

# Platonism for the Iron Age



Platonism for the Iron Age:  
An Essay on the Literary Universal

By

Frederic Will

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Platonism for the Iron Age: An Essay on the Literary Universal,  
by Frederic Will

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## THE UNIVERSAL IN CHINA

In 2003 I was teaching American literature in Changsha, Hunan Province. It was at the time of the outbreak of the Iraq War. For several weeks we foreigners had felt anxious about the advance toward this military adventure, which seemed unjustified by any danger it posed to our country, and in fact narrowly concentrated on one bad guy and his regime, to the exclusion of many other equally harmful regimes. What we have subsequently learned proves how right we were. The little guy is not without understanding. But that's not yet my point. For days, as the approach to war came closer, and the conclusion of our class on American poetry came closer, we had been noticing a huge red banner hanging in front of our apartment building. It was inscribed with a message, in yellow-colored characters, proclaiming the evil of the American position on Iraq, and the danger America was presenting to the world in that Middle Eastern country. We foreigners felt vaguely excluded by the sentiments expressed there, which were clearly aimed at "us", though we also felt in agreement with at least some of those sentiments. This was one of those occasions when a bit of our nationality stuck to us, though most of our consciousness was where the other was, in the thought position that challenged our nationalism. It was not a comfortable position, though it is one that many of us will recognize as part of the cost of belonging to a "nation-state", and I took that discomfort on as I prepared my last class.

In class I had a kind of epiphany which intersected with the reactions invoked by the red banner. The epiphany was rooted in the ground where we long to be one with each other, as fellow humans, but find that longing thwarted. We were concluding with Emily Dickinson. I had been loving the chance to share her insights, while at the same time feeling the distance between my efforts to share and the comments returned to me from the students. I had wanted to be one with my students, across the text of Emily Dickinson. But now I wanted to move the conversation, between me and these students, to a more personal engagement than even Emily Dickinson's text authorized.

## 2

## EMILY DICKINSON AND CHINA

We had been reading Emily Dickinson's words about what it is to be human, to fear death, to see precisely what the slant of the sun is in a garden—wherever that garden is. (The banner fluttered in my mind.) We had been talking, directly if belatedly, about universal human experiences. Didn't Emily Dickinson take us to those places? Do you think there was a lot, I asked the students, in the way she showed us those places, that you were not able to share with me, or me with you? I didn't expect a response, and got very little. The students were on the whole glad just to be through with class. But I went on. We Americans in China are aware of being in a culture where the current message is that we are aggressors. I mean in advancing on Iraq. I have seen the banners outside my flat. They made me nervous. They gave me the sense that this place, this location on the globe where I had been for some time, is not mine. I had thought I owned my flat, and the walk leading to it, and the look of the line of tofu shops that subsided into their own damp smoke, every night after midnight, leaving their owners bent with sleep over the charcoal. What has intervened between me and these places and moods? I am not a politician, or am I? Am I just by virtue of my personal history shaped by the mould of my culture? Am I locked inside a condition where the universal is unthinkable?

What keeps collectivities of people apart? Is it the details of the ways they dine, or shave, or make up their faces, or present their obeisance to god? I was raised in a certain place and time, as were these students of mine. Now a war was threatening which seemed to pit against each other the world views of two nation-states from which, willy-nilly, these students and I had adopted viewpoints. "Viewpoints" is so shallow a word for the imbrication of the individual with the attitudes of his or her *kulturwelt*. Those attitudes are as thick on us as are the bacteria and molds that throng our faces when we wake in the morning, and which, in fact, we would be dead without. So sensing and being all that I called on my students to be, as though in fact we were one, despite the barriers inhibiting our oneness, I asked them to think that the poems of Emily

Dickinson touched universally valid themes that joined us, me and them, in reading those themes, and at a level of oneness which surmounted any possible disharmonies introduced by politics and government. I waxed rhetorical, anxious to make this Iraq friction the occasion for pointing out how deeply literature brings together people who are falsely separated by their differing embeddednesses in time. I know how much mere rhetoric was wrapped into that “falsely”; how unpleasantly likely it was that distance and difference were the very names of our condition. My students finally “appeared to be touched” and to get the point I was fervently trying to work out *for myself*. But I have every reason to believe that the scum of embeddedness, on every cheek in the room, was far more irremovable than the clichés of the political arena.

## 3

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE UNIVERSAL

What did I think to say through the Emily Dickinson poems foregrounded in the last class in Changsha? There was an historical convergence that day, as I climbed for the last time up the steep cloudy hill past the tofu grills and tea shacks to the main drag of the University. I wanted to complete the class on a note of drama. For a long wet semester I had put forth histrionically on the American poetry I most love—Whitman, Hart Crane, and now Emily Dickinson, whom I thought we had earned. I wanted to conclude with that spare poet who reduces speech to skeletal codes, and life to the point where death can be seen cleanly through it. I wanted to say, through our discussion of such poems as “to see things slant”, that we, my students and I, were understanding each other through understanding the text between us which was a text in which the fundamental nature of human existence was being encoded. I had the impending war in my mind, and the hostility to it both of the culture I was living in and, but in a different register, my own hostility to it. I was made very sensitive, on that day when I aspired to a certain end of class showmanship, to the fact that living in a polity or politics is part of your condition, and that the universal oneness symbolized by certain works of art rubs hard against history. And yet I felt the validity of some “transcending” point I was fumbling to make.

