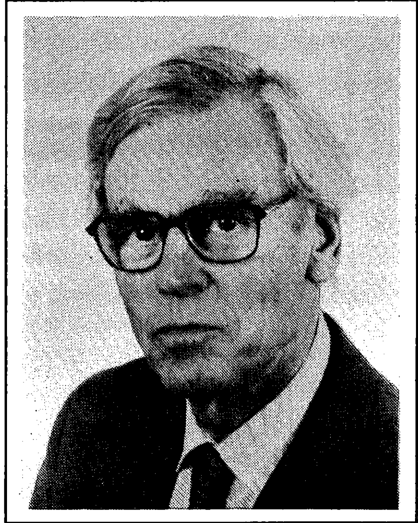

KNOWLEDGE, IMAGINATION, AND THE NOTION OF CULTURE

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Some dilemmas in the cultural debate are quite persistent. Whatever arguments are used, they never seem to lead to a conclusion acceptable to all parties. One such dilemma is the question whether it is possible to establish truth independently of the language which one speaks or the culture to which one belongs. The question requires consideration of the possibility of an individual free judgment as opposed to judgments determined or restricted by one's language or culture. In fact, there are more factors restricting our judgments. Apart from language and culture, they include religion, class, ethnicity, gender, and other social determinants. The question is: are human beings capable of emancipating themselves from the bonds of the environment into which they were born? Or, more concisely: Is there a human nature independent of the social and cultural environment? As I said, the question has not been convincingly answered. The reason may be that it is wrongly phrased (particularly in its concise wording), or that concepts are involved which need clarification before we can properly use them.

In this paper I will address the question from various angles, beginning with an example from political theory, then turning to the anthropological debate, and ending with discussions of the problem in the humanities. I cannot avoid discussing the question of the relation between knowledge and imagination in research and cultural practice. But the central topic of this paper is the question of universalism, in particular in the study of literature and culture. I know that this is quite a program for one evening, and therefore much can go wrong. One more caveat, I am not a philosopher by profession, and if I come to speak about epistemological questions it is mainly in relation to the study of literature and culture.

The question of human nature

The first case I wish to discuss is one of political theory. In Europe we have almost already forgotten what Marxism is. We are thinking of the future of the European Union, of right extremism, of religious fundamentalism, of the relation between Europe and America or between the European Union and Russia. But Marxism is not a topic anymore, neither in practice nor in theory. This is short-sighted, and it shows how short-lived our memory is. Marxist theory is as important as it ever has been since the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848. Some knowledge of the theory and practice of Marxism is essential if we come to study nationalism, religious fundamentalism, racism, or gender theory, for these thought systems have at least one basic element in common with Marxism: they divide humanity into two or more kinds and, in their more rigid variants, either explicitly or implicitly ignore the unity of humankind, such as claimed by the tradition of the Enlightenment and in our days, for instance, by Lévi-Strauss (1978) and Todorov (1991).

In 1942, in his "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," Mao Zedong criticized what he called "the theory of human nature." His ideas are in line with the Marxist tradition, but the emphasis he put on a discussion of human nature was motivated by his wish to distance himself from Confucianism, in which the notion of humanity (*ren*) in its various meanings is the central idea. Mao argues:

> Is there such a thing as human nature? Of course there is. But there is only human nature in the concrete, no human nature in the abstract. In class society there is only human nature of a class character; there is no human nature above class. (Mao Zedong 1942: 90)

Mao continues to attack the idea that "the fundamental point of departure for literature and art is love, love of humanity" (ibid.). He argues that

> there has been no such all-inclusive love since humanity was divided into classes. All the ruling classes of the past were fond of advocating it, and so were many so-called sages and wise men, but

> nobody has ever really practised it, because it is impossible in class society. (Mao Zedong 1942: 91)

I am quoting from the official 1965 English translation of the second Chinese edition of the *Selected Works* of Mao Zedong, published in 1960. There are other versions of Mao's speeches at the Yan'an Forum. One of them, a text of 1943, was translated by Bonnie McDougall, which in various respects is somewhat more explicit and less in line with Soviet Russian cultural policies. In that 1943 version Confucius is mentioned by name as one of the so-called sages who advocated the love of humanity. And there is also a negative judgment of Tolstoy, which is lacking in the official Chinese edition of 1960, since at that time the Party leadership in Beijing had not yet ended their political coordination, also in cultural matters, with Moscow; in the Soviet Union, Tolstoy was widely read and respected as a great patriotic writer.

