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The Illusion of a Crossroads: Parmenides, Arendt, Mamardashvili and the Space for Truth

Abstract:

If “classical” lies aimed to conceal truth and “modern” ones attempted to destroy it, “postmodern” propaganda targets the self and the certainty of thinking. The organized lies of our times aim to silence the self by sabotaging our ability to make sense of the world. As a result, it is difficult to speak truth today. It is equally difficult to hear it, not in the least because truth, unlike propaganda, is unwilling to admit that it is one opinion among others. An artificial form – a metaphor, a paradox, a novel, or a painting – can help truth be heard. Literature can help me decide something that has already been decided. Hannah Arendt’s essay “Truth and Politics,” the text written by Parmenides, Merab Mamardashvili’s concept of artificial organs, and Stanislav Aseyev’s recent memoir help me establish these claims.

Keywords:

truth, propaganda, art, Arendt, Mamardashvili, Parmenides, Ukraine, Aseyev

“We have to keep with closed lips truth that has the face of a lie,”¹ insists Dante in his *Divine Comedy* before introducing the monster of falsehood, Geryon, who has the tail of a snake with a forked, scorpion’s tip, the hairy paws of a lion, and a human head. We must fall silent whenever a truth too closely resembles a lie. This

1) “*Sempre a quel ver c’ha faccia di menzogna*,” *Inferno* XVI, 124. Alighieri, *Divine Comedy: Inferno*, 210.

exhortation seems especially fitting for our own age when “everything is possible and nothing is true.”² I will argue, however, that quite the opposite is the case: given the elusive nature of truth and proliferation of lies, it would be monstrous to remain silent when truth is at stake. Given this, it is the question not of whether to speak, but of how to speak.

About a month and a half after the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine, I interviewed a survivor from Bucha – a town next to Kyiv that was occupied by the Russian army in the first days of the 2022 invasion. Kateryna Kibarova escaped into Western Ukraine after thirteen days of hiding in the basement of an apartment building. As she was telling her story, I was struck by her tenacious “it is necessary to talk about it.” She repeated it several times in the course of the interview.³

Kibarova’s passionate and confident words have several interesting meanings. Unsupported by public discussions, truth is quickly suffocated or diluted to the point of being unrecognizable and ineffective. Several decades ago Hannah Arendt pointed out that truth “exists only to the extent that it is spoken about.”⁴ Kibarova recognizes the urgent need to keep the truth alive about the violence inflicted upon Ukrainian civilians by the Russian army.

Kibarova’s “it is necessary to talk about it” also reveals a tension – *nadryv*, as one would say in Ukrainian and Russian – a rupture or tear, a result of overstrain. On February 24, Kibarova was violently torn away from the life that she created for herself over the years; she was severed from her self. This liminal experience could have become her undoing. The certainty that she must tell the truth of what had happened to her and to others might have been helping her maintain a precarious grip on life. Indeed, in the subsequent interview Kibarova mentioned that she has had to seek medical help for various physical and psychological ailments that developed after the initial shock has subsided.⁵ The act of telling truth, but also the need to do it, allows me to gather my self, even if only for a brief moment. Stanislav Aseyev survived 28 months of a concentration camp in the Russian-occupied Donetsk before he was liberated in a prisoner exchange. In a preface to a powerful memoir that recounts and reflects on his experiences in this camp he notes: to write this book “I had to survive. To survive I had to know that I need to write it.”⁶ Speaking truth is a way of holding together the world and the self that are disintegrating, or that would otherwise fall apart.

Kibarova’s and Aseyev’s determination to speak also ruptures the current “postmodern” skepticism about truth; it tears through the prevalent indifference and cynicism. The difference between truth and lies is clear to them. Their words assume and confirm the meaningfulness of the distinction between truth and falsehood, and are consistent with the emphasis of Eastern European philosophers of the twentieth century (as opposed to their Western European counterparts) on the need to live in or search for truth even if an ultimate truth can never be fully attained or grasped.

It is necessary, but difficult to speak the truth about violence because violence silences – it catches me off-guard, throws me off balance, and fractures my self. But, even if I can gather myself into a tentative “I” capable of speech, it is not a given that I will be understood. The other must make a considerable effort to hear. There are ways, however, to make truth more likely to be heard.

In this essay I briefly discuss two vivid cinematic examples of self-silencing – both are a reaction to violence. I then reflect on why truth is difficult to hear and understand. Arendt’s essay “Truth and Politics” helps

2) I am referring to Hannah Arendt’s claim in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that Peter Pomerantsev makes the title of his book: *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*.

