THE IMAGE OF THE PLANT AND SELF-CULTIVATION

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an anthropological investigation into the plant and its cultivation as an image of self-development. I examine the different ways this image is used in three domains: the Western tradition, popular tales and, briefly, in China.

In Western thought, the metaphor of the plant waspromoted by Plato in order to define the soul. Since the nineteenth century, it has been associated with the dictum "Be yourself!" The self is supposed to be an innate kernel that we can develop through our own efforts.

The image of the plant has quite different implications in popular tales: the plant represents life, which is transmitted from the parents to the child, from the dead to the living. The girl or boy who receives this gift must turn it to good account, and, to this end, has to interact with his environment in an outgoing and adequate way.

There are obvious affinities between the implicit wisdom of tales and certain Chinese storieswhich illustrate the right way of "feeding one's life". For these stories also underline the need for adequate interaction with the world. Whereas Western thought contrasts with the oral tradition, Chinese literate culture seems to have kept in touch with popular stories.

Key Terms: Self development, life force, popular tales, open-mindedness, serendipity, Western thought, Chinese thought.

"What is it, at bottom, this 'being oneself'?"

Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*

Several Western languages use the same words to refer to work in the fields and self-development: “culture”, “cultivated” (or its opposite: “uncultivated”). The analogy linking the figurative to the literal meaning has however long been forgotten: when Westerners speak of someone cultivating himself, the image of the peasant or the gardener never even crosses their minds.

On the other hand, the plant metaphor has been used since Plato, quite consciously, to refer to the soul. In one of his dialogues, the *Timeus*, Plato writes: “We are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth. And in this we say truly; for the divine power suspended the head and root of us from that place where the generation of the soul first began, and thus made the whole body upright.” The belief in the heavenly origin of the soul is all the stronger as Plato’s use of the word “soul” refers to the whole person, including their thought and will. Plato of course recognizes that the body of the child stems from the flesh of its parents, but he is resolutely opposed to his contemporaries who considered that each individual owed its existence to his or her parents, and that their identity was defined by their place in a lineage. For Plato, our soul—that is, what we ourselves are—has a divine origin. As he explains in the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, the soul is an immortal substance, unlike the body into which it “has fallen”.

As far as this last point is concerned, Christianity has remained faithful to the Platonic doctrine, as have most of the great philosophers. Thus Descartes, in his *Meditations*, is at pains to point out that what was derived from his parents was his body but not his soul, which is a substance that exists by itself. Similarly, like the Stoics before him, he refers to the “seeds of truth” implanted by God in our souls. Getting these seeds to sprout is not the same thing as what non-philosophers describe as “self-cultivation”. Self-cultivation means nourishing one’s mind upon contributions drawn from outside a particular culture. On the other hand, drawing upon the “seeds of truth” through methodical philosophical reflection means deducing new knowledge solely through the exercise of one’s thinking power.

I. BEING ONESELF: DEVELOPING ONESELF LIKE A PLANT

With Romanticism, Platonic doctrine and the plant metaphor are again drawn upon, but in a context which, now, is not only philosophical and religious but also aesthetic. Hans Christian Andersen is a good example of this. In his tales, he makes frequent use of the imagery of plants, seeds and flowering. He thus alludes to the glory of Christ, born again through his own death, and to Christian hope in eternal life. He is also marked by German idealism which makes a distinction between, on the one hand, self-awareness reduced to itself like a seed and, on the other, its burgeoning in a primaveral reconciliation with the world. But above all, he crafts a poetic framework in which the melancholy of winter is opposed to the contentment of summer, loneliness to love, the feeling of abandonment to one of self-realisation in completeness. The cycle of the seasons, of life and death, encourages him to think that the rose of contentment can grow from a single seed, that is, from an unhappy soul. Already the poet Shelley, before Andersen, had attributed to his Prometheus, bound and suffering, the following declaration of faith in his own omnipotence: “to hope till Hope creates/From its own wreck the thing it contemplates”.

It will be seen from these examples just how strong a hold the seductive fantasy of being oneself through one’s own efforts has upon Western culture. “Be yourself!” is unquestionably the most consensual dictum of the Western world: your “self” is already present within you, like a seed or a kernel which contains, in germ form, the future flower; it is up to you, then, to “become what you are” (to paraphrase Nieztsche).

