



THE PLEASURES OF  
GENERALITY IN  
JOHNSON AND REYNOLDS

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Specificity, particularity, sensuous immediacy: these taken together have been so essential a part of modernist aesthetics that to insist on the pleasures to be had from *generalized* experience may come as something of a surprise. We are all Blakeans these days and was it not Blake who scribbled in the margin of Reynolds' *Discourses* that "to generalize is to be an idiot"? Has not "no ideas but in things" become one of our sacred mantras and did not Pound speak for a whole generation, the founding fathers of the literature of our own times, when he proclaimed that "art does not avoid universals [but] strikes at them all the harder in that it strikes through particulars"?<sup>1</sup>

Particularity and sensuous immediacy are not modern inventions; indeed, they are probably as old as poetry itself. Here, for example, are six lines which antedate Pound's "striking through particulars" by approximately six hundred years. Dante and Virgil have injudiciously clambered to the bottom of one of the *bolge*, or purses, of the eighth circle of hell and find that they have to beat a hasty retreat to avoid some importunate devils. Dante describes Virgil's cragsmanship as follows:

E come quei ch'adopera ed estima,  
che sempre par ch'ènnanzi si proveggia,  
così, levando me sú ver'la cima  
d'un ronchione, avisava un'altra scheggia  
dicendo: "Sovra quella poi t'aggrappa;  
ma tenta pria s'è tal ch'ella ti reggia."

<sup>1</sup> *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 420.

(And like one who works and reckons, always seeming to provide beforehand, so, while lifting me up toward the top of one great rock, he was looking out another crag, saying, "Grapple next on that, but try first if it will bear you.")<sup>2</sup>

Now it so happens that the only sport where I have ever been able to claim an even modest competence is mountaineering, and so when I first read these lines and noted how Virgil works out the next move before he comes to it\*("provides beforehand"), weighs up possible routes ("looking out another crag"), and tells Dante, in terms immediately recognizable to anyone who has ever climbed in the Alps with a guide, to be careful of the next hold before putting his weight on it as the rock might be loose, then I recognized that I was in the presence of a man who had done some serious rock scrambling in his time and knew how to go about it. Not only that, but a man who had experienced at first hand the hectic pace of climbing against the clock with a storm on the horizon and the possibility of fresh snow. The verse where Virgil tells Dante to grapple onto the next rock—

dicendo: "Sovra quella poi t'aggrappa..."—

"fairly pants expressing Virgil's effort," as Professor Singleton puts it. A comparable example occurs in two lines from Keats's "Ode to Autumn,"

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook,

where the line-break compels us to balance from "keep" to "steady," as if on stepping-stones. Such kinetic effects provide the very *essence* of sensuous immediacy in poetry and account for many of its keenest pleasures.

Now compare Dante and Virgil rock-climbing in hell with Dr. Johnson generalizing about the vanity of human wishes:

How rarely Reason guides the stubborn Choice,  
Rules the bold Hand, or prompts the suppliant Voice,  
How Nations sink, by darling schemes oppress'd,  
When Vengeance listens to the Fool's Request.  
Fate wings with ev'ry wish th'afflictive Dart,                   15  
Each Gift of Nature, and each Grace of Art,  
With fatal Heat impetuous Courage glows,  
With fatal Sweetness Elocution flows,

<sup>2</sup> *Inferno* XXIV, 25-30; *The Divine Comedy*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973).

Impeachment stops the Speaker's pow'ful Breath,  
And restless fire precipitates on Death...                   20  
Let Hist'ry tell where rival Kings command,  
And dubious Title shakes the madd'd Land,                   30  
When Statutes glean the Refuse of the Sword,  
How much more safe the Vassal than the Lord,  
Low skulks the Hind beneath the Rage of Pow'r,  
And leaves the wealthy Traytor in the *Tow'r*,  
Untouch'd his Cottage, and his Slumbers sound,                   35  
Tho' Confiscation's vultures hover round.

There is surely a very strong sense of lived experience in this passage, but nothing that gives any specific sensation comparable to that of a crag being climbed, or of someone balancing across a stream on stepping-stones.

