

## writing on universality

all humans are just fragments of this Bigger Thing. In the days when I spent my youth at the center of a peacekeeping operation in war-torn places, love and hate both implied fragmentation; but hate was this thing that would devoid the fragments of context. It did not want to admit that life was in the spaces between things and not in the things themselves. it did not render fear and division listless, because it did not want to prove there existed these Bigger Things.

by returning to the idea of universality,

Last year was the deadliest on record for global conflicts, with 233,000 people killed over the course of the year, according to Armed Conflict Location and Event (ACLED) data. A startling 1 in 8 people were within 5km of conflict around the globe throughout 2024.

of course, there is a grand multitude of factors that contribute to this, like a growing global, technology-driven need for cobalt that has and continues to exploit into mutilation the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or geopolitical power games between the US and Russia that are then played out by puppet armies in puppet wars on foreign soil. but the operating system at hand is compassion: the ability for any one person across this country and beyond to feel, first, that they have the ability to love another simply because it is a native condition of life, and second, that they've been passed down the knowledge on how to perform that love by someone who learned it before them.

of course we feel universally represented by something or another because a piece of well done art is a hint at the Whole. kind of like how we tend to be touched by sculptures that are missing parts, like how Sontag explains in her famous Rolling Stone Magazine interview that Venus de Milo becomes more moving because it has no arms. reminds us of History, a bigger narrative.

semantics over genius, like how sometimes russian writers produce the driest of original texts, but still pulsing with life and meaning. or like Max Blecher. worth seeing this via proust's idea of genius as being a reflective art rather than literary talent or exceptional experiences

"the men who produce works of genius are not those who live in the most delicate atmosphere, whose conversation is the most brilliant or their culture the most extensive, but those who have had the power, ceasing suddenly to live only for themselves, to transform their personality into a sort of mirror, in such a way that their life, however mediocre it may be socially and even, in a sense, intellectually, is reflected by it, genius consisting in reflecting power and not in the intrinsic quality of the scene reflected."

universality through particularity, especially in works like "Ulysses" where a single day in Dublin becomes a window into all human experience. or involuntary memory in "À la recherche du temps perdu." The madeleine isn't just a personal trigger - it becomes a gateway to understanding how all human memory and experience works. The deeply personal becomes universal precisely because of, not in spite of, its specificity. this is inherently because we are born teachers, because our knowledge (which includes the knowledge of compassion) dies a premature death if it's life cycle does not include the process by which that knowledge becomes shared.

Joyce takes this to an extreme with Leopold Bloom - by following every minute detail of his day, every wandering thought, we paradoxically access something universal about human consciousness and experience. The more precisely he renders Bloom's particular experience, the more it speaks to universal human conditions.

this approach to universality is both modernism and also deeply pre-modern, the latter in its understandings of subject-object relationships, where the boundaries between self and world, individual and collective, were more permeable because everything participated in divine reality.

how medieval Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart would talk about finding God in the most mundane particulars of life - not by transcending them, but by penetrating their depth. There's a similar logic at work in Buddhist thought about interdependence and non-dualism.

Nicolescu's work on the "Hidden Third" (le tiers caché) is especially relevant here - the idea that beyond the apparent subject-object duality, there exists a unifying realm that makes their interaction and mutual understanding possible. In quantum physics terms, this relates to how the observer and observed system cannot be fully separated, creating what he calls a "zone of non-resistance" where rigid distinctions break down.

I remember reading *Kafka on the Shore* when i was quite young and being touched by the idea of the transgender librarian that houses Kafka when he runs away from home — transgender, I suppose in the context of the story, in order to represent the idea from *The Banquet* by Plato when he's discussing people originally being androgynous and then cut in half by Zeus so they spend their whole life looking for the other half. the librarian was the only person in the story who was "whole."

we have grown, in unsuspecting increments, further and further away from each other, where the space between two bodies is an immediate unreality, like stacking vellum sheets on top of one another until the accessible question becomes not what is on the other side, but rather whether there's something there to begin with, and if one must bother to even ask. this past week, the Trump administration gutted USAID, which provides 43% of the world's humanitarian aid -- life saving interventions and resources that will no longer prevent the death by starvation of upwards of 100 children per day in Sudan, or keep the doors open of secret schools for Afghan women, or provide treatment for HIV/AIDS globally through PEPFAR, a program that's saved upwards of 26 million lives since its launch in 2003 by then-President George W. Bush. in my home, New York City, it's assumably an assimilation practice to glide past unconscious people on the street, loosely inconvenienced and personally exhausted. online, it is learnt behavior to mark pictures of a once three-dimensional war zone as "not interested," or to consume street-interview-style videos where participants' behavior and looks become a flattened commodity that allows no necessity for the whole self.

from a subject/object perspective, genuine relating isn't just about a subject (caregiver/observer) connecting with an object (person being cared for), but about accessing a shared space where such distinctions become fluid. genuine human connection requires dropping our habitual ways of "objectifying" others

robert irwin: "Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees"

perhaps the most effective acts of care, the most rigorous displays of humanity, like the most effective art in Irwin's view, create conditions where we can't maintain our comfortable distance but must engage directly with what is. It is a Weil-ian force, attention as the rarest and purest form of generosity.

work in conflict zones seems to embody this principle - I remember my milkshake with a former gang leader in Nairobi or the dance circles i joined on an Axum highway on my way back from collecting documentation of unreported war-related mass atrocities. not just observing as an external subject, but entering into that "zone of non-resistance" where genuine connection and understanding become possible.

Nicolescu would likely see this as exemplifying what he calls the "logic of the included middle" - moving beyond binary oppositions (helper/helped, observer/observed) to a more complex understanding where relationships themselves become a kind of reality.

Trust that the World's proportions were calculated only insofar as for us to have a space tall and wide enough to fit all our love into.