I will not further elaborate on these politically motivated philological details. However, I should recall the further consequences of the rigorous concept of the class struggle in the Chinese political practice: large-scale persecution, widespread famine, and the death of millions of people during the Cultural Revolution. The practice of Maoist ideology has defeated its theoretical underpinnings. After the Cultural Revolution – after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 – Tolstoy and Confucius could be read again and writers and philosophers who in some way or another had defended 'the theory of human nature,' such as Feng Ding, were rehabilitated, many of them posthumously. There is a parallel in Russia and Eastern Europe where the practice of Marxism has defeated its theoretical basis.

My second example is provided by the debate among anthropologists about human nature. In a seminal essay "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" (1966), Clifford Geertz opposes the Enlightenment concept of human nature. He also ridicules Samuel Johnson, who wrote about Shakespeare that "his [Shakespeare's] characters are not modified by the customs of particular places unpractised by the rest of the world." Similarly, he is critical of Racine who considered the success of his plays on themes from antiquity as proof that "the taste of Paris … conforms to that of Athens" and

believed that his "spectators have been moved by the same things which, in other times, brought tears to the eyes of the most cultivated classes of Greece" (quoted by Geertz 1966: 35). The trouble with this kind of view, Geertz argues, is

> that the image of a constant human nature independent of time, place, and circumstance ... may be an illusion, that what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who he is, and what he believes that it is inseparable from them. (ibid.)

There is a puzzling and somewhat embarrassing similarity between Geertz's view and that of Mao Zedong. Geertz has a more sophisticated defense of his conception of human nature and, thank heaven, he was not a politician who tried to put his convictions into practice. Yet, there are similarities between their views. Whereas Mao Zedong holds that class position is decisive in human behavior and beliefs, Geertz maintains that humans are defined by the control mechanisms inherent in their social environment, or, in his own words:

> man is precisely the animal most desperately dependent upon such extragenetic, outside-the-skin control mechanisms, such cultural programs, for ordering his behavior. (Geertz 1966: 44)

Although Geertz professes that he does not join the historicism and cultural relativism of a Ruth Benedict, he rejects "empirical uniformities" and, what he calls, "bloodless universals" (Geertz 1966: 38, 43). The middle course between cultural relativism and universalism – so I am bound to conclude – is difficult to define, which is one of the reasons that the debate on these issues seems a never ending one.

In what sense does Geertz differ from Ruth Benedict and other cultural relativists? I assume it is his holistic approach. The cultural relativists emphasize the differences between cultures, but for Geertz any human being has his or her particular (both innate and acquired) control mechanism, which combines individual particularities with elements shared with other people. Human beings and cultures should be seen as a whole; any analysis may fall short of explaining their uniqueness. Geertz despises analytical explanation linked to "invariant points of reference"

(1966: 43). He prefers the narrative which suggests a combination of belief and practice, and of the action and interaction of living people.

"The basic unity of mankind" is still upheld by Geertz as a governing principle of anthropology – though he writes these words within quotation marks (1966: 36) – but it is a rather vague idea in the background, never clearly phrased and only suggested by the accumulation of innumerable narratives. In Geertz's view, human nature cannot be grasped, since "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture" (49). Whereas in the Maoist interpretation of Marxism human beings are determined by their class position, in Geertz's anthropology they are determined by their culture.

My third example brings us closer to the humanities, or, as I prefer to say, the cultural sciences. (In Geertz's conception, anthropology may also be considered a cultural science rather than a social science; I would have no objection to this view.) The field I wish to discuss now is that of cultural theory as practised by Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty. The question again is: are human beings capable of emancipating themselves from the bonds of their environment (class, ethnicity, religion, gender, culture or language)?

In *Knowledge and Commitment* (2000) I have discussed Michel Foucault's concept of discourse as phrased in *Les Mots et les choses* (1966) and *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), which heavily influenced Edward Said when he wrote his book *Orientalism* (1978) and, through him, postcolonial theory. I will not elaborate on Foucault or Said here and somewhat abruptly present my conclusion: Foucault's concept of man is determined by the notion of episteme, the discursive practice of a particular age. Foucault never discusses the reasons why one particular episteme was succeeded by another one. He could not do this since he lacked a concept of reality independent of his concept of discourse. There was no reality – not even a conception of reality – outside the current episteme. And there was no observer capable of seeing such a reality, as all observers were locked up in the prevailing discursive system. This leads to the obvious question how Foucault, living in the twentieth century, could believe to have access to the episteme of the Middle Ages or of Classicism. The inconclusive, paradoxical answer is

that he uses the contemporary discourse of archeology. But he has warned us that this archeological discourse has no privileged status (Foucault 1969); it is not a metadiscourse that transcends the differences between the epistemes.

