

Ruth Levai

The concept of truth. Four Works by
Annette von Droste Hülshoff, Harriet
Beecher Stowe, Fyodor Dostoevsky and
Georges Bernanos

Doctoral Thesis / Dissertation

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DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

**TO FIND IN INFINITY SOMETHING NEW: THE CONCEPT OF
TRUTH IN FOUR WORKS BY ANNETTE VON DROSTE-
HÜLSHOFF, HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, F.M. DOSTOEVSKY
AND GEORGES BERNANOS**

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Doctoral Dissertation

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**To find in infinity something new: the concept of truth in four works by
Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Harriet Beecher Stowe, F.M. Dostoevsky and
Georges Bernanos**

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Table of contents

I.	Introduction	3
II.	Chapter I The Influence of Enlightenment Thinking in European Literature: The Power of Anxious Concern?	12
III.	Chapter II Aspects of the Enlightenment Embraced or Rejected by the Four Authors	38
IV.	Chapter III Four Specific Works and the Modern Notion of Truth	70
V.	Chapter IV Modern and Postmodern Truths	128
VI.	Conclusion	141
VII.	Bibliography	148

„Who, then, are the true philosophers? Those who come to love the spectacle of truth.”¹

„Legal texts judge about right and wrong. 'Literature,' by contrast, and this includes the fabulations of the *mythos*, preserves the right of justice by pronouncing neither a judgment nor even a judgment on judgment.”²

Introduction

“O Menschenherz, kannst du denn alles zwingen? Muß dir der Himmel Tau und Regen bringen? Und öffnet sich die Erde deinem Wort?“—„Ach nein, ich kann nur sehn und mich betrüben, es ist noch leider nach wie vor geblieben und geht die angewies'nen Wege fort.“³ I open my study with this quotation from Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's collection *Das Geistliche Jahr*, not only because she is one of the main characters of this study, but also because it so aptly summarizes the problem I wish to examine, namely that of human knowledge of the truth: whether or not it is possible, by any humanly conceivable means, to understand the inner workings of reality and manipulate them. It is striking how in just these few lines Droste was able to convey the close connection between will and desire, knowledge and power. It is the heart, rather than the mind, which is held accountable for its aggression, and the lure of knowledge is represented as being its promise of granting power over the natural world, the physical order of things as they stand. I do not presume to provide an ultimate answer to the aforementioned question in and of myself since, by so doing, I would contradict the very premise of our opening quotation, nor do I believe the authors at hand do so categorically. Rather, I wish to demonstrate how each of them in their oeuvre, while displaying both their love of truth and the value of its pursuit, at the same time call into question the possibility of empirically or epistemologically knowing this truth. In this way the authors prefigured, in the case of Droste, Stowe and Dostoevsky, and concurred with, in the case of Bernanos, modern notions of truth, such as that reached by Eugen Fink: „Since the world is not some real existent, it can become illuminated only if it enters the enigmatic equivocality or real non-reality of play...Such completion of the fragment can only take place

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, Translated by Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott, 167.

² Hamacher, Werner, „The Right Not to Use Rights: Human Rights and the Structure of Judgments,” 682.

³ Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, *Sämtliche Werke*, *Das Geistliche Jahr Am Neujahrstage*, 472. (Oh human heart, can you force everything? Must the heavens bring you dew and rain? And does the earth open itself upon your word?—No, I can only see and distress myself. All remains as it was before and continues on its charted path.) translation is mine

as a reflection or shining back of the whole, and that humans cannot control.”⁴ Hans Georg Gadamer would go on to elucidate this idea of „play” in his classic study of hermeneutic principles *Wahrheit und Methode*. To the extent that Gadamer understood dialogue as a „medial event” equivalent with his hermeneutic concept of play, namely an „uncontrollable event” in which the „prevailing truth of the issue may loom up,”⁵ our analyses of the literary works at hand will focus mainly on passages of dialogue.

