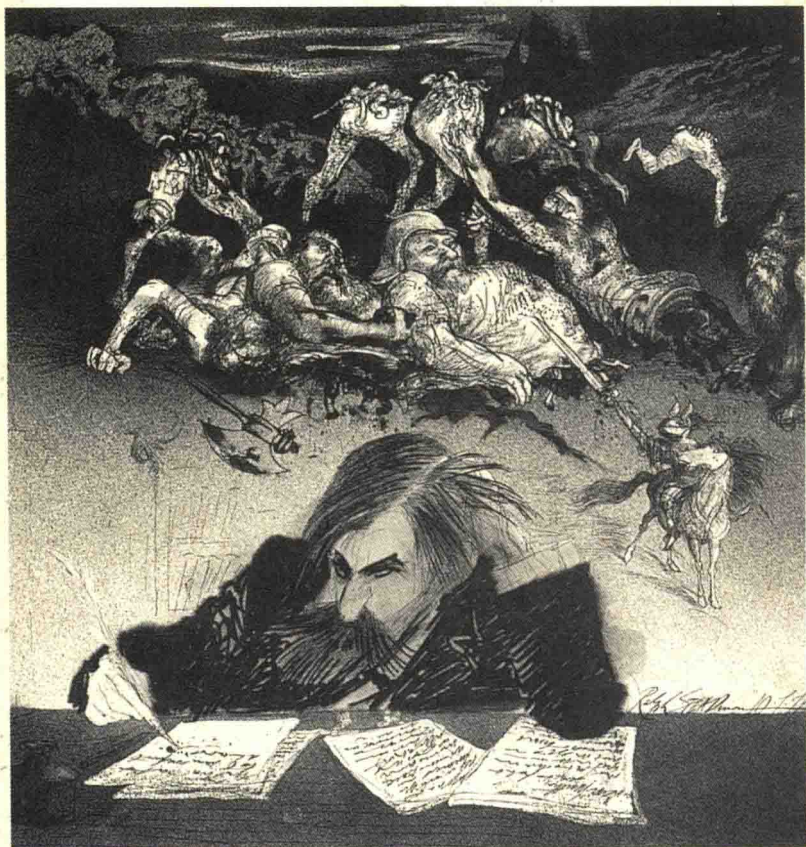


# TRUTH

Lies, Money, and Psychoanalysis

# GAMES



**JOHN FORRESTER**

FOREWORD BY ADAM PHILLIPS

# Truth Games

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Lies, Money, and Psychoanalysis

JOHN FORRESTER

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*For Lisa,  
who more than does*

# FOREWORD

Adam Phillips

In obeying the fundamental rule of free association—what John Forrester calls in this book “the breathtakingly imperialistic requirement to reveal all”—the person entering analysis agrees to suspend, or at least to defer, the evaluation of what he says. The distinction between truth and lies is assumed to be a resistance to speaking freely, an obstacle rather than an instrument. Telling the truth in analysis, that is to say, means relinquishing one’s wish to tell the truth. The patient has to stop weighing his words. The liar, after all, is the one who is supposed to know at least what the truth is; only knowledge of the truth would make one lie.

Speech becomes fuller, Freud discovered—more interestingly meaningful—if the analyst also abjures the criteria of truthfulness. It is as if with the concept of truth—and money: our currencies gain currency, as Forrester shows, by doubling for each other—we have been bewitched into believing that there is an ultimate, foolproof, universal object of desire, and that its legitimacy is beyond question. To ask what else we could want seems both silly and suspect. “Telling the truth,” Forrester mentions, “never raises questions about one’s motives, whereas telling lies always does.” Good words make a good life; but psychoanalysis makes us wonder what good words are true to.

It was the figure Freud called the censor—originally the magistrate who kept accounts of the property of Roman citizens, imposed taxes, and watched over their morals—who appeared to know both what

was worth saying, and to whom. Precursor of the superego, it was the function of the censor, who combined the severe moralism of the aesthete and the dutifulness of the customs official, to discriminate: between pleasure and pain, good and bad, truth and lies. All judgment, Freud implied, is punishing. All truth-claims are triumphalist.