That Johnson was concerned to *minimize* all particularizing detail can be proved if we compare the first draft for this passage from "The Vanity of Human Wishes" with the version published in 1749. For example, in line 13 Johnson had originally written "How *Families* sink, by darling schemes oppress'd" and in line 34 "*bonny* Traytor" for "wealthy Traytor." The Scottish word "bonny" would inevitably have drawn attention to the group of Jacobite peers, Lords Cromartie, Kilmarnock, Balmerino and Lovat, who had recently been imprisoned for high treason. Johnson is willing to forego this topical reference for the universality of "wealthy," a word which encompasses a great variety of sinners, both Scottish *and* English.

Now this generalizing practice is backed up by a fair amount of theory and since much of it is well known and readily accessible, I shall skate over it pretty lightly. Perhaps the best known passage of all is the one Johnson puts into the mouth of Imlac in *Rasselas* (Chap. X):

The business of the poet ... is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest.

Such a formulation might lead us to assume that Johnson was in favor of ironing out *all* individual differences, but his remarks on Shakespeare in his "Preface to Shakespeare" show that this isn't so. Shakespeare could create a variety of characters and variety *in* his characters but what is important is that they each represent some general tendency or truth about mankind: "in the writings of other poets," Johnson explains, "a character is too often an individual: in

those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species." It is "irregular combinations of fanciful invention" that we must avoid. And one of his weightiest criticisms of Cowley is that by "pursuing his thoughts to their last ramification... he loses the grandeur of generality."

Johnson here points to one of the great advantages of generality, which is that it frees us from the sway of the contingent, the quirky, the pathological, the solipsistic, the self-absorbed. So much of the most striking poetry of the last few years has consisted of a series of psychic squawks —life studies, howls, journeys to Bedlam and part way back. To share these moments of extremity we have to leave the well-lit room of rational discourse and grope our way down dark corridors, across ghost-infested landings, and up flights of creaky stairs to the attic where society keeps its mad wives, broken toys, and desiccated Emilys. "As they were wholly employed on something unexpected and surprising, they had no regard to that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and pleasures of other minds," said Johnson of the *Metaphysicals*, and it is a comment which could well be applied, with only a moderate degree of unfairness, to much of the production of Lowell, Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Ted Hughes, and many others in our own day.

My complaint is really that a taste for psychic carnage impairs our willingness, or even capacity, to respond to the clear cold voice of reason or the clear warm voice of common humanity. An admirable poet like the Englishman Philip Larkin is little known or appreciated on this side of the Atlantic, largely, I think, because he inhabits those large, well-lighted rooms on the ground floor where strangers can meet, talk, and enjoy "that uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and to excite the pains and pleasures of other minds." In the following lines from Larkin's poem "Aubade," the particularizing effects of metaphor are kept to a minimum:

And so it stays on the edge of vision,  
A small unfocused blur, a standing chill  
That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
Most things may never happen: this one will.  
And realization of it rages out  
In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
People or drink. Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.

The virtues of such lines are essentially those of persuasive, generalizing *statement*. Larkin's concern is with the elements of our

common experience, or with what unites us in the human family rather than with what separates us, and to strike that note effectively he has to cut back on all the detail and particularity in metaphor which holds good only for one time and for one place.

The mention of humankind as a common family brings me to the second of the pleasures of generalization, which is what I shall call the pleasure of quotation. Immature poets borrow whereas mature poets steal, T.S. Eliot reminds us, and much of the delight (for those in the know) and of the misery (for those out of it) in reading Eliot comes from our being able to spot the provenance of his thefts. (Incidentally, I still remember the self-congratulatory glow when I tripped over the parable about giving, sympathizing, and controlling *-datta, dayadhvam, damyata-* in the course of reading the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. The effect was as if I had discovered a theft from "The Waste Land"!)

Eliot and the poetry of generalization both "quote," but the difference is that in "The Waste Land" Eliot quotes from a *specific* area of context whereas Johnson quotes from the context as a whole. Such practice is based on the neo-classical theory of "imitation" whereby the reader of an eighteenth-century poem must continually bear in mind the details of the classical poem which is its prototype (in the case of "The Vanity of Human Wishes," Juvenal's tenth satire). But perhaps what Johnson was trying to do has been best put into words by his namesake Jonson, himself a consummate "quoter." For a poet to imitate, Jonson says, is to "convert the substance, or riches of another poet, to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grow very he: or, so like him, as the copy may be mistaken for the principal."<sup>3</sup> The moralistic overtones of this are unmistakable and there is no denying that such an idea of imitation lies at the very roots of our culture, taking in such phenomena as the Christian religion, the epic hero, and the Lone Ranger. To climb onto the back of a worthy predecessor and appropriate his knowledge and perhaps also his virtue is an admirable guarantee for continuity and depth in art as in life; it is a cultivated version of the behavior of cannibals who ceremoniously kill and eat their ruler so as to acquire his powers and virtue.