Oh human heart, asks the speaker of Droste’s poem, can you force everything? Are you able to manipulate anything you set your mind to? Of course, the resounding answer of the heart in the poem is no, despite its maneuverings and displays of will, everything stays as it was and continues on its charted path. It may seem here as though Droste was promoting a belief in a kind of fatalistic providence, a Calvinistic predestination. Yet we know from works such as her poem „On the tower” that Droste was anything but resigned to docile forbearance and abstinence from the seemingly unattainable: „O wilder Geselle, o toller Fant, ich möchte dich kräftig umschlingen, und, Sehne an Sehne, zwei Schritte vom Rand auf Tod und Leben dann ringen!”⁶ There was a truth, at least a true state of being, to be had and known, and Droste was willing to struggle, to risk everything for it, although she knew it meant never being in control, never being able to change the course of time or reverse her destiny. As she so astutely noted, speaking with regard to her reinterpretation of events for her crime story *Die Judenbuche*, which we will later more closely examine: „...denn einfache Wahrheit ist immer schöner als die beste Erfindung.”⁷ Surely she cannot have meant here the facts of the original crime her novella was based upon, otherwise why would she have considered it worthwhile to provide her own version? Why would she have devoted her life to creating works of art? To what „simple truth” can she have been referring then? Clearly, it was a truth that went beyond circumstance and situation, fact and fiction, word and thought.

Dostoevsky voices his conviction regarding a similar approach to human knowledge and expression of the truth in a letter written to K.P. Pobedonostsev, shortly after the completion of the sixth book of his final masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Speaking of the response he wished to present in his work to Ivan’s treatise of the Grand Inquisitor, he writes to his friend:

⁴ Nyíró, Miklós: „On the Scope and Function of the Concept of Play – Heidegger, Fink, and Gadamer,” 12.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Droste, *Sämtliche Werke*, 124. (O wild opponent, o fine dandy, I want to tightly embrace you, and, sinew to sinew, two steps from the edge, battle it out between life and death!) translation is mine

⁷ Heselhaus, *Annette von Droste-Hülshoff: Werk und Leben*, 147. (For simple truth is always more beautiful than the best invention.) translation is mine

...the answer itself is not a direct one...but only an indirect one. What is offered here is a worldview that stands in direct opposition to the one that was previously presented, but again the opposition is not made point by point but, so to speak, in the form of an artistic picture...whereas real life is full of the ridiculous and is only sublime in its inner meaning.⁸

Dostoevsky here indicates that while ultimate sublimity and meaning do exist, it is impossible to capture them fully in words and concepts formed by the human mind. Yet he asserts that through artistic pictures there is some hope of glimpsing this meaning, obscured, for whatever reason, by what he calls „real life.” In his monumental work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Mikhail Bakhtin provided a succinct and brilliant exposition of the guiding principles behind Dostoevsky's writing. Our task here will be neither to critique nor to expand upon his points but rather to integrally incorporate them into the wider ongoing dialogue about the nature of truth, a dialogue that will also engage contributions from Droste, Georges Bernanos and Harriet Beecher Stowe, as well as contemporary physicists and modern and postmodern philosophers. As this is, however, primarily a study about literature we limit our sources on string theory to Brian Greene's *The Elegant Universe* in view of the fact that he is both a widely acknowledged expert in this field as well as being the author of this text meant for a broader audience. Bakhtin wrote at the conclusion of his study that, „The *scientific* consciousness of contemporary man has learned to orient itself among the complex circumstances of 'the probability of the universe'...but in the realm of *artistic* cognition people sometimes continue to demand a very crude and very primitive definitiveness, one that quite obviously could not be true.”⁹ Might these complex circumstances of probability coincide with the simple truth referred to by Droste? What can we learn from the scientific approach to reality that would aid us as we explore the realm of artistic cognition? As Bakhtin strove to demonstrate, the great appeal of Dostoevsky's works seems to lie in his avoidance of any „primitive definitiveness,” something Bakhtin believed we all have an innate aversion to.

The work of early twentieth century French novelist Georges Bernanos also reflects a penchant for a certain indefiniteness, despite his devout Catholic faith. The poet and contemporary of Bernanos Pierre Emmanuel writes of him:

Bernanos never condemns anyone, because he knows that a person's interior time never runs out, that the weightiest decisions are never definitive. He knows that there is always a possibility open for changing the past at its very root...for, beyond all

⁸ Frank, Joseph and Goldstein, David I., ed. trans. Andrew MacAndrew, *Selected Letters of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, 486-487.

⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, 272.

apparent causes, the deepest cause of every human action can only be intimated obscurely.¹⁰

On the surface this can be taken to mean that Bernanos tends to portray an absence of real consequences, however anyone familiar with his work knows that this is certainly not the case. In what sense then does he demonstrate his conviction that human decisions are never absolutely definitive? And what evidence does he use to corroborate his belief in the impossibility of penetrating to the deepest cause of human actions? Although he questions the ability of the human mind to perceive and comprehend individual motives he does not deny their ultimate existence or relevance. Hans Urs von Balthasar, perhaps the most well known biographer and commentator on Bernanos' life and work, remarked on the paradoxical maxim of reality that found its expression in Bernanos' writings: „To be human, therefore, means both things at once: to understand oneself in one's uniqueness as a being oriented through death *toward* eternity (as a being who is *becoming* eternal) *and* to see and understand oneself nevertheless within temporality *from* the perspective of eternity.”¹¹ Similar to Droste and Dostoevsky, Bernanos appears to have conceived of the truth of what it means to be human as something which can only be defined in terms of an interrelatedness between time and eternity, death and life, resignation and struggle.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, in the second of her antislavery novels, *Dred: a tale of the great dismal swamp*, also highlighted the difficulty of defining truth, about a situation or about the motives of those involved, in terms of a set of overriding principles or a one-size-fits-all philosophy. The opening lines of the chapter entitled „The Desert” in volume II read: „There's no study in human nature more interesting than the aspects of the same subject seen in the points of view of different characters. One might almost imagine that there were no such thing as absolute truth...”¹² As with Droste, reality, or the subject, appears to be indivisible, all remains as it is and continues on its charted path. Yet Stowe's narrator asserts that there is still nothing more worthwhile than taking the time to see this reality from different points of view, to struggle to perceive there that simple, absolute truth which seems so elusive. Echoing Bakhtin's observations concerning Dostoevsky's use of dialogic exposition, Jacob Stratman, in his article „Harriet Beecher Stowe's Preachers of the Swamp: *Dred* and the Jeremiad” notes that, „According to *Dred's* narrator, engagement with

¹⁰ quoted in Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence*, 84-85.

¹¹ Balthasar, Hans Urs von, 121.

¹² Stowe, Harriet Beecher *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp, Together With Anti-Slavery Tales and Papers*, Vol. 2, 77.

contradictions could bring forth the truth. What the narrator astutely envisions is that the truth can be found within a particular conversation.”¹³ Engagement, struggle, contradiction, opposition, dialogue are all recurring themes in the works of these four authors and their commentators. The following questions remain: What or whom do we engage with? Who or what stands in opposition? What is the end of the struggle? And how do we then recognize the truth? As William James noted in *The Will to Believe* at the end of the nineteenth century, „No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon.”¹⁴

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht notes the contemporaneity of these questions in his essay "Explosionen der Aufklärung":

Und die Tatsache, dass Intellektuelle seit jener Zeit (1900) die Welt nicht mehr anders als sich selbst beobachtend erfahren konnten, wurde zum Ursprung von zwei Konsequenzen, die seither zentral für unser Denken und unsere Kultur geworden sind. Wir können die erste dieser Konsequenzen "Perspektivismus" nennen: ein Beobachter zweiter Ordnung entdeckt, dass seine Repräsentationen der Welt von den jeweils eingenommenen Perspektiven abhängig sind, und weil die Zahl solcher möglichen Perspektiven kein Ende hat, folgt daraus, dass es zu jedem Referenzgegenstand eine potentielle Unendlichkeit möglicher Darstellungen gibt. Das führte sehr früh im neunzehnten Jahrhundert zu einem epistemologischen horror vacui, zu der Befürchtung nämlich, dass es möglicherweise keine mit sich selbst identischen Referenz-Gegenstände gebe...der Doppelbödigkeit menschlicher Weltaneignung, die sich nicht nur als Erfahrung (Weltaneignung durch Begriffe), sondern auch als Wahrnehmung (Weltaneignung durch die Sinne) vollzieht. Damit rückte die Frage nach der Möglichkeit einer Kompatibilität zwischen Erfahrung und Wahrnehmung in den Vordergrund. Dieses letztere aus der Emergenz des Beobachters zweiter Ordnung erwachsende Problem ist bis heute ungelöst...¹⁵

Indeed, the early twentieth century French philosopher Gabriel Marcel addresses the same dilemma in his lecture „Légitimité de l'ontologie": „Il semble bien plutôt en réalité que nous soyons à la recherche de quelque chose *à partir de quoi* des normes deviendront

¹³ Stratman, Jacob "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Preachers of the Swamp: Dred and the Jeremiad" *Christianity & Literature*, 381-382.