## 4

## THE UNIVERSAL IN LITERATURE

The form of the universal in which I am interested is the universal revealed in literature. What is the literary universal? Let me make a distinction between two kinds of literary universal. First, you write the universal into your text. That action is often applied to some of the skills writers like Dante, Homer, Goethe display. That is “writing the universal.” That takes genius. Second, though, there is the capacity to formulate and talk about the literary universal—the capacity I associate with thinkers like Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, Johann Winckelmann, or Joshua Reynolds, *who saw through the lens of the universal*, or who used the universal as a dominant concept for their thinking. They are critics, while the first group are creators. What I learned that day in Changsha probably taught me something about what I think it can mean, in poem or story, for the universal to be touched by either of these two means. If you tell me that Hamlet’s dilemma should be readable or graspable in any culture that wants to stage it, I will agree. Everything about *Hamlet* is essentially and deeply understandable in any cultural environment, provided a minimum of translation has taken place. Shakespeare’s genius has embedded the universal in his text as Hamlet. Of Dante’s work it has been said, by Grandgent:

When we ask ourselves why we are so strangely stirred by the words of a man of whom we know so little, one so remote in date and in thought, we feel that it is because...he knew how to present universal emotions, stripping his experiences of all that is peculiar to time or place...

## 5

## AESTHETIC UNIVERSALITY: A MINI-HISTORY

The notion of artistic universality has a modern history, and to that history we owe even the terms of the present analysis. As worked out in certain adventures of eighteenth-century aesthetics—Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, Johann Winckelmann, Johann Goethe—the universal is “that which is always and everywhere true.” For Samuel Johnson truth and beauty are universals, transcending time and place. Goethe writes of the universal dignity of the human face, any face, as it emerges into form, and “adopts the stage of the universal.” Pope wants us to let nature be our guide, and doing so to let what is universally valid declare itself. For Winckelmann the truth in art is not a single cultural truth but a symbolical way of pointing to a truth which transcends all cultures. What is beautiful or true to me here in Iowa is going to be beautiful to the man or woman on the street in Calcutta, and vice versa. (Examples from nature are regularly chosen as back-up evidence for the existence of such universal beauty: the beauty of the sunset, of the rose, of the child’s smile, of “beautiful” events that evoke the same pleasure in Japan as in Cedar Rapids.) The ugly or perverse or degraded is never the example of choice for the universal, but why should it not be? That notion of universality has much to do with the question of “generality”, and the “general” condition may seem incompatible with the perverse or degraded. Samuel Johnson’s “character” Imlac, in *Rasselas* (1759), urges his young pupil-artist to strive for the general in his work, for *quod semper, quod ubique*; the pupil is not to “number the streaks in the tulip” but to strive for general truth. This notion of “generality” is related to that of universality. The universal is taken to be the individual stripped to its generic simplicity. For an art thinker like Winckelmann the universal is like the purest water drawn from the heart of the well, clear and clean as the water Pindar considered the best thing in the world. Both concepts—universality and generality—became creative phrases for eighteenth-century European thought about the arts.

This whole bolus of aesthetic perspectives, which to many in our day may seem archaic, was shortly after its time under challenge by eighteenth-century contemporaries like Montesquieu, in *L'Esprit des Loix* (1748), who were already beginning to query the nature of the cultural “other”, and thus to complicate the notion of the universal. It is not a question here, of course, of a few names of creative movers, who occurred all together and were on the growth curve of “modernity”, and with it that impulse toward social self-awareness which was later to give birth to the “sciences of society”. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Herder (and at times Goethe himself)—among multitudes of outstanding thinkers—were already in their time launching early social scientific perspectives, wondering whether other cultures saw the world as they saw it, and thus, of course, whether the true, the beautiful, and the good applied equally to all cultures at all times, or were even the universally highest values. This was a kind of querying that was in some cases—take the example of Shaftesbury in the *Characteristics*—both working the territory of the universal and doggedly worrying it, taking the universal notion as a springboard toward a quest for ultimate value, and at the same time questioning the idea of any universality of taste or meaning. One of the mysteries that defines our own time was unfolding: interest in the other and its relations to us inevitably leads to concern with the essence we have in common with the other, but the very discovery of that commonality is a gateway to discovering the funny little ways the other is *not* like us—the ways the African eschews the very dining fork on which we Iowans count to save ourselves from too-direct contact with the confection on the plate.