Nowadays, of course, we are told to stand on our own feet and be "original," but in the eighteenth century, as in the advice Sir Joshua Reynolds gave his students in the famous series of lectures later published as *Discourses on Art*, the injunction was rather: "Avoid

<sup>3</sup> *Timber, or Discoveries*, ed. Ralph S. Walker (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1953), p. 86

originality! Steal from the great masters of the past, and if you can't steal, borrow." Reynolds put it very plainly in his Sixth Discourse:

We come now to speak of another kind of imitation; the borrowing of a particular thought, an action, attitude, or figure, and transplanting it into your own work: this will either come under the charge of plagiarism, or be warrantable, and deserve commendation, according to the address with which it is performed ... Borrowing or stealing with such art and caution, will have a right to the same lenity as was used by the Lacedaemonians; who did not punish theft, but the want of artifice to conceal it.<sup>4</sup>

Now fortunately what Reynolds meant by "borrowing a particular thought, an action, attitude, or figure and transplanting it into your own work" can be illustrated in much less time than it would take to explain it. Take for example, one of the grandest of Reynolds' generalized portraits, that of *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (fig. 1). The Mrs. Siddons we see here isn't just the Mrs. Siddons we might have met at a garden party (and as Gainsborough portrays her in his ravishing portrait of the same subject): she is Tragic Art incarnate and her posture is meant to evoke a variety of reinforcing associations which situate her within a long receding perspective of history, mythology and biblical lore.

And how can a painting obtain this three-dimensional effect, this sense of history crowding in behind the given image? In painting, as in poetry, the answer is: by quotation. In *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, for example, the position of Mrs. Siddons' head, her left elbow resting on one arm of the throne and her right wrist dangling loosely over the other arm, are in fact "quotations" from two of the prophets of the Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco (figs. 2 and 3).<sup>5</sup> We know from Reynolds' Fifteenth Discourse that he greatly admired the grandeur of Michelangelo's work which reminded him of "the most sublime passages of Homer."<sup>6</sup> Here he quotes from it so as to situate Mrs. Siddons, and his own portrait of Mrs. Siddons, within the noble perspective of art in the grand manner (Homer-Michelangelo-Reynolds), just as Johnson situated his "Vanity" in the perspective of a Roman satire. Both picture and poem aim for a universality which consciously transcends the particular circumstances of their creation.

<sup>4</sup> *Discourses on Art*, ed. Stephen O. Mitchell (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 85-86.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nikolaus Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art* (New York: Praeger, 1956), p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Discourses on Art*, p. 235.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

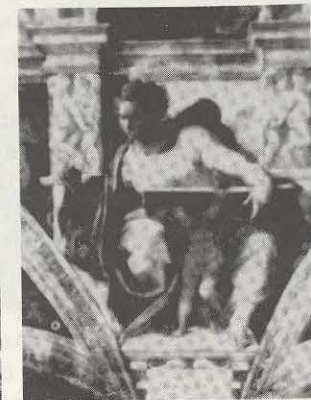


Fig. 3

From: *The Englishness of English Art* by Nikolaus Pevsner.

Similarly, when he wants to impart a sense of heroic resolve to Augustus Keppel stepping ashore from the wreck of the "Maidstone" he deliberately quotes from the most famous male nude surviving from antiquity, the *Apollo Belvedere*. And in his self-portrait (fig. 4) he is seen, not as an individual suffering soul as Rembrandt might have painted him, but as a grand representative figure, first president of the Royal Academy and English heir to Michelangelo whose bust may be seen in the shadows to the right. A final example is his portrait of *Lady Cockburn and her Three Eldest Sons* (fig. 5) and there is a delightful story attached to this painting which illustrates Reynolds' generalizing intent to perfection. Eighteen years after the picture was painted, Lady Cockburn's husband, Sir James Cockburn, received a request for it to be made into an engraving. By this time James, George and William Cockburn (on left, right, and in Lady Cockburn's lap, respectively) were beginning careers that would lead to their becoming general, admiral, and Dean of York. Perhaps foreseeing these dignities, Sir James was reluctant to have the Cockburn name associated with the proposed engraving, but as Lady Cockburn was conveniently dressed in antique style (in accordance with Reynolds' precept that dress too should be generalized), he gave his permission on condition that the family group in the engraving be called "Cornelia and her Children," Cornelia being the mother of the Gracchi and the traditional exemplar of Roman motherhood. So Lady Cockburn was generalized into Heroic Motherhood, just as Mrs. Siddons had been generalized into Tragic Art, and Sir Joshua himself into Presidential Dignity.

