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*The Way We Have Become: A Surfeit
of Seeming*

We are the bees of the invisible.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters*

To be visible all the time—to live
in a swarm of eyes—
surely that leaves its mark on the face.

—Tomas Tranströmer, “Solitude”

I

The way we live: when I think of that in the cusp of some small frustration—say, holding the phone waiting for a warm-bodied techie—random themes begin to buzz in my brain, like restless bees in a hive. Themes like politics, marketing, celebrity, trust, art, the void. How can I quiet these themes, these concerns, long enough to make sense of the noise?

I do not mean to make an essay out of the tribulations of writing an essay—that’s tacky; I mean only to explain my title as a bewildered approach to the multitudinous present, the way we have become. It’s a large topic, relevant to what V. S. Naipaul called “our universal civilization,” relevant also to all those errant souls—immigrants, refugees, displaced persons, expatriates like myself—wandering the earth. It’s a large topic, but I have tried to hew to a particular line: the tyranny of appearances, a surfeit of seeming in America. Yes, now things must seem, not be.

Bees buzz and also sting. The line I have taken may not always please. But I suspect that even Candide knew in his heart of hearts that whatever is,

is not always, well, cool. The difficulty is tact: how to give dissatisfaction its due without slighting the fecundity of the present. In the end, Emerson said, temperament is the “iron wire on which the beads are strung.” In this text, temperament and autobiography do serve as wire, but also something else. Something impersonal. (No, not postmodern theory.) Call it an aspiration to reality beyond the delirium of appearances. That is also to say, an invocation of truth, not absolute but fiduciary—a truth we can trust—as mind, in its give and take, reckons with the world.

But truth, trust, and mind can be weasel words. Some clarification of them, *as they apply to this essay*, is due before we start fingering the beads.

Philosophers have long puzzled trust as they have puzzled truth. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates and Glaucon debate whether trust depends on fear of detection, as in the case of the shepherd Gyges, who found a gold, magic ring in the Lydian wilderness and considered keeping it. This perspective, rooted in rank self-interest, informs subsequent discussions, through Machiavelli and Hobbes and on down to John Nash’s solution—yes, think Russell Crowe in *A Beautiful Mind*—of the Prisoner’s Dilemma in game theory. Another perspective, developed by Locke, Hume, Kant, and Rousseau, takes a more benevolent view of human nature, locating trust in love, sympathy, moral responsibility. Then there’s the leap of faith, Kierkegaardian or otherwise, that finds truth and trust—now fused—in a spiritual impulse that overwhelms doubt, defies the weight of the world.

And now? We perceive a crisis of trust, a dearth of veracity, everywhere. (This is not an American dilemma only, as Onora O’Neill’s Reith Lectures of 2002, in Britain, suggest.) Still, I am not wholly persuaded that America has become a culture of mistrust. Yes, hermeneutics of suspicion abound in academe. And yes, public scandals—in church and state, in sports and entertainment, in the very media that report all the scandals—seem unremitting, indeed cataclysmic, as we can now see. But have Americans really lost the will to trust, to believe in trust?

More than a century ago, William James wrote in *The Will to Believe*:

Our faith is faith in some one else’s faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other, —what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up?

Has that desire disappeared? Is “cognitive dissonance” now our common fate? I think there is an urge called truth, a longing called trust, which our natures seem unable to quell despite the chameleon in us all. Paradoxically, that urge and that longing find fulfillment in self-abnegation, self-bracketing at least, and at best self-dispossession. Thus we tend to credit what demands nothing from us and trust those who have emptied themselves of their needs. Perhaps that is the mysterious call of our destiny, the secret lure of all our religions and philosophies. Perhaps that was the primogenial impulse of mind, after all.

As to mind, its road has been long and anfractuou. Some say the journey began with the big bang. Some say it started with a stray asteroid rich in iridium, smashing into present-day Mexico, exterminating the monsters of the earth, and tearing a hole into evolution so that our ancestors could squeeze through. To this accident or event—maverick scientists ascribe to it the so-called Anthropic Principle, enabling sentience on planet Earth—we owe not only our existence but also our awareness of existence, and even the capacity to name and explain the event itself. In short, the gift of language.