For the various eighteenth-century thinkers—the Encyclopedistes, Condorcet, Lessing, Malthus—who were the founders of our soon-to-be social-scientific preoccupations, it was becoming obvious that other cultures belonged to the unity of human thoughts, even that the Classical-based Western tradition was “historical”, but less obvious that the highest artistic values of one culture would translate into those of another culture. These thinkers were reaching toward a discovery that would be typical of the cultural anthropologist’s find; that the grid of sameness, through which we perceive the other, is the grid through which we are enabled to perceive the oddity, the non-normal of the other. The birth of the social sciences in the nineteenth century signaled what was about to be a widely respected case for “cultural relativism” in such disciplines as anthropology and linguistics. (One might think of the work of Sir James Frazer—*The Golden Bough*, 1922; or Benjamin Whorff—*Language, Mind, and Reality*, 1942.) It is a long story to trace and map the inroads of relativism into the idea of the universal, but we will hang on to what we have already established

here, that there is a kissing kin relation between universalism, the thinking of the literary universal, and the newly refined awareness of how different cultures do their lives differently. It might additionally be argued that the case for universalism, in a new guise, is returning at certain points in twentieth and twenty-first century argument—cf. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1944) or Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1984). But if so, and this is a long story for which I simply suggest a title or two, attempts to rescue universal value reappear now from the dimension of religious/philosophical thought, rather than from the implicit values of the thinking of a society in action, as was the case with the universalism of the eighteenth century. Some of the great texts that in our time have supported renewed ideas of the universal are the Greek classics, recaptured, for instance, in contemporary educational movements like the Great Books Program. Yet the Greeks of the Classical period, whose greatest work has generated so much thinking about the universal and general, and whose greatest theorists, Plato and Aristotle, are above all concerned with the universal and general, themselves had no aesthetic or literary concept of the universal. In fact, on such matters as universal artistic value the Greeks were entirely silent, even in the limited amount they wrote about the nature and import of the arts. We might say that the Greeks did the universal while the moderns occasionally talked and thought about the universal.

## 6

## UNIVERSALITY AND HISTORY

On the face of it, interest in universalism today sounds erudite and detached. The opposite is the case. Our topic, the literary universal, is a concept whose very formulation is alive and arouses edginess, and which is made provocative by the current climate of cultural discourse; to draw attention to literary universality suggests in our time almost an engaging trench-level statement. In an age when everything political and cultural is about difference and the other, it will seem offensive to many to regress into the topic of the universal. And the intellectuals? How will they cotton to such talk of the universal? Within the academy, to be sure, attempts to pin down the universal traits in mankind might in one sense seem to be welcomed; after all, those traits mesh with the viewpoint of globalization, which is as much in vogue today as diversity; though globalization, as shibboleth, might well seem to proceed in the opposite direction from diversity. (There is no rigid exclusion between the two terms, but the operative fallouts from them move in opposite directions. If the revered minority is found to be just part of the global whole, it loses its distinct condition; if the global whole is imagined to embrace endless subgroups, the grand unities of the whole are leached away.) But the fact is that the flag of universalism, for all the support it provides to the global perspective within the community of thinkers, lies even there under a deep cloud. It is as though the *quod semper, quod ubique* perspective implied a politics of the elite, which it certainly need not. And yet that seeming implication has brought a political dimension into the discourse of historical aesthetics. We must attribute this cloud over the universal to a prevailing world cultural view in which the welfare state, attempting to mandate equality of rights, shudders at *any* suggestions of cultural superiority, and scorns itself for any semblance of prioritizing, thus feeling obligated to prioritize the “dispossessed of the earth” at the expense of the unity of human being. The fact in that within this complex of issues the notion of the universal, “what oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed,” finds itself in stormy weather today, and is likely to capsize at any given moment for want of any thorough inspection of its historical roots.

## 7

## DIVERSITY AND COMMONALITY

What we call “diversity” today, implying at this time the respect for the rights of minorities and marginalized groups, is what we have for a half-century wanted to promote through government “entitlement programs” on the federal level, bringing the support of our government to bear on the entitling of those “history” has left behind. This promotion of under-supported diversity has laudable generosity as one of its roots, and makes its claim, today, to pride of place in the intellectual’s arsenal of perspectives. Diversity, however, has not always been the sought-after goal of our society—nor is it universally sought-after today in other societies. There are different ways to view the diversity issue. Diversity is not the sought-for goal, today, in Nigeria, or Iceland, or China, all of which countries promote a preference for their own indigenous inhabitants—one of 300 pronouncedly separate ethnic groups (Nigeria); a member of the Nordic community of nations (Iceland); the vast Han majority of the population (China). Nor, in fact, was immigration, and the striking diversity it promotes, a priority for the *polis* of fifth-century Athens, in which being foreign was a strong mark against you; in which being a *barbaros*, speaking Attic Greek with a funny accent, was an inherent reproach, not the mark of a to-be-valorized outsider. That is to bring up a few examples of laws and public policy on immigration, as it occurs today, a topic of complex contention in a country like the United States, where a long unprotected border to the south has allowed in floods of undocumented aliens, for the most part illegal and in some degree, to some (but far from all) people, an unwanted element in the population. The issue of cultural diversity, and the promotion of it, is hot and active in America today, because our desire to respect the basic human identity of these illegal presences speaks very loudly in many sectors of the population, and lays a claim precisely on respect for the brotherhood of humanity.