In rather a stark sense psychoanalysis depends upon the censor; without the notion of censorship, the theoretical system is unintelligible. Without the possibility that the censorship itself can be censored—that it is subject to modification, that it can recognize an authority other than its own—psychoanalytic treatment is futile. From a psychoanalytic point of view censorship is the paradigmatic speech act, the need to render something acceptable. But if, as Forrester writes in this patient and startling book, “psychoanalysis always subordinates the discourse of blame to the discourse of discovery,” how does it do something that is so against the grain of the moral imagination? What else can we do with the unacceptable but blame it for something? What, in other words, does psychoanalysis promise, what is the patient entitled to expect? In *Truth Games* Forrester shows us, among many other things, how psychoanalysis radically re-describes the twin notions of the promise and the contract: the foundations, dependent as they are on trust and good faith, of the erotic and of the marketplace. The psychoanalytic contract, he suggests, reveals both the ironic impossibility and the virtual necessity of contract. Children have to be sufficiently agreeable to their parents, but they don’t make an agreement with them.

It is one of the paradoxes of beginning an analysis that the patient agrees to buy something that no one can really describe. Psychoanalysis has its history, its theory, its rules, and indeed those news bulletins called case histories. But what is going to be said and what is going to be heard—and the consequences of all that ritualized speaking and listening and silence—are forever beyond anticipation. What the analyst and the patient will make of each other is always an unknown quantity. In this sense psychoanalysis is both the exemplary and the parodic commodity: the kind of investment no rational person could

possibly make. You pay money for an indefinite period to somebody you know very little about; this person, who doesn't say very much, has no idea what the return on your money will be, but knows it will be painful whatever else it is (from a psychoanalytic point of view, only what is unacceptable is, as it were, in a position to return). What your money allows you to give to the analyst is what you are able, or enabled, to say in her presence. And the words that she gives back to you serve to make more of your words possible, or valuable. But it is not words for words' sake; it is words to relieve suffering, to make something newly bearable. The analyst and the patient trade vocabularies to make a good difference, without knowing what the good will be. The analysis is bought on trust; the currency, as Forrester's title intimates, is truth games, lies, money, and Freud. But what exactly is on offer?

It has been one of the abiding preoccupations of Forrester's prolific, shrewdly informed work to describe the nature of the exchange that is psychoanalysis, and the histories of the institutionalized exchanges that are its precursors. In the two essays that make up this book—which should be read as two linked intellectual novels, a Bildungsroman of ideas—Forrester addresses with a new kind of attention the really very strange, deadpan question posed in *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis*: “What is the story of the unconscious?” What are our stories about it—stories that inevitably interweave competing discourses—and what kinds of stories does “it” tell?

Psychoanalysis assumes that all stories, of whatever kind of coherence or intelligibility, are histories: histories of what we want, and of how our wanting works—and of the relationship, if any, between what we want from each other and what we can be said to give to each other (Lacan terminally ironized the gift, Forrester suggests, whereas Freud made of indebtedness a tragedy). What is distinctive about the histories Forrester has to tell in *Truth Games*—and history, Forrester has often implied, is the meeting point (or the melting point) between gossip and scholarship—is that they are, as it were, genealogies without piety and nostalgia. They situate psychoanaly-

sis—in relation to epistemology (truth games), economic theory (gift, money, and debt), and the history of medicine (particularly the placebo effect and its link with hysteria)—without overcontextualizing it. There is no background for psychoanalysis to fade into, but there is some limelight for it to steal. What Forrester wants to claim, following from Nietzsche, is our need now, in the light of what he calls “the blithely truth-serving epistemologies of the natural sciences,” for a psychopathology of the truth-teller. And what Forrester wants more blithely to proclaim, following (agonistically) from Lacan—against, that is to say, the Symbolic as a synonym for the obsessionality of debt—is an acknowledgment that “our deepest wishes are for something that is as gratuitous, as full of grace, as happiness. The gift of something for nothing.” Forrester, in other words (that are his) wants to keep psychoanalysis as a “pure culture of the life-instinct.”

