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SECTION FOUR

COSMOS

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BEYOND POSTMODERNISM:
TOWARD AN AESTHETIC OF TRUST

INTRODUCTION

My theme is the evolution of postmodernism, or rather, our own evolution in postmodern times. Since I owe readers clarity and concision, which have all but abandoned us in academe, let me focus the issue at the start. What lies beyond postmodernism? Of course, no one knows; we hardly know what postmodernism was.

But questions have a way of inveigling an answer. I will offer a double response in the form of two, major intertwined themes: postmodernism expands into geopolitical postmodernity while seeking to become a postmodernism not of suspicion but of trust. The braided strands of this proposition may define the cultural code of our moment. How?

WHAT WAS POSTMODERNISM?

Let us step back for a moment. What was postmodernism in the first place? I am not at all certain, for I know less about it today than I did some thirty years ago. No doubt, that is because I have changed, postmodernism has changed, the world has changed, and historical concepts, unlike Platonic Ideas or geometrical forms, suffer the tyranny of time.

Of course, postmodernism was born in strife and nursed in contention; it still remains moot. Lock ten of its foremost proponents in a room, and watch the blood trickle under the door. Hype and hyperbole, parody and kitsch, media glitz and ideological spite, the sheer, insatiable irrealism of consumer societies all helped to turn postmodernism into a conceptual ectoplasm. I cite – from an essay called “From Postmodernism to Postmodernity” – four current exemplars of the phenomenon, nearly at random:

1. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Spain), Ashton Raggatt McDougall's Storey Hall in Melbourne (Australia), and Arata Isozaki's Tsukuba Center (Japan) qualify as postmodern architecture. They depart from the pure angular geometries of the Bauhaus, the minimal steel and glass boxes of Mies van der Rohe, mixing aesthetic and historical elements, flirting with fragments, fantasy, and even vulgarity.

2. In a recent encyclical, titled "*Fides et Ratio*," Pope John Paul II actually used the word postmodernism to condemn extreme relativism in values and beliefs, acute irony and skepticism toward reason, and the denial of any possibility of truth, human or divine – in short, from the Church's point of view, incipient nihilism.

3. In cultural studies, a highly politicized field, the term postmodernism often surrenders to postcolonialism, the former deemed historically feckless, being "unpolitical" or, worse, not political in the right way. Postcolonialism is deemed a serious concept, postmodernism a light one.

4. In Pop culture, postmodernism – or PoMo as Yuppies call it insouciantly – refers to a wide range of phenomena, from Andy Warhol to Madonna, from the colossal plaster Mona Lisa I saw advertising a *pachinko* parlor in Tokyo to the giant, cardboard figure of Michelangelo's David – pink dayglo glasses; canary shorts; a camera slung across bare, brawny shoulders – advertising Kon Tiki Travel in New Zealand.

What do all these have in common? The answer is familiar by now: fragments; hybridity; relativism; play; parody; pastiche; an ironic, sophisticated stance; an ethos bordering on kitsch and camp. So, willy nilly, we have begun to gather a family of words applying to postmodernism; we have begun to sketch a context, if not a definition, for it. (More ambitious readers can consult Hans Bertens' *The Idea of the Postmodern*, the best and fairest introduction to the topic I know.)

But who needs definitions nowadays, anyway? The desert grows, the desert grows, Nietzsche growled only yesterday, and our mouths now parch with de-definition, with disbelief. Still, rather than construct bizarre tables, contrasting modernism with post-modernism, as certain critics have done, I propose to engage postmodernism in ways that may lead us through it, beyond it.

THE EQUIVOCAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN AGE

In 1784, Immanuel Kant asked, in a celebrated essay, "*Was ist Aufklärung?*" The question was taken up by Michel Foucault, though we would do better to ask ourselves, in terms of this particular occasion, "*Was ist Postmodernismus?*" How could we ever share the historical poise of the punctual thinker of Königsberg? Versed in suspicion, inward with incredulity, votaries of decenterment, pluralist, pragmatic, polychronic, we can hardly

privilege our moment as Kant privileged the Enlightenment. Instead, we betray an abandon of belatedness, a delirium of reflexivity, a limitless anxiety of self-nomination. Who am I, who are we – is that not the chorus of the moment? Perhaps postmodernism can be defined, after all, as a continuous exercise in self-definition. Or perhaps we can simply call it the equivocal autobiography of an age.

