

# On Universalism and Particularism

or

## Looking at Flowers Again

### *Twelve Propositions*

1. For poets, as for everyone else, the challenges, dangers, possibilities and hopes of our epoch are enormous. Our time is unlike any other. We have lived through modernism: we know all about that. And we have gone through, or past, post-modernism – even if many of us still don't quite know what that was, or even if it was really anything at all. Modernism is dead. Postmodernism was stillborn. We know this. We sense it in our guts and our bones. They were both silly labels anyway, too self-contradictory to be interesting, and eventually, too overloaded to mean much.
2. As for our own epoch, as yet it has no name, no convenient label. Perhaps, rightly, we've come to suspect all labels. For many of us have grown as wary of the dangers of own irony towards labels as we have always been of the labels themselves. So perhaps a label is the last thing we need. Even so, under the protective sheen of multiple intermeshed ironies, both individual and collective, we also know that our time is full of its own special conditions: special snares, risks, opportunities, promises.
3. So where should we look, in and through this particular here-and-now of ours, for a new ethic, a new and worthwhile value-set, a new delineation that fits our times and our predicament? The key to our lives and to our practice as poets, I believe, is in honouring and loving the universal in the particular and the particular in the universal.
4. Since the 1940s, a gradual, powerful, unstoppable, universalist tendency has been under way among poets. This tendency is everywhere apparent, all over the world, so much so that it's more or less taken for granted as an accepted, obvious feature of our contemporary culture, wherever we live, from Burma to Britain, China to Chile, Macedonia to Mongolia.
5. In 1959, the Mexican poet and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz (1914–1988) – and my personal friend and mentor – wrote: “For the first time in our history, we are contemporaries of all mankind.” (Paz 182; tr. slightly amended, RB).

6. This remark presents a model of hope, compassion, tolerance, magnanimity and aspiration for the future, grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.
7. The universalist tendency in poetry today is founded on twin premises or beliefs, whether explicit or subliminal. The first is that all human beings, and hence the cultures of all peoples and nations – past, present and future – are all tributaries to the one great river. This is of course both an old view and a new one. Considering his own mortality, the seventeenth century English poet and Anglican priest John Donne (1572–1631) expressed this identical idea, though by means of a slightly different geographical metaphor:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if any promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.(Donne 108-109)

Retrospectively, this statement by Donne is limited only by its Eurocentricity. Its dazzling dignity, depth and delicacy surpass that limitation. But what makes Paz's vision *new* – not only newer than Donne's but more relevant to our present, more pressing in its urgency, and more joyful in its implications, is the fact that it operates *explicitly* for everyone, not just within one religion, nation, ethnicity, time, place, etc., but incorporating all human beings, everywhere and everywhen, regardless of aspect, background, context, or any other factors of any kind. Donne's statement is itself all-inclusive: Paz's makes it not only incontrovertible, but a basis for action.

8. The second premise, which underlies the first, is that differences among cultures, nations, languages (etc.) at different times and places are as natural, necessary and inevitable as is the fact of diversity among biological species. What is more, implicit in this understanding is the recognition that diversities are *great gifts and treasures*. They are nothing short of *glories*. It follows, then, that the idiosyncratic expressions and manifestations of all cultures are to be respected, honoured and loved – precisely *for* their uniquenesses.
9. And here, the ideas and practices of two more visionary English poets offer foundations for our necessary love and respect for diversity, for uniquenesses, for what *we* are given and for what others are given. The first of these is William Blake (1757–1827), who wrote repeatedly of “the minute particulars”. These are interpreted by S. Foster Damon as “the outward expression in this world of the eternal individualities of all things” (Damon 280). For Blake, any universalist

vision without love of these “minute particulars” is abhorrent: the vilest of vile prisons, a mechanistic abnegation of human freedom and Imagination, a hell.

10. The second poet is the Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), whose study of the medieval philosopher and theologian Duns Scotus’s notion of *haecceitas* or ‘thisness’ led him to celebrate what he called the ‘instress’ and ‘inscape’ of things (Hopkins 1966: 572; and 2013: 1039, indexes): their individual unique quality, their glory. This is identical to what, in the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition, is called the *Shekhinah*. Here is what Hopkins says as he looks at a glass of flowers: “Take a *few* primroses in a glass and the instress of – brilliancy, sort of starriness [...] – so simple a flower gives is remarkable” (Hopkins 1966: 206).
11. This understanding of the uniqueness, the instress, the beauty of flowers is central to any poetic vision: Compare Hopkins’s remarks with these famous lines of Blake:

To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

When we are considering multiplicity in the context of a necessary tolerance and universalism, then I suggest that what’s needed above all is *the feeling eye of the poet*, which combines awareness of what the ancient Greek philosophers called *το ἓν και το πᾶν* [*toen kai topan*], ‘the *one* and the *many*’: that is, the majesty of indivisible and encompassing oneness and the glory and majesty of diversity.

12. So, if you want to appreciate diversity, and to respect the unique dignity and *thisness* of each separate being, and the achievements and glories of each separate tradition and each separate language, start by looking at flowers again, and do so with the eye of a poet.

## REFERENCES

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