

Doubt vs. Lies in Malcolm Bradbury's *Doctor Criminale*

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The truth about lying is that there is no single generally accepted definition of the notion even if one of them is commonly quoted. It belongs to Arnold Isenberg, a philosopher. In *Deontology and the Ethics of Lying* (1973) he claims that “a lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it” (Isenberg 248). In Isenberg’s definition the addressee is not specified, so James E. Mahon, author of the article on lying and deception in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, restates it as follows: “To lie is to make a believed-false statement to another person with the intention that the other person believe that statement to be true” (Mahon).

While theorists are working hard on a more clear-cut and reliable definition (and there is a growing literature on this subject),¹ we will use Mahon’s which he labelled “traditional.” It highlights four conditions for lying, thus helping to distinguish what can be called a lie from what is not a lie. The first one—the so called “statement condition”—requires a person to make a statement. The second one—defined as the “untruthfulness condition”—demands that the statement be untruthful. The third one—the “addressee condition”—presupposes that the statement is targeted at another person. And the final one—the so called “intention to deceive the addressee condition”—means that the person intends another person to believe that the untruthful statement is true (Mahon). Only by fulfilling all four conditions can lying be identified as such.

In *Doctor Criminale* (1992) by Malcolm Bradbury lying is primarily and mostly associated with one of the two key protagonists, Doctor Bazlo Criminale—an academic and theoretician of international repute known as “the philosopher for our times” and a “media intellectual,” to borrow Olivier Mongin’s phrase, (“*un intellectuel médiatique*” [307, my translation]). The influence of this charismatic personality is evenly exercised in both the public and professional spheres; the man is warmly welcomed at diplomatic and ministerial receptions, he is even offered political positions at various stages of his career. For a long, chaotic period of time, known as post-war Europe, the age of the Cold War, and the fall of the Iron Curtain, he has been making statements, false statements in public and academic circles.

¹ E. g. Thomas Carson, “The Definition of Lying,” *Nous* 40 (2006): 284-306; Adam J. Arico & Don Fallis, “Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics: An Empirical Investigation of the Concept of Lying,” *Philosophical Psychology* Vol. 26, Issue 6 (2013): 790-816.

Accordingly, Bazlo's addressee is a large audience, people belonging to different generations and cultural backgrounds—the readers of his books (and he published quite a few pandering to every political culture), listening to him and watching him (he is permanently in the media) on television. Bazlo makes false statements about his past, explaining how he became what he is. He has also been lying to financial organizations since the time of the Iron Curtain, as someone who has been engaged in fraud on a pan-European and transatlantic scale. And now his life is no less tricky: with a Hungarian passport, an Austrian passport and a Swiss bank account, Bazlo is a man trusted everywhere who is involved in illegal transactions and collects Party funds. The reader becomes aware of Bazlo's ongoing lying somewhere in the middle of the novel.

So, we have the liar, his intention and the addressee. The missing element is condition number two in Mahon's terminology. According to "the untruthfulness condition," lying requires a person to make an "untruthful statement," a statement that he or she believes to be false. Bazlo hides everything from his past, and a lot of his present life is also kept in disguise. In order to fulfill this condition, Francis Jay, a young British journalist (and the novel's narrator), has to prove that Bazlo has been making untruthful statements. In other words, the act of detection is also the strategy used to fulfill the "untruthfulness condition." How does Francis achieve that? Through doubt, stemming from his original curiosity.

Doubt as a strategy to detect lies

In very general terms, doubt is an instrument of skeptical thinking. It is conceptualized as a practice "that constantly challenges the limits of representation" (Zerba i). In her book *Doubt and Skepticism in Antiquity and the Renaissance* (2012) Michelle Zerba takes the view that doubt "inhabits Western thought from very early on in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and gives rise to ways of thinking that are both part of the Western canon and critical of canonicity" (Zerba 5). As a cognitive practice, doubt may have various consequences—it can be aporetic, or it may provoke fear, or it can be fatal (we find one such example in *Othello* where the protagonist drifts from faith in Desdemona's love to doubt, which, because it is not overcome, leads to the murder). Doubt may also bring a sense of novelty or be encouraging. Bradbury's novel brings in another implementation, demonstrating that doubt can also lead to the detection of lies.