The first explicit encouragement to “be oneself” is to be found in the writings of the American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. In *The Poet* (1844), he refers to the passage in the *Timeus* quoted above in which Plato compares the soul to a plant of divine origin. When Emerson, in *Self-reliance*, states that “I must be myself”, he means: “I must coincide with the divine substance that makes up the heart of my being.” He returns to this subject repeatedly in, among other texts, *The American Scholar,* in which he associates “the active soul”, an expression which he borrows from Plotinus, with the Romantic conception of the genius: “The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. (...) In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favourite, but the sound estate of every man.” Insofar as he renews contact with this divine source, the individual can then “trust himself for a

taskmaster" and "be doctrine, society, law, to himself".

In *Civil Disobedience,* Thoreau, a friend and disciple of Emerson's, states that an individual's liberty belongs to him as a right and that it is inalienable. On this we can but be in agreement with him. But it is one thing to say that every individual is entitled to liberty, and another to say that he owes his own existence to himself. Yet this is what Thoreau suggests: "When an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can...". In short, each "*self*" develops independently of others. "If a plant cannot live according to nature, it dies," Thoreau adds, "and so a man." Thoreau fails to mention the soil on which the roots of the plant feed, and the air and light which nourish its leaves. Since, for him, the plant is the model of the man who creates himself, he overlooks the fact that plants depend closely upon the environment in which they live; hence, each plant, and each human being is considered as developing from its original nature. It is in virtue of such an ideal that the Romantic artist, and above all the contemporary artist, generally claim not to draw their inspiration from traditional models and present themselves as "creators", a term which evokes the Creator par excellence, the only God who created the world from nothingness. Obviously, this utopian ideal does not correspond to actual practice. It represents a discourse which shapes the latter, giving it meaning and justification, while at the same time masking those aspects of practice which do not correspond to this ideal.

As a conclusion to the first part, we observe that the ideal image of self-development in the Western world and the expression "self-cultivation" both clearly evoke the growth of plants, but not at all in the same way. For me as an individual, acquiring a culture involves assimilating the culture which came before me, and which has to be transmitted to me; I am not, therefore, a plant which develops from itself, but a plant which, through its roots and foliage, feeds upon the environment in which it lives.

II. THE TREE OF LIFE IN POPULAR TALES AND THE FIRST GIFT OF THE PARENTS TO THE CHILD

Westerners know the popular story of *Cinderella* thanks to Perrault and the Grimm

brothers, but numerous other versions have been collected across Europe and from as far afield as South-East Asia.

In *Cinderella*, as in *Donkey Skin* which belongs to the same family of tales, what is at issue, for the heroine, is the transition from the blood ties which link her to her parents' generation to a marital tie with a man of her own generation.

The ability to attain womanhood does not originate in the self; rather, the heroine receives it from the previous generation. This motif is quite frequent in a tale which belongs to the same family as *Cinderella*: *One-Eye, Two-Eyes and Three-Eyes* (the most accessible version is that told by the Grimm brothers). In it, a tree with fruit of gold grows out of the buried remains of the mother of Two-Eyes, the heroine. The tree draws the attention of a young prince. Two-Eyes is the only person who can pick this tasty fruit for the prince: her step-mother and her two sisters, One-Eye and Three-Eyes, attempt to pick the fruit, but in vain (the same motif can be found as far away as South-East Asia[1]). The motif of the tree born from the remains of the mother is also central in the tale of *The Cow of the Two Orphans*[2] (a tale which is found in North Africa and Egypt, in particular), in which the deceased mother—first in the form of a cow, then of a tree—continues to feed her children. As in *One-Eye, Two-Eyes and Three-Eyes,* the cow-mother is put to death at the behest of the stepmother. But a tree, which will subsequently feed the children, grows from the bones they buried (examples of the benevolence of a maternal tree can be found as far as West Africa[3]).

