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Opening Lecture

Telling Lies

Eva T.H. Brann, Dean
St. John's College, Annapolis

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The first lecture of the school year is, by an old tradition, dedicated to that portion of the college new to this Friday night ritual, the freshmen among us. Yesterday, Thursday night, you participated in the first of many seminars where you yourselves do all the talking. Tonight you are present at the only weekly event where someone else gets to speak to you, a dean or a tutor or a visitor. One thing stays the same. Whether you are speaking or listening, you are intended to hear and to judge. Although you may have allowed the talk of the world to persuade you that "being judgmental" is a social sin, judgments are what you are intended to render — on the words of others, though above all on your own.

For example, this lecture is entitled "Telling Lies." What, you are intended to ask yourselves, "is she up to?" Is she going to start us off here by giving lessons in lying? Or, what is worse, by preaching honesty to us, good people all? If she is so preoccupied with telling lies, that's perhaps what she does.

And in fact I have already engaged in false speech: That "old" tradition of dedicating this opening lecture to you, the freshmen — I made it up myself and it is only three years old. To recognize this and similar lies you have to know some facts, and to judge their seriousness you have to have some appreciation of rhetoric.

For the bravado of rhetorical overstatement seems to be a species of the so-called white lie. Perhaps such a colorless lie is better than a blazingly scarlet one, perhaps it is not. You will spend time in the language tutorial distinguishing and analyzing the rhetorical deceptions of language and forming judgments about them. To top it off, for your last seminar, not only of your freshman year but again of your senior year, you will read a dialogue by Plato, the *Phaedrus*, in which questions of love, rhetoric, and truth are intertwined. Unfortunately, the knowledge that initiates you into judging speech cannily *can* also be construed as lessons in lying — an uneasy fact to which I shall return.

But I have put the cart before the horse. Before you can judge whether an utterance is a lie, you have to be able to discern what it means: meaning first, then judgment. For example, what does "telling lies" mean? Does it mean "uttering untruths," as in "She stands up there and keeps telling lies"? Or does it mean "revealing," as in "Achilles' lies are always telling lies, since they tell us a lot about him"?

In order to establish possible meanings you have to know some grammar. You have to know that "telling" can be a participle, a verbal form, and then "telling lies" is something a speaker does. Or "telling" can be an adjective modifying "lies," and then "telling lies" are lies that tell you something. "Telling lies" is in fact a pun, and puns exploit the squirminess of language, while grammar nails down the choices. You will be studying a great deal of grammar in your language tutorial. (If that prospect does not delight you, do but consider that grammar is etymologically connected to glamour, a most telling relation.)

There is one more study that completes the traditional trio making up the art of language. Besides grammatical regularity and rhetorical effect you will also be studying logical validity. I shall return to the relation of logic to lying later.

All three studies are intended to make you canny and witting hearers and speakers, able to discern meaning and judge truth, to have your wits about you. You will need these skills here, because you have joined a community that engages in a very peculiar activity. We ask after truth. We ask whether the books we read contain something true, and we ask on occasion not only what truth herself might be, but also what *the* truth is, independently of books. I will say something later about the reasons why it is unusual for a college to admit these questions after truth and what the conditions are that make them possible.

Whatever the conditions, let me point out one consequence of trying to live in a truth-seeking community. Members of such a community should probably try not to tell lies. It is conceivable that there might be one who earnestly seeks the truth for himself while determinedly telling lies to others. But such a person is probably a loner, not a friend among friends.

Let me give you two reasons that may be new to you why members in any intimate community, such as ours, should be truthful with each other.

We are able to tell lies because we who speak are encased in a cocoon, in our opaque body. Some people think that they can see through others and that others are transparent to them,

but where they think they see through our exterior as through a pane of glass they are in truth apt to be looking into a mirror. There are no certain somatic signs of lying. The nervous reaction to being suspected is not discernibly different from that of being guilty. Consequently even lie detectors are known to be unreliable. The human carapace is really impenetrable.

Now when people live as closely together as you will on this campus, a certain decent distance is essential to comfort. You will not want to observe each other too penetratingly. But a bodily presence that hides a lie draws attention, and a face suspected of being a facade invites searching curiosity. Telling lies in close quarters is a temptation to breached privacy and to sorry involvements. Under these circumstances there is no harm that is not compounded by lies.