If the hero of the first essay is the child who lies, the hero of the second essay is the child whose desire is not for money. The child’s first successful lie to the parents, Freud stated, was his first moment of independence (or freedom, to use the old-fashioned word). By making himself opaque to his parents, the child proves that the parents are not omniscient, not of the same mind as he. What is morally unacceptable—the lie—is developmentally essential. The child’s capacity of lying, his talent for deception, guarantees his future (honesty is a symbiotic fantasy). But if children need to learn how to lie, they also have to learn to want money. What is most remarkable about *Truth Games* is the way in which Forrester has made and elaborated the connection between these two simple and apparently disparate things. “Infantile wishes are foreign to the logic of money,” as Forrester says, but compatible with, if not integral to, the logic of dissimulation.

Quoting Freud’s famous letter to Fliess—“Happiness is the belated fulfillment of a prehistoric wish. For this reason wealth brings so little happiness. Money was not a childhood wish”—Forrester, making one of the many telling connections that characterize this book, links

Freud's remarks to the fact that at the time of this letter—early in 1898—Freud was at last detaching himself from his fateful relationship with Breuer, by attempting to pay off his extensive financial debt to him. But paying off the money, of course, didn't cancel out the relationship (Freud went on guiltily and gratefully referring to Breuer until the early 1930s). There is, as Forrester notes, "no means of measuring symbolic debt"; by quantifying debt, money provides a spurious absolution. What we owe each other, like what links us to each other, is singularly lacking in definition (and, what do they amount to, our obligations and our relationships? seems like the wrong question, but the accounting still goes on). It is in the implications of indebtedness that Forrester finds his theme: in the no man's land between obligation and desire.

What does the child owe the parents: truth or lies, compliance or development? What does the child want from the parents, and how does he distinguish this from his obligation to them? Is speaking itself, to take Forrester's salient example, a repayment of the debt of language, a repayment of the words invested in us by our parents? In *Truth Games* Forrester circles these questions psychoanalytically: that is in the fullest sense, historically, not through the available reductions of child development, or the economic and ideological determinisms, but rather by interleaving a concise history of the genres of truth-telling with a sharp account of the evolution of economic systems.

When Lacan reads Freud it is as though, Forrester suggests, he is under some terrible obligation—as though in all his ironic exhilaration he is showing us how demanding the dead are. Lacan reminded us that on virtually every page of Freud there was a reference to language; Forrester points out that on virtually every page of Lacan there is no quotation from Freud. These are the strategies of transmission: ways of unburdening the past. *Truth Games* shows us how we can make a gift of our inheritance.

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# INTRODUCTION

Everyday life contains many truth games. The social processes and institutions that establish power, expertise, and authority also generate truths. In deference to their formal structure and their internal rationality, but in a spirit of agnosticism concerning their claims, one against the other, to the Truth, we can call these procedures truth games.<sup>1</sup> We seek the truth through the courts, in scientific laboratories, in our religious institutions, and in private from those we love. Each of these processes gives rise to truths, more or less generally accepted but not necessarily compatible with one another. In large part, we accept the differences between them and, once we have been acclimatized, we know reasonably well the different rules, the different answers, the different prohibitions and failures of courtesy, taste, and etiquette proper to each.

Our own good behavior does not prevent us from enjoying the spectacle of transgression of the rules defining each of these games. This enjoyment often embodies the hope that a transcendent truth will, under the pressure of these transgressions, eventually break through, revealing something beyond the earthbound truths whose human failings and limitations we are, on those rare occasions when we want to be, only too well aware of. So, the spectacle of the scientist uncomfortably cornered by a terrier-like journalist, or a prelate confessing his sexual predilections over the dinner table, or a judge who reveals her ignorance of the latest fashion—whether it is a sophisticated new forensic laboratory technique or the name of a rock

group—all of these give us a social delight arising out of the carnivalesque transgression of the rules of the game. We know full well that, in the morning, things will go back to normal: scientists will have an unquestioned authority over their specialized domains of expertise; priests will incarnate moral authority over matters public and private; judges will have dominion over matters of life and death, criminality and liberty. None of this prevents truth games from changing their rules, often more rapidly than we would like, and almost always without our agreement.