Francis Jay's doubt is three-dimensional: it is his character trait and life guidance—he calls himself "skeptical" and "doubting" (123). It is also a part of his educational background: he acquired a literary education at the University of Sussex in the mid-eighties, dubbed as the Age of Deconstruction (6). Although Francis did not embark on an academic career he clearly identifies himself as "the aspiring journo in the age of literary confusion" (7). Working as a journalist, he makes masterful use of the knowledge and skills in literary theory he acquired at

the university; it also helps him refine his individual artistic style of writing—self-defined as inquisitive, sarcastic, aphoristic, and doubting. In addition, Francis Jay is a person of his time and his skepticism, in the context of the intellectual thought of the 1980s and its postmodernist aestheticism, is reminiscent of John Barth's definition of postmodernism as engendered by modernism, cataclysm and skepticism (Barth 285).

We may also assume that the protagonist's doubt appears to correlate with the authorial skepticism, in particular with how Bradbury defines what it means to be a comic novelist: "Like most comic novelists, I take the novel extremely seriously. It is the best of all forms— open and personal, intelligent and inquiring. I value it for its skepticism, its irony and its play" (Harvey-Wood). Skepticism, irony and play are the virtues that Bradbury attributes to the genre of the comic novel.

Francis opts for doubt as his key strategy from the very first episode in the story of Bazlo Criminale. On receiving a task from a small TV production company, Nada Productions, to write for their one-hour feature within the series "The Great Thinkers of the Age of Glasnost" he, against the advice of the media-wise Lavinia and Ros, decides to make his own inquiry rather than take things for granted. His doubt is methodological, one may say Cartesian by essence and consequences" (Popkin and Stroll 63). As we know, in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes prefers doubt as a strategy to "recognize something certain," or "recognize for certain that there is no certainty" (Descartes 80). Francis scrupulously follows this pattern, bringing to light the true by discarding the uncertain or false.

On the one hand, in the time of "hysterical mediatization" (*médiatisation hystérique*), to borrow Mongin's term (Mongin 11), no one is more visible than Bazlo Criminale; on the other hand, little if anything is known about his real life until a verbal, not a visual person, as Francis calls himself repeatedly, begins his search for truth. For the reason that Bazlo's visibility is media-constructed, in order to find out the truth, Francis rejects media files and privileges his own empirical investigation. "Demediatization," so to speak, as a reverse process, is from now on implemented in an exciting, vibrant, detective story full of comic episodes that develops approximately in the middle of the novel with the speed of a released spring. The life story of the public figure of international and historical resonance is not only surrounded with an aura of mystery and secrecy but is also full of skeletons in the closet. Remarkably, the higher the level of scrutiny Francis brings to bear on the personality of Bazlo, the more obscure and enigmatic his figure actually becomes, and the more the journalist is faced with new mysteries—like Bazlo's age, origin, connections to the authorities. To his amusement, the text he has been deconstructing is full of gaps and lacunas. Therefore, to find an answer to the question of who Bazlo really is, where he was between the fifties and the eighties as well as who was around him, he opens up the Eastern European page of his investigation.

How successful is Francis in reading Bazlo as a text? He finds out that Criminale is a complex personality whose ambiguity is suggested by a variety of contexts: born in Bulgaria, he was a student when the country was “as the saying had it, ‘liberated to the Russians’ by Georgy Dimitrov”—“not the ideal place for a free and inquiring spirit” (22); later, he studied in Berlin, Vienna, Moscow, and in the United States. Paradoxically, the man was in great demand and highly accommodating on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Resembling Carlo Goldoni’s Truffaldino in *The Servant of Two Masters*, one week he is photographed with Shevardnadze at the Bolshoi and the next with Madonna at the Brown Derby. Francis’s inquisitive mind finds the clue to this ambiguity: “The Party people needed the West to be their bankers” (219), so Criminale was a connecting link between them. A form of consensus, as it were: while the Communist leaders had access to the Western banks and property, he had his freedom and his “charmed life” (223). And now, coming out of the old Marxist world, he feels completely comfortable in the capitalist world, and in that sense Bazlo Criminale is just one in a row of those “thinkers,” tainted intellectuals, who successfully managed to be on both sides of the fence. I briefly return to this issue further on in this study but I must now emphasize that, ironically, when the new time arrives after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he is welcomed in the West as an anti-Communist dissident.

As Francis meets more and more people, and collects evidence in different places in Europe, he gradually understands that Bazlo Criminale made his way through this time of chaos and terror thanks to deception, making pacts with Stalinism in the fifties and posing as a peacemaker, a linkman between the East and the West in the following decades.