The diversity issue has become intense in America because the thrust of much legislation and popular feeling is sympathetic to minorities, and sensitive to the disparities of wealth and privilege which have the

cumulative effect of concentrating national power in the hands of long-prioritized cliques or individuals; while at the same time we know that the commitment to the universal human is a strong thread in our humanity.

We envisage the global—the global village, the economic community of nations, World Music or World Literature—as at least one omega point of progress among human beings. One goal of such universalism, we suppose, is the erasing of the differences among the local communities that go into composing a world community. And as we know—from our daily experience either of arts from other cultures, of summit meetings joining leaders from different cultures, or even of supremely testing struggles of cultural difference—like the Sharia incursion of *Islam in the Magreb* into Mali, as it runs into the post-colonial Westernism of Socialist France—our thoughts, feelings, and prejudgments about *the other* are constantly modifying, so that even in the knowing of the other as brutally other we are *knowing* the other. Or to pick a more digestible instance, go to Barnes & Noble with me last week. *Americanah*? Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie? Had to pick it up. Never do that, just explore. I'm caught at once, as I follow the self-analysis of brilliant English transcending norms, fussy in elaborate detail over the choice of hair attachments and sarcastic blogs in Princeton and Trenton, skipping over into a Nigerian high life you scratch my back I'll scratch yours living room dialogue, until I find myself an hour later chucklingly rehearsing the sounds of the once unknown cultural dialogue of Nigerian sophistication; through another which marriage has welded me to I realize how utterly I have learned to speak to myself in a new language. I have met the other and know it, but precisely through knowing the absolute knife of difference that defines it.

## 8

## EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE, GREECE, THE UNIVERSAL

What about the culture that generated the Western concept of literary universality, the eighteenth century in Europe? What kind of complex of world views were those people coming from, into their notion of the universal? Did they see in the universal that strange affinity to the particular, the locally familiar, which we discussed above? What *was* their attitude toward diversity?

Put yourself back there in 1750—in Leipzig, or Dover, or Nantes. The world is shrinking around you; the great initial voyages of discovery were well in the past, distant corners of the globe were coming into the light, and even notions like travel and tourism were beginning to take their bite out of human ignorance. From where, in this developmental picture of the world two and a half centuries ago, would have come the notion of the global and the universal? And were the notions of the global and the universal twinned? Or only indirectly related to one another?

In the Western hemisphere the global was at that time only a form of pronouncement. Who expatiated about the importance of the global, or thought, in that sense, about the unity of all mankind? My story book answer has several chapters in it, all already part of the foregoing discussion, and all pinned to textbook elites. It includes Johnson's Imlac, urging Rasselas not to number the streaks of the tulip, but to stick with the general, the universal; meaning-themes containing within them the rich content of the particular. Another chapter includes Sir Joshua Reynolds, charging against Blake's idea of "minute particulars", with his own notion of idealized portraiture, which goes for the general human features of the portrayed. Another chapter includes Goethe, digging up the traces of the generally valid from the phenomena of clouds, or from evolutionary human behavior—what could go for the *type* more than the argument of *Faust*, that symbolically embedded figure in whom the human quest for infinite learning and at the same time tangible here-ness is essentialized? (We begin to track here the intersection point where the concrete

universal, what we find in Falstaff, borders on the abstractly universal, where Blake and Reynolds actually belong in a hidden dialogue with one another.) My last chapter includes Alexander Pope, looking for “what oft was said but ne’er so well expressed,” as though there were ways waiting there for reality to find its best expression; an expression uploaded from the nature which is the universal mother of us all. I am throwing everything but the kitchen sink into this farrago of eighteenth-century references, mixing the literal shrinking of the globe with the consequent widening of the mind, the beginnings of that paradoxical humane geography which has reached the haunting stage by our day, and may contain in it the one grail, the unity grail, lying before and within the future of humanity. I am tracking in a few sibylline words the interplay between globalism and regionalism. And implying a kinship thread between the global village thought and the thought of the literary or other artistic universal.

