

## Some Friendly Words for the Postmodern

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Work in progress, Max Deutscher

### Radio short-circuits the urban-rural line

I heard on the radio the other day that on going deep into the forest to find the reclusive lyre bird your ‘return to nature’ was met with a mobile phone theme-call, mimed of course by the reliable native bird, oblivious to your eco- sensibilities, perhaps not even innocent of the appeal of technology. Here, lines intersect: classical purity of nature, progressive sciences of modernity and postmodern irony. Not that I would reduce what the postmodern offers to ironic distance. The postmodern is a deliberate and deliberately partial resolution of the competing demands and attractions of past traditions and modern discoveries and challenges. The postmodern is alternative to the dreams of a golden classical age that could coexist with innocent nature. It is alternative to purist modernist fantasies of an escape from superstitious ignorance and the darkness of human nature – from history, in short. How a lyrebird returns technology, dispelling classical and modernist illusions can be intensified. In *Notes from a Wild Country*, Deborah Bird Rose cites reports from that ‘wild country’ that existed for the peoples who began to encounter each other, here, in the late 18C. Those who arrived thought to ‘tame’ a ‘wild country’ – and had their pangs of regret at the loss of a state of ‘pre-civilised innocence’, too. Bird presents the recorded words of those already here who saw Cook and those around him as ‘wild men’, and mourned the increasing *wildness* of the Australian land that was being produced by the newcomers. It is not that *they* saw it as being ‘tamed’ and hated that, as if longing to continue their ‘wild unfettered ways’. They saw an influx of ‘wild unfettered ways’ destroying what they had, in immeasurable years of physical work and artistic practice, raised up to a decipherable order. Their words and perceptions issue in a gesture that deconstructs modernist pretensions to an unequivocal command of what counts as civilisation. But with no less force, that indigenous judgment deconstructs the nostalgia of the modern settlers for a ‘return to nature’. Nostalgia for a past that never was, as Derrida puts it.

Is there something about the radio that announces the postmodern? Years ago, in the mid ‘80s, we were camping on the banks of the Murray River near Corowa. In the evening we were sitting in the car – taking refuge from the rigours of the tent – from the dark, perhaps the silence. There beside the river, under the red gums, over the radio came the voice of someone reading Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Stranger*. The expected comforting voice of steady narration is, if a narrative voice at all, that of a radio commentator (and who were we, listening to the radio not having heard of the conceit of Calvino’s non-novel that the opening

words were not, precisely, that of a radio commentator?) or public lecturer introducing a ‘reading’ – thus speaking as if directly through the pages to the reader before the pages begin:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, ‘No I don’t want to watch TV!’ Raise your voice – they won’t hear you otherwise – I’m reading! I don’t want to be disturbed!’ Maybe they haven’t heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: ‘I’m beginning to read Italo Calvino’s new novel!’ Or, if you prefer, don’t say anything; just hope they’ll leave you alone.

As if the author himself – though he’s used a literary *compère* – someone introducing a literary work – were questioning the possibility of going on reading novels, now that we know their form so well. We know all too well what must happen simply because they are *novels* and have their appointed task to fulfil. As when, watching a tense crime drama, we look at the program and say to the one watching with us ‘Well, they’ve only got less than ten minutes to wind it up and bring it all together.’ That fragment of a literary *compère*’s voice is itself a fragment of a story no less than it is a compressed story about writing. And of course we hear, not the ‘real voice’ behind the story, but one more persona created by the one whom realism tells us must be somewhere back there in the dark behind the dark of a voice on radio. Someone who once was *actually writing* the whole thing. The unseen author. Yes, one might well have met Calvino. Had you done that and he felt like talking he might have told you, as would any writer, that, in speaking to him – a real encounter, no mere voice mediated through a series of literary narrators mediated by technology into the Australian bush – still you are separated by a *categorical* difference from some ‘one real source’ of the various narrators that were constructed as he turned to his daily task in writing his non-novel.