A twenty-six-year-old man, Francis Jay learns about the complexity of a personality evolving in different political, sociocultural contexts in relation to his own character. Bradbury’s novel can, therefore, be read as belonging to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, displaying some of the key elements ascribed to this genre: the narrative charts the protagonist’s journey, both geographical and metaphorical, from youth to maturity when he, in his own words, has “grown up, [...] passed from deep smart youthful wisdom into a perfect adult innocence” (187), become “older, wiser” (231). Francis also learns a lesson from his own relationship with society. Consequently, his study of Bazlo’s nature has transformative effects for him personally in as much as he refines his own philosophy of life. How the young man benefited from this new wisdom is explained by his own moral imperative on the novel’s concluding page: “I would always be tolerant, skeptical, permissive, pragmatic, good-hearted, open, late liberal. I would also assume nothing is true or certain; no ideology, philosophy, sociology, theology any better than any other” (250). He continues:

Life for me would therefore be a spectacle, a shopping mall, an endless media show, in which everything—amusing or grotesque, erotic or repulsive, heroic or obscene, sentimental or shameful—is an acceptable world-view, and anything could happen.

There would be no great wisdom, and no great falsehood. A mule would be the equal of a great professor. Or so, I seem to remember, they say in Argentina. (250)

This philosophical rather than detective ending of Francis's search brings the reader to appreciate doubt as an effective strategy to escape the restrictive representations in the age of visual representation—earlier anticipated in Bazlo's own statements that “the image is a deception” and “celebrity is a public delusion” (172). Doubt is also presented as an antidote to any kind of dogmatism.

Is lying represented in the novel as morally wrong?

The last three sentences of the quote above proclaim ethical relativism, but does it mean that any judgmental statement regarding Bazlo Criminale is eliminated? In other words, as far as he is concerned, is lying understood as beyond ethical dimensions? Is it still morally right or wrong? In my opinion, even though Francis refrains from making affirmative statements about Bazlo Criminale in public, preferring to hide the truth about his lies from others, lying is nevertheless presented as morally wrong.

One has to admit that just like Francis is left bewildered, different theories of ethics treat lying differently. Basically, the way these theories answer the question “is it good to lie?” divides them into two major camps: consequentialists and deontologists. Consequentialists (aka utilitarians) estimate the rightness or wrongness of doing something by the consequences caused by the act; in other words, if telling a lie leads to a better result than telling the truth, then it is good to tell the lie. Deontologists, on the contrary, would argue that even if lying brings about better consequences, it is still morally wrong. The generally accepted moral law says: do not lie. A classical deontological approach is exemplified in Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative: “Act so that the maxim of thy will can always at the same time hold good as a principle of universal legislation” (Kant 30).

In his two short treatises *De Mendacio (On Lying)* and *Contra Mendacium (Against Lying)* St. Augustine, another prominent deontologist, holds that lying is wrong though it can be pardoned. However, this is a less widely known position of the bishop of Hippo who “is usually remembered for his austere condemnation and inflexible opposition towards any kind of lie” (Gramigna 447). Depending on how difficult it is to pardon, Augustine suggests an eightfold hierarchical classification of lies. His taxonomy may profitably be brought up at this point as it becomes a central point in Criminale's own strategy of self-justifying explanation of his past actions. Augustine wrote in *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Charity*: “To me it seems that every lie is a sin, but that it makes a great difference, with what intention and on what subjects a man lies” (96).

According to Remo Gramigna, Augustine considers that “at the kernel of the notion of lying lies the idea of intentionality” (Gramigna 446). In his taxonomy of lies, provided in *De Mendacio*, out of the eight degrees of culpability, the most relevant to Bazlo is the last one, that is, “a lie which is harmful to no one and beneficial to the extent that it protects someone from physical defilement” (87). Bazlo did not risk “physical defilement” but, just like many others, could have physically suffered from the repression of a totalitarian state. This is how he justifies himself to Francis: “Over there in those days we lived in a time when the only rule was to lie. By the wrong emotion, the wrong gesture, you betrayed yourself. But if you knew how to lie, if you supported the regime in public, you were allowed your thoughts in private. [...] We were a culture of cynics, we were corrupt and base, but it was the agreed reality” (239).

Bazlo acknowledges his lies and explains that for that very reason he is a survivor. Yet, granted Criminale was lying under serious threat, does it follow that he is in a morally strong position? He adopts a consequentialist approach but when it comes to responsibility he prefers to speak in the first-person plural—and not the first-person singular—thus making a shift in agency, from the personal to the collective. In Bazlo’s logic, had he not lied he would have been in danger whereas lying promised greater chances of survival. Was lying truly self-defense aimed to prevent irreversible harm? From an ethical point of view shared by deontologists, it is still a lie, but according to the classification of Augustine, it is a pardonable lie.