All thinkers discussed so far – Mao Zedong, Geertz, and Foucault – reject the notion of metadiscourse or metalanguage, i.e., a kind of language independent of class position, cultural and linguistic condition, and other social determinants. Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty are equally opposed to the attempts to construct a metalanguage capable of bridging different discourses and different worlds.

The argument of Jean-François Lyotard in *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1979) is well-known. He explains the postmodern condition as characterized by a distrust of metanarratives ("l'incrédulité à l'égard des métarécits" – Lyotard 1979: 7). His polemic against Habermas, who pursues the still uncompleted project of the Enlightenment, reminds us of Geertz's criticism of the Enlightenment view of human nature as well as of his own Marxist background. Lyotard questions the attempts to reach consensus. He distrusts the "grands récits," such as the emancipation of mankind, and argues in favor of the "petit récit" (98). His basic value is to maintain the heterogeneity of language games, or "l'hétérogénéité des jeux de langage" (8). He rejects not only the metanarratives but also the construction of an encompassing metalanguage: "[une] métalangue générale dans laquelle toutes les autres peuvent être transcrites et évaluées" (104).

Although Rorty made an attempt to mediate between Lyotard and Habermas, he sides with Lyotard in distrusting all metanarratives. "Nous pourrions tomber d'accord avec Lyotard que nous n'avons plus besoin de métarécits" (Rorty 1984: 194). Later, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) he uses the term 'metavocabulary' as a variant of metalanguage. In his own words (but again in full agreement with Lyotard):

> there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and

> feeling. A historicist and nominalist culture of the sort I envisage would settle instead for narratives which connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. (Rorty 1989: xvi)

Geertz, Foucault, Lyotard, Rorty, as well as Marxist thinkers such as Mao Zedong – they all doubt that it is possible or useful to try to construct a metalanguage which would enable us to bridge the gap between different class positions, cultural environments, or language games. This massive opposition to the idea of constructing such a metalanguage is rather alarming to researchers who are interested in comparing different cultural practices or who wish to explain historical change. In the passage just quoted, Rorty advocates historicism and nominalism. Geertz is close to historicism and cultural relativism, although he does not agree with Ruth Benedict's rather extreme interpretation of cultural relativism (Geertz 1966: 43-44). Marxism, including Maoism, has a strong historicist component, though this is not a rigorous or 'abstract' historicism. Marxist historicism (and cultural relativism) is always balanced by the presentist principle of furthering the class struggle in the here and now.

Our problem is: is there a 'human nature' independently of the restricting conditions of class, ethnicity, religion, gender, cultural and linguistic conditions, and can we find a language to describe such a human nature which transcends historicist and cultural relativist differentiations? In order to come closer to answering this question two preliminary observations must be made.

First, from an epistemological point of view, a general concept of 'human nature' can only be a mental construct; it cannot be thought to exist in physical reality. Here I take a position that is radically different from Mao Zedong. As quoted earlier, Mao said: "there is only human nature in the concrete, no human nature in the abstract." I suggest that there is only human nature in the abstract, not in the concrete. Although it cannot be touched or seen, the concept of 'human nature' may serve as a hypothesis which may help us to do research about human beings living in different cultures and different conditions. This is in line with Todorov's argument (1991).

Second, in our political discourse it is useful to have a concept of 'human nature,' even if it is no more than a product of our imagination, a useful fiction, a utopian idea. As a political and cultural fiction it can become part of our social reality.

The solution of the question whether human beings can be exhaustively defined by their class, ethnicity, religion, gender, culture and other environmental restrictions has been greatly hampered by lack of attention to epistemological procedures, including the necessity of reduction (in the full awareness that this results in simplification) and including also the role of imagination in research, which may coin concepts and establish links which are simplifications but at the same time add to our understanding of things.