This is not altogether flip: two pivotal points are at issue here. One regards the hermeneutic seductions of postmodernism in developed societies. The other relates to the crisis of identity, driving geopolitics in the postwar era (I will return to that idea in discussing postmodernity). Let me begin with the former.

Autobiography, as we all know, is a verbal interpretation – not simply recollection, not simply construction – of a life. So is postmodernism a collective interpretation of an age. More than an artistic style or historical trend, more than a personal sensibility or *Zeitgeist*, postmodernism is a hermeneutic device, a habit of interpretation, a way of reading all our signs under the mandate of misprision. I simply mean that we now see the world through postmodern-tinted glasses. Rabelais? Look at all those excesses of parody and pastiche, all those paratactical lists. Sterne? Please, don't be obvious. Jane Austen? See all those self-reflexive ironies, those subtle deconstructions of squirearchy not to mention phallocracy. And so it goes (as Vonnegut would say). Moreover, it's all true, or at least partially true. But not even a *fatwa* would induce me to consider Rabelais, Sterne, and Austen postmodern or, preposterously, pre-postmodern.

Certainly, we read history from the vantage of the present; certainly we write history as narratives, tropic and revisionary. But this gives us no licence to cannibalise our past to feed our flesh. History, too, has its pragmatic truth, its otherness, which refuses assimilation to our needs, our desires. History, too, requires our tact, our respect, our trust: I mean that measure of intuition, empathy, and self-discipline enabling every cognitive act.

I hope you do not think I have lost myself in the labyrinths of postmodernism. Words like truth, trust, tact are key to the idiom of this paper, and I will return to them, repeatedly. For the moment, however, I wanted simply to suggest that postmodernism could be understood as a kind of autobiography, an interpretation of our lives in developed societies, linked to an epochal crisis of identity, the other pivotal point.

A GLOBAL CRISIS OF IDENTITY

What, then, is that global crisis of identity? Look everywhere, the evidence chills the blood, boggles the mind. Fortunately, some sane and readable books, like Michael Ignatieff's *Blood and Belonging* and Amin Maalouf's *In the Name of Identity*, help us to

awake from this particular nightmare of history. The latter work is especially pertinent here, though I can summarise its generous argument only in the boldest terms.

Maalouf calls for the acceptance of multiple and dynamic identities, without prejudice to any; he rejects, in all of us, a single, static, essential self, “deep down inside,” coercing other allegiances. And he insists on respect, reciprocity, non-exclusiveness, in the exacerbated traffic between fields of cultural force, anthropological zones, estates of personal being. Still, since modernity is so often perceived as the hand of the stranger in many cultures, the shadow of suspicion, indeed of outraged rejection, as Maalouf notes, falls on the West, especially on the United States. In this nexus, a free spirituality, loosely attached, or even unattached, to the need to belong, may prove salutary. Maalouf concludes by enjoining us to act and to dream:

We must act in such a way as to bring about a situation in which no one feels excluded from the common civilisation that is coming into existence; in which everyone may be able to find the language of his own identity and some symbols of his own culture; and in which everyone can identify to some degree with what he sees emerging in the world about him, instead of seeking refuge in an idealised past. (163)

That is, indeed, the practical dream of a pluralist postmodernity. But how is that crisis of identity relevant to postmodernism itself? And how do I distinguish between postmodernism and postmodernity?

In the past, I resorted to a neologism, “Indeterminance,” to interpret postmodernism. I meant to designate two decisive antithetical, but not dialectical, tendencies: indeterminacy and immanence. (See “Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence” in *The Postmodern Turn* and the “Postscript” of *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*.) Since then, the double process of “localisation” and “globalisation,” as every CEO now glibly says, has become dire. What I had hinted has become the daily grist of our news: I mean the sundry movements of secession, decolonisation, separatism, on the one hand, and the fluent imperium of high-tech, media capitalism, on the other – cargo cults here, satellites there, the Taliban in one place, Madonna everywhere. In sum, cultural postmodernism has mutated into genocidal postmodernity (witness Palestine, Bosnia, Kosovo, Ulster, Rwanda, Chechnya, Kurdistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Afghanistan, Tibet...). But cultural postmodernism itself has also metastasised into sterile, campy, kitschy, jokey, dead-end games or sheer media hype.

To these changes, the world responded with vast changes of its own, changes that I describe as postmodernity.

FROM POSTMODERNISM TO POSTMODERNITY

This brings me to the first braided theme of this essay: namely, the expansion of postmodernism into postmodernity. It is as if the breaks, the indeterminacies, of the former have turned into tribalism (postcolonial factions), and the immanences of the latter have accelerated world interactions (globalisation). I say “as if” because I distrust large and symmetrical explanations.

