

Talking (across) Cultures:

Grace and Danger in the House of the European Inquirer

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1.

¹ In this paper, I want to begin to contemplate the possibility that the concept of culture could one day be thought outside modern Western thought, via a reading of [Martin Heidegger's](#) 'Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer'. As we shall see, for Heidegger, the dominant position here is representationalism. And so a large part of what I want to do here is to begin to shake the concept of culture from these dominant representationalist moorings.¹

² Heidegger's problem with the history of Western thought may be put as follows. In this tradition, the difference between Being and beings (the ontological difference) is forgotten so that Being comes primarily to be considered in terms of beings. Beings are, in turn, considered in terms of their relations to one another, with the being called 'man' routinely standing to one privileged side of those known as 'objects'. Thereby thinking about Being is reduced to the question: how is it that man relates to objects? The problem is compounded when the answer to this question is given as: man knows objects. And it is even further compounded by the dominance throughout all of this of representational thinking: the idea that man knows objects only 'indirectly' through their representations.² To challenge representational thinking in Heidegger's sense, then, is to challenge not just a 'way of knowing' but also the dominance of 'man' ([Foucault's](#) central uptake of Heidegger), the separation between 'man' and 'things', subject and object, and, ultimately, it is to challenge the very idea that Being is no more than the aggregate of empirically accessible beings.

³ To find alternatives to representational thinking Heidegger looks elsewhere, or, more precisely, in turning to the pre-Socratic Greeks, elsewhere. He does this throughout his work, but most explicitly in Early Greek Thinking. Yet even this work barely distinguishes between (what we would now think of as) natural and cultural production in any clear way. Instead, it appears there as if the ontological difference itself -- the difference between Being and beings, between sheer coming-to-presence and that which happens to be present -- is of such urgent importance that it cuts across the apparently less important distinction between natural and cultural varieties of beings. As an advancement of his claims about the ontological difference (as a neglected and almost unthinkable difference today), the Heidegger of Early Greek Thinking in effect obviates the nature/culture distinction along with representational thinking.

⁴ If the modern Western concept of culture, then, depends for its existence on the prior existence of a constitutive outside (such as nature) then is it possible that culture as such (whatever theory of it we hold) is irrevocably part of representationalist thinking? Is it intrinsically representationalist -- from, say, Hobbes to the present day or, indeed, in whatever past or future manifestation -- by virtue of its dependence on a culture/non-culture distinction? If this is so, again, there is a remarkable consequence for all the cultural disciplines and for cultural studies in particular. It is this: any non-representationalist approach to culture would be a contradiction in terms; so that, by virtue of it being specifically culture we are interested in, our interest will be necessarily representationalist. Outside representationalism, what we are dealing with could not be culture as such. The sorts of objects which we have, until now, thought of as cultural objects (photographs, museums, policy documents, forms of dress, music and so on) become interesting and significant outside representationalism only to the extent that they instanciate the ontological difference. We can, that is, no longer afford to think of the cultural as ontologically separate in any way. Instead, the move away from representational thinking would mean that objects of whatever kind -- 'gods and men, temples and cities, sea and land, eagle and snake, tree and shrub, wind and light, stone

and sand, day and night' (Early 40) -- are effects of the distinction between coming-to-presence and merely happening to be present. And they ought to be experienced, inspected and understood for what they are, fundamentally, in this respect. What would this mean?

5 One occasion where the later Heidegger does treat 'cultural' matters (in several senses and by, perhaps for the first and only time, going across contemporary cultures) is in his 'Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer'.³ This strangely readable little colloquy requires inspection, I believe, if we are to proceed any further along what the Heidegger of Early Greek Thinking calls 'the lines of usage' and into the peculiar territory beyond representational thinking.⁴

2.

6 What is at stake here may be this: whether in this dialogue we are experiencing a cultural difference. Or perhaps, whether we are experiencing the presence of culture(s) at all. Put another way: the essay in question (in the form of a dialogue) may be an instance of either (a) a cultural difference or dialogue; or else of (b) an accidental similarity or monologue. Let us look briefly at both possibilities.