In the normal run of things, we take the plurality of truths for granted. We inhabit the games that generate them without any feeling of outlandishness or oddity. The fact that these games are often allied to an array of institutions, each with uncontested authority over truth claims made in its name—among them the law, medicine, the churches, the sciences, the central bank when allied with the arms-bearing state—does not strike us as perverse. It seems natural that banks should control money rather than pass judgment, and equally natural that being proficient at controlling money confers no authority over the conduct of surgery. However, it has been argued with great persuasiveness that this separation of institutional powers and authority is the distinctive and unusual feature of Western societies as they have developed in this millennium.<sup>2</sup> There might have been, there might still be, just one way of deciding a question as to truth, instead of the variety of ways which we live by and with. We certainly are only too aware of contests between rival institutions, between rival procedures. The warfare between science and religion was one; the rivalry between doctors and lawyers over unreasonable law-breaking actions was another; covert and not so covert tugs of war between politicians and their scientific advisers are becoming routine; and in the United States, the lawyers and the journalists increasingly vie for the highest public function of supreme adversary of those who would deny or cover up the truth, whether it be about killer viruses, arms scams, or athletic lovers.

We give the name “scientism” to the conviction that scientific truth should have hegemony over other truths, and that scientific institu-

tions therefore have a privilege in relation to other institutions. We live in the age of scientism: by which I do not mean that scientism has been accepted, simply that ours is the age in which it is a continual presence, a continual seduction. One may be extremely sympathetic to its seductions, one may be extremely impressed by the successes of the sciences and their interdependent technologies, but that should not prevent us from recognizing how extremely vulnerable we are to scientism, nor from recognizing that its victory would spell the end of the distinctive plurality of truth games which constitutes the present dispensation for truth in our world.

What are the best ways of investigating this present dispensation of our truth games, including the insistent longing for the definitive scientific answer? When practitioners, institutions, whole discourses lay claim to their truths, the obvious point of entry into the foundations of their claims is the manner in which they exclude threats to the well-foundedness of those claims. The liar emerged for me as the exemplary figure of the outcast from those competing discourses. Error and ignorance, as the obverse of truth, appear as less interesting and threatening than lies. Each discourse or institution has its procedures for dealing with error and ignorance, which range from the legal fiction that ignorance is no defense to the philosopher's fiction that error, in the form of a bold but falsified hypothesis, is the highest scientific virtue. The liar, however, can become a truly subversive and scandalous figure, whose nefarious influence may extend far more widely than her own individual actions. Every truth-establishing institution has its own version of the liar: in the realm of economic transactions, there are the counterfeiter and fraudster; in the realm of politics, there are the Nixons, Hitlers, and Stalins—we even remain content with a definition of the diplomat as someone sent abroad to lie for his country; in the sciences, there are the Kammerers and Burts. But I had additional reasons for thinking that lying was a profitable area of inquiry.

Our century has given rise to a most original form of scientism: the quest for a science of the intimate and private person, a science of our moral inclinations, imperatives, failings, and hypocrisies—in

short, a science of the individual life and of its fateful tragedies and comic fatalities. That project is psychoanalysis. It is well for us to recall the hopes and confidence that attended the rise and expansion of psychoanalysis—not least because we live at a moment when those most imbued with scientism repudiate as vociferously as the laws of libel and slander will allow the claims to scientific status of the somewhat becalmed flagship of their movement.<sup>3</sup> Part of the revolutionary, even flamboyant, promise of psychoanalysis was its pledge to reveal the underbelly of all other truths: of the physicist's truths, of the politician's, not to mention the more obviously targeted judge's and priest's truths. All that was necessary was for them to lie on the couch. Freud proposed that no area of discourse should be closed to the analyst's inquiry; and he also offered the rule of thumb that the sexual life of each individual should be considered as the model for his or her activity in all other areas of life, in the process proposing that sex be regarded as the ultimate truth about human beings.

However, allied with the breathtakingly imperialistic requirement to reveal all is the psychoanalyst's limitless tolerance for the subject's inability—his refusal—to speak the truth. Psychoanalysis is thus an intriguing example of a scientistic discourse that is focused on the intimate truths of everyday life, while redrawing the conventional lines between truth and lies. Might the psychoanalytic equanimity concerning lying offer a clue as to the manner in which other truth games, which are markedly less tolerant in this respect, regulate their practitioners and manage their relations with other, competing truth-seeking institutions? Could it be that the transgressions of truth and the truth game played by the psychoanalyst, that connoisseur of transgression, show us the means of discovering how we are governed by the various regimes of truth under which we now live? This book attempts to show that the answers that flow from this question are, at the very least, intriguing.

