

THE REINVENTION OF TRUTH
Part I
R E I N V E N T R U T H
by JOAN RETALLACK

I'm interested in how a perception of truth can compose conceptual coordinates one thinks one must or should live by. A poetic approach admits certain investigative principles that wouldn't fit if I were attempting a strictly historical or philosophical or philological study.

Rule one: do not enclose any key terms—e.g., “truth”—in quotes, except when referring to them as words. This eliminates the following kind of construction: The “truth” as I “know” it is the propositional “manifestation” of the “real.”

Rule two: notice and follow lettristic swerves. For instance, if one applies a gratuitous (though historically precedented¹) principle of economy by adjusting the redundancy of “t”s and closing the space in the phrase “reinvent truth,” rendering it “reinventruth,” there will be a magnification of semantic consequences.

The word “ruth,” familiar now as a proper name, or enjambed with the suffix “less,” is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary as 1) compassion or pity for another, 2) Sorrow or misery about one's own misdeeds or flaws. These denotations aren't labeled archaic though they've been lost to current usage. That “truth” contains “ruth” is nice though the implications are neither rigorous nor obvious.

a) Calculating Losses

While in the computer room of a research institution in Rome last spring, I came across a page left in a printer. In the upper left hand corner is:

8 CUTHBERT, COUNTING OUR LOSSES

This formula appears at the top of the page:

$$= \frac{(n-k_1)(n-k_2)\dots(n-k_y)}{n^y}$$

According to Cuthbert, “If we have a formula for the probability that any given original piece is not known to us, then we can use the principle of expected value (discussed above) to estimate how many pieces we would expect to be missing today, given the manuscripts we have and the number of pieces there once were in the trecento. (Note though that the probability of x not appearing in any MS, and the expected number of such pieces, each depends on n , the original number of pieces in the trecento—which is

¹ Scarcity of ink and paper led early scribes to omit unnecessary letters and spaces.

exactly what we are trying to find in the first place! This obstacle will be worked out soon.)”

I’ll try to apply this formula to the loss of *ruth*. It may seem unnecessary to go to such trouble since the prior presence of *ruth* is well documented in commonly available dictionaries. But Cuthbert’s formula, as I understand it, is designed to detect loss in the present state of the text and hence the culture from which the piece is missing, along with the scope of the prior context, now beyond our ken. Any text may appear complete, even though a great deal may be missing. I would not have noticed the absence of *ruth* had I not come to it via the lettristic route outlined above.

Given my incomplete access to Cuthbert’s manuscript, I don’t understand the formula well enough to use it with full confidence. However Cuthbert does go on to say that the application of the formula amounts to “computer-assisted ‘trial and error’” in order to arrive at the value of *n* which comes closest to solving the equation, i.e., the value that comes closest to making the left side of the equation zero. This is something I can try. I’ll start by working only on the left (the zero side) of the equation.

b) _____ =
Let (_____) = _____

Everything that follows can be read as contained in those empty parentheses above.

(After leaving Rome, I stayed in a small apartment in Venice where I found myself writing this:

The truth of the empire is not in the empire, which is full of lies, but radiates toward its terminus in the confrontation with the object of its lust—the dreaded other.

Is this true or does it just sound true? ((It certainly sounds familiar.)) Beware of phantom eloquence; easy eloquence.

The truth of the empire is everywhere in the empire but not evident to those who live in it. It must be exported to become visible.

This is unfortunately an unusable truth, approaching truism. No need to remember it. ((See d) Mnemonic Devices below.))

The incomprehensibility of what has been repressed, oppressed, conquered, occupied, annexed (but never absorbed) is unrecognizable and thus always perfectly understood.

There’s a lot more of this in the Venice notebook. How much of it comes from being in Venice; how much from having seen the British Raj over and over again on Masterpiece Theater; how much from reading *Invisible Cities* too many times; how much from experiencing the ruthlessness of America day in, day out as an increasingly numbing wound, or seeing it from the eyes of non-Americans now, when it has escalated so

astonishingly. And/but, how can it be so astonishing? What is the loss that makes this seem so new?

The loss of energy to act comes from the loss of a sense of what to do—the loss of certainty (not bad) without an equally compelling strategy for fighting the misery of injustice. Is this the loss of *ruth*? The loss of a form of life that connected *ruth* with the noticing of certain sensations? This and possibly more, not apparent at this time, more missing pieces, more unassigned values of x . Or, is it chiefly about loss; might it not be about something that has not yet come into existence—the province of poetry according to Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*? What's needed to determine the location of x —avant-garde poetry? Ethical philosophy? Random linguistic mutation?)

c) Meanwhile

Meanwhile, I'm experiencing computer-generated trial and error on my email screen in Rome, Geneva, Venice and Frankfurt as I travel, working in ways I can't at home. The spam that gets past my blocker is doing so via random language generators. I've given up on frustration. I'm starting to enjoy it, partly because the randomized words are programmed to disappear shortly after the body of a message is opened. That function lends it aesthetic properties I value—the improbable glimpse, the fluid ephemeral, surprise in the midst of infernally closed systems, etc. It's engaging me just as I've argued avant-garde art should—activating the making of meaning despite better judgement.