7 If (a), then we have a clear lesson (on the model of the 'danger' of language): the nature of culture cannot derive from a metaphysical distinction between culture and contenders for the title of 'non-culture' (for example, physical nature or science or barbarism); for anything that was a culture would have to be already in place in order to generate such a division (or anything like it) in the first place. The name, then, of this prior condition cannot be 'culture' itself. But that is precisely how the cultural disciplines have used the term -- 'cultures', we hear, are what make the 'nature/culture' distinction -- albeit that each may do it in its own, 'culturally specific', way.⁵ This is why the cultural disciplines cannot imagine a culture which does not, in itself, have a deeply-seated representational concept of culture as its ultimate ground. Anthropological thinking -- in the broadest philosophical sense, not just in reference to a specific discipline -- entails the search for the other's meaning of its own (anthropology's) idea of culture. In effect, it cannot imagine a culture outside Western metaphysics but must forever translate 'different cultures' into versions of it (albeit with minor empirical differences). So if the name of the condition for the nature/culture distinction (that is, the name of the nature of culture) cannot be 'culture', instead its name must be 'representational thinking' -- at least for all cultural theory to date. The modern concept of culture's ultimate contradiction would be that it would rest upon the assumption of its own universal presence while also denying cultural universals.

8 If (b) -- if, that is, we are not, in this dialogue, undergoing an experience with culture at all -- then the 'Japanese' is no more than a token non-European Heideggerian. He is whatever may be non-European 'in' Heidegger himself. He is a fictional device for having Heidegger's fellow Europeans (his readers) see how it is possible to think outside Western thinking -- or at least to get a glimpse of such a possibility. He is a stooge, a ploy, and -- what's more -- an 'orientalised' ploy: a classically European fictional depiction of the mysterious Orient and its inscrutable thinking.

9 So much is at stake in how we read this work. And a number of very important issues depend on our (necessarily ethical and political) decision as to how we should read the essay. For if reading (a) prevails, cultural difference (or whatever term we decide to use to replace it and its ultimately limited horizon) is not something, in itself, of its nature or essence, that can give any comfort to notions of 'orientalism' or 'stereotypes' or any of the other tropes of fashionable (cross-)cultural criticism. Instead, the cultural itself, wherever it is predicated on Western representational thinking, is intrinsically Western thinking. There is no outside of Western culture (the Western concept of culture) for that culture to grasp -- whether it would ideally grasp it in scientific, anthropological, liberal humanist, cultural relativist, orientalist, colonialist or racist ways. These 'ways' and the differences between them have no meaning on reading (a). They are all, in effect, one way.

10 But if reading (b) prevails, then all seems well with Western representational thinking. It has no problem because, now, all cultures would, factually, have a Western concept of culture at their core, albeit of a particular inflexion. They would all be just like 'us' in their essential metaphysics. He who recorded the different tensions or versions of this single metaphysics might be a scientist or anthropologist. He who appreciated such small variations might be a liberal humanist or a cultural relativist. He who dogmatically believed in the superiority of his own tension or difference and degraded others might be an orientalist, a colonialist or a racist. But these would be, on reading (b), but small variations along a single path. They would be like the right, left and centre lanes of a one-way street.

11 So neither reading turns out to be very hopeful for today's cultural disciplines. The first suggests a much deeper-seated difference than those disciplines have been able to imagine hitherto; something much less easily grasped than the culture/non-culture distinction (and such that some 'cultures' are not, in and of themselves, quite that). The second suggests that the easy victories of principled cultural criticism and cultural identity politics (as well as those of less 'enlightened' positions) are grounded on the most Western of Western thinking: its representationalist theology.⁶

12 It looks as if there are only two possibilities: either culture rests upon a bed of difference that lies so deep as to remain forever outside Western thinking; or every other is ultimately, at the deepest point of difference we can think, a version of the West. But on both sides of the divide, the initial idea of culture is culture-as-presence: 'are we in the presence of an intercultural dialogue?'; or 'are we in the presence of a culture talking to itself?' If we could move even a little way from this and begin to think of culture-as-coming-to-presence (or just as 'to come', to invoke a [Derridean](#) variation on the theme), then it turns out that (a) and (b) are necessarily undecidable matters within representational thinking itself but that, as we begin to move outside it, the decision becomes irrelevant. But we must reserve this (in)decision for another occasion and proceed with the dialogue at hand.