In fact – to put it bluntly – all theorists discussed so far (Geertz, Foucault, Lyotard, and Rorty, as well as Marxist philosophers) have little affinity with scientific research in the sense of advancing hypotheses, doing empirical research, and attempting theoretical explanation. Geertz (1973), for instance, sees anthropology as an interpretive rather than an observational activity. Lyotard (1979) emphasizes the locality of consensus, the "anti-method," and, what he calls, *la paralogie*. Rorty, distinguishing between the political and the philosophical projects of the Enlightenment, hopes to maintain the political project, but wishes to abandon "Western rationalism" (1997: 36). He has expressed himself against the authority of Reason and of Reality (both written with a capital R) and favors to conceive of reason dialogically:

> We treat it as just another name for willingness to talk things over, hear the other side, try to reach peaceful consensus.... We think that anything you can do with notions like 'Nature', 'Reason' and 'Truth,' you can do better with such notions as 'the most useful description for our purposes' and 'the attainment of free consensus about what to believe and to desire.' (Rorty 1997: 43)

This is very far from following strict rules of scientific research. At the same time, this "pragmatist view," as Rorty himself calls it (1997: 35), hints at a practice which cannot be denied to play a role in the shaping of

a culture: the self-propelled selection process, motivated not only by what we know, but also by what we imagine and desire. "Our species," Rorty writes, ever since it developed language "has been making up a nature for itself" (1991: 213).

Similarly, Geertz (1966) suggested that human beings are partly *made* by the cultural programs they activate. Yet, there is a danger that certain notions are mixed up here, such as the concept of knowledge and the concept of desire (or commitment). It is characteristic of the standard model of scientific research that the two are separated. For clarity's sake, reliable knowledge about empirical reality must be distinguished from wishful thinking.

The notion of culture

If we accept the idea that human beings are partly *made* by the cultural programs they activate, it is important to examine the problem of what culture is and how it can be investigated more in detail.

The traditional distinction between nature and culture was clearly phrased by Freud in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930). Freud posits

> dass das Wort `Kultur' die ganze Summe der Leistungen und Einrichtungen bezeichnet, in denen sich unser Leben von dem unserer tierischen Ahnen entfernt und die zwei Zwecken dienen: dem Schutz des Menschen gegen die Natur und der Regelung der Beziehungen der Menschen untereinander. (Freud 2000: 56)

Geertz's "control mechanism view of culture" (1966: 45) rejects – or at least qualifies – this opposition of nature versus culture, but maintains, as part of the human condition, that human beings can alter the environment into which they were born at least to some extent. He describes thinking as making use of symbols "to impose meaning upon experience." From the point of view of any particular individual, these "symbols are *largely* given" (emphasis added). An individual

> finds them already current in the community when he is born, and they remain, with some additions, subtractions, and partial

> alterations *he may or may not have had a hand in*, in circulation after he dies. (Geertz 1966: 45; emphasis added)

Freud's conception of culture seems more 'activist' than Geertz's, but the latter does not exclude the possibility of individuals interfering in their natural and cultural environment, though, according to Geertz, the determining force of a given culture should not be underestimated.

The more or less strongly 'activist' concept of culture calls for further discussion. Whether an individual acts on his or her free will is a metaphysical question, which we need not answer in one way or another. However, we should keep in mind that Western democracies have been built on the assumption that, in principle, human beings are free to decide how to act and can be held responsible for their actions. The freedom of an individual is restricted only by the condition that he or she should not impede the freedom of other individuals.

Perhaps this idea of individual freedom is a fiction. Though there are good reasons to believe that each human being, as to both its hardware and its software, is a strictly individual, even unique phenomenon, individuality is not a sufficient condition for *freedom* of decision. However, the denial of individual freedom would mean chaos. Imagine that humans were completely determined by their social environment. This would be the end of individual responsibility, the end of any motivation for individual initiative and action, the end also of any attempt at independent research. Hence we claim the principle of the individual freedom of decision.

One may argue that this individual freedom is part of human nature, or that human beings are to be considered human precisely insofar as they have the competence to consider the extent to which they are determined by the class, ethnicity, religion, gender, culture and language into which they were born: they have a competence for self-reflection. And, in principle, they also have the capability of breaking away from these bonds, if they desire to do so: they are capable of self-emancipation. In short, human beings are entitled "to determine their own destiny" (cf. Kooijmans 1995: 7).