Putting the blame on the tough historical circumstances and political culture, Bazlo defines lying as “the only rule,” “the agreed reality.” What if lying is an ideological strategy that permeates the whole totalitarian society and those who do not accept this rule are put under pressure in one of many possible ways? It could be so but the fact that he keeps using the same strategy when the totalitarian regime is no longer in place subverts his own argument.

Yet if a lie is a shared collective entity, the responsibility is then ascribed to all the agents of “the agreed reality,” it is a shared or collective responsibility. The notion of *collective responsibility* is almost always a notion of *moral*, rather than purely *causal*, responsibility. According to Marion Smiley, such a responsibility

does not associate either causal responsibility or blameworthiness with discrete individuals or locate the source of moral responsibility in the free will of individual moral agents. Instead, it associates both causal responsibility and blameworthiness with groups and locates the source of moral responsibility in the collective actions taken by these groups understood as collective.” (Smiley)

Scholars argue whether it is possible for groups, as distinct from their members, to be guilty as moral agents? How can one distribute collective responsibility across individual members of a group in a particular context? Now I would like to dwell on another aspect of the question, namely the moral responsibility of individuals who belong to groups that are themselves

thought to be morally responsible for particular cases of harm, the intellectuals in the context of wars and totalitarian regimes. Can one, when dealing with intellectuals, replace an individual responsibility with a collective one?

Bazlo Criminale is an intellectual whose visibility in societal life has always been above average. The impact of public intellectuals is perceptible in any society—I will now touch upon this issue for two reasons: firstly, the text itself is very suggestive of this problem, and, secondly, it is the intention recognized by the author himself (Karpen).

Intellectuals: between collective and individual responsibility

In fact, Bazlo is just one of many intellectuals in the novel, all of them belonging to academia, to different countries and generations. Minor figures set aside, we have a corrupted Professor Doktor Otto Codicil and his young assistant, Gerstenbacker who dreams of replacing him one day; a financial swindler Sandor Hollo and his ally Hazy Ildiko; Professor Monza, who perfectly balances the West and the East, Europe and Asia, literature and power, and one may only guess in what way and at what expense. Intellectuals facing power, as the novel suggests, have several ways of doing so, unfortunately most of them tolerating deception.

In the text one also finds a number of historical examples of famous intellectuals whose reputation was tainted. Remarkably, they all relate to the twentieth century defined as “an age of brutality and unreason,” “an age of ideology,” “a century of intellectual terrorism” (29). While some, like James Joyce, chose “silence, exile and cunning,” there were “artists and intellectuals [that] had had strange flirtations with the mad ideological world” (29). Pound had played with Fascism, Heidegger with Nazism, Brecht with Stalinism, and Sartre with Marxism (29).

Gertla, once Bazlo’s wife, labels Bazlo and similar public figures intellectual “acrobats” and “liars” (202). A witness of his past fame, she knows that he keeps lying because it is the way for him to hide his shameful past, and how he became what he is now. He had his freedom, lived a charming life because he played by the rules and the secret agreements he had with the authorities, and at the expense of others, his survival being often conditional on the betrayal of other people. So not only did he survive but he also profited from the chaotic state of the second part of the twentieth century. When asked straightforwardly by Francis about his past compromises, Bazlo does not make a confession, but adopts a cynical approach. Even when the lie is detected, he is incapable of ferreting it out—it has become a part of his identity. So he almost automatically performs one of his “acrobatic tricks”—another gesture of self-justification—in a long monologue as to whether it is possible to elevate thought over circumstance. Though cornered by Francis, at the moment when it is inevitable to discard the disreputable past, he masterfully turns it into a sin of conscience.

Bazlo Criminale represents a historical type of intellectual. Critics have recognized in this character “a walking web of contradictions who embodies key aspects of contemporary history” and the novel as “an earnest attempt to illuminate the extraordinary historical complexities associated with *glasnost* and with the difficult emergence of a brand-new Euro-world” (Conarro). Historical and political aspects, emphasized by Joel Conarro, are in accord with the authorial intentions. Bradbury’s own comment on the essence of this character in an interview with Lynn Karpen proves an affinity between the so-called “Communist cultures” and “a certain kind of intellectual,” sometimes called “tainted,” like Brecht or Lukacs (Karpen). In Bradbury’s own view, “taintedness” is determined by totalitarianism, yet is not limited by it. As he puts it in his interview: “We’ve had many such figures, from Heidegger to Paul de Man. [...] We very often approach them innocently and assume their integrity is easily come by” (Karpen). In fact, Heidegger is repeatedly mentioned through the novel and thus can be regarded as a means of defying the historical determinant in the character of the key protagonist belonging to the second part of the twentieth century.