To see behind a pretty picture of a mother and her children the shadowy but potent image of an English Mother rearing the Rulers of Church and State so as to defend the Traditional Liberties of England from Foreign Tyranny (the eighteenth-century vogue for capitalization is catching and may itself be considered a symptom of the generalizing habit), and to see behind this mother a whole line of other heroic republican mothers extending back to Cornelia, is in itself the greatest of pleasures —half-a-dozen pictures for the price of one. And this is essentially what I mean by "quotation." To quote is to open a sluice gate from the vast reservoir of artistic and cultural tradition. And if a work cannot "quote" in this sense, it is limited to expressing what it is itself, and nothing more.

The third and final pleasure of generalization is essentially a matter of syntax. Poetry, I believe, can be compared to a set of pearls thrown down on a tabletop (although not necessarily before swine); to pearls arranged on a string, but with only the pearls showing; or to pearls on a string, but with more string showing than pearls. An experience of the first might be that of reading two dozen haiku at a

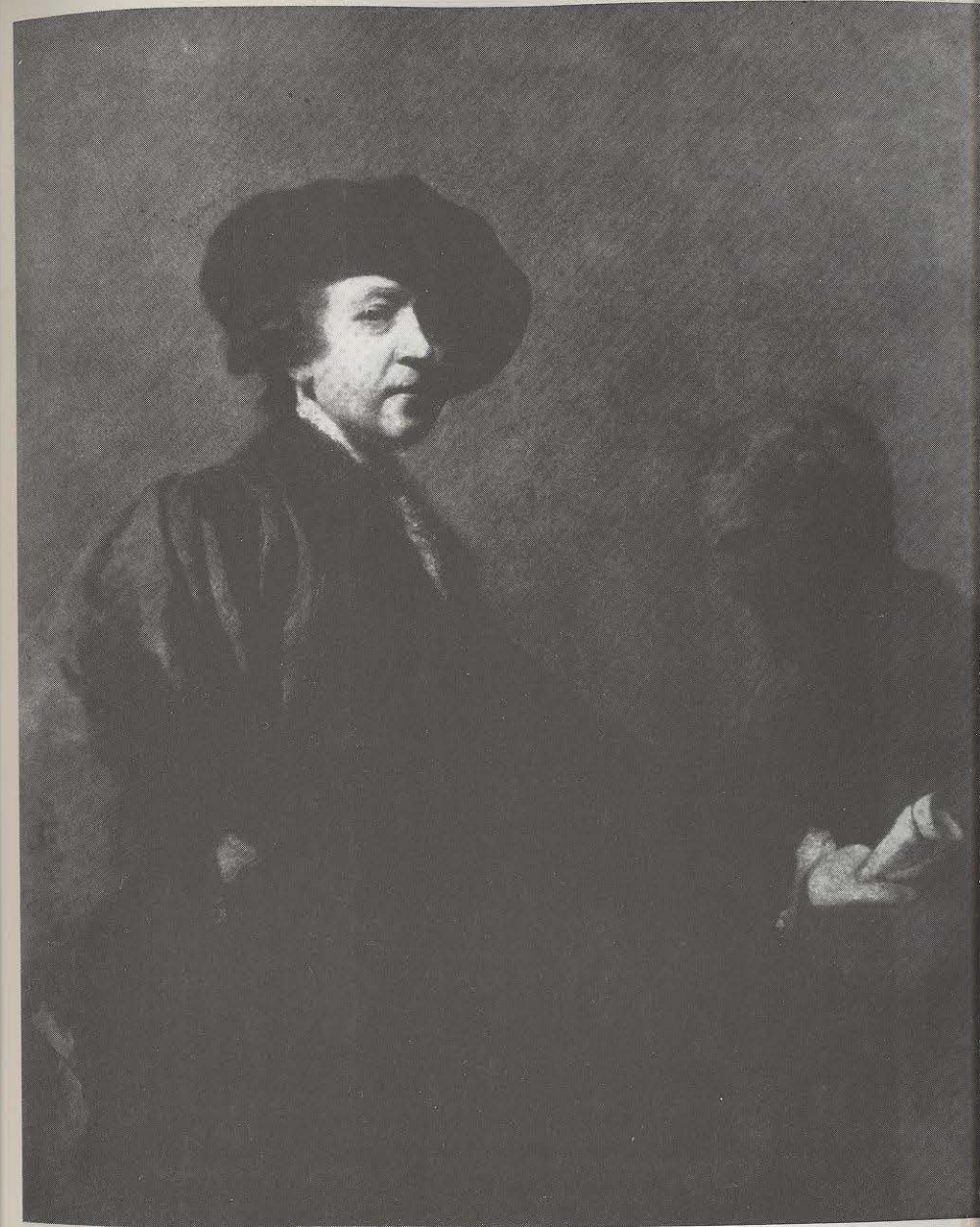


Fig. 4

The Royal Academy of Arts, London

Sir Joshua Reynolds, D.C.L. (1723-1792)  
1773 (?)



Fig. 5  
Augusta, Lady Cockburn, and her children R.A. 1774 (220)  
National Gallery, London

sitting; of the second, that of reading Pound's *Cantos* wherein meaning issues from "a sufficient phalanx of particulars" (*Canto LXXIV*); and of the third, that of the generalizing discourse which is the subject of this essay.

The image of "two dozen haiku at a sitting" might appear exaggerated so let me scale it down a little. The real question at issue is this: Just how does the average intelligent reader read a new book of poems that comes into his hands? Does he read it right through? Does he bolt three or four poems between mealtimes and another half-dozen as a nightcap before going to bed? Or has he taken a course with Poetasters Anonymous and learnt to kick the habit for good?

My own shamefaced answer to these questions, which I offer in the belief that it has some representative significance, is that I usually get halfway through such a book and then give up. The melancholy truth is that the act of reading most collections of contemporary verse —each a tight little node of intensities, insights, ironies, ambiguities, etc.— is just too wearisome, like going for a long bicycle ride in hilly country where the pleasures of swooping downhill are cancelled out by the tedium of pumping, or pushing, uphill. Or to vary the metaphor, a modern poem is usually a hard serve followed by a rush to the net for a smash when what one really longs for is an extended rally off the baseline. And don't even poets themselves sometimes weary of the genre? At any rate I was struck recently by the following, from the introduction to Alastair Reid's latest collection: "I look on this book as something of a farewell on my part to formal poetry, which seems to me now something of an artificial gesture, like wearing a tie."<sup>7</sup> Reading modern poetry is often like dressing up for the Casals Festival: collar's too tight —neck appears to have grown— music's wonderful...but when will it ever end?