These, with other like observations about how the materiality of writing goes with the dematerialisation of the ‘author’ as origin that explains it, are collected under a famous dictum typical of the *postmodern* – ‘that the author is dead’ – a figure of language that recalls the Zarathustra who says ‘God is dead’.<sup>1</sup> (Another of Nietzsche’s voices says that, in effect, God is preserved in our grammar.) One thinks of the voice in the Hebrew Book (collection) that utters ‘The fool has said in his heart that there is no God’. ‘God’ is in part a name. Only a fool would name something and then say that it wasn’t there. It is, even more profoundly, an *appellate*. It is a word with which one calls upon a being presumed capable of hearing and responding. What kind of a fool calls upon a being in order to announce his non-existence?

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<sup>1</sup> To say that *Nietzsche* declared that God is dead is typical of the failure to read what is *doing in writing*. *He* raises up a classical voice from the pantheon who utters in frenzy that we have murdered God. (Lloyd Reinhardt has remarked that there is a paragraph in *The Gay Science* where Nietzsche says for himself, ‘God is Dead’.

Early in the last century, a few decades after Nietzsche wrote *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Bertrand Russell was sensitive to the tangle involved in denying existence to a being that one seems to accept in the act of naming it. He untied the tangle. By *deconstructing* proper names he neutralised naming's implication of existence. As with the paradoxes,<sup>2</sup> he offers an evasive manoeuvre to avoid the gesture of calling upon a being one denies to exist. He avoids naming altogether, reminding us of how, when an interlocutor does not know whose proper name we are using, we replace it by identifying descriptions.<sup>3</sup> In place of '*God exists*', Russell writes '*There is something that is all-knowing and all-powerful, and any being that is all-knowing and all-powerful is that (same) one being.*' One can then deny the existence of any such being without making the gesture of first *naming* something.

If we follow Russell's manoeuvre these days we do not pretend that any use of descriptions (no matter how extended) *restores* the sense of a proper name. Rather, we might use a picture of explanations typical of Derrida – writing our new 'descriptions' over the partially *erased traces* of the old 'proper names'.<sup>4</sup> Derrida is amongst those of a 'postmodern' temper who would leave behind, along with assertions and denials of the existence of God, the whole field of metaphysical declarations about the mind, soul, consciousness and time. To insist upon the name of God even in denying 'His' existence – to call out to a being one holds not to exist – is a gesture that resembles *mourning*. To mourn is, for the very reason that one knows that someone is dead, to call out to them. Because to grieve involves one's continuance in a mind that would address the one we miss, we engage in acts that we know to be self-belying. Derrida took up as an iterated theme, these deliberate impossible acts from which we seem to find it impossible to extricate ourselves. Derrida's foes criticise him as 'irrationalist', citing him as accepting contradictions – as if he *believes in* what is impossible. But to shoot the messenger

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<sup>2</sup> Faced with self-reference infecting with paradox general systems like logic and mathematics and finding no solution within the terms of the system, he sidesteps the problem with a 'theory of types'.

<sup>3</sup> Someone called 'Isaac' lives next door to someone who says to another neighbour that Isaac was almost murdered by his father. '***You're saying that the man next door was nearly murdered by his father!***' (Laughs) '***For God's sake, I mean the one who is described in Genesis as having been bound and placed as ready for a holocaust!***' Russell rather took himself to be offering a *logical equivalence* to the use of a name. We now say that he was offering us not a duplicate language but an alternative form, not equivalent but still adequate to what we need when we identify the people, things and events that we name.

<sup>4</sup> In the contemporary encounters of Richard Dawkins with the dedicated and the sometimes verbally quite skillful 'creationists' we can perceive shades of the difficulty that Russell encountered in trying to argue for atheism when confronted with practised theologians. Dawkins says that he thinks the theological tradition asked the right questions, but gave the wrong answers. So his own right answers are made to be considered on the same ground as that of the theologians. He is right to resist the appeasing line that theology and science have their own proper validity in their own spheres. But to score a direct hit by placing science on the same terrain as theology he turns science into a kind of theology despite himself. In some imaginary world he would never mention God or Real Origins. He would intrigue his listeners with the details of scientific practice and thought, so that they would leave 'God' and 'Christ' and all that in some lumber room under the house. Decades later they might peep in at it with a rueful smile. After millenia, people could enjoy the whole story with impunity, as we enjoy and learn from the ancient Greek tales, not to mention those indigenous to our own country.

is *unjust* and to call Derrida's tracing of paradoxical speech acts self-contradictory is *illiterate*. What disturbs even his careful readers however, is his *acceptance* of these 'impossible' practices of mourning, giving gifts, or finding origins.<sup>5</sup> Deconstruction does not translate them away.