3) An abridged version of this interview was published as Kibarova, “We Did Not Ask for ‘Liberation.’”

4) Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 238.

5) An abridged version of this interview was published as Kibarova, “Coming Home to Bucha.”

6) Aseyev, “*Svitlyi Shliakh*,” 224, my translation. This book has been translated and published as *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*.

me think about two obstacles that stem from truth's very nature: it is opaque and has tyrannical tendencies. One of the earliest philosophical texts from ancient Greece, Parmenides' *Poem*, and the writings of a Soviet-era Georgian philosopher, Merab Mamardashvili help me to establish that truth benefits from an engagement with art. I rely on Mamardashvili's conception of art as that which helps me to stretch a brief moment of truth that enters the world like lightning and that could be easily missed. Truth needs art's artificiality; truth must approach fiction to become "more believable." I argue that art can help offset that which Arendt calls truth's "tyrannical tendencies," because it creates a space for the decision about truth and lies, but also about being and non-being – it creates a space for the decision that has already been made.

Two Words for Silence

Ukrainian, and some other Slavic languages like Russian and Polish, have two different words for silence: *tysha* or quietude and *movchannia* or mutedness. The English "silence," by not distinguishing between these meanings, disguises its relationship to violence. By silence we most frequently mean not the absence, but a quieting of sounds. The word "silence" comes from the Proto-Indo-European root **seyl-* – "still, windless, quiet, slow" – and is related to the Old Norse *sil*: "slow flowing water." Silence does not exclude sounds, rather it does not favor abrupt and noisy motion. Ukrainian has a word for this: *tysha*; it is kind of silence which is not mute, but full of quiet sounds and slow movement. The other kind of silence – *movchannia* – is voiceless. I can refrain from words to let the other speak, to hear the slower movements of the world. I can also fall silent in the face of violence. I can be silenced or silence the other.

Two protagonists of Andrei Tarkovsky's films vow silence in response to violence. Icon painter Andrei Rublev, in the film the title of which shares his name, refuses words and painting after he witnesses the slaughter of civilians and the destruction of a church that he recently filled with frescoes and icons. Alexander, in Tarkovsky's last film *The Sacrifice*, vows silence to save the world from nuclear war. Neither of these two silences is a good response to violence. Tarkovsky is explicit about this in *Andrei Rublev*: its protagonist breaks his vow of silence after he sees a youth cast a church bell whose joyful sound makes people's lives more beautiful and meaningful. This convinces Rublev to return to words and icon painting. In *The Sacrifice*, Alexander, a celebrated actor, repeats "Words, words, words" until one day he decides to leave the stage, and eventually gives up words altogether. His vow of silence (and the burning down of his home), are also a response to violence – Alexander attempts to avert WWII. Although we never find out if he recants his violent reaction to violence, the film ends on an uplifting note: Alexander's son, who remained silent throughout the movie because of a recent throat surgery, recites the opening words of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the word," as the camera's and our gaze slowly moves upward, following a barren tree trunk that might one day show the signs of life, even if this seems rather unlikely. Even so, this final movement of the film is taking us out of the silence as *movchannia*.

The Words that Stink

Silence threads dangerously close to death. A quieting, a slowing down of the flow of words, is often necessary to help one hear, but refusing to speak surrenders space and time to what Nikolai Gumilev called "dead words." Dead words do not respect silence; they use it. They are loud, they make the news, disorient, create apathy and distrust. They silence.

In 1919, while inhaling the putrid smell of the burgeoning Soviet narrative, Nikolai Gumilev wrote a poem "Word" that begins where Tarkovsky's film *The Sacrifice* ends – with the world's inception:

On that day when, over the new world,
God was looking down,
the sun was stopped with Word,
the cities were destroyed with Word.

An eagle did not raise its wings,
stars huddled in horror around the moon,
when, like a rose-colored flame,
Word floated by above

The final stanza of the poem reveals how destructive human beings could be:

We set as its limits
miserable bounds of existence,
and like bees in a deserted hive
dead words stink.

I would like to take Gumilev's point a step further: foul-smelling words are the words that are not quite dead. The words of organized lies – of propaganda and disinformation – have a modicum of truth to them, and this makes them especially dangerous. Dante's Geryon is a monster because he combines parts of actual animals: the body of a snake, a scorpion's forked tail, the hairy paws of a lion, and a benign face of a just man. It is necessary, then, to make Gumilev's term a little more specific; the foul smell comes from *undead* words.