And what is it again, that unity grail? Put it a different way this time. The human infant grows into the stages of life, and for part of that growing curve an apex is envisaged, a point of maximum operation which precedes the central nervous system slowdown that leads to death. Same with the humanity which spreads over our globe. Infant cultures mature and in that process they learn more about the world outside them, at the same time discovering more about other people and about themselves. The Chinese come into contact with Indian Buddhism through a monumental series of translation efforts, in the first centuries after Christ, and in the course of it Chinese culture is hugely enriched, mutual understanding promoted, *petit à petit*, between the two huge cultures. The globe grows smaller, the humane purview wider. The contemporary American, emailing his fellow geologist in Sarawak, makes a new whole in the noosphere, while shrinking it, in the course of discovering similar tectonic plates which are at the same time different in ways that can only be seen through their similarity. But—and this *but* is where the complexity lies—for the contemporary American, the British gent of 1750, or the Athenian in the agora watching *The Persians*, the move outward into the general unities of the human condition is at the same time an unfolding of the difference among people, the diversity that is only discovered by the unity. We are on the path, today, to discovering new forms of an old paradox, that the more we discover of our common humanity the more we discover of our common difference.

## 9

## DIVERSITY, STANCE, HELLENISM

This is to keep ourselves within the issue of thinking about the universal, and, in an age obsessed in the West by the notion of diversity, with the issue of the paradoxical relation between diversity and unity, the mutual hunger of one and other with which Plato himself is obsessed in dialogues like *Protagoras*, and in which, in fact, the Milesian hylozoists were themselves obsessed, say Anaximenes as he saw the diverse permutations of a single substance, air, into snow, ice, and evaporated water. It was the Greeks themselves, in fact, who most transparently grasped the polarity of universality with the local, and so it was the Greeks, once again, who take us back to the other aspect of the universality discussion, that of the creation, as distinct from the analysis, of the universal. We make our roundabout way back to the meaning of the mysterious universality of Classical Greek writing and art.

What is it about Greek sculpture (the work of Phidias), Greek architecture (the Parthenon, the Temple of Poseidon at Sunium, the Temples at Paestum), Greek poetry (Archilochos, Sappho, Simonides), Greek epic (Homer), and Greek philosophy (Plato and Aristotle) which seems to set a perspicuous standard for other times and places, which seems to speak for mankind, as was said in an earlier day, while at the same time emerging deeply regional, local, clothed in the dress, rhythms, audiential environment, and sense of precision that bespeak that time and that place? (I beg my way out of an “historical” explanation for this dated aristocratic Hellenist viewpoint, the explanation that the traditions of ancient Greece and Rome, which were in Europe prioritized by the Renaissance and the two following centuries, only in the nineteenth gave way to the adulation of Hellenism, which was in fact a latecomer in the self-definitional aspirations of the “cultured West”.) It is a question of where we start, no? I started with Greece. Parker Peckham, a colleague of my father at the University of Illinois, came to our house when I was thirteen; he and I studied Greek together and I have never felt such life-changing freedom. This was my Renaissance. You and Juan and Supriva and Ching-hsien will all have had different entry points into the material of

culture, but what I am arguing, here, is that we all, all, find ourselves back to a common understanding in the end, a human nature for which we may never have time to adopt a single term, but which is the *blaue Blume* that blossoms inside us. So, shelving for the moment where the point is to go, keep the point clear: that the Hellenic is capable of arguing itself, here, as a creative matrix of universal achievement in artistic symbol. This weighted historiography is different from that by which we disengaged the eighteenth-century concern with the thought of the universal, the produce of a tradition, fundamentally elite Romanized, which derived from the Renaissance and farther back from the typological writing we find in *Paradise Lost* or *Gawain and the Green Knight* or *Beowulf*, in all which texts there is a sense that what is being transmitted is there for *semper et ubique*.

The point just made will shortly fall back to let us look again at the “Greek miracle”. First, though, we need to mark the special sensitivity of the point just made. In the culture wars of our day it is made to seem of supreme importance which point of entry one makes into a discovery of cultures and mankind’s unfolding in them. The priority of the Classical has lost favor, not to mention the whole priority of the West as portal. One can review this sensitivity academically in terms of the development of a “discipline” like Comparative Literature, for which the issue of choosing a starting point has always been central. That choice is implicit in the idea of choosing. To be sure, there are neutral ways of setting up a situation of choice. You can ask a child whether he wants an orange or an apple. You can do so without any preference for the choice he will make. But is your offering voice without valence?