The same mortal sheath that hides thoughts can be used to express them. I say "can be used" because every adult expression is part performance. A small, close, lively community acts at its best like those revolving stone polishing cylinders that take off the rough edges and bring out the natural markings of a piece of rock. Those markings represent the personal rhetoric, the gestures and the diction, that a community of learning brings out in people. It is a curious fact that adult nature has to be brought out by polishing.

Consequently there is nothing straightforward about uttering — which literally means "outering" — your meaning. Some of you may think that spontaneity and sincerity are natural and therefore easy and that controlled expression is hypocrisy, an elderly vice. I think intended spontaneity is a self-contradiction, and sincerity is a sappy virtue, the virtue of insisting on being always one's — possibly reprehensible — self. And isn't it a strange fact that people indulging in natural expression tend to look dramatic and self-dramatizing to their neighbors?

So I think I need to say something in favor of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy derives from the Greek work for actor, *hypocritēs*. It is a necessary part of adult conduct because it prevents something worse. Hamlet urges his adulterous mother to

> Assume a virtue, if you have it not. (III, iv, 158).

She is to make a pretense of purity so that it might turn into truth. There is a stage of badness beyond being bad, and it is not caring how one looks. Hypocrisy, they say, is the compliment vice pays to virtue.

There is another similar word that brings out my point. The word "person" comes from the Latin *persona*, an actor's mask. A person is a being behind a mask, a self-made facade through

which come utterances. The lower animals at least do not seem to have such masks, because they have no conduct, only behavior. Perhaps one should say that they *are* masks, masks through which nature expresses herself. But we *have* masks, and we conduct *ourselves*. I mean that there can always be at least a brief check between our impulse and our expression. Homer uses a wonderfully apt figure: "What a word has escaped the barrier of your teeth?" one person will say to another, implying that the words should have been held back. We can maintain silence, and we can shape our speech and its expressive accompaniments. In fact we cannot do otherwise, for all human conduct is a kind of self-presentation, and being natural is a great feat. (A sociological classic on this subject is Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959.)

Suppose I am right in intimating that learning to be oneself, to be a person in a community, is an arduous work of mask-making, requiring much biting back of words, some white lying, and continual attempts to find expression that will do justice to one's meaning. Then to derail these efforts at sculpting one's own expressive persona by the strong jolt of a crude lie would be a crime against your own developing personality, particularly when you have looked someone in the eye and sworn that what is about to come out of your mouth is the truth.

In Robert Bolt's play about Thomas More, *A Man for all Seasons*, Thomas says:

> When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. (*He cups his hands*) And is he opens his fingers *then* — he needn't hope to find himself again. (Act Two)

So these are my two arguments — I don't think they are preachments — against outright intended lying. Telling such lies prevents intimacy and wrecks self-formation.

There are plenty of authors who disagree with me in both directions. Kant, whom you will read in your junior year, will condemn every kind of lie from the whitest social lie to the heroic lie told to protect an innocent life. For lying, he says, is "the obliteration of one's dignity as a human being" (*The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* 429). He thinks so because he thinks that the will to communicate our thought is part of what it means to be a person, and thus to misuse speech is to abrogate our personality, to undo the intention of our own rational will, which must be to utter truth.

There are, on the other hand, authors who advocate lying like hell. Machiavelli advises his prince to be like a fox and to

deceive when it is to his interest (*The Prince*, Ch. XVIII). Rousseau blithely confesses that he often lied from embarrassment just to keep the conversation going. In fact, he does talk a suspicious lot about lying, in his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (Fourth Walk), a book we don't read. Nietzsche inveighs against veracity as the impossibly naive wish to come clean, to expose oneself, and he praises the bracing tonic of a falseness perpetrated without guilt (*The Will to Power* 377-78).

For my part, I am not entirely persuaded by Kant's absolutism and more than a little repelled by the others' equivocations.

There is, happily an author who seems to me to speak sweet reason, and that is Thomas Aquinas, who treats of lying in a book of which you will read parts next year, the *Summa Theologica* (II, 2, ques. 110, art. 4 ff.). He gives various useful classifications of lies and concludes that not all lies are mortal sins, sins that entail damnation. Lies that injure God and your neighbor are mortal, but lies told with no intention contrary to charity, are not. This judgment leaves room for white lies and seems to me pretty good for practical purposes. (Practical lying is treated by Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, 1978.)