That’s reaching far back, back to the origins of our flawed consciousness. But in a self-conscious age that considers representations supreme—signs, symbols, images, simulacra—the reminder is apt. These semiotic shards and shavings of mind, slowly displacing nature as our environment, now largely constitute our world. And so we live among superabundant signifiers—but where’s the signified? We have perceptions without substance. We lull ourselves with the mantra “appearances are everything.” This mantra echoes throughout American politics, economics, private lives, even the arts. How live with this surfeit of seeming? Let’s finger the beads, not wring our hands.

II

Statecraft is stagecraft, the dictum goes—it’s all show business, magic or show business. Nothing here is new. Cheops made the Great Pyramid his stage even before it housed his tomb, and the great Wizard of Oz used the props of comic fantasy to hide his impuissance. The fact is, politics owes more to dream, myth, ritual, and magic than to that Johnny-come-lately of evolution, the neocortex. Atavisms—irrational associations, projections, propitiations, scapegoatings, the illusory omnipotence of primal wishes—rule and overrule even worldly self-interests.

In politics today, every photo op is an exercise in magical thinking—witness that wretched *New Yorker* cover caricaturing the Obamas as Islamic terrorists. Do the Kennedys still possess charisma? Shake a Kennedy hand. Do you need the approval of Joe Six-Pack? Lift a beer bottle to your lips. Have you survived the Hanoi Hilton? True grit belongs on Pennsylvania Avenue. I will spare you further examples. The point, as every spinmeister knows, is to charge the image intensely enough, repeat it often enough, spread it wide enough—bloviating all the while—to convince everyone. Perception is all and the method is magic, magic exercised at the cutting edge of technology. So, what is real?

The comedian Steven Wright tells this joke deadpan: “I woke up one day and everything in the apartment had been stolen and replaced with an exact replica. I said to my roommate, ‘Can you believe this? Everything in the apartment has been stolen and replaced with an exact replica.’ He said, ‘Do I know you?’” The joke refracts our world, darkly. If appearances are all the eye can see, why speak of truth at all? Isn’t it there, and there, and there, manifest to all? Thus objectivity—however moot or complex, it remains indispensable to our understanding of reality—becomes truly superficial, simple as pie.

The politics of perception is marketing by other means, and marketing, I submit, has become our obsession, our malady. America may always have been the land of entrepreneurs and hustlers glorying in greed, but what we experience today, as markets melt down before our eyes, is something else: the grip of an insidious hand outstretched. This is not high finance as we know it, not top-hatted capitalism. This is a radical reconception of human relations in terms of profit; it is an eversion of society itself, crunching credit (*credo*), subverting faith and trust.

Church, college, hospital, and local charity have an honored right to seek our support. But try to call a bank, publisher, mortician, insurance agent, health provider, phone or gas or credit card company without dodging a sales pitch. I am not speaking of the princes of skullduggery, men like Bernard Madoff, Michael Milkin, and Jeffrey Skilling, or of the ghouls of the subprime debacle; I am speaking of the way we live, all existence as spam. We even sell by pretending not to sell—it’s called “murketing”—and we buy in a trance. The “numerati”—omniscient analysts of the consumer age—see to that.

At this point, a voice usually snarls: “You gotta problem with spam? It circulates wealth, keeps the juices going, don’t it? It’s the American way, fella,

get used to it." I flinch but stand my ground, thinking: no, no, spam is a corruption of marketing, and marketing a corruption of giving and taking; they both undermine trust. We all fear not only the Mad Hacker but also the ubiquitous cadgers and subtlers prowling the Web. Once, knowledge promised power; now, trolling information—your data and mine—guarantees lucre. And that's what happens to "marketing"—we used to say advertising—when it becomes evangelism, indistinguishable from civic or religious zeal. The gospel according to Nielsen.

But here is the outcome: the individual—the one with a surname, the one with a unique personal history and perhaps a few secrets to keep—fades happily into virtual space.

With that remark, we approach the inner world, whether in cyberspace or in the mind.

Though I hardly visit MySpace or Facebook, I know that on these sites the most aching private diary can be read in Tokyo or Timbuktu. Read not once but forever. Read by sympathetic or predatory eyes. On these sites, a person—whatever age, gender, race, class, or sexual inclination—can have not ten but hundreds of "friends." What, precisely, is the quality of these fungible "friendships"? Has privacy become so antiquated as to merit only a shrug and a rolling of the eyes? Or are we witnessing the emergence of a new self—a cyber or cellular self—a digital leap beyond David Riesman's "other-directed" person?