The undead words are not empty words, but they are also not meant to persuade by making me change my mind; at least not any longer in our so-called postmodern age. The undead words target my humanity: they confuse, disorient, and make me lose heart. They are cynical, and try to mold me in their image. They make the ideals of humanism, trust, and understanding look ridiculous.

Undead words refuse the benefit of the doubt; they deride openness toward the other, including the other who I am, or could become. They cling to me, claiming to protect, but only isolate me from others; they immobilize me in one, homogeneous identity. The undead words try to break me; they cut the threads of trust that connect me to others, and that could support me in creating a complex self.

When several decades ago Arendt was analyzing the mechanisms of Nazi and Soviet propaganda, she pointed out that, unlike the "traditional" lies that developed elaborate structures meant to be a substitute for reality, the "modern" lies try to destroy truth.⁷ One could expand Arendt's idea: if the classical lies aim to conceal truth, and modern lies attempt to destroy it, then the "postmodern" lies target the self and the certainty of its thinking. Their goal is to forestall my attempt to understand or make sense of the world; to distinguish truth from lies.⁸ The undead words of the twenty-first century use liberatory theories and practices to bully me into believing in nothing. I must resist internalizing their nihilism – the feeling that I have nothing to say, that I am powerless; that there is no "I" capable of speech. I must resist the temptation to preemptively silence myself. "Nothing is true" is *the* truth claim of postmodern propaganda.

7) Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 252–53.

8) Ibid., 253.

The Tyrannical Side of Truth

Telling truth is difficult because it requires withstanding the violence of undead words. It is even more difficult because of two other obstacles, this time located on “the side of truth”: truth is opaque and has tyrannical tendencies.⁹ The Greek *turannos* refers to an absolute ruler, unlimited by law or constitution, who might or might not be despotic (of course, the odds are against a *turannos* who does not become a tyrant). No law is “above” truth, so it is only “natural” for truth to have despotic tendencies. Truth’s equally “natural” opacity, which stands in the way of understanding, also prevents truth from becoming tyrannical, especially if it is buttressed by art.

The despotic tendencies of truth are palpable both in Plato’s dialogues, especially *The Republic*, and in Plato’s encounter with Dionysius II, a tyrant of Syracuse. In his writings, Plato resists truth’s tyrannical temptation by using the literary form of dialogue, incorporating riddles and paradoxes, and bringing out Socrates’ comic side.¹⁰ Plato’s encounter with an actual *turannos* seems to have been much less successful.

Axioms and postulates are despotic. Consider the central ontological claim of Parmenides’ *Poem*: being “is, and is not possible not to be,” or Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction: “It is impossible for the same thing at the same time to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same respect.”¹¹ Aristotle notes: I cannot make sense, or speak well if I refuse this *arche* of all other axioms. He points out that I will have to remain silent, becoming no more than a plant.¹² It is impossible to even begin disputing these truths. Factual truth too insists on being “acknowledged and precludes debate.”¹³ It does not leave space for the kind of conversations, in which all of the interlocutors are equally open to hearing and learning from each other. When it comes to truth, there is no in-between, no other side to it. Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. I, who know this, also know that this truth is non-negotiable. “Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies.”¹⁴ Truth has the face of a lie because, rooted in certainty, it demands to be recognized for what it is.

Truth leaves me no room for deliberation, no space to “make up my mind.” The unnamed goddess in Parmenides’ *Poem* declares: “it has been decided,” there is only being.¹⁵ I can repeat a truth, commit it to memory, fail to understand it, but I am not free to decide about it, and in this sense I am not free to think about it. This is truth’s natural weakness. Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, and then again in 2022. The Russian army has been committing despicable war crimes in Ukraine. These truths do not leave room for debate. They demand at the minimum: recognition, and, ultimately, action.

9) Arendt points out that truth “carries within itself an element of coercion,” see *ibid.*, 239, see also 240.

10) See my essay on Plato’s *Republic*: Sushytska, “On the non-Rivalry.”

11) Parmenides, Fragment B2, in Kingsley, *Reality*, 60; and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV. 3, 1005b20. Parmenides’ work is sometimes known under the title “On Nature.” This title is most likely not authentic, and certainly misleading. The poem was written in hexameter verse, and only fragments of it survive.

12) See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV. 4, 1006a15.

13) Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 241. Arendt distinguishes between philosophical and factual truth while acknowledging that this distinction is problematic and perhaps even provisional. I think that this distinction can be useful, but, ultimately, every factual truth relies on philosophical truth.

14) Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 241.

15) See Parmenides, B8, 15–16.

The Many Ruses of Propaganda

Propaganda is much more obliging than truth. It looks “smart”: “Since the liar is free to fashion his ‘facts’ to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were, since the element of unexpectedness – one of the outstanding characteristics of all events – has mercifully disappeared.”¹⁶ In this quote Arendt exposes a key quality that makes the modern lie so effective. It proposes a narrative that is much less complex, and requires significantly less effort and commitment from its audience. Lies have fewer rough edges, or fewer edges that seem rough. It requires much less mental energy and imagination to accept that others are automata (because all I can see are their hats and the coats)¹⁷ or reptilians, than trying – and perhaps never succeeding – to understand the complexities of an other’s or my own self. To take a simpler example, Russia’s account of Ukrainian identity is false precisely because it is significantly less complex than Ukraine’s account of itself.¹⁸

A modern lie is more easily digestible and more comforting than truth. Postmodern lies appreciate this simplicity and likability, but also do not shy away from inconsistencies. They are inclusive and welcome “diversity.” Alongside the more “logical” modern propaganda, they promote contradictions and logical fallacies. This makes the undead words of today much more effective – they have something for everyone. They do not waste time on trying to convince, but tap into the pre-existing fears and prejudices. If you consider yourself an anti-Nazi, Russian propaganda tells you that Russia is fighting Nazis in Ukraine. If you are a proponent of Nazi ideology, you hear from the Russian media that the goal of the Russian army is to eliminate a Jewish conspiracy in Ukraine. Then another “narrative,” meant to appeal to a wider audience, is added (without any attempt to take down the previous ones): in Ukraine, Russia is fighting Satan.

The postmodern lies often gain credibility by emphasizing that they do not aspire to have the status of truth. Pomerantsev notes about Russia circa 2015: “the lies are told so often that after a while you find yourself nodding because it’s hard to get your head around the idea that they are lying quite so much and quite so brazenly – and at some level you feel that if Ostankino [the main, Kremlin-run TV channel] can lie so much and get away with it, doesn’t that mean they have the real power, the power to define what is true and what isn’t?”¹⁹ These organized lies are backed up by considerable power and resources – by wealth of oligarchs, but also by criminal structures that in some cases have merged with governments. Russia is a splendid example of this.

Using the “knowledge” accumulated in torture chambers by the KGB and its predecessors, the organized lies of today aim to destroy our ability to make sense of the world. Stanislav Aseyev’s *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street* attests to this. Having spent two and a half years (2015–2017) in a concentration camp overseen by the Federal Security Bureau of the Russian Federation (KGB’s successor), in the Russian-controlled city of Donetsk, Aseyev describes how extreme physical and psychological torture is used to destroy one’s humanity and the sense of self. The guards subject political prisoners to torture and humiliation for no apparent reason (sometimes only because they sent one pro-Ukrainian message to their family members), and the guard’s actions are entirely unpredictable. They can come at any point of day or night to drag their next random victim to the

16) Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 251.

17) See for example Descartes, “Second Meditation.”

18) Timothy Snyder notes that, “Ukrainian national rhetoric is less coherent than Putin’s imperialism.” See Snyder, “The War in Ukraine.”

19) Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True*, 230–31.

torture chamber.²⁰ The absurdity of suffering destroys human beings by preventing them from making sense of what is happening to them. The lack of an explanation, and the impossibility of establishing logical connections between events incapacitates the self, turns one into an object, or a piece of meat. I either plunge into the nothingness of silence-*movchannia*, or scream, overcome with equally destructive hatred.

Russia is using the same strategy to dehumanize the entire population of Ukraine through senseless and unpredictable bombardments of Ukrainian cities. As I am writing this, the rubble of a high-rise apartment building in Dnipro is being cleared, and the number of the dead and wounded is rising. In a video from the scene of this war crime one can hear a woman screaming from under the rubble.

Several decades ago, Arendt pointed out that organized lies aim to destroy “the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world.”²¹ Since then, the technological advances have perfected some of propaganda’s methods. A sign of their success is cynicism: “an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established.”²² If truth has tyrannical tendencies, postmodern lies force one to choose non-being.