In any case, the horrendous facts of postmodernity invade our lives continually: diasporas, migrations, refugees, the killing fields, a crisis of personal and cultural values seemingly without parallel in history. Therefore, we may be forgiven to conclude: a specter is haunting Europe *and* the world – the specter of Identity. Can we wonder that its ghostly steps lead everywhere, from the jungles of the Philippines to those of Peru, from the ruins of the World Trade Center to the wastes of Gaza, from the tenements of Belfast to the mosques of Kashmir?

Some will proffer socio-economic explanations, the inequities of north and south, west and east, which feed the inequities of the world. Some will adduce vast conflicts of civilisations, which, since 9/11, have given Samuel P. Huntington renewed plausibility. And some will cite sociobiology, the “epigenetic rules” of E. O. Wilson or the “mass soul” of Elias Canetti, hard-wired in our species. Yet none of these facts suffices alone, as Amin Maalouf would agree.

Beyond postmodernism, beyond the evasions of poststructuralist theories and pieties of postcolonial studies, we need to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes – indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers – discover what I call a new, pragmatic and planetary civility. That’s the crux and issue of postmodernity.

But how do we establish this civility without borders?

Needless to say, short of omiscience, short of omnipotence, I find no answer to this query. But I can try to put certain ideas, certain words, into play, words that we have forgotten in academe, words that need, more than refurbishing, reinvention. I mean words like truth, trust, spirit, all uncapitalised, in addition to words like reciprocity and respect, sympathy and empathy, so central to *In the Name of Identity*. Here twines the second strand, or major theme, of the essay.

TRUTH AND TRUST

If truth is dead, then everything is permitted – because its alternatives, now more than ever, are rank power and rampant desire.

True (pun intended), we no longer share an absolute, transcendent, or foundational Truth. But in daily life, we distinguish well enough between truth and falsehood, from little white lies to darker deceptions. It is repugnant to pretend that the atrophy of transcendent truths licenses self-deception or justifies tendentiousness – truth is not *pravda*.

Truth is a single phoneme, but it carries the curse of miscellany, of sundry semantemes. There is traditional truth: what myth and tradition hold to have been always so. There is revealed truth: what a divine, sacred, or supernatural authority declares as true. There is the truth of power: what a tyrant proclaims, believe it or die. There is the truth of political or social or personal expediency: it would be good for the party, or for the community, or for my own interest, to assume such to be the case. There is truth as correspondence: in naïve science and empiricism. There is the more sophisticated truth of scientific falsification: a theory is held true until disproven. There is truth as coherence: in the arts, especially music, in mathematics and logical systems. There is the truth of a poetic intuition: for instance, Yeats's quip that we "can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence." There is subjective truth: what you intensely feel or experience or desire becomes incontrovertibly so. There are probably other kinds of imbricated truths, and they all revert to some underlying axiom or belief.

William James knew this nearly a century before Rorty or Derrida. In *Pragmatism*, he acknowledges the fecund diversity of truth, a truth, he says "*made, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience*" (143). But this is *not* an invitation to cynicism, self-interest, or ideological mendacity. For at the heart of James's own philosophical practice is an idea of *trust: truth rests not on transcendence but on trust*. This fiduciary principle is epistemic, ethical, and personal all at the same time, since our trust must also depend on another's trust, and our faith, James remarks in *The Will To Believe*, "is faith in someone else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case" (9). Hence the self-defeating character of radical relativism, of extreme particularism, which denies reciprocity, denies both empathy and obligation.

Epistemic trust flows, in Western cultures at least, from evidence, logic, dispassion, trial, doubt – from intuitions and speculations, too, that can earn our unselfish assent. Altruism, like self-criticism, is conducive to trust. Such trust, I have said, is fragile. "How can one and the same identical fact experience itself so diversely?" James asks in *A Pluralistic Universe* (94f). And in the end – I repeat, in the end – he answers that our "passional natures" must decide "*between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*" (W,11). But these "passional natures," I wonder, have they no cognizance of broader restraint, a larger reference?