But it was not really my purpose to talk about the practice of lying, either whether to do it or how to go about it. What I want us to consider is the theory of lying: What are the conditions of human nature and the world that make lying possible?

It seems to me that the inquiry into telling lies is particularly appropriate to a school devoted to the truth. You will discover in the next four years that the most convenient access to the house of truth is often through the back door. The assumption in the back-door approach is that truth precedes falsity, that it is the original positive. Our language seems to imply the priority of truth, since we speak of untruths but not of unlies or unerrors. Your reading will often take the back-to-front way: In Homer and Tolstoy, War precedes Peace. In Dante and Milton, Hell comes before Heaven and Satan, the lord of lies, comes before God, the fountain of truth. In Plato, error explicates knowledge. And in Aristotle, art elucidates nature.

Before I proceed to lies, I want to pause a moment to reinforce the claim that in this school we seek truth. Of course that is not the only, or even the first, interest we have. We also acquire skills and learn arguments and even gather some facts. But we do have a remarkable hypothesis. We ask ourselves and each other: "Is what I am reading true? Should I let it enter my life or must I fend it off?" Here are two special conditions that

support our search for truth. One is that we are not ashamed to be discovered in error. When I say "we," I mean *we* — tutors along with students. We go so far as to regard the recognition of ignorance in ourselves as a high achievement. The other condition is that we admit no institutional truth, no authoritative dogma. If we had the truth, we would not need to inquire about it.

This hypothesis of ours is peculiar and hard to defend. At most academic institutions the professors deny it and take precautions against it; they bracket the question of truth and set it aside. They have good reasons: They think many old books by now have historical interest only, treating by-gone problems and providing "irrelevant" answers. They think it is a sort of intellectual tactlessness to get too close to students' lives in the classroom, and they distrust the authority such inquiries might give the professor who directs them. They think there is no fixed public meaning in texts, that the meaning is construed anew by each reader, and often they also think that a question after the truth is in principle nonsense, because truth is a private or senseless notion.

All of you will be coming to grips with some of these notions right in the seminar. For example, you will be tempted to say that a proposition is "true for me," if not for you, and then you will have to consider whether the word "true" can be used in that way. Meanwhile we will ask you to act provisionally on our hypothesis that truth may be pursued, to be shamelessly open to the pursuit, to trust your tutors as fellow learners, to work at discovering the meaning of a book, and to treat authors as fellow human beings who raise questions you can care about. In short, we will ask you to engage in what Francis Bacon calls

> the inquiry of truth, which is the love-making and wooing of it. ("Of Truth")

By way of beginning the inquiry into telling lies as a prelude to searching for truth, I want to add a classification of lies to those given by Thomas Aquinas: Some lies are subjective, others are objective.

The subjective lie is the one Kant defines and proscribes so absolutely: wilful, intentional falsehood. Your straight basic liars intend to tell lies and know they are doing it. But there is also the objective lie, an unintentional falsehood, a failed willingness to tell the truth. Being willing to tell the truth but failing at it is usually called being in error. At this point I might be accused of the rhetorical trick of metonymy, a figure of speech in which the speaker confuses species and genus. For

here the genus seems to be the False and the species seem to be the Lie and the Error. An error is not really a kind of lie, but one of two parallel species of the False, the Unwitting and the Witting Falsehood. Errors are all the unintended misses of targeted truth: mistakes, misspeakings, misjudgments, misperceptions.

Now there will be a man, the guardian angel or perhaps the goblin of your first year, Socrates, who will claim that ignorance, and therefore error, is the genuine or "true lie" in the soul (*Republic* 382 b). He is helped in saying so by the fact that in Greek the word for error and lie is the same. It is *pseudos*, which you know, for instance, in the word pseud-onym, a false name. But he also really does mean to identify lie and error, and his thinking is roughly like this: He will try to persuade you that effective virtue is a kind of knowledge. If he is right, then it is at least likely that ignorance is a kind of vice, and that the particular ignorance manifested in error is not far from the vice of lying. After having studied some logic in the sophomore year you will be able to show diagrammatically that these consequences are not logical entailments but just thought-possibilities.

If you find reason to accept them, then there is no truly unwilling falsehood; our errors become our responsibilities, and we are charged with exorcising the unwitting lie in the soul. This ignorant lie is what I call the objective lie.