Truth and Art

Truth is coercive, but also opaque.²³ This is why a truthful account is more complex than a lie. Ultimately, truth is opaque because thinking is not identical to being. Truth is also opaque because you are not transparent to me, and moreover, I am not identical or transparent to myself. The non-transparency of truth means that it cannot be communicated or transmitted directly. I can tell you (or myself) that if A then B, and if B then C, but unless you (and I) are thinking, you (and I) would not know that if A then C, or even that if A then B. We might repeat it, commit it to memory, and yet not understand it. The narrator of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* did not understand that his grandmother died until many years after her funeral. He suddenly comes to know the truth of her death while tying his shoelaces.

To make it more likely that you and I might recognize a truth, its opacity needs to be exaggerated: truth must be made obscure in a way that sets off the process of thinking. To achieve this effect Heraclitus used the literary form of paradox, and Plato – dialogue. Mamardashvili called the structures that help one think “artificial organs.” I can attach these devices created by others to my own self, and through them expand the range and the depth of my sensibility and understanding.²⁴ Mamardashvili’s examples of artificial organs include novels, paintings, and architectural forms (for instance, the dome), but also institutions such as the *agora*, which enables and cultivates civil society. The creation of these structures requires considerable effort, and might take a lifetime. The work that goes into their creation makes me more human, as does the effort that I must exert to read a novel, or to see an artwork. In other words, by making a given structure a part of myself – by connecting it to my mind and my body – I am able to see or feel the world in a new way. I can now see the beauty of dilapidated factories and decrepit houses because Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* expanded my concept of beauty and multiplied the ways in which I see the world.

20) Aseyev, “*Svitlyi Shliakh*,” 255–56.

21) Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 257.

22) Ibid.

23) “Rational truth enlightens human understanding, and factual truth must inform opinions, but these truths, though they are never obscure, are not transparent either.” Ibid., 242.

24) See Slaughter and Sushytska, “Introduction,” 17–52.

Artificial organs help me understand something that is difficult to understand by stretching the brief moment of an encounter with truth. They enlarge the time and space of this encounter; they lure me into becoming more open to a truth by way of obscuring truth's forbidding frankness. Art creates space for a decision, and allows me to decide for myself what has already been decided. It allows me to imagine the horror of Russia's crimes against Ukrainian civilians by transporting – *meta pherein* – me across the difference between myself and the young woman crying amidst the rubble of what was moments ago her apartment in Dnipro. It allows me to tell and understand something that, I hope, I will never have to experience directly, but that I do need to know in order to be human: the truth about Russia, the truth about war, the truth about human indifference and also human resilience. Metaphor is another formal device that helps a truth to be heard. It thrusts two unlike things against each other in order to induce a spark of understanding. Artificial organs do not guarantee understanding: metaphors become platitudes, Van Gogh's paintings turn into kitsch, and Plato's complex dialogues are reduced to slogans. Still, truth's natural opaqueness supported by art provides a certain protection against the living dead of propaganda.

A Decision That Has Been Made

A recent study of social media users who have not fallen prey to propaganda and disinformation revealed that this otherwise vastly diverse group of people shared one common characteristic: they “had been voracious readers from a young age.”²⁵ Moreover, it was not “factual material” that they have been reading, “but fiction, novels, poetry.”²⁶ These individuals, the study explains, developed the ability to *imagine* another reality and establish an emotional connection with it.

Arendt would not have found this surprising – one of the key claims in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* is that imagination allows me to test my opinions and develop my understanding. This means, however, that to imagine another reality I must think, and not merely or not primarily, rely on empathy. Arendt calls this process “enlarged thinking”: “The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinions.”²⁷ Such enlargement of thinking can happen in a classroom, during a public lecture or a forum, but I would like to suggest that art is more effective than other kinds of artificial organs in helping us imagine the other's standpoint. A well-told story helps me to transport myself – *meta-pherein* – across the difference that separates us. It gives me access to a situation, in which I might have never found myself, or would have never willingly occupied. An artwork can seduce me into the process of thinking because it does not insist that it is giving me access to truth. Frequently, it does the exact opposite – it flaunts its fictitious nature.

“We have to keep with closed lips truth that has the face of a lie,” insists the narrator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but a few lines after this striking statement declares: “but here I cannot be silent.”²⁸ He then swears to the reader *by the lines of his comedy* that he will tell us the truth: he saw Geryon, the lion-snake-scorpion-man, whose stench fills the entire world.²⁹ Soon after, this the monster of lies, transports – *meta pherein* – him and

25) Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda*, 195.

26) Ibid.

27) Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 241. See also Arendt, *Kant's Political Philosophy*.

28) Dante, *Inferno* XVI, 127.