The question reclaims maligned universals. Both social determinism and cultural constructionism find them anathema. Yet universals, not Platonic but empiric, abound. For

instance: languages; human emotions; marks of status; ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death; gods, spirits, taboos and their rituals; not to mention sociobiological imperatives like the sixty-seven cross-cultural practices Wilson lists in *Consilience* (160f.). Human beings are not a *terra nullius* colonised by myriad systems of signs. Human beings also create themselves and recreate their environments, and chance and aeons of biological evolution help shape their lives. (To hard-core cultural constructionists, I say: browse Matt Ridley's *The Genome Project* or Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate* to see the intricacies of "nature" and "nurture," no longer separable in their interactions.) In sum, human beings not only vary infinitely; they also share a portion in the infinite.

Pragmatic or "soft" universals need not alarm us; they enable both individual and collective judgments. Without them, the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights would vapo- rise; without them, Amnesty International would whistle in the wind; without them, jurists at the Hague would sit in an empty court; without them, Greenpeace or the Kyoto Proto- cols would founder in the Pacific. In short, without qualified generalisations, no appeal to reason, freedom, or justice can stand; no victim can find redress, no tyrant retribution.

I am aware of the arguments against Truth (capitalised), from Nietzsche to Derrida. Nietzsche offered the best challenge, first in his youthful essay on "Truth and Lying in the Ultra Moral Sense," then in his posthumous *Will to Power*. Truth, he said in the earlier essay, is "a mobile army of metaphors" (508); truth, he later declared, is an aspect of the "will to power," thus a "*processus in infinitum*, an active determining" (298). But the truth he attacks is not pragmatic, only universal, truth.

William James, we have seen, also abandons the transcendental view of truth, opening it to our "willing nature," nudging it toward a "noetic pluralism," a process more than state, subject always to contestation. Still, his view makes place for a will to truth, as strong in certain human beings – the great saints, artists, scientists, intellectuals – as the will to power or the will to believe. Does not Oedipus embody, beyond a shady Freudian complex, that miraculous will to truth – what interest can it possibly serve? – that implacable will to truth, at the cost of self-destruction, entailing blindness, bringing a deeper, luminous sight?

Oedipus here is apt. Truth, I have said, rests on trust, personal, social, cognitive trust. But what is trust? Roundly, I answer: more than consensus, trust depends on self-abnegation, self-emptying, something akin to *kenosis*. It requires dispassion, empathy, attention to others and to the created world, to something not in ourselves. But, ultimately, it demands self-dispossession. That is why truth and trust remain spiritual qualities – not simply psychological, not merely political, but, above all, spiritual values.

At the mention of spirit, some may grit their teeth. So, put spirit aside, if you must; I will not insist on a willing suspension of disbelief. Consider another line of thought. The

humanities, by the very nature of their epistemologies, can not resist the incursions of history and politics, ideology and illusion. *But that is precisely why the humanities must not yield to their promiscuous incursions*, which would degrade knowledge, deface evidence, defeat answerability. Truth does matter, as we know from Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Lecture (a single truth is more powerful than all the weapons of the world, he claimed); as we have rediscovered in the Sokal Affair. Truth matters and the "calm sunlight of the mind" (5), as Susan Haack put it in her wise *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*. We may be all biased, as the jejune slogan goes, but we are not all biased about the same things, or to the same degree, or in the same manner, nor, *above all*, do we all comply with our biases invariably. Discriminations here are the life-blood of thought, nuance is mind. If nothing else, let us recover the truth of tact and nuance, the trust of intellectual courtesy, which tacitly assumes self-control, if not outright *kenosis*.

REALISM AND THE AESTHETIC OF TRUST

I come at last to the aesthetic, to the literary question, in my subtitle: "Toward an Aesthetic of Trust."

As you know, Beauty is back in the work of Elaine Scary, Wendy Steiner, Charles Jencks, among others – and I am immensely cheered. But I will consider the aesthetic here from another ambit, that of realism. Realism, you cry, in 2002, *realism?* A moment ago, I spoke of trust as a quality of attention to others, to the created world, to something not in ourself. Is that not the premise of realism?

Realism is no light matter: it touches the inviolable mystery of mind's relation to the world. It refers us to the enigma of representation, the conundrum of signs, the riddle of language, the chimera of consciousness itself. So let us step gingerly here.

Elsewhere, I have presumed to remark on realism in science, philosophy, painting, photography, and literature, concluding that realism, despite its cunning, is a convention built on answerable faith – something like Santa Claus. Ernst Gombrich summed it up in *Art and Illusion* with wondrous concinnity: "the world," he said, "can never quite look like a picture, but a picture can look like the world" (395).