Socrates has something to say not only about the untold lie hidden in the soul but also about the outward telling of lies. There is a dialogue we don't read, called the *Lesser Hippias*, so called because it is the shorter of two dialogues featuring a sophist called Hippias. Sophists figure in many of the Platonic dialogues, above all in the dialogues called *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, in which Plato deals respectively with error and the possibility of lying. I can tell you that no book has affected me more than the *Sophist*.

A sophist is the most fascinating creature in the world, and Plato is never through with him. The sophist has a name that begins with the word for "wise," *sophos*, and ends in *-ist*, a suffix that denotes an imitator and an operator. For Plato ordinary sophists are wise guys, smart and dumb at once, by profession evasive, tricky, and deceitful, though sometimes in person endearingly naive. The sophist extraordinaire is Socrates himself, a canny wise man, whose mode is irony, a wily sort of self-deprecation that Aristotle does not hesitate to classify among the lying deviations from truth (*Nicomachean Ethics* II, vii, 12).

Now in the dialogue Socrates carries on with Hippias, two characters that will soon be very familiar to you come on the scene: Achilles and Odysseus. Hippias, who can quote Homer, cites passages to show that Achilles is a true and simple fellow, who tells Odysseus that he hates lies worse than hell (*Iliad* IX, 312). Odysseus, on the other hand, is a habitual teller of lies. The two men differ as truth-teller differs from liar. Now comes Socrates to prove that Achilles sometimes tells lies. For example, he informs Odysseus that he will leave Troy so that "on the third day he would come to fertile Phthia," his home — and yet he makes no move at all to go. Hippias objects that Achilles tells untruths unwittingly while Odysseus lies by design. Socrates then tricks Hippias into admitting that it is the person with the more capable soul, the one who knows exactly what he is doing, who is best, and that therefore the voluntary liar is better than the unwitting teller of falsehoods. The claim that the true lie is a kind of guilty ignorance is here complemented by the not altogether playful assertion that the truer and more genuine person is the liar who knows the truth and determines not to utter it. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, agrees with Socrates' estimation of Odysseus, for she declares her love and loyalty to him as a cunning knave and a witting liar (*Odyssey* XIII, 287 ff.).

Not only, I conclude, is the silent lie in the soul to be held against us as a weakness because it betokens a culpable ignorance, but the utterance of a lie confirms our strength, because it presupposes knowledge of truth. As Nietzsche puts it: "The recognition of reality... has been greatest exactly among liars" (*Will to Power* 378). More generally, anyone who grants the possibility of lying reveals a commitment to the existence of truth.

With subjective and objective lies established, let me now list the rubrics of conditions that make the telling of a lie possible. I will read them off before explaining them:

I. Will II. Knowledge
III. Negation
IV . Necessity V. Freedom

I. First, then, for a lie to be told there has to be the *will*. This is the main condition for the pure subjective lie. Perhaps will is too strong a word, since much lie-telling results not so much from strong choice as from a weak willingness. In the lingo of this decade: We give ourselves permission. Sometimes lying is even a mere default position of the will. But one way or another

the capacity for choice, for letting the words escape from the barrier of our teeth, is involved. What the human will is, and how the will comes not to will, are a long story for another night.

Of course, as I have said, the exterior has to cooperate: The body has to be opaque and the world obtuse. If every lie caused our noses to grow proportionately, or if a spade when falsely called a shovel protested loudly, we would in time lose the will to lie.

II. Second, for a lie to be told there has to be, as I have intimated, *knowledge*. As Socrates shows, a liar has to know the truth, all sorts of truth, but particularly the truth about words. Otherwise the uttered lie may be a false lie, an unwitting truth. Uttering unwitting truth is just what happens to Achilles, when he says that on the third day he will come to Phthia but stays in Troy. He does not know the truth of the name of his all-too-attainable home. The knowledge of such truth is called "etymology," and *etymos* is a Greek term for word-truth. Socrates has such knowledge. For in prison two nights before his execution he dreams that a beautiful woman quotes Achilles' words to him (*Crito* 44 b), and *he* clearly knows what "coming to Phthia" must mean. It means death, for Phthia means "Land of the Dead," from the verb *phthinein*, to destroy (H. Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Woerterbuch* II, 1015).

You have to know both what is the case and what you are saying to tell a proper lie. They say there are no atheists in the foxholes of war, and there are surely few relativists among the true tellers of lies. Consequently, as I have said, this condition for lying is an odd cause for cheer: Every telling of a lie is a reaffirmation of the possibility of truth.