29) Dante writes: “e per le note / di questa comedia, lettore, ti giuro ... ch'i' vidi.” Ibid., XVI, 127–30. “Ecco colei che tutto 'l mondo appuzza!” Ibid., XII, 1–3.

Virgil to the lower circles of Inferno. Dante takes us closer to truth by creating a fiction. He uses literature to corroborate the truthfulness of his words. What is more, he writes this work in the “vulgar” language of the marketplace. Paradoxically, this fabulous creature brings me closer to truth by opening a space for thinking, and therefore for my own decision about a truth.

Parmenides’ *Poem* helps explain in what sense one can make a decision about something that has been decided, that is, about a truth. It is not insignificant that Parmenides presents key ontological and epistemological truths in a text written in hexameter that features several mythological characters, and is an account of a journey. In other words, he uses the literary form of epic poetry to convey philosophical and scientific truths. This is one of the ways in which he creates a certain distance between me and the truth claims that are made in his text. Moreover, the fragments of the *Poem* that have reached our times are for the most part words of an unnamed goddess. She announces at the end of the first fragment that she will do “the talking,” and says that it is up to the *Poem*’s narrator to “carry away my words once you have heard them.”³⁰ In other words, the goddess acknowledges the distance between the one who speaks truth and the one who might or might not hear it. She also suggests that her audience will need to make a decision as to her words: it is up to us to understand them.

In the longest extant fragment, the goddess notes that the most serious problem faced by us, mortals, is that we think there is a decision to be made when it comes to being:

The decision about these matters consists in this:
is, or is not. But it has been decided, as is necessary,
to leave the one unthinkable, unnameable, for it is not a true
route, to (let) the other happen and authentically be.³¹

The goddess criticizes us, “twin-headed” mortals, for thinking that there are two paths when it comes to being, or that there is “the other hand” when it comes to truth.

Here is another way to think about this: it takes an immortal to see that a crossroads of being is an illusion; that there is only one way forward.³² To us “twin-heads,” this becomes clear only in retrospect. Only once we make a decision, and only if we make it in favor of being, do we realize that we could not have chosen anything else. Afterward, it will become obvious – both clear and distinct – that there was only one way forward. This will be afterward; but for now, works of art open up space and time for a decision. They create the illusion of a crossroads so that we might choose the only path – the road of being. Even if this might cost us our lives.

If truth has the face of a lie, and the monster of falsehood has “the benign face of a just man,”³³ then truth must make an effort to look less like a lie. It can do it through the artifice of art – by creating a beautiful form for words, a structure that can withstand strong winds and the heavy rain of propaganda (Proust compared his novel to a cathedral). I must help truth take a step back from itself, opening up a space for a decision that has been made. It is my responsibility to make it easier for you to understand me – my responsibility to truth.

30) Parmenides, Fragment B2, 1–2; in Kingsley, *Reality*, 60.

31) Parmenides, Fragment B8, 15b–18. This translation, slightly adjusted by me, is by Manchester, *The Syntax of Time*, 171–73.

32) “What I will tell you is which roads of inquiry,/and which roads alone, exist for thinking./The one route, that is, and is not possible not to be,/is the way of Persuasion; for Persuasion is/Truth’s attendant. And as for the other,/that is not, and is necessary not to be:/this, I/can tell you, is a path from which no news/returns. For there is no way you can recognize/what is not – there is no traveling that path – /or tell anything about it.” Parmenides, Fragment B2; in Kingsley, *Reality*, 60.

33) “La faccia sua era faccia d’ uom giusto,/tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle,/e d’un serpente tutto l’altro fusto;/due branche avea pilose insin l’ascelle;/lo dosso e ’l petto e ambedue le coste/dipinti avea di nodi e di rotelle.” Dante, *Inferno* XII, 10–11.

Postscript

Sorrows, but also joy and bliss, “become bearable and meaningful” only when we “can talk about them and tell them as a story,” writes Arendt.³⁴ Aseyev’s story makes meaningful the absurd and senseless suffering – his own and that of so many other people – in an FSB concentration camp that still exists to this very day. His book makes this suffering meaningful by revealing its meaninglessness.

Toward the end of the book Aseyev recounts the words of a fellow prisoner: anybody who was not imprisoned with them cannot understand “the feeling that this door can open at any moment and you will be dragged nobody knows where and for what purpose.”³⁵ I hope that I will never understand this feeling, and yet, after reading this book it is absolutely clear to me that this prison must be wiped off the face of the earth.

34) Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 262.

35) Aseyev, “*Svitlyi Shliakh*,” 380.

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