beloved:

Incapable of more, replete with you,  
My most true mind thus mak'th mine eye untrue.

But in this single line the criteria for what is "true" are shrewdly double. The truth of the eye has been traded, not for error, but for another truth, the truth of faith. It is not that one is true and the other false absolutely, but that each is true (and the other false) under specified conditions. And the poet who writes the poem recognizes that, as lover, his vision is limited. He sees doubly, both the truth seen by himself as lover and the worldly truth he thereby distorts.

Thus the two truths are in conflict with one another, the warm truth dictated by love's faith against the cold truth seen by the ruthless eye of empiricism. That older notion of truth which we used to call "troth" (or faith) resists the newer truths unmodified by faith in an historical conflict between world views and concepts of value. The choice seems to be between being true to a person and a belief and being true to a dead world, a world of inhuman objects. And the two truths seem incompatible with one another, even though history has seen the word "truth"—in accordance with the scientific spirit of Bacon's "advancement of learning"—pretty well appropriated by literal reality at the expense of faith.

Still, even now, for Shakespeare, the faithful, trothful vision that gilds our experiential world, turning brass into gold, resists yielding to what a grimmer

realism (the realism of the Baconian scientist) may insist upon as the only truth. If this gilded version of reality is taken as actual — and not just as illusionary— then, as Shakespeare is to suggest, the lover is a successful alchemist in that he has literally transmuted impure materials into pure gold, elixir of the life of the spirit. His golden vision, a world seen through the idolatrous eyes of love, is thus treated as an alchemical transformation of the world, which has truly, and not just metaphorically, turned all dross into gold. But even if the poet is persuaded of the alchemy, is he not aware too —in his more skeptical moments— that it is also a deceptive flattery of the world which raises it to values higher than it deserves? The next sonnet in the sequence, no. 114, completes the argument by confronting just this need to decide whether the golden vision is alchemy —and thus a new and miraculous truth —or is mere flattery, and thus a deceptive untruth.

Or whether doth my mind, being crown'd with you,  
Drink up the monarch's plague, this flattery?  
Or whether shall I say mine eye saith true,  
And that your love taught it this alchemy,  
To make of monsters and things indigest  
Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble,  
Creating every bad a perfect best  
As fast as objects to his beams assemble?  
O, 'tis the first! 'Tis flatt'ry in my seeing,  
And my great mind most kingly drinks it up.  
Mine eye well knows what with his gust is greening,  
And to his palate doth prepare the cup.  
If it be poison'd, 'tis the lesser sin  
That mine eye loves it and doth first begin.

To turn “monsters” into “cherubins,” thus creating “every bad [as] a perfect best,” would indeed be an act of alchemy, one produced under the influence of a transformed vision of truth such as faith alone allows. Still, the poet concedes that his special vision may be no more than flattery of the world, and hence an inaccurate exaggeration, at least when it is viewed from the world outside faith. So his eye is forced to be the flatterer, feeding flattery's poison to the love-smitten mind in response to its demands. But, the poem ironically concludes, the eye— though a conscious flatterer —is so enamored of the beautiful golden vision it is obediently creating for the mind that it begins to worship that vision itself, taking

it as if it were the alchemical reality indeed. In effect, the eye becomes self-deceived before it begins to deceive the mind about the heightened nature of reality. It believes its own vision which it began by creating to sooth the visionary needs of the love-sick mind. Its flattery becomes its truth, all that it is capable of seeing as its reality, at whatever expense to the eye's old naked truth.

Shakespeare, at once pious and skeptical about the poet's and the lover's vision (or rather the vision of the poet *as* lover), sees it as perhaps false if viewed from the world's cold fish-eye of objectivity, though as vision it is the only truth he has, a truth which he rushes to embrace. The beloved, as the poet's god, cannot countenance anything in the world that falls short of perfection. Through the beloved, love transforms the poet's mind into a sun god which alchemizes all it touches, like the sun turning everything it shines upon into gold (or is it only the appearance of gold?). Thus, we are told, the mind creates "every bad a perfect best/As fast as objects to his beams assemble." This is what Shakespeare in another sonnet has called the "heavenly alchemy" of the sun, the god which transforms our imperfect world, a god empowered by the faith engendered by the perfection of the beloved. This vision is so persuasive that it persuades the eyes themselves, despite their normally world-bound character as the prime agent of empiricism. The eyes trade their passive, receptive role for an active, transforming role.

But if, as Shakespeare here suggests, our illusion —as our vision —becomes our reality, thanks to the persuasion of our act of faith, then what indeed is truth for us (if I may return to Pilate's question)? Our visionary god, inspirer of our faith, is that which provides the lens for the world we see. What we seem to find there for us to see derives from our faith in the view of the world to which we devote ourselves, whatever our field of interest or avenue of approach to our reality. As the love poet's world is a vision shaped for him by his faith in his beloved as the god who makes his reality, so we have our own faiths and gods creating visions which become the coherent realities within which we operate. Indeed, Shakespeare's conviction that the eyes themselves, though the would-be agents of naked empiricism, fall prey to the illusion permitted by the lens of consciousness may remind us of recent acknowledgements in the realm of science that empiricism is itself a fiction.