III. The third and central of my five conditions for telling lies is a human capacity, which is an incapacity as well. I will call it the power of blind *negation*.

In the dialogue the *Sophist* that I mentioned before, the main speaker (not Socrates) says:

> To believe or to say the things that are not — that is, it seems, the lie arising in the mind and in words. (260 c)

More than two millennia later Captain Gulliver is, in the course of his travels, set ashore by his crew of mutineers in a land governed by noble horses who call themselves Houyhnhnms. The land also harbors some savage, repulsive two-legged ape-like creatures, the Yahoos, with whom the horses identify Gulliver, calling him their "gentle Yahoo." Gulliver tries to give his equine master an account of the mores of the European Yahoos, but the noble horse is hard put to it

to comprehend the Yahoo custom of telling lies, which is, Gulliver notes, "so perfectly understood, and so universally practiced among human creatures." The noble horse calls it "saying the thing which is not," to him a most self-defeating use of speech.

By this testimony, we may begin to define lying as saying the thing which is not. So, of course, is speaking in error, as Socrates had already intimated in the dialogue on error that precedes the *Sophist*, the *Theaetetus* (199 d, see also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011 b 27.)

In fact, in logic the two falsehoods are indistinguishable. For logic abstracts from what is called the pragmatic aspect of speech, the internal intention and the social use. I might put it this way. In the full human context, lies have something infernal about them; they are under Satan, the prince of lies and of denial. In the bright and weightless realm of logic, denial is a mere squiggle or "curl" (~) — just an operator. It is defined by a table of so-called truth-values. ("Value" in logic as in life denotes an arbitrary as opposed to an intrinsic worth.) If a proposition, little p, is assigned the truth value T, then squiggle-p (~p) is F, false, and conversely. T and F are mere symbols; T has no primacy over F and imparts no particular significance to a proposition. (While it is the case that logicians think about what truth is, they do not feel equally obligated to think about what is true, though it may be finally impossible to separate the two questions.)

Now in real life people do not talk "propositionally" very often, except in courts of law, under cross-examination: "Is it or is it not the case that your mother told you something significant? Just answer yes or no, please." In ordinary speech the negative does not stand outside an impregnable proposition but invades it and is deeply implicated in it. Traditional logic does in fact recognize two additional possibilities for the position of the negation. Textbooks on logic seem quite unamazed by these possibilities, which they blithely declare to be equivalent (e.g. I. M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, p. 223), though thoughtful logicians have had their preferences. In what follows S stands for the subject, capital P for the predicate of a proposition. We can say:

1. S (is not) P. Here the proposition itself, internally, is said to have the "quality" of being negative or positive: Achilles is-not a liar. Some authors maintain that this form alone is correct because logical quality belongs strictly to the copula connecting the subject and the predicate (Maritain, *Formal Logic*, p. 110). I think that view is too restrictive.

2. S is (not P). Whether the speaker is telling the truth or a lie, this form posits a "thing that is not": Achilles is a non-liar. It therefore supports the doctrine of lies adopted by the *Sophist* and the Houyhnhnms.

3. Not (S is P), i.e. ~p. The negative is outside the proposition: It is not the case that Achilles is a liar. This is how the modern logic called propositional places the negative, though the thought goes back to the Stoics and to Abelard (W. and M. Kneale, *The Development of Logic*, p. 210). Here the whole proposition is externally negated.

The real life differences among the three forms are remarkable when the logical bones are fleshed out with meaning.

For while the negative that has got inside the sentence wrecks havoc there with meaning, the denial of the whole proposition leaves it intact, as putting a negative sign before a number leaves it its absolute value. Look at the example of the truthful Achilles, the unwitting liar.