From inside himself, however, the child will occupy a point of preference—I tasted this at Gramma’s and boy was it sweet, or wasn’t that a worm I saw in one of those apples at Jim’s?—and will choose from there. The grounders and namers, of the Comparative Literature that has become an academic discipline in the West, were initially not only Westerners, “cultured” inheritors of the “Classical traditions” and European higher history, but were there because of the luck of history in flight from a seething Europe: René Wellek, Renato Poggioli, Jorge Guillén and Roman Ingarden. That Europe was seething in part from the illness of the nationalism which had been born two hundred years earlier in the very Western Europe that was ripping itself apart; it was not surprising that, wedged into a small corner of history by shocking and bitter events, Kristallnacht, Munich, the annexation of the Sudetenland, these culturally sensitized Western Europeans should have sought refuge in the havens of the United States University world, whose open curricular

environment, coinciding with the strong doctoral study programs inherited after all from Germany itself, by way of Johns Hopkins, assured areas for innovation and scholarship which were no longer available in Europe. (So much has to be *not said*, in accumulating a background to the social dynamics of any event horizon, in this case the establishment of American Comparative Literature; for example *where* the American Graduate Study world found itself in Humane Studies, at the time infusions from the European experience were being made available to it.) It was also not accidental that these refugee scholars were living the salience as well as the nightmare of nationalism, as they carried their culture across the ocean; with the result that the first steps of Comparative Literature within the American academy were firmly planted both in the notion of national literatures and in just those Western national literatures, with their Classical origins, from which was to emerge the marked Western-culture emphasis of the study of Comparative Literature. Which brings us by the inevitably foreshortened arc back to the issue of where we stand in the understanding of Comparative Literature study today, and, of course, of how far we have come from the mid-twentieth-century establishments by hyper-cultured men in flight with bizarre accents.

We haven't even started talking about the immense journey already traveled by Comparative Literature, in a half-century of volcanic cultural challenge. (The author teethed on Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*, 1949, and is hit in old age by *The Death of a Discipline*, 2003, by Gayatri Spivak, who used to sit down the corridor from him in the tooth-cutting early days [1965–70] of Comparative Literature at the very University of Iowa where René Wellek taught for seven years upon arrival in the United States in 1949. The measuring of cultural difference, between those two books, will be at least a sub-theme of the present *Platonism for the Iron Age* book.) No, we're not legitimately back to the Greek miracle, we're not back to the generating point of the universal in the arts, but we are isolating a reason why the establishers of the academic discipline of Comparative Literature thought in terms of Western national cultures as the basis for the process of "comparison". Whether or not they had thought of their ethnocentrism is uncertain, for they were fighting within them the battle of the nationalities we all were then; while they were much less aware, even than we are today, of the richness of the *world's* cultures.

We will return to that rich and super-current issue of self and other, starting point and object, in literary studies, but it is time first for the housekeeping we had promised ourselves, a look at the creation, rather than the academic search for, the universal, and that is of course the topic

of the Greek miracle. Did the Greeks of the Classical period find their way to expressing what makes human sense everywhere and at every time? Or is that kind of old-fashioned pre-empirical nostrum one for the history of self-interested nationalism, as retro-fitted by the Renaissance and the nineteenth century onto a pile of hard-to-interpret texts which are still being processed, and at that from an unstably onward-rushing platform, our hurtling momentary perch on history as we write?

Friends of the Greek universal claim, allies of Johnson and Pope, are likely to play their strong cards first, as have most versions of the modern Classical tradition: Homer, *Oedipus the King*, Thucydides are likely to preempt the discussion; and for the good reason, I believe, that these writers were supreme masters of the distance and quality of distance separating themselves from their texts and their audiences. That heavy overworking of “distance” needs justifying, as does the present author’s headlong rush into the language of quality, following say the tradition of Matthew Arnold and Rachel Bepaloff. If we meet the challenge of this quality language, we may approach a formula for the transcending achievement of these writers sprung up on a rocky peninsula in the Eastern Mediterranean, and without immediate influential antecedents—the highly creative humanisms of Babylonia and Egypt, not beyond shouting distance, were hard to incorporate in the present apostolic succession.

Homer, Sophocles, Thucydides: all create from a narratival magisterium, from their first lines controlling us: “*Menin aeide thea...*” putting us in the space of invocation—but what counts, keeping us there until, with *Peleiadeou Achilleos*, we are on a level with our entire upcoming narrative:

My children, latest generation born from Cadmus,  
why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks  
in supplication to me, while the city  
fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain,  
Children, it would not be appropriate for me  
to learn of this from any other source,  
so I have come in person—I, Oedipus,  
whose fame all men acknowledge...

How much more a master of distance can the teller of tales be? Is the quality of distance, removed in myth space, not designed to take you unresisting into its space? and as for “Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians; he began at the moment that it broke out...”—is there not both total control of the reader and a placing of the narrative promise in a ritual/mythical

accounting which—and this is where authorial distance might swing over into “universal claim”—we see the promise of temporal and spatial transcendence, a reach to the universal?

The self-confident authorial distance, intimated above, tracks into tales which are carried through on a sustained arc of intention: the *Iliad* flaying us with unremitting scenes of hand-to-hand combat, local cunning, acts of bravery, leading us toward the gesture of grace, on Achilles’ part, which is all the preceding could have justified; and doing so in a counterpoint of caesura with run-on which is of unequalled energy; Sophocles unfolding, with us, a tale so thrillingly internal to itself, that even its spectacular displays of passion and loss are folded back into its artistry, chorus and actors blending in a growing awareness of despair; Thucydides, in a dry sublime, rubbing our attentions in one after another increasingly heartless example of the *Machtpolitik* that lies at the heart of intra-political relations, and that leads inevitably to system breakdown. The authorial distance claimed in all these texts is the pre-condition for the carrying power of each text, to a point where it is hard to imagine the text not presentation-worthy for any culture that speaks the human condition.