### **Reality and Textuality**

Andreas Huyssen's 'Mapping the Post-modern'<sup>6</sup> presents a clear idea of what is perceived as deconstruction's alleged denial of reality ('the Real') in favour of the play of text on text. Discussing 'whether .a self-limitation to language and textuality has not made post-modernism a mere 'atrophied [relic] of an earlier aestheticism', Huyssen concludes with the flourish:

To insist on the adversarial function of.. breaking linguistic codes when every second ad bristles with domesticated .. post-modernist strategies strikes me as .. that very overestimation of art's transformative function for society, which is the signature of an earlier, modernist, age. Unless, of course, *écriture* is merely practised as a glass bead game in happy .. or cynical isolation from the realm the uninitiated keep calling reality.

But one cannot call upon 'the uninitiated' since 'they' (that is, we ourselves) talk not about Reality, but of the usual things - ships and sealing wax and kings. Those who do remark about Reality at large speak as if those in *another* domain have access to it.

To say that post-modern intensified forms of writing are carried out in isolation from what the uninitiated' call 'reality' makes it seem as if there are reports about what happens 'out there' which the post-modernist ear would not heed. But any claim about how things are can, as a 'text', be considered by anyone. Nothing is foreign to the post-modern. The mythical postmodernist is reckoned to hold that it is texts that are heard and seen rather than the reality they purport to describe. How could this be other than a myth? Is it really supposed that those who deconstruct our language about the world make sure to keep their eyes and ears 'wide shut'? Then they could not *read* texts since textualists take writing as *material* – not as an immaterial 'meaning'. Friends of the postmodern adopt the language of 'textualisation' when it suits; at all times we keep our eyes peeled and an ear to the ground.

The paranoid reactions to 'post-modern practices of deconstruction' – to 'the emphasis on text and inter-textual play' – arise out of an implicit assumption that acts of speech and writing are a kind of intermediary between Reality and us. The reactions to the persistent textual focus of deconstructive methods are so extreme that you would think the world itself was in danger of demolition – as if 'postmodernism' or 'deconstruction' might replace Reality-Itself with post-

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps they think, 'Surely, if rational, he ought to chide humanity for its mourning, its giving of gifts, its attempts at final explanations of origin. Why does he describe it so patiently?

<sup>6</sup> *Feminism/Postmodernism ed. Linda Nicholson. Routledge N.Y.1990*

modernist language and that the public might be taken in by this legerdemain. Even were such suspicions correct, only *remarks* about language as a ‘play of text on text’ would replace *remarks* about language as ‘concerning Reality’. ‘*Language might replace Reality*’ is itself a piece of ‘text’ that one would set about to deconstruct. Philosophy stages its own special theatre of the absurd for those players who declaim sternly about the need for philosophers (and all) to recognise Reality-Itself as that which authenticates speech and makes true what we declare in language. The declaimer reveals himself as thinking of Reality as flimsy – ready to be blown away by the deconstructive rhetoric that he decries as enfeebling ontology. As if reality might be at risk from what the Realist wants to regard as ‘mere’ writing.

If writing were ‘mere’ writing, and did not involve reality at every point, and at every stage, then it could not, in any case, threaten anything. And if writing can carry force, can pose and take an existential and an ontological risk, then one ought not fear that the close study of the play of text on text would diminish the vivid and concrete sense of dealing with how things are – just what good writing evokes. We get merely a bizarre image if we were to require the writer to have one eye on Reality and just half an eye on the page as they put pen to it. To evoke the reality when we write, we fully attend to writing.