And in literature? We all know the epochal work of Erich Auerbach, a Teutonic hymn to mimesis. But a reader of that work may well conclude that the great scholar regards the loss of mimesis in modernism with acute ambivalence. The "uninterpretable symbolism" in the works of Joyce and Woolf; the "multiple reflection of consciousness" leaving the "reader with an impression of hopelessness," "something confusing, something hazy... something hostile to the reality which... [the works] represent;" the "atmosphere of universal doom" and implied "hatred of civilization" (551) – Auerbach finds all these

distressing in modern literature. At the same time, he fairly recognises that in the work of Virginia Woolf “random occurrence” can yield “something new and elemental...nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice” (552).

I am not sure that Saul Bellow or John Updike would disagree with Auerbach. I am not sure that younger writers, like David Malouf (this the Australian not the French Maalouf now) or Salman Rushdie or Vargas Llosa or Michael Ondaatje would disagree either. I am not sure that certain qualified postmodernists would fail to recognise the price literature has paid in renouncing realism altogether. Hence, the innovative, not to say magical, realism in such novels as Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Vargas-Llosa’s *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (which the author claims to be an accurate description of life in Sri Lanka, a claim similar to that of Garcia Marquez about life in his native Columbia).

The critical point here is that literary realism, though it may not suffice, remains indispensable; its discontents spill into, indeed inform, other genres.

Myself, I believe that Virginia Woolf’s strictures against certain realists – Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, Mr. Galsworthy, as she called them with withering courtesy – still stand. They are “materialists,” she wrote in *The Common Reader*, by which she meant that “they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (187). *That* has ever been the banal flaw of realism. Yet Woolf herself had great faith in the possibilities of the novel, and in the same essay, “Modern Fiction,” she reminds us that there is no limit to the novel’s horizon, “and that nothing – no ‘method,’ no experiment, even the wildest – is forbidden, but only falsity and pretense” (194).

Only falsity and pretense are forbidden: these words lead to my penultimate section.

ON SPIRIT AND THE VOID

Falsity and pretence stand nearly antithetical to truth and trust. Hence my interest in what I will call fiduciary realism, a postmodern aesthetic of trust. Such an aesthetic would assume “negative capability” (Keats), but would go farther toward self-emptying; as in Shakespeare, Kafka, or Beckett, it would become acquainted with Silence, with the Void. For Nothing (Nothingness) is the other face of fiduciary realism. Emily Dickinson expressed it stunningly:

By lonely gift and hindered Words
The human heart is told

Of Nothing –
 “Nothing” is the force
 That renovates the World. (650)

She might have said as well: “That renovates the Word.” For a realism of faith must know that Silence or Absence is the ground of language, the ground of Being itself. This idea, surely central to both modernism and postmodernism, makes us all acolytes of the void. This intuition, central again to postmodernism, surely engages spirit as I understand it. But how do I understand, if not define, spirit?

For the last time, I need to step back a little, in order to see past, beyond, postmodernism. By the late eighties, I have said, I began to wonder how postmodernism could recreate its best self. Could it take a spiritual turn? Could the materialist ideologies of the moment open or crack? And what would spirit mean in our intellectual culture of disbelief? Certainly, it would not mean atavism, fundamentalism, or occultism; it may not mean adherence to orthodox religions – Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam – though it would not exclude them.

I did not answer these questions, though I made a stumbling start in an essay titled “The Expense of Spirit in Postmodern Times.” There, with some encouragement from figures as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, and John Cage, I envisaged a postmodern, spiritual attitude compatible with emergent technologies; with geopolitical realities (population, pollution, the growing obsolescence of the nation state); with the needs of the wretched of the earth; with the interests of feminists and minorities and multicultural societies; with an ecological, planetary humanism; and perhaps even with millennial hopes. I could so envisage the prospects of a postmodern spiritual attitude, without occult bombinations or New Age platitudes, because spirit pervades a variety of secular experiences, from dreams, creative intuitions in art or science, and a sense of the sublime, to extraordinary, visionary states, including the gift of seeing the eternal in the temporal, an apprehension of primal relations in the universe. Indeed, spirit echoes even in geopolitics, as in current debates of the idea of Forgiveness with regards to genocides (see the references to Ricoeur, Derrida, Morin, Kristeva, among others, in a recent issue of *PMLA*).