Distance and carry are enabled, in these examples, by some capacity for projection. In Adrian Stokes, *Greek Culture and the Ego*—for in that book I get intimations of what “projection” in great art means—I get a fleeting sense that the way we try to overcome loss, by reconstituting our bodies in an image, like that which fine art produces, is our path to the creation of literary universality. This would be the path, to put the point in terms of Classical literature, down which Homer, Sophocles, and Thucydides walked, but not Virgil (great though he is in lesser ways), not Seneca (too weak to discipline a strong theme), or Tacitus (too brilliantly of the moment to keep the longest arc going).

Is the formula for literary universality then to be found in a quality of self-definition? And if so, why did it take place in Greece when it did? Did it take place in all the expressions of the Greek people in art? And if so, did it take place throughout the productions of fifth-century Classical Greece, through the fourth century? Why did it stop, this miracle of self-definition and controlled inner distance? Why did Hellenism have to happen?

The explanation surely lies in the quality of Greek self-definition. But the hard work of explaining starts there, with the words. In artistic creation you define yourself in terms of a relation to what you make. One quality of that relation might be distance. This is a phenomenological term, a measurement of felt distance. It is like the *distance intérieure* Georges Poulet writes about, which is a quality of relationship. By cliché

agreement, and by intuition out from the points in this text, the Classical distance would be one which is removed but not dehumanized. To some extent this point applies to effective literature of any kind—to literature which deals *with* emotions, like Fromentin's *Dominique*, as well as to literature which deals with the structures of human relation like Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommés*. It is not in the emotions of the text but in the emotional working through of the creator that the healing and enwholing process of high art takes place. We can postulate for the Greek classics a maturity of distancing in which the authorial voice clears an exceptionally healthy environment for hearer or reader attention. This is the space in which the great author defines and clarifies himself. It is by traversing this interior space that the reader or listener recovers him/herself. And it is because this movement of self-recovery is a fundamental human gesture that a kind of universal applicability leaves its shadow on the great text.

And why did such a capacity for artistic greatness—for we are on our way to the *visual* arts of Classical Athens as well as the verbal—"take place in Greece when it did"? The political/economic conditions for personal freedom—trade, monetization, the growth of literacy, the stimulus of rivalry, the plastically growing availability of a language both incremental in vocabulary, supple in those all-determining niceties like prepositions and prefixes, and finally the exhilarating sense of establishing the new, in genres, in emotional range, and in philosophical power: all these conditions were present in fifth-century Athens. Discovery begat discovery in an intense historical spiral. A wide formula, to be sure, and one to which high cultural intelligence was essential, and from it the luck to have been christened by *the Bible*, the Homer text, which was itself on the highest level of literary making. (Contrast, here, the exemplars under which other great literary cultures worked: *Vedas*; the early Italic texts Virgil later draws on for a mythography of Rome; *Sundiata* or *La Araucana* or *Os Lusíadas*—noble tales of foundation, but tales tied to the local pride of a single tribe; the *Song of Songs*, or the Confucian *Analects*—all of them reverberations of the effort to find the control point in an emerging society—rather than designed projections into the open space of naming the whole human condition—as we find it in Homer.) It is no wonder that the myth system of Greek worship remained as fluid and inventive as it did, spawned as it was by Ionian dactyls.

Did this Hellenic literary achievement find its way into other arts, as we would expect? The same maturity of demand we meet in Homer, Thucydides or Sophocles enters our response space in the early Attic *kouroi*, in the Poseidon temple at Sounion or the Parthenon, in the Zeus Temple at Olympia, or in the sculptures of Phidias. Yes. Confronting any

of these structures means moving into a sharply defined space of concentration. One can adopt this access spirituality from any position, the acid test of the self-enwholing achievement such architects as Ictinos were achieving. (It sets the seal on the discovery, of the carrying demand of this visual achievement, that even the hidden parts of the Greek temple are worked with perfection in mind. The unseen back of the metope is refined to the max. The conscience of such work ends nowhere.) These productions for the eye make a claim in which universality is less difficult to argue for than it is in works of literature. Even when in justice we add back the painted surfaces of these structures and creations which we now know as brilliant marble, we see nothing about cultural difference, even over a long diachronic distance, which would suppress the carrying directness of this work, as it enters new spaces. Did this therapeutic fullness of achievement persist through the Classical period of Greece—which was markedly an Athenian period? If we look on Plato as a creator of art the answer will be yes. Plato both explores what makes beauty transcend the moment, and enacts, in his dialogues, that interplay of ideative subtleties which is itself art in the making. But if we concede this point, and cut Aristotle off from our list of makers of the universal in art, we need to ask ourselves what happened, in Greek culture, to bring an end to this period of literary universality. The answer, to keep to our level of easy generality, will once again take us to political developments—loss of the integrity of the fifth-century polis, with its democratic rumbustiousness—and to the introduction, with the Hellenistic world and the “globalism” of Alexander, of genre visuals—the Boy with the Goose, the Altar of Pergamon—and genre texts—the poems of Theocritus, the dramas of Menander, the mimes of Herondas. Contrary to what might seem logical expectations, the entry of such sentiment sharply reduces the universality of the art works produced. Apparently the universal carves sentiment away from it, and leaves what Johann Winckelmann considered the ideal, the purest water from the center of the spring.