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I have lived with the ideas in this book for a long time, long past the nine years enjoined by Horace. It was Lacan who first kindled my

interest in the topic of lying, with his observation that the psychoanalyst's patient is, even when lying, operating in the dimension of truth. If such is the case, I reflected, then psychoanalysis must operate with a very different notion of the rules connecting truth and lies from those implied by the blacks and whites of the moral condemnation or the blithely truth-serving epistemologies of the natural sciences. I also quickly came to recognize that the lies of childhood, my own included, were, as philosophers, psychologists, and pedagogues insisted, of great significance. There are those who acquire the habit of lying in a spectacular and dramatic manner, transforming their lives in the process. For them, lying can have a foundationally creative function; that first lie marks the opening of their own personal truths. But then there are those who have always lied, whose lies as a consequence appear somewhat inconsequential, just a habit, like playing with their hair. For these, lying was more a natural disposition, akin to enthusiasm for sex or sport, than a matter of life and death. My growing awareness of the interesting variety of lies and of liars, fully sustained by numerous conversations and encounters in which I was told of the most horrendous, entertaining, and extravagant bouts of lying, led me to realize that this was a topic about which many people felt enthusiastic and perplexed. This recognition kept me working on the topic, on and off, over a period of twenty years.

At some point in the work, about ten years ago, I became preoccupied with the questions of trust and confidence that are linked to the endemic fear of lying. If the world were full of liars, the argument so often ran, how could we trust what other people said? This argument, it seemed to me, always put the cart before the horse. As all people seem to agree when they are living in their unofficial worlds, there is a great deal of hard lying that goes on in the world, especially among those we most respect and admire. But, nonetheless, we live in a world in which there is trust; how much lying goes on in that world appears to be a matter for disinterested empirical inquiry rather than philosophical anxiety, and may bear only very indirectly on the basic attitude of trust. A venerable parallel began

to impress me, that between the trust underlying the institution of truth-saying and the trust underlying the institution of economic exchange. Counterfeiters are the liars of the economic world, and their attack on the institution of money seems very much akin to the liar's parasitic attack on the institution of truth. Are not both institutions dependent, as all the commentators seem to agree, on trust? And are not both institutions therefore always in need of something deeper, more solid, more foundational, more rocklike, than trust upon which to base that trust?

I explore the parallel between money and speech in the second essay in this book, through an examination of the metaphors of circulation, exchange, indebtedness, and trust that slide incessantly from one domain to the other, from words to coins and back again. The essay opens by looking at the relationship between Lacan and Freud, but it soon extends to the broader questions of the anthropology, the economics, and the metaphysics that underpin psychoanalysis and the human sciences. And it closes with the conclusion that the concepts which we find it impossible to relinquish when we assess human relations and human connectedness, the concepts of gift and debt, are irremediably unstable, riven with internal contradictions whose effects we live with but can never master. In transactions, in intercourse, whether the gift is of speech or of a harder currency, we seek benchmarks which we will never find. That, too, is a hard truth of—and for—psychoanalysis.

# TRUTH GAMES

## I: Knowing Lies

So I have often reflected on what could have given birth to our scrupulously observed custom of taking bitter offence when we are accused of that vice which is more commonplace among us than any of the others, and why for us it should be the ultimate verbal insult to accuse us of lying. Whereupon I find it natural for us to protect ourselves from those failings with which we are most sullied. It seems that by resenting the accusation and growing angry about it we unload some of the guilt; we are guilty, in fact, but at least we condemn it for show.

Montaigne, "On Giving the Lie"

It is a truism to say that the sciences have developed a privileged claim on truth. The truth of science goes without saying. Other truths—moral, religious, aesthetic, personal—require special pleading, even a special epistemology. Truth, therefore, now has an intimate relation with *knowing* things.

But we should not be too hasty in assuming that the importance attached to truth stems from its recent sequestration by the self-appointed spokespersons of the scientific community. Our devotion to truth is older than the hegemony of science, much to the current benefit of science. For centuries, the concept of truth gained much of its purchase through the conviction that the fate of a man's soul hung on his adherence to the truth. The importance that we in the West attach to truth-telling may well owe much to the importance that the public profession of faith and martyrdom took on in the expanding evangelical origins of the Christian West. Certainly