Facebook started at Harvard and then flung open its cyberdoors to the world. I doubt this hospitality came from the heart. In any case, the urge to socialize on the Web becomes the urge to be *perceived* socializing, to be *perceived at all*, and in the process to estrange oneself. (We become like those Scribble dolls of the fifties, with blank faces, their features drawn and erased with a special pen.) In this sense, the Web contributes to a virtual ontology: it surpasses politics and economics in validating our phantom being, worldwide.

Think of celebrity—all glitz, frippery, and folderol. We know how much it depends on perception, reflected in the omniscient eye of the media, the "transparent eyeball" of our time. Celebrity is not only fifteen minutes in everyone's life, as Andy Warhol—do we remember him?—quipped; it is also cyber-fame, everyone's secret life writ digitally across the universe. What chance has Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds against those hallucinations we call celebrities?

And what Paris Hilton or Britney Spears, poor thing, does not pine sometimes to escape our swarming eyes, our roiling ids?

I have no wish to asperse the young or to ridicule their alternate lives on Web 2.0. My concern is the thinning of the self when perception defines reality, when mirrors line every wall. Americans, of course, have been long charged with smiling vacuity; that is a stereotype demanded by European self-esteem. But is there no world within the world the media project? Should the medium always be the message? And must Narcissus, glazing all our images, define the limits of our trust? No man or woman is wholly transparent: we first assume, and then simply trust, who they are. (The trust from which inwardness derives thrives elsewhere, without self-concern.)

Perhaps all this is only a matter of generational change, which always overtakes us while we are looking the other way. But Claude Lévi-Strauss thought a society can survive only if it is able to transmit its values from one generation to the next: "As soon as it feels unable to transmit anything, or when it does not know anymore what should be transmitted, it ceases to be able to maintain itself." The statement cannot be dismissed as conservative. Meaningful change preserves even as it destroys, and all generations are lost only to find themselves again, both in succeeding and in antecedent generations.

That, at least, is the gist of my experience. And so to experience I come, the experience of my own generation in and out of Egypt—these memories are also beads—before coming to literature and the arts.

III

I am writing this very sentence on the Fourth of July, 2008, listening over National Public Radio to several voices read the Declaration of Independence: "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people. . . ." It is a list of complaints, you might say cynically—complaints like mine?—and yet so much more than a list; it is a document that rises to a unique historical register. Whatever the myths of the American Revolution, whatever its gritty realities, the republic perdures, framed in a somber question: What happened? What happened to the Great Republic, as Winston Churchill once called it?

Nothing, for me, makes the changes in America more vivid than my own sense of it as an Egyptian boy. To my feckless crowd, throughout the years of World

War II, America meant Chiclets and Lucky Strikes and glorious Hollywood movies (the legs of Betty Grable, the gags of Bob Hope, the swashbuckling of Errol Flynn). For the few of us who had read *Moby Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, America may have also meant . . . what? The fringe of darkness in high romance? Violence inhabiting the immensities of space and the human heart? That terrible loneliness, beyond self-reliance, of the American soul? All these are in my highfalutin, critical idiom now, but what Arabic, French, or English words would I have used then?

In truth, I don't know what genie planted America so firmly in my head. The act was so free of material duress as to appear gratuitous, even perverse. Yet I still see my errant motive—that long desire, that bright trespass—on faces crossing every meridian in our diasporic times. Let's say I had a westering spirit, drawn to horizons, to visions of the verge. It's in the American grain.

It is facile now to think of America as the global imperium of the dwindling dollar, but that wasn't always the case.

When Rommel turned his foxtail on El Alamein, Egyptians did not know whether to weep or cheer. In my hot-headed cohort of engineering students at the University of Cairo, some were pro-German, some pan-Arab, none that I knew pro-British. Didn't the Union Jack still flutter over the barracks at Kasrel-Nil? Then the victorious Yanks arrived, with their Ray-Ban glasses and lazy drawls. Many young people, including myself, became instantly infatuated with—or rather, found validation of their fantasies in—these creatures in crisp uniforms, who seemed to have stepped down from a large, flickering screen. It was more than that, of course; it was America itself, its commitment to defeat fascism, its anti-imperialist stance, what we knew then of the American Way of Life. (Lynching was not on our screen; “It's a free country, ain't it?” was.) Never, never in history, was so much might expressed with such genial ease.