The second type of poetry avoids this serve-rush-smash syndrome since now there is an on-going scheme underlying the discrete intensities, a cord on which to string the individual pearls. Pound's *Cantos* is probably the most influential model of our times for this sort of poem, the "open" poem which "does not follow a thought to the end but stops at the penultimate phase of ideation, the reader [being] necessarily forced to complete the thought process."<sup>8</sup> To put it differently, the reader is presented with a series of tableaux, groupings of association, nodes of memory (call them what one will), each of which serves as a sort of ideogram *presenting* the experience at a vivid though incomplete stage of its realization, rather than

<sup>7</sup> *Weathering* (New York: Dutton, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> *New Approaches to Ezra Pound*, ed. Eva Hesse (London: Faber, 1969), pp. 15-16.

describing it as an achieved reality. By these means the quiddity of the experience is preserved, or what William Carlos Williams has called "that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself."<sup>9</sup>

Personally I'd compare the experience of reading the *Cantos* to skimming an ocean of varying depth, with now and again some brilliant algae glimpsed just below the surface, here and there a shadowy monster scurrying away behind a reef, and much opaque foam which there is no seeing through even with the help of snorkelling equipment. So much of the material (all those memories, private associations, snippets from forgotten readings, etc.) seems lost at a hopeless depth of water, and so much of the rest can only be deciphered by peering through portholes of some bathysphere of research. Apropos, Yvor Winters says that the notes being amassed by scholars at the University of California "are almost as voluminous as the *Cantos* and can scarcely be held in the head— in fact, when the work is completed, it may well be impossible to hold them in the hand."<sup>10</sup> And on the same page Winters puts his finger on the basic flaw of the method as a whole: "Sensory perception replaces idea. Pound, early in his career, adopted the inversion derived from Locke by the associationists: since all ideas arise from sensory impressions, all ideas can be expressed in terms of sensory impressions. But of course they cannot be: when we attempt this method, what we get is sensory impressions alone, and we have no way of knowing whether we have had any ideas or not." The "sense impressions" Winters refers to are like a series of exclamations or clauses, what Pound himself has called "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,"<sup>11</sup> but they fail to achieve the relatedness and coherence of the fully developed sentence.