¹⁴ James, William, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 15.

¹⁵ Gumbrecht, *Explosionen der Aufklärung: Diderot, Goya, Lichtenberg, Mozart*, 5. (And the fact that intellectuals from that time on (1900) could no longer experience the world in any way other than through self-observation became the source of two consequences which have since become central to our thinking and our culture. We can call the first of these consequences "perspectivism": an observer of the second degree discovers that his representations of the world are dependent on each of the received perspectives, and since the number of these possible perspectives has no end, it follows that every point of reference has a potentially infinite number of representations. Very early in the nineteenth century this led to an epistemological horror vacui, or to the fear that there might possibly be no corresponding objects of reference in existence...the duplicity of human appropriation of the world, which occurs not only through experience (appropriation through concepts) but also through perception (appropriation through the senses). In this way the question about the possibility of a compatibility between experience and perception was thrust into the fore. This latter problem resulting from the emergence of the second degree observer remains unresolved to this day...) translation is mine

pensables.”¹⁶ What enables us to distinguish between fact and fiction, wisdom and foolishness, the worthless and the worthy, the outdated and the timeless? As William James put it, „...the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no.”¹⁷ Why, if at all, does it matter? If we come to understand this capacity of differentiation, can we alter it? Can we mold it to serve our needs, our desires, our imaginations? These are the questions which have gripped intellectuals in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and which continue to be wrestled with today.

What is even more remarkable is the fact that an odyssey of a similar nature has been unfolding almost simultaneously in the natural sciences. Just as writers, poets, philosophers, artists, etc. continue to forge ahead in their pursuit of that „what” beginning with which norms become thinkable, Brian Greene writes in *The Elegant Universe* that, „...physicists by their nature will not be satisfied until they feel that the deepest and most fundamental understanding of the universe has been unveiled.”¹⁸ At the heart of their struggle stands a paradox which bears a striking resemblance to that of the aforementioned second degree observer:

...the gravitational force allows us to declare that all observers—regardless of their state of motion—are on absolutely equal footing...gravity enforces the symmetry: it ensures the equal validity of all possible observational points of view, all possible frames of reference...just as we say that a sphere exemplifies rotational symmetry because it looks the same regardless of how we rotate it around in our hands or how we shift the angle from which we view it, we say that the universe exemplifies *strong force symmetry*.¹⁹

So far, so good, we have liberté, égalité and fraternité. However which way we turn the ball, reality remains unchanged, there is no danger in changing perspective, in worrying about whether this or that point of view is valid. But alas, just as this was not the end of the story for intellectuals of the arts and letters, neither was it for physicists:

...quantum mechanics changes this conclusion radically. *Everything* is subject to the quantum fluctuations inherent in the uncertainty principle—even the gravitational field...John Wheeler coined the term *quantum foam* to describe the frenzy revealed by such an ultramicroscopic examination of space (and time)—it describes an unfamiliar arena of the universe in which the conventional notions of left and right, back and forth, up and down (and even of before and after) lose their meaning...this conflict rears its head in a very concrete manner. Calculations that merge the equations of

¹⁶ Marcel, Gabriel, *Le Mystère de l'être*, 53. (It seems that in reality we are rather in search of something beginning with which norms become thinkable.) translation is mine

¹⁷ James, 16.

¹⁸ Greene, Brian, *The Elegant Universe*, 117.

¹⁹ Ibid., 125-126.

general relativity and those of quantum mechanics typically yield one and the same ridiculous answer: infinity.²⁰

So the *horror vacui* is not just an epistemological experience but rather extends to the empirical realms of the natural and mathematical sciences. It would seem that physicists have run up against the same principle of reality, the same perspectivism that has confounded all post-Enlightenment intellectuals. And they have reached a conclusion which echoes that of Gabriel Marcel: “Even more recently, physicists have realized that infinite answers are a signal that a theory is being used to analyze a realm that is beyond the bounds of its applicability.”²¹ Interestingly, it appears to be something that is not merely the result of the emergence of the second-degree observer but rather something that is intrinsic to the very fabric of life, since the phenomena observed by physicists are not a product of the human mind. String theory proposes to be a possible solution to this incompatibility between the symmetry ensured by general relativity and the chaotic reality of quantum fluctuations. According to string theory, “extradimensional geometry determines fundamental physical attributes like particle masses and charges that we observe in the usual three large space dimensions of common experience.”²² It is called string theory because it hypothesizes strings, rather than particles, such as atoms, as being the basic building material of our physical reality. In string theory “tiny strings vibrate through all of the spatial dimensions, the precise way in which the extra dimensions are twisted up and curled back on each other strongly influences and tightly constrains the possible resonant vibrational patterns.”²³ The unveiling of the quandary of the second-degree observer may even be called serendipitous in that it enabled us to see, as Gabriel Marcel noted, that, “...la réalité qui nous concerne le plus directement n’est en aucune manière comparable à quelque chose que nous pourrions toucher ou atteindre.”²⁴ Which other theories might be attempting to penetrate a realm that is beyond the bounds of their applicability?