I recall Colonel Siemen, a plump judge advocate with steel-rimmed glasses, who came to know my parents somehow. A Philadelphia Jew, he bore unobtrusive good will toward me, taking in hand my “pre-American education,” as he called it, and securing my admission to his alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. I recall his quick, serious smile, crow's feet around his eyes, whenever I showed off a bit of Americana. I never saw Colonel Siemen after I left Egypt on a rust-splashed Liberty ship called—yes, really—the *Abraham Lincoln*. Still, I felt carried away by his generosity, as on a gentle tide, rippling out across the Atlantic, rippling still.

Others had it, too, that American “willingness of the heart” (F. Scott Fitzgerald). Like Dr. John Brainard of the Moore School of Electrical Engineering at Penn. Mild-mannered despite his crack mathematical mind—he was a co-designer of the original differential analyzer, ENIAC—he recognized my inchoate wish to abandon engineering for literature. Coughing diffidently behind his palm, blue mischief in his eyes, he asked, “Are you sure? Have you read the Elizabethans? Beaumont and Fletcher?” I hadn’t. Still, despite his cheerful puzzlement at my lapse, he eased my crossing over to the wrong side of the professional tracks.

And Dr. C. Harold Gray, seemingly stolid like a fireplug but with a far-away gaze. He hired me as instructor of English at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute when no one else would entrust me—an intense young man with a foreign accent—with teaching young Americans their own literature. Some thought he favored me because he had once taught at Roberts College in Istanbul. I believe he was himself a maverick and liked to take risks. He saw life as an adventure in the old American way; he liked to lend a hand here, there tweak fate. So why not hire a lapsed engineer to teach English to would-be engineers?

Then Dr. Victor Butterfield, president of Wesleyan University, visionary with gnarled hands and thin, craggy face. He interviewed me one summer while driving his bulldozer, clearing out boulders on his New England farm. My seat next to his was bumpy, the interview smooth. We spoke of Plato and Akhenaton, *Billy Budd* and *Science in the Modern World*. (Whitehead was his intellectual hero.) Butterfield hired me, I believe—hired me in his head—before we dismounted from the monster machine. Sixteen years later, I left Wesleyan a changed man after arguing ideas with gifted colleagues and, terrified into a semblance of pedagogic competence, learning to teach from smart students confident of their future.

Where but in America? Common as these events seem—and that’s also the point, that they are common—they reveal a large aspect of this “fresh, green breast of the new world” (Fitzgerald again), still flowering for wanderers and sojourners of every kind. Oh, I admit it: I believe in the pursuit of happiness. Like other immigrants and expatriates, I believe in that ideal, peerless among nations, richer than the dream of riches within the American Dream. But that is only a partial admission.

Earlier in this essay, I asked: what happened in America? I ask again, and this time two images, two actual photos, float into my mind. One, taken in 1961, shows Louis Armstrong, cheeks puffed, eyes closed—I imagine the eyes

laughing behind their lids—and trumpet tilted toward the sun, playing for a jubilant throng of Egyptian children in front of a hospital in Cairo. The other, snapped secretly some four decades later in Abu Ghraib, shows a prisoner . . . do I need to describe that grisly parody of the Statue of Liberty? The latter we rightly remember, the former we sadly forget. Two sides of America or the same side? Say, rather, part of an endless montage that includes literature, all the arts.

Oh, those supermarket peaches, glorious in their skin, tasting of Styro-foam within: they are not all that America grows. A great literature has sprung from this soil.

IV

I come to the jewel among the beads: art. But does high art still enjoy wide esteem? Will it survive television, the computer, the delirium of our super malls? Can it still purvey the truth we need lest we perish? (I know: we perish anyway.)

American popular arts—film, television, music, song—are the gold and tinsel of entertainment in our time, sometimes both in the same glance, the same beat or breath. Their underside, like the hidden face of Dorian Gray, is a grotesquely contorted image of America: drugs, violence, crime, promiscuity, an anarchic licentiousness that doubles as the world's id. "They" loathe us because, among other things, we offer what they crave but cannot admit they want. In this sense, the Great Satan acquires the shadow of sense.