## 10

## THE SELF AS AN ADVENTURER IN LANGUAGE

I started with an anecdote. I wanted to open out some of the dramas, aspirations, and inevitable frustrations of the drive to connect universally. There were thinkers in the eighteenth century who felt that the clarity of Classical thoughts, their relation to nature and God's plan, guaranteed intelligibility worldwide for distichs written with Latinate discipline in a corner of English culture. This was a forgivable innocent parochialism, as, someday, will seem to distant ages our own tortured efforts to measure the limits of human understanding and of the global social. Right in the midst of the universal thicket do we stand now, and while ready to formulate a data bank of the world's Babelian thousands of languages, and inwardly ready to say yes to any culture's eccentricities, we still think and feel from an historically over-determined I with which we inevitably dress the universal. I am still seeing through American lenses, twentieth-century Midwestern filters on them, and contacts, believe me, layer on layer there, passed on from the Urbana Illinois lens to the eastern Iowa lens, to the marriage number three lens, and you carry the ball from there, right down to the surface of those other balls, the eyeball and the mindball, and the hardball diamond where I played my Illinois heart out.

As if to ease itself into the morass of our efforts at historical self-location, this study in literary universality can hardly move more honestly than into the *language* it uses to interview the possibility of the universal. (It is as though, in the midst of a prolonged filibuster, the talking head makes an abrupt stop, steps into a separate chamber, and views a documentary video of him- or herself talking for the previous two hours, and wants to know *what is that talking face and animated mouth?* What kind of an action is it in the midst of, and what has that action to do with something taking place inside it, like a brain? Is not this action detachable from everything else inside or around it? Is not every philosophical question we can ask, about the psychology or aspirations of the human animal, patent to read from those moving lips and palpitating throat?) We have so far looked at—thought about—the existence of the universal, and at creations which intend to incarnate the universal. Both kinds of thought

were formulated in language attempting to scrutinize uses of language, to palp language claims for the translatability of all languages into mutual intelligibility; and rightly were those claims assumed because the literary universal is nothing except what we might want to say or write about it, and what we might want to say about it is nothing except in terms of what other languages can validate as our thought. (The universal itself, in whatever form it appears, may exist before or outside language, but the point is arid—for only in language can we even formulate the point.) The essential role of language, in making ourselves parts in a world, is taken for granted here.

The present text records dramas: some of the adventures of language in substantiating and characterizing the universal. But what credentials back up this effort, and justify our attention to it? We live in a biosphere of verbals, each cropping from the ground we sow it in, and each as easily detracked from its cognitive mission as the a in Derrida's *différance*, that portal into the discovery that meaning (as Derrida sees it) exists only as a byproduct of the mutual self-definition of terms and their opposites. Nothing, we know, binds us to spelling or numeration as they are passed down to us. Nothing guarantees us the referential usefulness of our language except its extension over the globe of the human biosphere.

Sartre gives us, in *La Nausée*, the moving example of Roquentin fixated on the roots of a giant tree in his city park. He grows increasingly terrified as the roots, swelling before him in the dusk, push back the language coverings—Roquentin gradually loses control over the word “racine” and starts to babble at it, as though he were having a stroke—and has an intimation of the world *that is not made up of language*. This kind of intimation is of great rarity—we rely on the testimony of the mystical in us—and by the nature of our condition in language virtually precluded. Our discourse about the universal not only participates in creating the great prison house of language, but is guilty of perpetuating, in language, the particularly extravagant proposal that texts made of language, words, could contribute to appreciating the fundamental oneness, the humanity, of humans around the globe. Humans exist over the drop space on the other side of which is *l'innomable*, that which, because it exists as what we cannot name, threatens with special indifference those language sallies in which we aspire to name the most lasting format of our presence on the globe, our universality. In Chapter 15 of *Time, Accounts, Surplus Meaning* (2012) I do my best to characterize that pre-speech zone, while in Chapter 7 of the same book I try to “get inside the mind of the prehistoric artist.”

What we are saying there, and here, is that what we are saying, about the place of the concept of literary universality both in thought and in