This is *not* an answer to our initial question: 'Is there a human nature independent of the social and cultural environment?' That question cannot be answered, since human nature is an abstraction and has no logical relation with empirical entities such as the social and cultural environment. However, we have come to understand that the need for an individual freedom of decision calls for a strategy to claim that freedom, to make the fiction come true. If our question is rephrased as whether human beings can *postulate* an individual freedom of decision and *act as if* that freedom allows them to reconsider the social determinants of their life, it is possible to answer the question. In fact, we see that people do postulate that freedom and act accordingly. The idea of a human nature independent of social determinants lies at the basis of the idea of human rights as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, of which the first article runs: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." The formula is a postulate, not an empirical fact backed up by research.

The equality and freedom of human beings is both an ideal and a norm; as such it serves as a political goal, which has given hope to people enslaved by human sacrifice, serious mutilation, and other forms of suppression justified by a mistaken idea of cultural diversity. The ideal of freedom and equality applies also to the position of researchers.

Research needs an observer (actor, or subject), a concept of reality, and conceptual or material instruments. On all three factors a brief commentary is in place. We may hope and expect that the observer in some way or another will transcend the restrictions imposed on him or her by social determinants such as ethnicity, gender or culture. Karl Popper has a solution for the subjective bias of researchers (see, for instance, Popper 1962). The results of research should be open to criticism, any bias should be exposed in an open debate.

As far as reality is concerned, in this context I prefer a pragmatist concept of 'reality,' such as explained by Hilary Putnam in his criticism of Derrida. Putnam argued that "doubt requires justification as much as belief"; we may, of course, doubt whether we can know 'reality', but then there should be good reasons for such doubt (Putnam 1995: 20). It is helpful to distinguish between physical and social reality. Social reality

consists of human relations, social organizations, shared customs and beliefs, the knowledge of language and other symbolic systems. With the advance of scientific research the borderline between physical and social reality may shift.

However, what I wish to discuss more in detail are the instruments of research, not the material ones but the immaterial instruments: the concepts and categories which we invent before or while doing research, and the ones we take over from our predecessors – sometimes without much reflection – such as historicism, cultural relativism, universalism, human nature, culture, and a host of terms belonging to the field of epistemology, from hypothesis and definition to metalanguage and logic. The selection of a particular term or definition is largely dependent upon the goal we have in mind. The choice for a particular conceptual instrument depends on the research we intend to do. For instance, I believe that the broad definition of culture -- such as subscribed to by Freud and traditional anthropology -- including all the activities and institutions by which human beings distinguish themselves from animals, is much too wide to be helpful in research. I prefer to be guided by a more restricted concept of culture. In my view, culture does not consist in the material protection against nature but rather in the mental conception of such protection and in the coordination with other people – the kind of coordination necessary for building a house, weaving garments, growing crops, organizing social life, and believing that all these things are done in a meaningful way. It is not the objects which are essential in a culture, but the way people handle these objects and attribute meanings and functions to them.

Also for methodological reasons we should focus on the attribution of meaning to cultural objects by individuals and groups of individuals rather than these objects themselves, because there are psychological and sociological methods for examining the attribution of meaning, whereas research into cultural objects irrespective of the context in which they have functioned can lead only to vague and very diverse generalities. Culture has primarily a social dimension. It can be examined as a system of conventions.

A convention, David Lewis (1969) has suggested, is an explicit or tacit agreement, which could have been different but which is considered satisfactory because everyone or almost everyone knows what is expected. Conventions are solutions to coordination problems. As such, conventions are partly arbitrary, which distinguishes them from natural inevitability and logical necessity (cf. Fokkema and Ibsch 2000: 91-96). Cultures can be described in terms of conventions; we can try to grasp their geographical and social distribution. We can also investigate whether conventions are strict or loose, and what kind of sanctions there are if one deviates from a particular convention.

If we are interested in comparing cultures, the analysis of the constitutive conventions of these cultures, their clustering and hierarchies, will provide a way to do this.

