

Patrick Deane
President and Vice-Chancellor, McMaster University
Convocation Address, Fall 2016

“Art of the Lie” is the title of a recent essay in *The Economist*, one which poses the question, “Politicians have always lied. Does it matter if they leave the truth behind entirely?”¹ The question takes us back to the nineteenth-century Irish writer Oscar Wilde, who in a famous essay called “The Decay of Lying” (1889) criticized politicians for not being good enough liars—precisely because they lacked the “superb irresponsibility, . . . [the] natural disdain of proof of any kind” that characterizes “the true liar.”² And the true liar in Wilde’s tongue-in-cheek view is the consummate artist, the progressive undermining of fact and proof an indication that “a new Renaissance in Art” is imminent.

These are the sentiments that defined a late Victorian cultural movement known as Aestheticism, one in which the imagination and its works were argued to be superior to anything discoverable in nature or amenable to empirical inquiry. Thus, writes Wilde, “if a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once.” The lies of politicians—at least those that do not “leave the truth behind entirely”—are not worth the telling and probably worse in his view than “dull fact.”

To understand the point of Wilde’s witty argument in “The Decay of Lying,” you need to know something of the time in which he was writing, and in particular the extent to which in the late 1800s, with the institutionalization of statistics, the derivation of systematic knowledge from descriptions of observed particulars was becoming the dominant epistemology. Wilde’s essay—and indeed his entire career—must be understood as a reaction—always satirical—against an emerging world order in which the “fact,” particularly as conceived in quantifiable and observable terms, was becoming dominant. It was, in other words, a protest against the kind of world-view which today we take for granted.

I’d like to go back to the question posed by *The Economist* and think about recent history, in which political and policy issues have been increasingly decided with apparent indifference to considerations of truth or fact. I speak about “recent” history, and of course you will all be thinking about last week’s presidential election in the United States; but that was part of a trend identified as early as 2004, when Ralph Keyes published a book entitled *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. In 2010 David Roberts³ coined the term “post-truth politics” to identify an approach to political debate in which there is an appeal to emotion altogether disconnected from fact or evidence, an approach which vitiates

¹ 10 September 2016

² <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/decay.html>

³ Blog post, *Grist*, 1 April 2010.

traditional debate entirely by dismissing the truth as of secondary importance at best, and as irrelevant at worst.

This past August, William Davies,⁴ writing in the pages of the *New York Times*, declared finally that “We have entered an age of post-truth politics.” And then just yesterday came the news that the Oxford Dictionary has proclaimed “post-truth” the word of the year—use of the term having increased by 2000 per cent in 2016 as compared to the previous year.⁵ Lest we are tempted to think the descent into “post-truth” is an exclusively American phenomenon, Davies finds examples in the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom and in political controversy elsewhere—as in the surprising political traction achieved by climate change deniers, for example.

If Davies is to be believed, then, Oscar Wilde has had his wish and political life in this second decade of the Twenty-First Century has become art: instead of taking its cue from the “dull facts” of life as they are lived and experienced, politics bends the facts to its will in a spirit of fearlessness and (as Wilde memorably put it) “superb irresponsibility.” The period in which Wilde wrote is known as the Decadence, and it is perhaps helpful to think of our contemporary “post-truth” world as a New Decadence—like its nineteenth-century precursor not only indifferent to empirical fact but also contemptuous of the ethical and moral constraints that accrue when we acknowledge the existence of truths over and beyond ourselves and our self-serving desires.

Nineteenth-century aestheticism was not, nor ever could have been, a platform for politics or a basis for social order—not surprisingly, of course, because it was in essence an ironic repudiation of both those things. Oscar Wilde discovered this to his cost when in 1895 he found himself prosecuted and convicted for his homosexuality, a victim of social intolerance and bigotry wedded to a very real socio-political structure with the authority to enforce its beliefs.

Wilde was an artist, not a politician, and his comments on politicians were satire of the sort today we associate with John Oliver and Samantha Bee. To be an artist he had to be free of mundane constraints—hence his rhetorical advocacy of the lie; but paradoxically in his liberated sexuality and the extravagance of his lifestyle, he lived his truth. In his famous novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* he explored the destructive alternative—what it might mean to live a lie, hidden behind a false front. But for living his truth, “the love that dare not speak its name,” he spent two years in Reading Gaol. One lesson to be learned is that none of us lives entirely in the world of fact or the world of imagination, and what we imagine—our lying, if you like—will almost always have consequences in fact.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html?&r=0>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>

What are your responsibilities in this context? And why is that an important question to ask at a university convocation?

The answer is simple, and in providing it I will turn to a theme explored nowhere as positively and effectively as in the United States, where a long tradition exists of seeing education as *the* fundamental and indispensable building block for democracy. From the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University this week there came a condemnation of the “disregard for facts and truth” evident in the election, and a call for universities to “seize this moment in the nation’s history to reflect on their role in strengthening American democracy. That reflection would include honest introspection and an examination of political learning, discourse, and action during the election, as well as a look at the underlying campus climate for democratic learning.”⁶ While it emerges from the American academy and this particular moment in history, the reminder that as educated citizens we should assume responsibility for the quality of our own democracy should be heeded everywhere.

Even when lying is the object of our study, as in disciplines like my own where works of the imagination stand front and centre, what we do at university is seek the facts—however we would define them—and try to apprehend truth. Even when our enquiries point to the conclusion that the truth is unknowable, meaning perpetually deferred, or the human condition hopelessly solipsistic, we seek a deeper understanding of those very issues; we enquire into them as in the natural sciences we enquire into phenomena that stand outside ourselves, our minds and imaginations.

Facts are neither dull nor absolute, because when interrogated by the mind they lead to new understandings. It is that process, the rigorous weighing of evidence and questioning of received wisdom, which opens the way to truth. For researchers the truth is always provisional, subject to revision as new evidence is amassed and existing evidence analyzed in new ways. And of course lie and fact come together in the “felt” truth of art, music or literature.

As members of this community of scholars we can and do accept that the truth is complex, relative and provisional. It is a various, changeable, chameleon of a thing that we would likely all define differently. But that does not mean the fruits of our studies and research are no better than lies—although that is exactly what is being asserted in the new “post-truth” world. Whatever our disciplines, we are all united in our work by the *desire to understand*, and the products of that desire will advance society by provoking deeper questions. “Post-truth” utterances, on the other hand, are intended to discourage the spirit of inquiry. The distinction is critical for all of us and for the good of our society.

⁶ “Election Reflections from Nancy Thomas, IDHE Director,” <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/idhe/>.

That is the lesson and the habit that I hope you will take with you as you leave McMaster. Facts and evidence are important, not merely as the end of our labour, but as the beginning of all work that matters. No matter what the fashion of the age may be, your responsibility is to serve as ambassadors for truth, carrying with you the tools for understanding our world and the hope—which underpins everything we do in the university—that rational and creative thought can ultimately make it a better place.