Here are some samples from a single morning, barely captured before they morph into adds for gold watches, stock funds and sexual apparatus:

nicholls, he had nearly, nicholls, he had nearly, nicholls, he had nearly. nicholls, he had nearly, nicholls, he had nearly.

gedanken bullyboy ford digress polymorphic conveyance adhere april composition cane exponential tinge equipping different dilatory tot boom christie condense eradicate chippendale plot

frightful carrot grimaldi maid disembowel gains lymph cos duopolist innumerable nicosia decorticate circumvent indefinable monarchic lift sarcoma fredericton micron irrecoverable collusion rectifier

celeste calligraph perusal byway combinate hereinafter Jewell gall midweek flanders alleviate nucleotide coachmen sip stan uptrend considerate counterattack

navajo backboard installment dinah carve dustbin bone johnston durer team candle cocoon squeaky cretin placenta volt whereabouts aggravate pipeline idyll parapsychology said tarpaper rogue diode castle bomb nameable activism roundhead manama angelica

sepia tenacity alchemy devil hester nautical econometrica chou almost syrup percept
frostbite cutler lavish puddingstone frightful weld carnival enigma reave rousseau
withstand tuttle melodious triassic dissident absorptive catsup turban turnout duluth
commandant curtsey seidel conferred expensive mediocrity poke

activism buzzy dreadful banshee counterargument lever chippendale fragrant schiller
isotope sociable puffy polariscope clothesman alpine contestant creepy yeats selena
brookline kick baudelaire balboa palm mercury compliment bindweed masonic coliform
diaphanous victoria estes cinematic macroscopic transfuse chipboard

There is for the moment a limitless supply of this. (Collect it while you can.) It's difficult to select from the wealth of *breathy transgression*. One *disposable arabesque* after another caught afloat in the *caveman eulerian aorta* of the wwweb. It has it all. Hi-lo references, wit, undercurrents of anger and critique, stunning economy—no unnecessary grammatical scaffolds, no traffic directing articles, pronouns, prepositions, gerunds, verbs. Under a peculiar surface tension it teems with implications, even in its *pyramid cadet asceticism*. It almost seems to make the contemporary avant-garde poet redundant. These dissociative-associative logics come from sources that exceed any single neural network while engaging each and any. I'm led to rethink the role of poetry in a socio-politically troubled society, in a world full of catastrophe and despair. Did it really once seem to be the cure?

d) Mnemonic Devices

Everyone knows the story of Simonides, the poet who met with enormous gratitude because he could identify the remains of his dead audience when the roof of the dining hall collapsed in the middle of his recitation. They were all crushed beyond recognition. (Simonides had by chance been called outside just a moment before the tragedy occurred.) He's credited with the invention of mnemonics because this terrible drama brought fame to his technique of structuring a performance by connecting its parts to faces and their locations in the room. Mnemonics appears to be a way of preventing rather than calculating losses.

Two students (Daniel Gindikin and Pierre Ponce) in the Natural Languages Processing Program at Stanford University developed a way of encoding material in language taken from Jane Austen novels and three other textual sources—the Bible, Shakespeare, and the Wall Street Journal.)² Here's a mnemonic for the speed of light:

² "Automatic Mnemonic Device Generation," <http://nlp.stanford.edu/courses/cs224n/2004/GindikinReport224n.doc>

2 9 9, 7 9 2, 4 5 8 m / s

He certainly presented himself incapable of such cruel behavior. (Austen)

Here are two other examples, the first for the value of π :

3 1 4 1 5 9 2 6 5 3

and I know , these daughters of Canaan shall see

the second for quiescence:

Quickness Us Into Everlasting Stillness

What would be the ideal mnemonic for remembering *ruth*? This question poses a problem not connected to the examples above, or for something like Kings Play Chess On Fiber Glass Stools (Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species). They all have scientific significance that the “we” of institutionalized society deems worth remembering. In fact, the solution to what one might think of as lost realizations, e.g., of how people come to brutalize and kill one another, doesn’t seem to depend on memory so much as on finding other ways of being. I’m not ruthless because I’ve forgotten what *ruth* means.

If language contains only those things some we or another cares to notice, distinctions some we or another cares to make, its truth is the truth of that fact alone. Since ruth has become regrettably less noticeable in our culture, all the mnemonics I tried turned out to be indistinguishable from slogans. Slogans attempt the impossible: to create the context simultaneously with the exhortation:

Ragged Urchins Trust Hate
Reality Upstages Tiptoeing Honeysuckers
Real Understanding Triggers Hope
Relishing Understanding Trumps Hitler
Realistic Undertakings Trump Hegel (Heidegger, Husserl, etc.)
Rapacity Urges Treacherous Handshakes
Rescuing Underclasses Tackles Hopelessness

Am I trying to catapult myself back into faith in strange poeties?

Mid-this, or some other this, message from new hire in Language & Thinking Program appears on screen:

I'm sorry I can't come to your party on the 17th I've gotta drive the dog and the orchids cross-country.

This can't end here but for the moment does.

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