As previously mentioned, Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his ground-breaking study *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, was also in pursuit of this elusive deepest and most fundamental understanding of the universe:

Wir fragen nach der Identität dieses Selbst, das sich im Wandel der Zeiten und Umstände so verschieden darstellt. Es wirft sich offenbar in die wechselnden Aspekte

²⁰ Greene, Brian, *The Elegant Universe*, 127, 129.

²¹ Ibid., 396.

²² Greene, 206.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Marcel, 55. (the reality which concerns us most directly is not in any manner comparable to anything that we could touch or reach.) translation is mine

seiner selbst nicht derart auseinander, daß es seine Identität verlöre, sondern es ist in ihnen allen da. Sie alle gehören ihm zu. Sie alle sind mit ihm *gleichzeitig*.²⁵

He, like contemporary physicists, never gave up the notion of an underlying unity and harmony, were we but able to find a way to view it in its entirety. Once again, we cannot help but be struck by the overarching themes of simple truth and representations, circumstance and probability, indefiniteness and symmetry, identity and relationship.

Paul Ricoeur describes the interplay between the historic and the imaginary in his analysis of the nature of time, *Temps et Récit* in strikingly similar terms, implying a truth that escaped them both: “D’autre part, le caractère elusiv de ce vis-à-vis, pourtant impérieux, nous a entraîné dans un jeu logique où les catégories du Meme, de l’Autre, de l’Analogue structurent l’énigme sans la résoudre...c’est toujours par quelque transfert du Meme à l’Autre en sympathie et en imagination, que l’Autre étranger me devient proche.”²⁶ Neither history nor imagination, the Same or the Other, resolution or irresolution hold the monopoly. It is again rather the moments of interaction alone which hold out any promise of sublimity. This would seem to contradict the age-old notion of truth as absolute unmediated knowledge. Giles Whiteley, in his recent study *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum: The Truth of Masks*, notes,

...we might say that, for Plato, truth—what Hegel would call ‘absolute knowledge’ (*das absolute Wissen*)—is only revealed in its absolute presence when unmediated. Plato’s key philosophical image—indeed, if Heidegger is to be believed, *the* key philosophical image—is that of *aletheia*, the unveiling that is the disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*), or the unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*) that is the event (*Ereignis*). For these reasons, then, Plato dislikes *mimesis*. But at the same time, he cannot help but be drawn to it.²⁷

Is truth necessarily unmediated? If so, can it be grasped/apprehended in its unmediated form? Or is it something that can only be engaged in this present moment in its present form? Plato did not take well to the idea of a morphing Reality, yet he could not completely dismiss it.

Perhaps the key lies in understanding the ambivalence of *mimesis* itself, an imprecise concept which encompasses both what modern French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion would

²⁵ Gadamer, Hans-Georg *Wahrheit und Methode*, 126. (We are asking about the identity of this self, which presents itself in such a different light with the passage of time and circumstance. Clearly, in these changing aspects of its essence it does not deconstruct itself to such an extent so as to lose its identity, rather it is present in all of them. They all belong to it. They are all simultaneous with it.) translation is mine

²⁶ Ricoeur, Paul *Temps et Récit 3. Le temps raconté*, 335, 336. (On the other hand, the elusive character of this vis-à-vis, although imperious, has led us into a game of logic where the categories of the Same, the Other, and the Analogous structure the enigma without resolving it...it is always by some transfer of the Same to the Other by way of sympathy and imagination that the Other stranger becomes close to me.) translation is mine

²⁷ Whiteley, *Oscar Wilde and the Simulacrum: The Truth of Masks*, 12.