To attend to text as erasure and the tracing over of previous texts is to pay close attention to how things are. Derrida describes the project of metaphysics in terms of indefinite deferral because he diagnoses its chronic intellectual *disease* as the project of ‘capturing’ reality itself and giving it an immediate presence in a writing that would (as if by magic) transcend its own contribution to the process. Thus Derrida describes as an indefinite deferral the practice of metaphysical writing. If metaphysics aims at an absolute revelation of Reality then its results defer its Presence. We go to grasp Reality Itself and fill the page with writing. It is childish to blame Derrida or the ‘corrupting practice of deconstruction’. We need have no fear that attention to text is inattention to how things are. Every text says how things are.<sup>7</sup> Saying how things are is the one act that cannot be deferred when you write. If we do not like what we find has been said (or the way it is said) then we contest it. In so doing, we add to the currents of writing about how things are. To defer that is to defer the business of writing.

Inexorably, texts lead on to further texts as we explain and describe what we began to deal with. But that is not an indefinite deferral of description and reference, since every coherent part of a text says how something *is*. And the appearance of the text is not a deferral of the appearance of Reality Itself, since that cannot *appear as part* of a text. So let us ‘erase’

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<sup>7</sup> To decree how matters ought to stand is to say that *how things are* leaves much to be desired.

*Reality Itself* and lightly pencil over it, 'Each and every way that something is'. What, in a text, is said to *be* cannot be excluded from the text – but is neither inside nor outside it. It is 'within' simply as *mentioned*. And were we to fantasise textuality as *replacing* or *displacing* reality then as taking on reality's role it would remain neither inside nor outside the text.<sup>8</sup> There is nothing left to be 'inside', and, to be 'outside the text' reality would be outside itself.

### **Out in the real world**

Academics, perhaps philosophers in particular, are liable to think of themselves as cut off in their living and their thinking from the 'real world out there'. This is an illusion that is common to any profession. A real-estate agent, the archetype of a 'hard-nosed realist', expresses his envy of philosophers because his life puts him 'out of touch with the real world'. Locked in to the closed circuit of seeing people in terms of their moving out of or into houses, he feels that he has come to see houses merely in their capacity to inspire the fantasy that generates a sale. Thus he comes to feel that a philosopher, meeting others on the basis of mutual disinterested interest, is the one in the 'real world'. As philosopher (he romances) we deal with people and their ideas without impediment or restriction.

People involved in intensive commercial enterprises are not in touch with the real world, of course - they are hypnotised by the ledger sheets (or computer screens) of profit and loss, of futures, take-overs, and all the 'merely symbolic' representations of some underlying industrial, agricultural and domestic realities without which business would scatter like moonbeams. Like the ghostly phenomena of epiphenomenalism,<sup>9</sup> the business of entrepreneurial capitalism seems to ride upon a material base that it needs but from which it is forbidden intimate acquaintance.<sup>10</sup> There is a 'real world out there' of those who invent, build, produce, carry, shop, cook, store and sell.

The lawyer deals with social shadows cast into their office by theft, violence and fraud. City folk buy food as a commodity – inside wrappings that bear no trace of the white heat of a wheat field or the bellowing and stench of the abattoirs. Scientists can feel enclosed in their laboratories as they control processes in artificial environments; they describe the world only in terms of the most extreme of abstractions. The *non*-scientific and *un*-scientific come no closer for abandoning intellectuality. Unwilling to probe how things appear, they cannot see

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<sup>8</sup> Berkeley cannot deny *reality*. When his 'ideas' replace 'objects' the ideas become realities in themselves.

<sup>9</sup> A dualism of the 'real' and the 'representation': the representation produced by the Real has no effect upon it.

<sup>10</sup> Dealers in electronic capital – are they the ones in touch with the *realities* of economics?

beyond the present moment for lack of concepts and theories. What to do? Take up the cause of ‘intelligent’ design? Confer the status of theory upon old myths?<sup>11</sup>

Such alienated scepticism by each about their world recalls for us the first moment of uncomprehending reflection when we have been disturbed from our usual absorption in the world, as we know it best. We are derailed from the tracks that had set the familiar view. We had lived within the consciousness of totalizing realists, accepting things as being simply *the world*.<sup>12</sup> When we become aware of the partiality engendered by our position and its synergistic vision we feel caught in unreality. *Reality* now ‘lies beyond’ these ‘old illusions’. Reality as where we are not – the talisman of traditional metaphysics.<sup>13</sup>

After the enlightening task of sorting out these confusions our next thought might be that *everything* is real – all too real. Freed from the sceptical hiatus in finding reality and truth, now it seems that there is no escaping it. Far from eluding our search Reality becomes our shadow. It dogs every step, laughs at every tic as it eludes our every attempt to leap from it. As when I jump towards my own shadow, I cannot get so close to Reality as to stand upon what moves with me at every step.<sup>14</sup>

### **Being true, being factual, and being there**

‘Tell me, where is fancy bred? Or in the heart or in the head? (*Merchant of Venice*, Act , Sc. ).