While the author and critics highlight the ethical responsibility of intellectuals at all times, inasmuch as they expand the historical context of the novel’s main story, Noam Chomsky is more straightforward and precise demanding of them “to speak the truth and to expose lies,” and not “to tolerate deceptions.” This moral call is part of his article—definitely a landmark—“The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” written in 1967 and targeted at those American intellectuals who were largely subservient to authorities during the Vietnam War by providing pseudo-scientific justifications for the crimes of the state regarding the war.

In recent years much has been written on tackling the distribution question in different contexts. In his essay, “Collective Responsibility and Qualifying Actions” (2006), Gregory Mellema provides a very practical way of assessing various degrees of individual contribution. He argues that “not every member of the collective is equally responsible for performing the qualifying act he or she performs. Moral responsibility comes in degrees, and one member of the collective might be responsible to a high degree for performing his qualifying act, while another member might be only minimally responsible for performing her qualifying act” (170). He distinguishes between six different ways in which individuals can be complicit in wrongdoing. According to Mellema, individuals through their “qualifying actions” (1) may induce or command others to produce harm (2). They can counsel others to produce harm (3). They can give consent to the production of harm by others (4). They can praise these others when they produce the harm (5). They can offer assistance to those producing harm (6). They can fail to stop them from producing it.

Appropriating the typology, one may assume that the contribution of Bazlo Criminale (and similar personalities), his part of collective responsibility is measured within the points 3 and

4—he gave his consent, cast his affirmative vote and praised those who produced harm. Moreover, his “qualifying acts” were performed through lying while “he knew the truth and kept it quiet” (223). And the complicity in wrongdoing is no longer abstract, anonymous or ambiguous; Criminale is not a victim but an agent of victimizing others.

But what if Bazlo and not Francis was the narrator? In that case it would not have been a story of detection. Yet while it is Francis who exposes the lies, only the reader is granted the privilege of learning the truth—that is, who Bazlo Criminale actually was. There are at least two explanations for this restricted awareness. First, the doubt which helps Francis to expose lies stops him from making them public—a form of resistance to any certainty. Second, the narrator ends up in confusion as to processing the truth. Consequently, Mahon’s second condition for lying, the “untruthfulness condition,” is met twice in the fictional world of the novel. It is partial if we talk about the narrative surroundings of Bazlo Criminale. A full compliance with the condition takes place in what Wayne Booth has called “a secret communion of the author and reader behind the narrator's back” (Booth 300). Throughout the novel the narrator is not identified with the author of the novel, and towards its end the distance that separates them increases culminating in Francis’s refusal to expose the liar. Hence, “the reader is called on to infer the author’s position through the semitransparent screen erected by the narrator” (Booth 301). The “semitransparency” in this case is established through various instruments of unreliability of the narrator.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude with five observations:

1. In Malcolm Bradbury’s novel *Doctor Criminale* lying is presented in a series of different contexts—academic, political, cultural, historical, geographical, etc.—and is strongly defined by context but not bound to it. In totalitarian societies, it is “the agreed rule” and a strategy of survival. For Bazlo Criminale, a successful public figure coming from the ex-Communist bloc, lying is not the only possible action, but a preferred one, granting the liar exclusive benefits. Even when perilous times are over, the former pacts with the authorities, financial frauds of international scale and routinized dishonesty preserve lying as his daily practice.
2. The “hysterical mediatisation” (Mongin) of our times is presented as highly supportive of deceptions and in particular regarding opinion-makers and influential public speakers.
3. The novel is an act of detecting lies, and doubt plays a key role in this process.
4. Lying is recognized as morally wrong. The ethics of lying are presented through the controversial figure of a public intellectual amid the political and ideological challenges of the eventful twentieth century.

5. Even though the issue of responsibility is part of the narrative, the uncovered truth is not made public, nor is it condemned directly. The novel's ending suggests, among other things, a new, equally exciting theme: how the modern mind is ready to deal with lying if it is ill-equipped to recognise a liar.

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