Early on, in the first book of the *Iliad* (352), we see him withdrawn from his friends, weeping on the shore and calling his mother. "Mother" he says, addressing her plainly and intimately, "Mother, you bore me to be short-lived"; the Greek word is *minunthiados* — minute-lived. The son states it, and the mother confirms it: Achilles will die soon. Now listen to a later episode. In the ninth book (410) Achilles tells Odysseus, who has come to talk him into returning to the battle, that his mother — she is now grandly "the goddess, silver-footed Thetis" — has said that he has a choice of two fates. He can go home and forego fame or stay and die soon gloriously. Unless mother and son have been talking behind our backs, Achilles is engaging in sheer hopeful invention, attributing it to his divine mother. And finally, in a still later passage in the sixteenth book (51) he answers the concerned and suspecting question of his friend Patroclos, whether his mother had told him something from Zeus: "Neither do I care about any oracle that I know nor has my mistress mother [as he now calls her formally and coolly] told me anything from Zeus." This answer betokens what we like to call "going into full denial." Note the *progressive* negation of the truth. At first Achilles admits the hard fact: I and my mother both know I shall die young. The second version is: My mother has told me that I have a choice of fates. Here Achilles begins to say "the thing that is not": S is not-P. For he does not deny that his mother has been in communication with him, but he undoes and denies her message. And third he says: It is not the case that my mother has told me a thing. Now he is denying the whole proposition: not (S is P). This is not altering

the message and saying the thing that is not. This is a more radical lie, that of denying blindly that anything whatever has been said. Such is the progress and the pathos of Achilles' peculiarly telling lies, lies that reveal the young warrior's fear of facing death.

Let me step back for a moment. It seems to me that we can think more than we can say. The papers you write this year will probably demonstrate that fact. We can also say more than we think. Some of your colleagues in seminar will seem to you to give examples of that fact. Moreover, while the world contains more things than we can enumerate, it is also true that we can say what corresponds to no thought and no thing. We can speak without meaning. The word can become footloose.

One good example of a word rattling around by itself is the pseudo-name by which Odysseus introduces himself to the Cyclops, No-One (*Outis*, IX, 364-412). The poor monster literally does not know what he is saying when, having been brutally blinded by Odysseus, he calls on his neighbors for help. Who has hurt you, they ask, and he answers "No One." Nor do they know what they are saying when they go off shouting something to the effect: "Well, if no one has hurt you, you must be sick. Go see a doctor." For in conditional contexts the form *outis* turns into *mē tis*, which means again "No one," but it also sounds like *mētis*, which means "cunning, craftiness": "Cunning has done you in, go see a doctor" — that is what the Cyclopean neighbors truly but unwittingly say.

But particularly to my point are the words *no* and *not* and the prefixes *un* and *non*: The first philosopher, Parmenides, said that "neither could you know that which is not (for it is impossible), nor could you say it" (Diels Fragment 2). I think he holds too nobly simple a view of speech. I agree that it is not possible to think what is not. The intellect is incapable of the pure negative. When it tries to think *not* or *non* or *un* it always finds itself attending to something different or other rather than to nothing. For example, Un-rest is not No Rest but Motion, and Non-being is not Nothing but something Different or Other. I think that in perception too there is never nothing but only difference. Even the imagination cannot practice negation effectively. For an image of the imagination may be nullified, as a stamp is cancelled so that its value is gone — yet its face, though smudged, is not obliterated. In the imagination and in visual thinking — which is what we mostly do — negated being nearly always has a positive look. Denial produces a murky or perhaps a monstrous shape, but never a nonentity.

In speech alone can we say the negative and for a moment really mean nothing. It is, I think, this potent incapacity that makes lying possible. So let me sketch out for you how telling lies seems to me to come about as a product of negating speech and defective will.

There is a crucial moment — for Achilles it comes last, but often it is first — when we say a blind and ignoble *no* to the truth, when we will to tell the lie. The proposition that we know to be true remains untouched but we determine in our hearts to reject it, ignorantly and uncircumstantially: "Not (S is P)." The hero decides to maintain: "It is not the case, Patroclos, that my mother confirmed my pending death" — without thought for the consequence to the interior of the sentence. We *say* no and think *nothing* constructive, only "I shall not tell the truth whatever follows." Our two strange negative capacities for exercising an infirm will and for uttering an unmeaning word come briefly but momentously together.

In the second and third moment the negation invades the sentence and begins to generate meaning. Perhaps it first attaches itself to the copula so as to disjoin subject from predicate: Achilles and his death are not to be conjoined in speech. But eventually the negation ends up attacking the predicate itself; S is not-P: My mother told me not what you all think, Odysseus, but something else, that my death is still my choice. That "not" when stuck to the predicate no longer betokens pure blinding negative non-truth, but signals an alternative to the truth, a positive invention; the lie goes out of control and become baroque. Here cross the activities of telling lies and telling tales. Both tell the thing that is not.