Dictionaries offer many senses of “spirit.” These usually center on something fundamental to human existence yet intangible, an activating principle, a cosmic curiosity, a meaning, often religious or metaphysical in character, shading into the ethical yet irreducible to it. This bedrock meaning is not obsolete; for as Saul Bellow noted in his Nobel Lecture of 1976, when distraction increases, so does the desire for essentials. Can that desire be alien to our spiritual impulses? Is it not alive still in the work of another Nobelist, Seamus Heaney, who spoke of poetry as a “matter of angelic potential, a motion of the soul,” and of “tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium” (192, 3)?

Yet spirit does not offer invariable solace. As mystics know – I am *not* one – spirit is exigent; it has its harshness, its clouds of unknowing, its dark nights of the soul. It may begin in agnosticism and end in despair. This is particularly true in postmodern times, times of irony, suspicion, nihilism. Yet even nihilism, at its best, can serve as a penultimate form of lucidity. Thus, as I have insisted, a postmodern spiritual attitude may become deeply acquainted with *kenosis* – self-emptying, yes, but also the self-undoing of our knowledge in the name of something more fundamental than deconstruction: that is, in the name of Reality.

I have no space here to elaborate this concept of unknowing, of cognitive undoing or nescience, a kind of intellectual *via negativa*. I need only repeat that fiduciary realism – a postmodern realism, if any – demands faith and empathy and trust precisely because it rests on Nothingness, the nothingness within all our representations, the final authority of the Void.

But let me conclude now before I vanish into Buddhist nirvana before your very eyes.

CONCLUSION

My path has been sinuous. Perhaps I can make some amends by carrying forthrightly the argument to its conclusion, a quasi-utopian conclusion, I admit.

What lies beyond postmodernism?

In the larger scheme, postmodernity looms, postmodernity with its multiple crises of identity, with its diasporas and genocides, with its desperate negotiations between local practices and global procedures. To call this condition simply postcolonial is to misperceive our world. For colonialism and its afterglow cast only a partial light on our condition; colonialism is not the whole of our history. In this regard, I regret that prominent postcolonial critics have sometimes chosen to tap the vast, often justified, resentments of our moment instead of bringing to it fresh, equitable, and true discernment.

We, in our literary professions, must turn to truth, truth spoken not only to power but, more anguished, truth spoken to ourselves. This can not be sectarian, self-serving truth, which appeals only to partisans and subverts trust.

Trust, I have claimed, is a spiritual value, inward with self-dispossession, and in its postmodern form, familiar with the void. For only through nihilism is nihilism overcome. Our second innocence is self-heedlessness, and beyond that, “unknowing.” In the Japanese *Hagakura*, there is a shocking statement, inviting meditation, not explication: “This man has worth. In the highest level, a man has the look of knowing nothing” (26). I, for one, would trust such a man. I would also trust Voss, in Patrick White’s shattering

novel by that name, who at the end of his spiritual agonies in the Australian desert cries: “Now that I am nothing, I am, and love is the simplest of all tongues” (291).

Does love have a place in an essay on postmodernism? It does. A postmodern aesthetic of trust, I have argued, brings us to a fiduciary realism, a realism that redefines the relation between subject and object, self and other, in terms of profound trust. Are we not close here to something deeper than empathy, something akin to love? Are we not broaching, beyond realism, Reality?

An aesthetic of trust is, ultimately, a stance toward Reality, not toward objects. At the *far limit*, such a stance demands identification with Reality itself, dissolution of the distinction between the I and not-I. Emerson said it famously in “Nature:” “...all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing, I see all” (10). That is the horizon, infinitely far, attainable only by the elect, toward which fiduciary realism tends.

I repeat: it is a horizon, seen and perhaps imagined but never reached. But in the sublunary world we inhabit, fiduciary realism must content itself with humbler aims. It needs only acknowledge its debt to spirit, its wide attentiveness, its intuition of *kenosis*. Such an intuition may also assuage the trials of postmodernity, the clamors of identity – sages say, the solution to identity is, get lost – thus linking our two themes, cultural postmodernism and global postmodernism. Identities created by an assured way of being in the world flow toward ultimate mysteries, sometimes called sacred, beyond the horizons of their assurance. And they can do so without benefit of dogma – church, mosque, temple, shrine – because spirit finally empties itself out of its own forms.

But even that acknowledgment may put on postmodernists too great a demand. Perhaps it will suffice, on any good day, for fiduciary realism, to follow the advice of David Malouf in *Remembering Babylon*:

...the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even with the most obvious. We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there. (130)

Rub your eyes, rub them, please, without undue reflexivity, and without prejudice to Creation. That is my charge to postmodernists, which I hope is neither nostalgic nor utopian.

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