Truth pertains to what we say and think, not to what there is, beyond what there is that includes the beings who do the saying and thinking – ‘true friends’, ‘true observers’, ‘true recorders of events’. If we are inclined to say that there were *truths* such as ‘dinosaurs existed during the Jurassic period’ long before beings capable of asserting or thinking them, this leaning is well served by recognising that *dinosaurs* existed then. That is to say, before anyone thought or said anything about what there is, there were, roaming and populating the

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<sup>11</sup> Her I am indebted to Gilbert Ryle’s ‘The World of Science and the Everyday World’ (*Dilemmas*, 1953).

<sup>12</sup> A contradiction lurks here like that which undoes the time traveller who would go back to the past. S/he knows s/he must remain an uninvolved spectator so as not to disturb history. S/he arrives in the Past. Too late! Already the time traveller exists where ‘before’ the time travel s/he was not, so that s/he is and is not at that place and time. The history of the world is undone by a silent presence and a glance.

<sup>13</sup> One might have said, carelessly, ‘Western’ metaphysics – the ‘West’, not a geographical *relation* but a *quality* of life and thought. ‘Orientalism’ glorifies, then denigrates ‘East’ and then ‘West’. The cultural fantasy is of a ‘genuine’ reality over that horizon from which new days dawn. But then the ‘truth dawns’. If you were to *live* in the east, no longer would it *be before you* as ‘the East’. (No longer *be for you* as ‘the East’.) Only as a visitor who ‘lives elsewhere’ does it remain east of you, to keep its exotic quality. If you still *live* back in the West when present in the East, you realize that you left the ‘West’ in the illusion that reality was elsewhere. While ‘in’ the East you recall the sense that you hoped by travel to surpass – that you were in reality by being where you were, self referentially. But if that were *now* true you would be *living* here and no longer in the ‘East’ (The graffiti in the elevator - ‘I AM LOST’. Written below it, ‘NO, YOU ARE HERE.’)

<sup>14</sup> Here I acknowledge debts to Gilbert Ryle in ‘Self-knowledge’ (*The Concept of Mind*, Ch.6) and Donna Haraway in ‘Situated Knowledges’ (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 1991).

world, not truths but animals, birds, forests. And yet people do often react against any denial of the reality of eternal unwritten unspoken truths as if it were some sort of relativism. And, the spirit of the postmodern being to include a variety of textualities, it is suspected of infection by a virulent new strain of relativism.

Worse, 'relativism' itself is uttered as an almost universal swear/smear word. The pope thinks we are relativists if we think that we work out moral principles for ourselves rather than receiving them from an omniscient divine being. For those who would flourish their absolutes, the modernists who violently reject 'postmodern relativism' are themselves derogated as relativists because modernity (in the form of science and many kinds of professional philosophy) make people the judge of any alleged absolute, whether it be an absolute of faith, morality or science. It turns out that whether one is to be classified as a 'relativist' is itself a relative matter.

There are varieties of relativity. Dealing with them is integral to any possible objectivity in our approach to issues, people, things and events: a large ant is smaller than a small elephant. What we judge to be the case is relative to the framework of measurement taken (usually tacitly) as appropriate. If that is 'relativism' then we had better be 'relativist'. Within the disputes about relativism (even in professional philosophy) a form of 'subjectivism' (a scurvy term) is passed off as the most objectionable sort of relativism. What is true is what is true for 'me'. And who or what is this 'I'? Any being who currently assumes this self-referring expression. For each person, what is true is what is true for that person.