But what of high art, "serious" art? The question still matters though high and low have mixed in the wondrous achievements of the last half century—say, the works of Norman Mailer, the dramatic productions of Julie Taymor, the art of Robert Rauschenberg, the music and lyrics of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, or Bruce Springsteen, and innumerable films. The question still matters because art may be the last refuge of our inwardness, our spiritual life: it can never be all surface, it enfolds reality, it confronts even "the end: ice, chastity, null" (Thomas Mann).

Art, however, is notoriously long. Here, I will concern myself only with literature, particularly the scrambling of fact and fiction—symptomatic of our moment, so corrosive of trust.

For several decades now, writers—prize-winning journalists, novelists, memoirists, even scientists—have played fast and loose with the root assumptions of fiction and nonfiction, plagiarism and originality. The scams merit little attention in themselves; their authors are forgettable. But the issue remains central, gathering in itself other issues of authorial integrity, audience trust, ultimately the nature of appearance and reality. Lurking behind all the chicaneries, the fraying of fantasies and hyping of facts, is that old, intuitive sense of veracity. (Without that sense, Oprah will continue to scold her literary mountebanks in vain.)

The issue is no less ethical than epistemological, though ethical in multiple and surprising ways. It reaches beyond the lust for celebrity in a culture of surfaces. It spurns the pseudo-philosophical point that fiction and fact are both mental constructs, and so finally indistinguishable. (Oh, yeah? Cry wolf once too often and see who runs to your aid.) It transcends the neurological and psychological debates about the unreliability of memory, the fictive element in recall. Indeed, the issue, like so many human issues, returns to *us*, audiences and readers everywhere, how we live, who we are, how we speak, and the stories we tell as fabulating and confabulating creatures.

Confabulating? Is literature, then, but another sweet lie?

Here we need to widen our view, for the quarrel of fiction and fact, poetry and history—the quarrel about versions of truth—reverts, after all, to Plato and Aristotle, and has echoed through the ages in different cultures and climes. It still sounds, for instance, in the kerfuffles between historians like Inga Clendinnen and novelists like Kate Grenville, enlivening the current Australian scene. Who can deal better—more thoroughly, more insightfully—with the genocide of Aborigines? Who skews the truth more? And what about that smarmy statement, fronting so many novels, that “any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is unintended”? Is this a legal fiction or an empirical fact?

Nicholas Jose, an Australian writer of fiction and nonfiction, concludes: “We seem to be very complex creatures when it comes to questions of representation, willing to be deceived, yet not completely.” Just how much deceived? Author, author! we cry, and find unbearable the thought that a work, whatever its genre, gives us no emotional access to a fellow human being, preferably its author. This naiveté—if that’s what it is—animates literature, and has done so from the start. This simplicity—if that’s what it is—will never be wrested, nor

should it be, from every reader's heart. We want literary works to *answer*; we want someone to reach out to us through all the verbal ceremonies and forms. But that someone is not the author, a creature with a hand that sweats and bleeds: it is a verbal being.

Hence, I would submit, the importance of the label, the integrity of the genre, especially if it applies to the "nonfiction novel" or "creative nonfiction." The label tells readers how they may approach the author, adjust their expectations, receive the work. It also reminds writers—however devious their memories, however lively their imaginations—of their particular relation to audiences, the grounds on which they seek trust. Trust the novel, not the novelist, D. H. Lawrence cried. Precisely: dead or undead, the author tends to fib. Trust also the memoir, not the memoirist, Lawrence might as well have cried, because something in the act of good writing, of writing and endless rewriting—perhaps the fierce genius of language itself—burns off the human dross and lets the truth of writing shine through, sometimes as glimmer and sometimes as blaze, despite the author who sweats and bleeds. (In the end, the "verbal being" is all we really trust.)

Still, the trust we put in fiction and the trust we put in nonfiction are not of the same kind, as I want to show in a signal example: J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*.

V

The critical consensus about Coetzee is firm, and it includes members of the Nobel Prize and Booker Prize committees. Nevertheless, I want to demur at some aspects of his most recent work, a quilt—I almost said pastiche—of brilliant *aperçus*, bearish opinions, and narrative games.