Finally, seeing a culture as a system of conventions emphasizes the idea that cultures can change, since by definition conventions are, in principle, arbitrary solutions to a coordination problem. Hence, existing conventions can be replaced by other conventions, newly invented or borrowed from other cultures. For instance, the convention of thinking in terms of national interest can be – and sometimes indeed has been – replaced by thinking in regional or local terms, or rather by thinking in terms of the European integration. Why do such changes occur? How is it possible that an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), such as a nation, under particular conditions can suddenly shrink to either regional or expand to European proportions? Or even to global dimensions? How can people become interested in a European or even world citizenship (Nussbaum 1997)? In theory, the answer is simple: imagined communities are a product of the imagination. It is the imagination of gifted individuals who may see an unfamiliar perspective, which others may pick up and turn into a new convention. In this way cultures are subjected to innovation and renovation. Imagination, also as we find it in literature and the arts, may help shape new conventions and, thereby, new social realities. The unification of Europe was once merely a dream of some individuals; now, gradually, it is becoming a social reality. A dream can become an ideal or a norm, and the norm will be part of social reality. Culture is grounded not only in knowledge but also in imagination.

Literary imagination and its limits

All literature can be seen as a crystallization of imagined ways of life. Literature is about the behavior of and the interaction between human beings, but it rarely is an imitation of everyday reality. It rather adds significance or invents new significations, departs from prevailing conventions and introduces new ones. In contradistinction to scientific research, in literary fiction social and psychological experiments are attempted at remarkably low cost. (It is Wayne Booth who, in *The Company We Keep* [1988] pointed at this financial aspect.)

In modernist fiction – in the work of Mann, Proust, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, du Perron, and others – and in the historical avantgarde new aspects of life were discovered, analyzed and made amenable to social practice. Virginia Woolf most explicitly distanced herself from realist conventions by introducing an emphasis on psychological considerations, on awareness instead of social context, on thinking instead of action. Gide gave to the idea of travelling its positive, modernist connotation, in opposition to the conservative realism of Maurice Barrès and to the decadent seclusion of Huysmans' *A Rebours*. Paul van Ostaijen caught the chaotic experience of anonymity in the modern city in images which departed from realist descriptions of city life and the symbolist clichés of ugliness. The aestheticization of quotidian experiences in the city goes back to Baudelaire, as Bart Keunen (2000) has recalled. Van Ostaijen incorporates new tensions in his poetry, such as the opposition between the glitter of technology and the melancholy of solitude, as in *Music-Hall*. The examples of the emancipation from contextual determinism are numerous, and so are the images celebrating new volitional and mental constructs, new beliefs.

Modernism prepared the way for postmodernism, which further experimented with undoing the bonds of tradition and determinism. Still more than modernism, which can be detected in all major European literatures, postmodernism is a truly international style of thinking and writing, to be found in all cultural zones of our globalized world, even in areas, such as China, where it was not preceded by a full-fledged modernism (although some modernist techniques, such as the stream-of-

consciousness, were practised in the 1980s) and where writers jumped almost directly from realist conventions to postmodernist imagination. The postmodernist idea of "the heterogeneity of the rules" (Lyotard) means that in literary fiction the rules of logical and narrative connectivity do not always apply. This opened up a wide field of unlimited experimentation.

A device that is fully exploited by postmodernist writers is intertextuality: the reference to other texts, their plots, themes, and wording. Intertextuality is, of course, of all ages, as Ulrich Broich (1997) has observed, referring to Virgil's Aeneid, which echoes the Odyssea. It is not only of all ages, but also of all cultures. References to earlier texts, including various forms of rewriting, are particularly prominent in the Chinese tradition.

However, no one can deny that, when Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Harold Bloom, and Umberto Eco began theorizing about intertextuality, the concept aquired new significance. The postmodern focus on intertextual relations coincides with the belief that all we have is words. Assumedly, we cannot have reliable knowledge about social or physical reality, nor is the subject to be trusted. Every text is a mosaic of quotations, every text is the absorption and transformation of another text, Kristeva wrote. She added that the notion of intersubjectivity is replaced by that of intertextuality (Kristeva 1969: 146).

The postmodern concept of intertextuality seems to be built on the idea that the meaning of a text is always provisional and restricted by the context in which it has been used. This explains that texts (or parts of texts) can be re-used in a new context, which will generate new meanings. The re-usage of textual elements may signal anything between reversal and confirmation of the pre-text. In a sarcastic phrase Botho Strauss explained intertextuality as the "Wiederaufbereitung verbrauchten symbolischen Wissens, das recycling des Bedeutungsabfalls" (Strauss 1977: 85). Globalized postmodernism carried the device of recycling semantic waste to all corners of the world and made it into a universal technique.