Let me conclude this section on lies and negating language by reminding us that except for the willing, all I said holds also for error: Lies differ from errors only in beginning wilfully and then sliding out of control, while errors begin inadvertently and then settle in. I cannot resist adding that telling lies is also close in form to asking questions. A lie is in fact a kind of inverse question. For a question is a directed receptivity, a shaped expectation of a truth as yet unknown. And a lie is a directed rejection, a determined negation, of a truth already known. Since we are a school for questioning, lies, the diametric opposite of questions, would seem to be, on occasion, a proper preoccupation for us.

IV. I would phrase the fourth condition of lying, *necessity*, in this way: We can lie because we *must* lie. I am thinking not of the subjective pseudo-necessity of lying from fear or need, but of unavoidable objective lying. If human speech is to be effica-

cious it must accommodate itself to a world about which it is, as I have already intimated, simply not possible to speak with total truth.

Let me quote an author of the junior year with whom I maintain a — necessarily one-sided but cordial — friendship, Jane Austen. She says:

> Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken. (*Emma*, Ch. 49)

It is an ever-rewarded effort to try to tell the truth, but to tell the whole truth is beyond our cognitive abilities and to tell nothing but the truth is outside of our linguistic equipment. Anyone made to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth is being asked to stretch it.

We cannot utter exactly what it is we think because the qualifying internal history behind every thought is enormous. It cannot be put in finite words. Similarly we cannot tell all that we perceive, because the world's space is indefinitely extended and infinitesimally detailed, and in addition every spatial point has behind it an infinite history in time.

The case is not entirely hopeless and offers no excuse for not trying. Our cognitive constitution, our capacity for speech, and the external world all do seem to be to *some* degree geared to each other. Our attention highlights parts of the world that seem to be meaningful wholes. The parts of speech seem to fit the behavior of the world, and the words of language seem to be able to collect items scattered widely in space. Sometimes many things can be said "in a word." The constitutional limitation on our truth-telling, our necessary objective lying, is therefore also an incitement to subjective truthfulness, to the effort to do what we can with such telling speech as we have.

V. There is, finally, a fifth condition, *freedom*, the condition for telling true lies of a marvelous sort. Here is an activity in which the reckless will, the footloose word, and the feckless world intersect. This activity produces the freely willed lie called fiction, feigning wonderful worlds in words, or poetry, making splendid fabrics out of words.

The notion that fiction and poetry are a kind of lie is attributed to Socrates, and you will hear him say so when you read the dialogue called the *Republic* (Bk. II). Yet it was not a philosopher who first published this slander, but a poet, Hesiod, Homer's younger rival, for whom we have no time. He takes seriously what Homer takes lightly: the aboriginal birth of the gods and the daily work of men. This peasants' Homer

tells how the Muses spoke to him, a shepherd of the wilderness, and said:

> We know how to tell many lies that are similar to true words, and again, when we wish, we can utter true things. (*Theogony* 27-28)

These are wonderful lines because they introduce a distinction into the truths that are opposed to lies. There are what I will call world-truths, *alethea*, and there are word-truths, *etyma*, the term I mentioned before, the one that goes into the word etymology. Hesiod's Muses tell lies that are similar to true words. These are the free lies I am talking about: words freely chosen to tell lies that are true in the world of words. How is it possible that such liberated lies should acquire the force of a peculiar and special truth? The answer is in a strange capacity we share with the world, the power of entertaining certain half-existences called images. But like the will, the imagination is a mystery for another night.

I am nearing the end, and your turn to express your judgments of my lecture in your questions for me is about to come. Let me, on the way out, return once more to the second hero of this lecture, Odysseus. When he is about to become the teller and poet of his own travels, he introduces and reveals himself in this fashion to the Phaeacians, who will be the first folk to hear his odyssey:

> I am Odysseus Laertides; I am the preoccupation of mankind for all my deceits... *But* I dwell in lucid (*eudeielos*) Ithaca (IX 19-21).

Telling false lies and telling true lies, telling lies from necessity and for pleasure, Odysseus attains the sunlit clarity of the home he loves. Not, I think, the worst way to home in on truth!

But there is a better way still, Socrates' way: the unwillingness to tolerate the unwitting, untold lie in the soul, and the wit and wisdom to transmute the unavoidable lying of any utterance into the telling lies that reveal truth.