To say empiricism is a fiction is to admit that it also rests on faith, even though many scientists have never questioned their assumption that theirs is a privileged series of claims which alone are in touch with naked, illusion-free

reality. This concession to the plurality of scientific fictions ( or "truths" ) is essentially what is given us by the philosopher of science, Thomás Kuhn, in his influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, when he insists that universally accepted "facts" of scientific common sense are actually constructs within one of many possible scientific "paradigms" (to use his word). In effect, then, our notions about a neutral and immediately available "objective" world are seen as inventions, fictions—as much dependent on our faith in the controlling paradigm as our more spectacularly illusionary worlds of faith like the poet's. Similarly, Karl Popper's famous critique of empiricism may remind us that our experiential generalizations are actually based, not on discovered repetitions among objects we observe, but on our expectations which stage the necessity of the repetitions. Our experience thus becomes shaped by what our hypothetical model of experience permits, so that the raw data of experience is anything but raw since, rather than being simply "given," the data have been created in response to the demands of that model. The patterns we think we find in them are those which our expectations, governed by the model which our hypothetical vision imposes, have created so that we may find them. So in Popper as in Kuhn, rather than the neutral world itself, what we confront is our illusion of what the world must be for us to constitute it for ourselves as our world—in accordance with our faith (or fiction) concerning what it is seen by us as being.

In other words, all truth is really a form of troth: we are all in the position of Shakespeare's lover. We can see only actively and transformingly; we do not receive passively. There is, from the perspective of those viewing it, no neutral or naked world—only the world dressed in our vision of it as our faith constructs its paradigm of it so that it may be brought to life for us. And so the arts and the sciences proceed, doing the marvelous things they have in their history done in their faithful service of their various promising—which is to say productive—paradigmatic visions. Viewed this way, the similarities among the arts and sciences stand out more than their differences do. It is no wonder that, as we view their flowering variety through the centuries, we look more admiringly at Shakespeare's complex version of the problematic of truth than we do at Bacon's unilateral commitment which traps him within his own monolithic fiction. If this pluralistic notion deprives science of its privileged place with respect to truth and therefore leaves science not much better off than poetry, my own faith as a literary critic must think that this is a pretty good place to be left, that science has not thus been made to suffer as much as some of my scientific friends might fear. On the contrary, I see this fellowship between the arts and the sciences in the

visionary truths they share as an elevation for science, as well as an opening-outward.

It is in this sense that the literary student has his role to play here today : in that— as we saw in my treatment of the two Shakespearean sonnets —he deals with written works created expressly for the illusionary fiction or vision itself. Out of this visionary capacity, fully exploited for its own sake, emerge the arts and sciences and the individual works in them all, each as its own maker of vision for human comfort, for human use, and for human understanding. Perhaps this is one of the messages which the poet —as the original player with fictional metaphor as his instrument of faith —brings to the rest of us : that as we approach our own activities we are to recognize, and not to fear, our own visionary metaphors and the act of faith that activates them. For they are the mark of our humanity, whatever our field of visionary study, and through them we begin our control over the otherwise dead objects of a world unimposed upon by human vision.

As it does with vision, art also teaches us, and the scientist in us to take the concept of illusion seriously, as more than a make-believe deception. As creatures locked in the egocentric predicament —with access to experience only through our senses and the subjectivity behind them —we have illusion as what we have to live with when we live in our world. In the spirit of the great art historian, Ernst Gombrich, author of the ground-breaking book, *Art and Illusion*, we must come to appreciate both the source of art in its illusionary nature and, conversely, the source of all our illusionary obsessions in what art offers us. The association of art with appearance —with what the Greeks called *aesthesis* or the 19th-Century Germans called *Schein* —is as old as our study of the arts : I suppose we have always known that the arts help us to see and to find a human reality in what is apparently —even if only fictionally —there. According to this aesthetic tradition, art teaches us not to associate illusion with error or deception —in short, with delusion. We thus learn to compare an illusion (in the sciences as in the arts) not with an inaccessible “objective” reality —that neutral fiction beyond all illusion — but with other illusions, recognizing (as humanists all of us) that we are dealing with a world of human constructs. What we must attend to, then, are all our multiple human realities as they are created by all the visions which frame our consciousness. And perhaps it is the daring of the poet to confront the illusionary nature of his activity which leads the way by giving illusionary courage to the rest of us.

Using Shakespeare's example as our allegory, then, I have tried to talk about faith and love—not sentimentally, I hope, but in accord with our profoundest and most human capacity for original vision. We have looked at what our reality becomes as it is touched by faith in the peculiar god we have chosen to define our consciousness. This unconscious choice of our "necessary fiction" (as the poet Wallace Stevens calls it) frees our capacity to see (to see *by shaping*) a more meaningfully formed world than the one we have been "given." Faith and vision are thus humanistic values which can be shared (indeed *are* shared) by all creators in sciences as in the arts, perhaps more than ever (and more desperately than ever) shared in these often inhumane days. Should our education, in whatever field, be about anything except faith and vision in these special senses? Not if it is to lead outside ourselves to the truth beyond. For faith and vision, shape for us the world we know, with the especially daring metaphorical visions of the poet leading the way, and with his critic creeping along behind him.

Professor of English &  
Director, School of Criticism and Theory,  
University of California,  
Irvine ( U. S. A. )