3.

13 To proceed, we must continue with the dialogue's attention to language and particularly to the 'danger' of speaking about it. Language, that is, has a nature but it is concealed (by the representationalist difference between the sensuous and the suprasensuous) and this concealing is a 'danger' (21). One contender for the nature of language is to take it as 'the house of Being' (22). And this prompts us to remember that the dialogue describes the two cultures as different 'houses' (5) -- different 'language realities' (24) -- so that 'the nature of language remains something altogether different for the East asian and the European peoples' (23). In fact, it is so different that the question of what language is may not be a possible one for the Japanese (23). He insists that his people 'pay no heed' to the question of the nature of language. Instead they have a word that 'says the essential being of language, rather than being of use as a name for speaking and for language' (23). So this is not a referring word but rather a 'hinting' word (24). And the 'hint' would be what the Japanese translator feels when he feels the 'wellspring' from which such different languages as German and Japanese might arise. He also describes this in terms of a 'radiance'. This 'hinting', or 'gesturing', or 'bearing' (26) must not, the Inquirer demands, be clarified into a form of 'conceptual representation' (25). Were it to be, we would miss its nature outside Western reason. There is no analytic or empirical equivalent of 'the nature of language'. To think so is itself an instance of the worst sorts of metaphysics at work.

14 Following through the dialogue, we also find that to ask about the nature of language is also to ask the hermeneutic question in its non-standard sense; that is not as a methodological question about the means of interpreting texts but as a metaphysical question about what interpretation itself is (29-30). And this in turn has to do with 'bearing' (as in bearing a message, being a messenger -- gesturing, bearing, hinting). The so-far unannounced Japanese word for the nature of language, on the one hand, and the question of what hermeneutics is, on the other, stand together. 'Man stands in hermeneutical relation to the two-fold' (32), where 'the two-fold' is glossed as presencing (coming-to-presence) and present beings.

15 This hermeneutic relation, however, is complex. It involves man in preserving the two-fold (32) and also in the two-fold (presencing/present) using man (33). And, obviously enough perhaps, this idea of 'use' can no longer mean empirical usage in its quasi-linguistic sense. For, as we soon learn from the rest of the essays in *On the Way to Language*, the linguistic arts and sciences are thoroughly representationalist since they begin with the assumption of the simple existence of present beings (forgetting coming-to-presence and language's criticality to it) and consider language, as it were, to come later as a means of, and for, their re-presentation. (And this is, I would argue, precisely the function of terms such as 'language', 'discourse', 'signification' and 'image' in, for example, cultural studies.) Nevertheless the alternative to this mistaken view of language, the alternative that Heidegger calls 'the hermeneutic relation', is agentive. In fact it is doubly so. It involves, that is, practices (of preserving and using): 'the sway of usage' (33) and 'the sway of the two-fold' (34). The Japanese claims that there is a kinship between this thinking and his (or their) own (41).

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Footnotes

1. Representational thinking is clearly alive and well today in cultural studies -- perhaps even to the point whereby this otherwise critical discipline rarely subjects this concept to critical scrutiny. See Hall (Representation). A draft paper 'Representation and Cultural Studies' (available on request) deals with this question.
2. Hall's Representation book lists three such forms of indirect representation: 'the production of meaning through language, discourse and image'.
3. Two other central locations for Heidegger on culture are 'The Age of the Word Picture' and 'Science and Reflection'. Here and elsewhere, of course, Heidegger has very little time for the idea of culture and 'culturalist' explanations -- possibly because of their traditionally deep imbrication in representationalism. At times, his opposition is so vehement that we can practically hear him reaching for his gun.
4. In *Early Greek Thinking*, Heidegger translates a crucial part of the Anaximander fragment as follows: '... along the lines of usage [custom, practice]: for they let order and thereby also reck belong to one another (in the surmounting) of disorder' (Early 57).
5. [A paper submitted for this issue of M/C](#) nicely displays this in a single phrase: 'the Western cultural pattern that assigns things masculine to the cultural and things feminine to the natural' (my emphases).
6. On this matter, see Hunter on 'Setting Limits'.

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