Like Basil Fawlty letting loose his feelings upon his unreliable car by beating it with a branch, this is the position that those style themselves as 'realists' in their rejection of 'relativism' love to refute. A helpless confusion of a thought that never had a chance to assume responsibility for itself. Let loose, defenceless, into the cruel world of intellectual debate. 'What is true is what is true for each person' is nobody's child. If each person takes to be true what each thinks, simply because each thinks it, then each would refuse to grant the truth of what another thinks, if they disagree with them. If *I* think that what I think is true because I think it, then *I* do *not* think that what you think is true merely because you think it. Such a *crazed* relativist cannot make a generality of their claim. They would like to sound tolerant, generous to all, but that extension of tolerance is inconsistent with the privilege that each 'I' grants to itself in declaring that what is true is what is true for 'me'. And finally, if that inconsistency is avoided by the only possible recourse – that to be true means only to be

*thought to be so* – then nobody is in a position to *think* anything.<sup>15</sup>

The extreme relativism against which ‘realists’ would define themselves is incoherent. So, its denial fails to define their *realism* as coherent. There is no significant contrast. Criteria other than ‘being the denial of relativism’ must be invoked. So people say that realism means that what is believed to be true exists *outside* the thinker. This requires a dualism of thinker and the *reality thought* as existing in different categories. No realist who identifies thinking with physical states or processes in the brain (or the ‘embrained’ body) can use ‘being external to the mind’ as a criterion of ‘being real’. The thinker’s own brain or embrained body is what is doing the thinking and is *not* external to the thinker. Yet it must be declared ‘real’ because it is part of physical reality. Most of what is real is not confined within the brain or embrained body of the thinker, to be sure. Nevertheless, not its *externality* but what it is, constitutes it as *real*. Also, consider a *physicalist* hypothesis of the universe as a being devoted to thinking of its existence. Not *external* to itself as thinker, still the universe is *real*.

So, if those last two definitions were the best that we could find to define relativism (and realism in contrast with that relativism) we need not be bothered by ‘relativism’. It fails to be a *position*. Relativism deconstructs. In contrast, a healthy respect for the relativities of size, age, colour, strength, loudness and vivacity is a condition of objective thought and perception. So, is any relativist position robust enough to permit ‘realism’ to be defined by denial of it?

An *absolutist* would claim, about truth, a tautology that corresponds with the incoherence of relativism.<sup>16</sup> Whatever I think, I think to be the truth. So I must take as false whatever you think that is contrary to what I think. This is the mainstay of the Jensen/Pell objection to religious tolerance. One cannot deny the tautology. Perhaps one can avoid the ‘absolutism’ that typically attends it. Perhaps nobody *can* think what another thinks, so you cannot think the contrary of what I *think*. The contrary thoughts of others become mere appearances of difference. You say there is no drought in Australia but I cannot *think* what you *think* when you say that. This gesture at a tolerance that respects logic comes apart at its seams. We need call upon no devious opponent to snip or snipe at it. “*What I think* cannot be the same thought as *what you think*” defeats itself in its attempt to speak to another. If I have told you my

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<sup>15</sup> The usual criticism is that a relativist must maintain both ‘there is a widespread prolonged drought in Australia’ (because I do think it) and that there is no such drought (because someone else thinks to the contrary). More profoundly, relativism as theory transgress its endorsement of what *I* claim to be true as being true (for me). As general theory, relativism must think from *outside* the frame of ‘*What is true is what is true for me*’. From outside that frame, my *thinking* there is such a drought remains inconsistent with what *you* think. But, such arguments miss their mark against the postmodern, for whom relativism is an absolutism, scarcely disguised.

<sup>16</sup> Here, I attempt to catch the sense of *absolutism* that taking one’s own assertions seriously seems to require.

theory then *what I think* has been thought by you. But if you cannot think what I do when I say ‘*What I think cannot be the same thought as what you think*’, I say nothing to you.