Diary of a Bad Year comprises a trinity of parallel texts on the page, "spoken" by interacting figures. The first—let's call him JC—is the author of concise essays, packed with ideas and prejudices on topics ranging from the origins of the state to Dostoyevsky. The second figure, C, is a celebrated, wintry writer who tersely confides his life to a diary. The third, Anya, is a warm and lovely young woman, with dark hair and a "derrière so near to perfect as to be angelic." She types C's essays, comments irreverently on everyone, including her caddish lover Alan, and calls the great writer *Señor*.

Reading through the various layers on the page, I wondered: why this, why now? Nearly half a century has slipped away since the postmodern experi-

ments of John Barth, Julio Cortázar, and Michel Butor, since the fractional lectures of John Cage and antic essays of sundry paracritics. Why would Coetzee resort to the conceit of yoking fiction and nonfiction on the same page, indulging himself with wacky self-criticism and writerly in-jokes? A phrase, appearing below an essay called “On Terrorism,” kept tugging at my mind. The writer there, presumably C, says: “An opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies: how could I refuse?” Somewhat irritably, I thought: he means “ignoring,” not “declining to conform to,” and his self-irony does not cancel the point about “magic revenge.” This reflexive critique, whether in Anya’s, or C’s, or JC’s mouth, won’t wash.

In serious reading, however, irritation should serve only to clarify its own cause. Why my impatience with this text? Because of its dislocations, which necessitated reading and rereading, remembering and flipping the pages back and forth, lifting up my eyes then dropping them down again? Perhaps. But the game, though mechanical at first, compels readers to query premature closures of their reading, and therein lies a certain pleasure of the text. Then there is the childish, riddling delight of figuring out things for oneself, playing with time and space like a small-time demiurge, which is what every reader wants.

Whence the irritation then? Can it be the ethos of the superimposed essays? They display concinnity, yield startling insights, express some views I honor and values I share. Still, the essays—“laments, fulminations, curses,” as C himself remarks—will never be mistaken for the urbane meditations of Michel de Montaigne (woken to music every morning of his childhood). But why carp? Coetzee seems hard enough on himself—no hostile critics need apply.

What about half-friendly critics, though? Perhaps all of Coetzee’s tricks of anticipation, preemption, and self-subversion serve only to excuse, in fact to *validate*, their author. Then, again, I wonder: where is empathy, where compassion, for the strong as well as for the weak, for the bad and the ugly as well as the good? Great writers—Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Melville, but not Dante—strike through the mask of villainy, through evil itself, to seize the mangled human being within. Are historical figures—George W. Bush, John Howard, Tony Blair—wholly exempt from our deeper understanding?

Perhaps that’s what politics, bloody-minded politics, demands. Perhaps, also, that’s what Coetzee’s armchair “anarchism” entails—he calls it “pessimistic anarchistic quietism,” in self-parody. Then, again, perhaps the tone is due

to the need of a “selfish child . . . who has turned into a cold man” to expiate his imaginary sins. And, of course, there’s always Africa itself, all those failed states, blood and bile flowing in the heart of darkness, guilt blanketing the continent like jungle heat. But these are all extraneous speculations.

When all is said and undone, though, *Diary of a Bad Year* remains a warped text, neither fiction nor nonfiction; more, the “verbal being” who inhabits it eludes my trust. The driving force, the real conatus, of the work, despite its small drama of love, loneliness, and death, is less imaginative than political, is at best cerebral. Can we still make such distinctions after the works of Mann, Musil, Borges, Broch? I believe we can, because *Diary of a Bad Year* does not wholly surmount—sublimate? sublate?—its own animus as good novels do. I close the book feeling that Coetzee still *wants* something from me. What? All I know is: I’m not ready to assent.

VI

Here I reveal my own prejudices about art, about the novel particularly, and about the current clamor of nonfiction (including this very essay).

For me, the Kantian criterion of “disinterestedness”—pleasure “without a concept”—still holds despite the turbid tides of ideologies sweeping over the world since the *Critique of Judgment* appeared in 1790. The criterion holds, not only because it “suspends” existence for a time, and not only because it permits the “free play of imagination,” but also because, in its self-relinquishment, it *invites trust*. In that sense, all disinterestedness is spiritual: it turns us into “transparent eyeballs,” for as long as it lasts. “All mean egotism vanishes. I am nothing, I see all,” said the man from Concord. (Of course, the bounties of fiction are not all spiritual; they are also adaptive, evolutionary, as Denis Dutton convincingly shows in *The Art Instinct*.)