The third pleasure of generality, then, is the pleasure we get from talking in sentences rather than in exclamations. And whereas in exclamations it is the quiddity of things that matters (their nature or essence), in sentences what counts is process (their causal connection or relatedness). In other words, *verbs* become all-important. One of Donald Davie's most valuable insights into the generalizing style is relevant at this point. "The best eighteenth-century verse," he writes, "strikes us as active and weighty, governed by the forceful verb."<sup>12</sup> This may, I think, be seen in every line of the passage from "The Vanity of Human Wishes" quoted earlier, and worth noting in particular is the superb conciseness of line 31 where

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *New Approaches*, p. 234.

<sup>10</sup> *The Function of Criticism* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1957), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *New Approaches*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (New York: Schocken, 1967), p. 36.

the chaff left after the grim harvest of battle is magisterially raked in by the "gleaning" action of the Law, which allows no particle to escape.

The general effect of the active verb is to drive the verse on, to give us a sense of on-going process, to keep us reading. And this is a pleasure we are sorely in need of today when so much of the experience of contemporary literature is a grim battle with writer fighting reader to a standstill. Indeed, I suspect that what we often suffer from, to the exhaustion of our energies and detriment of our morale, is a surfeit of intensity. Perhaps what poetry really needs to become readable again is some of the discursiveness and expansiveness of the novel, though of course it will continue to make use of moments of heightened intensity, those characteristically *poetic* moments, when and as they are needed. Much of the poetry that one most enjoys reading —Shakespeare, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Pope's *Dunciad*— works this way and it is a way which constantly enforces a shared human context and the feeling that writer and reader inhabit roughly the same human world.

Discussing the predominant literary aesthetic of this century, Yvor Winters writes: "The clear perception of the detail, a clarity of perception so acute that it seems to imply undefined significance, that is, Joyce's epiphany or Pound's image or ideogram, has become the essence of great writing." And he goes on to say that "my own interest in this kind of particularity is mild indeed, for the world is teeming with such particularity, and as we grow older we become less interested in details and more interested in such conclusions as can be drawn from details; and conversely our interest in details becomes more and more concentrated on those details from which conclusions may be drawn or which contain important conclusions implicit within them."<sup>13</sup> As might have become apparent by now, I am broadly in agreement with this point of view and urge its adoption so that we may be delivered from the ego-trip of much contemporary art, and into the realm of the noble, the impersonal, and the universal.

Finally, since this essay began with lines by one of the great particularizers of Western literature, Dante Alighieri, so let it end with lines by one of the great generalizers of that literature —Dante Alighieri. It would be a pity if our admiration for the rock-climbing achievements of Virgil and Dante blinded us to the pleasures of lines like these from the *Purgatorio* (XXX, 139-145), coming shortly after Dante's reunion with Beatrice:

<sup>13</sup> *The Function of Criticism*, p. 37.



O isplendor di viva luce etterna,  
chi palido si fece sotto l'ombra  
sì di Parnaso, o bevve in sua cisterna,  
che non paresse aver la mente ingombra,  
tentando a render te qual tu paresti  
là dove armonizzando il ciel t'adombra,  
quando ne l'aere ti solvesti?

(O splendor of living light eternal! Who has ever grown so pale under the shade of Parnassus or drunk so deep at its well, that he would not seem to have his mind uncumbered, on trying to render you as you appeared, when in the free air you did disclose yourself there where in its harmony that heaven overshadows you!)

Where pearls stand for the particularizing image and the string for a connecting linkage of generalizing reflection and commentary, such lines belong to the string rather than to the pearls. But it is a *golden* string and it catches the light as few pearls could ever do. And so, *pace* Pound and that particularizing habit which has been a succulent fruit of the New Critical tree from which we have been nourished for so many years, it is the general which on occasion can outshine the particular and afford the reader an even greater intensity of pleasure. "To generalize is to be an idiot," did Blake say? Well, let us all agree to be idiots for a while and see where it leads us.