Perhaps I can keep this thought (‘*what I think cannot be what you think when I tell you about it*’) darkly to myself – something to muse upon as I go to sleep. But to think is a kind of conversation with oneself in which, as inner drama, I split into speaker and hearer. So, if the thought spoken by one cannot be what is thought when heard by another, how can the listening ‘*me*’ make anything of what is said by the ‘*I that utters*’? This critique is more than mere pyrotechnics. It is an entirely serious observation that since thinking is an inner dramatised form of speaking and listening, the ‘*me*’ that listens must make sense of what the ‘*I*’ utters. As Ryle has observed (*The Concept of Mind*, Ch2) one cannot identify intelligent thought as *talking to oneself*. I can speak nonsense or rant to myself just as I can talk nonsense or rant to another. You may guess rightly about me, ‘*You have no comprehension of what you are putting to yourself!*’ .

There may be more subtle – certainly devious – accounts of relativism and absolutism. One may point out that there are circumstances in which I have discovered something as true, even though were you to have looked, equally carefully, it would have appeared to you to be false. But there is nothing strange in this. This is what makes crime detection, scientific discovery and discussion of passing events so fraught. It is the inability to recognise relativities in how things appear to us – relativities that depend upon our education, past experience, cultural expectation – that constitutes intolerance and bigotry. Bigotry is buttressed by an abuse of the ‘absolutist’ tautology that I cannot but think to be true whatever it is that I do think. And that I am bound, if consistent, to think to be false whatever you think that is contrary to that. I *must*, out of respect for what I think, think you wrong. This is a version of Moore’s paradox: What I think may well be mistaken and yet I cannot say coherently, ‘It is raining but I do not believe it’. I cannot think coherently outside what I do think. As if respect for the differing views of others is condescension and multiculturalism is muddle-headedness.

This road to bigotry is a fraudulent use of tautology. ‘I cannot but think to be true whatever I think’, and ‘I cannot but think to be false whatever you think to the contrary’ implies nothing about how I deal with our disagreements. That you find that something appears otherwise than it does to me, leaves me free to entertain the possibility of my own error – to recognise at least the partiality in the way in which I have perceived and expressed what I have discovered.

Every finite thought and coherent thought involves something of partiality.<sup>17</sup>

### Noise

There is a high level of noise in the culture wars and truth contests. There is noise in the battle between the ‘*we can now establish settled truths by rational procedures*’ of the modernists and ‘*we deal with what we call our various ‘realities’ in working within our various textualities*’ of the postmodernists. Technically, a level of noise is the ratio of indecipherable signal to the desired one. (In radio signals, ‘static’ as against decipherable conversation or music.) The sound of the postmodern *contra* modernist battle is that of universal frustration with opponents who cannot hear one’s words. The trouble is that few respect the *aporias* of knowledge. As if, in a drought, we fought each other for causing the lack of water, rendering ourselves incapable of understanding how to use the inevitably limited quantities of it.

The cultural climate through which we have been living has been dubbed *postmodern* without much understanding of what that might mean. The postmodern condition is a syndrome, however wild the various ideas about it may be. And *postmodernism* as a series of formulated opinions or lines of thought is not the invention of devilish devious philosophers such as Derrida, Baudrillard or Irigaray. Postmodern lines of thought express changes in culture – the intellectual and emotional weather. The changes have causes whose momentum is beyond the power of any one or a few individuals to control. What is called *postmodernism*, as a kind of thought, marks the efforts of those who have recognised and attempted to chart those changes. Anti-postmodernists are caught up in the postmodern climate change. Modernist *doctrines* can no longer preserve the modernist *spirit*. They cannot restore *confidence* in it. Look at a parallel. It is *too late* for religious adherents to recreate an era of simple faith by yet stronger expressions of faith. These days, faith has to look like a kind of knowing. As *they* iterate the tenets of faith *we* hear only their present uncertainty about it. Religion is forced to return to medievalism – again *contesting* the status of established science. It is desperate to live as a medieval in this mixed modernist and postmodernist culture. What the creationists really *need* is not creationism as a new science. Like the neo-modernists who wildly attack the postmodern, the religious could succeed in their attack on the modern only were some cultural climate change to overtake the modern and the postmodern.

And the future for the present postmodern? Its flowers appear in cracks of pavement and foundation – a sensible sign of change in process.

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<sup>17</sup> These last paragraphs are very sketchy. I mean to develop them in the work of which this paper is a part.