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Should a Writer Speak for “The Universal”?

The above is a troublesome question. Writers are not a homogenous group, and should do as they like, for their own purposes, and on their own terms. At the same time, all of us need to be careful about making claims to do with speaking for or on behalf of others.

What about speaking for myself? I am a writer of fiction. Should I set out to speak for the universal? The answer is no. I would never do so. I would not presume to have the capacity to write this way, but further, doubt its achievability. Importantly, too, universality isn't the well from which my writing springs. My writing springs from particularity: particular troubles, life experiences, concerns arising from particular times.

Mary Oliver wrote: “One tree is like another, but not too much. One tulip is like the next tulip, but not altogether. More or less like people—a general outline, then the stunning individual strokes.”¹ This sentiment aligns with my experience as both a reader and a writer.

Outstanding writers of fiction have exceptional skills with language, storytelling, and the imagination. Often they exhibit an extraordinary capacity for empathy, too, enabling them to trespass into the imagined worlds of others. A good fiction writer shows something of what it means to live in a specific time and place, and to be of a certain culture or sub-culture. Even when they are seeking to represent space/times or cultures that may not literally exist, their work is imbued with particular ways of knowing, including the limitations of that knowing. Good literature can illuminate complexity, and help readers arrive at a question or a set of questions without being required to form solutions. Literature allows us to sit with trouble and contradiction, and contemplate these in a way we may not otherwise experience.

This capacity places literature in a particular relation to notions of truth or universality. A reader can draw conclusions from literature, but those are *their* conclusions, and that is a very different thing from saying a writer should or could speak for or on behalf of the universal.

What do we take the universal to mean, anyway? Claims to universality will always have a presumption about them we should treat with suspicion. If universality means an idea or experience understood as being the same across the universe, well, we need to ask, for whom? Not so long ago textbooks spoke of universal man, for example, excluding those humans gendered female. What about radically different worldviews, or worldviews we can only imagine? What about the values of the non-human—plants, animals, other forms of life? What do we humans know about the universe anyway? We cannot even agree on its edges.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a tremendously important document, perhaps one of the most important of the last century. It holds governments to account. But consider that when looked at closely, even this document assumes shared cultural understandings; it is a product of a particular group – the United Nations General Assembly – in Paris in 1948 and is inflected with

¹ Mary Oliver. *Upstream: Selected Essays*. Penguin, 2016.

that group's perspective. Consider Article 17: "Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others." Actually, I would argue this right is problematic, as it allows the global capitalist system to exploit the powerless.

How might writers claim space for, and remain vigilant on issues of human rights? By writing literature inspired by what moves, pre-occupies and disturbs our particular hearts.

How attached am I to universal values? I am attached to living a good life and helping others do the same. I think the generative aspect of my writing is informed by this attachment but, importantly, is not ruled by it. What is a good life? The answer can never be summarily declared.

I am for an imaginative writing capable of letting go—at least to some extent—of the very ideas of good and bad. It is writing as a kind of experiment glimpsed by Rumi, when he wrote, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing there is a field. I'll meet you there."²

² Jelaluddin Rumi. *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi*. Translated by John Moyne and Coleman Barks. Shambala, 1999.