In Borges' and Calvino's fiction cross-cultural intertextuality was not uncommon. But also in China postmodernist writers resort to cross-cultural references. For instance, Mo Yan, in his novel *The Republic of Wine* (*Jiu guo*, 1992) referred repeatedly to both Chinese and European pre-texts, to Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman," as well as to Joyce's *Ulysses*. The various pre-texts have a bearing upon both the thematic and formal structures of the novel, which embodies an extreme formal hybridity and, by means of exuberant fabulation, reaches for the outer limits of our semantic universe. There seems to be no limits to literary imagination.

This kind of cross-cultural intertextuality is no longer exceptional. Salman Rushdie has practised it, and so have Hélène Cixous and many other writers. Mo Yan's *The Republic of Wine*, now available in an English translation by Howard Goldblatt, calls for an intertextual and postmodernist reading. It has all the signposts reminding us of postmodernism: fragmentation of the narrative structure, an exchange of metafictional letters inserted in the text, the genre is that of the anti-detective, the story is utterly bizarre and full of impossibilities. The main character is Ding Gou'er, a so-called detective who is sent to a place called Liquorland in order to investigate whether some officials have committed the crime of cannibalism. The detective himself is being corrupted and, although there are stories about eating babies and young boys, these are never confirmed by a reliable narrator. The outcome is full of ambivalence.

We should see this novel definitely not as a product of wholesale Westernization. Cannibalism is also Lu Xun's theme in "Diary of a Madman." And, although the interior monologue in the last chapter of the book reminds explicitly of Molly Bloom, the narrative style in other parts of the text is clearly traditionally Chinese. The result is a hybrid structure which cannot be disentangled in terms of 'East' and 'West.' In this sense, the novel is part of world literature. It uses all possible resources of cultural diversity.

The work of Gao Xingjian, the Nobelprize winning Chinese writer who lives in France, provides further evidence of cross-cultural intertextuality, as well as of its almost unlimited possibilities. Gao

Xingjian reminds of Artaud and Beckett, amd he, too, reaches for the limits of our global semantic universe. However, he also shows how quickly extravagant interaction between people can be reduced to meaningless clichés of destruction and death. The absurdism of his plays, collected in English under the title *The Other Shore* (1999), in various ways brings us back to the closed universe of Sartre's *Huis clos*.

This digression on cross-cultural intertextuality may throw some unexpected light on the human condition and on the question of human nature. After all, the postulate that there is a universal human nature finds support in what can be considered universal conditions of human life, such as: birth and death; desire, satisfaction and frustration; knowledge and imagination, and the discovery that within our world both knowledge and imagination are provisional, shifting, corrigible, always exploring a world behind the horizon. In addition, there are techniques, such as intertextuality, which are universally applicable.

The major cultures of the world have several conventions in common, although these coventions may be more or less prominent, more or less rigid in the diverse cultures. One such convention is the convention of self-reflection (including the reflection on pre-texts). Like human beings, all major cultures have an inherent capacity for self-examination and self-correction. Gradually, as a result of increasing intercultural communication, cultures are more exposed to knowledge about alien cultures. Increasingly also, the inherent tendency for learning, which can be seen in all cultures, comprises learning from other cultures as well. In *Loose Canons* Henry Louis Gates argued that "any human being sufficiently curious and motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how 'alien' it may appear to be" (1992: xv). If this is true or largely true, it supports the idea that humans are *not* completely determined by their class, religion, culture or other social determinants. It also suggests that the fiction of a universal human nature includes a desire for knowledge and imagination which does not stop before the borderline of one's own culture.

The challenge is to design a perspective, a dream, or ideal which may capture the imagination. One such perspective may be to preserve the best of European civilization, to learn from other cultures as much as we

can, and to imagine a universal human nature inherent in all human beings. In other words: our perspective may be to aim at a world citizenship which is characterized by a combination of global responsibility and tolerance of difference.

In the course of thousands and thousands of years, human beings have emancipated themselves from a number of traditional bonds and restrictions. There is no reason to expect that in the third millennium they would not be capable of continuing this process of emancipation from remaining forms of social determinism. There is no reason to expect that the evolution of the human species will suddenly come to a halt, but the cultural programming which should accompany this continuing evolutionary process should take the limitations imposed on the human condition into account and at the same time offer a striking perspective. It is up to the actors in this process – writers, artists, and philosophers – to sketch that perspective.

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