But an ironic serendipity here intrudes: Coetzee himself knows that stories—unlike dogmas, documents, opinions—“tell themselves.” More, in an essay titled “On Authority in Fiction” in *Diary of a Bad Year*, he notes: “What the great authors are masters of is authority. . . . But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically?” For us, who listen rather than speak, a story draws us out of ourselves while the teller’s breath still hangs within the sanctum of our hearing. Isn’t that auricular kenosis?

“Once upon a time”: yes, yes. This “yes” knows a certain truth, the truth of imaginative trust. This “yes” is also what a deep reading of literature demands, the kind of reading implied in Emil Filla’s haunting portrait of Kafka, titled “A Reader of Dostoyevsky”: the very image not just of absorption, but of self-recognition in self-loss.

Nothing here would surprise readers of earlier generations. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis remarks: “In reading good literature, I become a thousand men. . . . I transcend myself; and I am never more myself than when I do.” Nor is anything here alien to later generations—generations are not cast in iron—that might include, say, a Junot Diaz, Pulitzer Prize-winner for fiction in 2008. A small-town librarian in New Jersey saved him from being “young and knuckleheaded,” from being poor, brown, immigrant, rejected, by opening the wide world of reading for him. Thus, at a recent Sydney Writers’ Festival, Diaz praised readers (not writers, mind you, and not even literature): “We readers will be remembered more than any individual writer for safeguarding that delicate web of human interconnectivity that so many forces wish to buy, capture, enslave, and mine.”

Hear, hear! That “delicate web of human interconnectivity” depends on imaginative trust. (No, literature does not lie.) Still, the Internet is here, not just to stay but to evolve, and the fate of *book* reading remains in doubt. Studies say this, studies say that, as pols and experts haggle. Meanwhile, young and old alike lead their lives, lost as always in the continual translations of existence, in the play of appearances and whatever reality may be intuited or grasped.

VII

We have reached the last few beads on the wire, and a moment of reflection about my own sense, my own translations, of the topic is due.

Statisticians may come to more cheery conclusions about emergent America, but statistics are not destiny, and in any case I prophesy nothing. I let my bafflement about the present stand; I refuse nostalgia. Thus, my critique of surfaces does not call for a return to mystifying depths or repressive hierarchies. If anything, it pleads the interdebtiness of all things. Buddhists know this, ecologists, cultural holists. Creation is not segregated but immanent. Betty Jean Craige reminds us in *Laying the Ladder Down* that a flutter of butterfly

wings, in chaos theory, may explode into a Caribbean hurricane. So lay that ladder down: there's no place to climb or descend.

But that does not mean reality is skin deep. Holistic views assume myriad relations invisible to the eye—the self-involved eye. Surfaces do reveal, but they also deceive. (Plastic surgery will not cure us of the human condition.) The Hollywood metaphysician Groucho Marx once remarked: “The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made.” Sometimes I think we've all got it made in that way. Given the tyranny of appearances, how else would the ego act? Is there no way out? Must there be a way out?

Once, at a small, lakeside resort in Wisconsin, sunset calming the water, my wife Sally and I watched children run and splash on the beach with a last, shrill burst of play while Mozart's “Gran Partita” wafted down from speakers in the trees. Moodily, I said to Sally: “Do they hear it? Do they know what's going on?” She looked at the children, the darkening oaks, maples, and firs, a patch of pale light hovering over the canopy, and without turning to me replied: “They are what is going on.” Perhaps that is the way out. But perhaps, in her mind as well as in mine, some larger idea waited to break out and take flight in the evening air. An idea lighter than air, an idea of nothing.

Nothing. Lao Tzu says: “Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub, but it is the hole in the center that provides its usefulness.” Likewise, beads and wire trace an empty space on the table, freed from needy fingers at last. Hole and hub, the prayer beads in a circle, zero, the Greek omicron and Hindu *sunya* and Arabic *sifr*—these reveal the foundations of the universe. As Robert Kaplan puts it in his wonderful book, *The Nothing That Is*: “If you look at zero you see nothing; but look through it and you will see the world.” How many of us can see the world through nothing? We understand foolish Lear better when he cries: “Nothing comes out of nothing.” (A slogan for marketers.) Yet it was the old king himself, grief-maddened and heath-wild, who discovered that naked we see reality at last.