The tree passes on a gift from someone deceased to a living person. This essential gift is that of the life force. Crossing through death, this life force creates a link between the same and the other; it passes from one character to another, and is the gift of being oneself: a gift, made to someone else, of the possibility of being himself. The beneficiary of the gift is not the donor, nor does the beneficiary return to the donor the equivalent of

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1 Thus, in a Thai version of Cinderella, the heroine is the only person capable of transplanting the tree with leaves of gold which has grown out of the remains of her mother, and hence of enabling a prince to take advantage of them.

2 See E. Laoust: *Contes berbères du Maroc,* Larose, 1949, t. II, pp.144-145, and M.- H. Dulac: "Contes arabes en dialecte de la Haute Égypte", *Journal asiatique*, January 1885.

3 See V. Gorog-Karady: "Parole sociale et parole imaginaire", in *Le conte, tradition orale et identitié culturelle*, Association Rhône-Alpes Conte, Saint-Fons, 1988, p.129, and G. Calame-Griaule (ed.): *Le thème de l'arbre dans les contes africains*, Selaf, 1970.

what he has received: he will, in turn, transmit the gift to his own children. The beneficiary, then, does not take the place of the donor, rather he occupies the same position as him. Cinderella becomes a woman, as was her mother. The life force thus secures its permanency through alterity. And this vital gift which Cinderella receives from her mother allows her to fulfil the requisite condition for her to be recognized as a woman by a man of her own generation.

Does the mother, it may be asked, want to transmit her life force to her daughter? The answer is yes and no. To the extent that she loves her daughter, she seeks her good. But, on the other hand, by transmitting her life force to her, she is handing over to her, and accepting her own death at some point in the future. Hence, the mother may wish to hold on to her life force. In the tale of Cinderella, the two characters of the good mother and the evil step-mother personify these two contradictory desires. The tale of *Donkey Skin* presents the ambivalence not of the heroine's mother but of her father: while, admittedly, he loves his daughter, he nevertheless wishes to keep her for himself, and make her his wife rather than give her what will enable her to become the wife of a man of her own generation. In this sense, the three beautiful dresses which the father gives his daughter as gifts, are poisoned presents. Similarly, in *Snow White*, in which the Queen, who is told by her magic mirror that her daughter has grown more beautiful than she herself is, gives her a poisoned apple, poisoned, that is, in the literal sense of the word. In another type of tale, generally entitled *The Riddle*, a princess who is capable of solving all sorts of riddles states that she will take as a husband the man who presents her with one which she is incapable of fathoming (as in *Turandot*, the opera by Puccini). On learning this, the young hero of the tale makes preparations to leave his mother and go and pose the princess a riddle. The mother would prefer her son to stay with her and offers him a glass of liqueur for the journey, but in this case, too, the present has been laced with poison! The hero however, fortunately for him, avoids drinking it.

III. HOW DOES ONE TO CAUSE THE GIFT TO FRUCTIFY?

It is not enough for life to be transmitted to us. This initial gift still needs to be made good use of and caused to fructify. And for that also to happen, everything depends, as

we shall see, on the relationship between the self and what does not originate in the self.

Although the gift that the young hero of *The Riddle* receives from his mother is laced with poison, he nevertheless manages to cause it to fructify. He pours the liqueur into his horse's ear and the animal dies; there follows, throughout the journey that takes him to the princess, a series of unexpected twists and turns which the hero manages, every time, to turn to his advantage. The riddle which he eventually proposes to the princess turns out to be a condensed version of the adventures he had encountered on his journey, an improvised riddle, one made to measure, which the princess proves incapable of solving.

Similarly, in *Donkey Skin*, the heroine turns her father's presents to her advantage. He had given them to her so as to get her to stay with him, but she uses them to win the heart of a young prince. Cinderella, for her part, manages to escape from the clutches of her wicked mother thanks to the gifts her good mother transmits to her.

There are a large number of tales in which a princess submits her suitors to a rigorous test. Often, the hero, who at the outset is an anti-hero, is the third of three brothers. The elder two appear to be ideally placed to win the princess's hand, but fail to do so. While the third, who appears totally ill-equipped to do so, wins her affections. Paradoxically, as in *The Riddle*, if this anti-hero triumphs, it is because he, unlike his brothers, is prepared to take an interest in the things he comes across in the course of his journey even if, at first sight, they appear to be of no interest. There is a word in English for this open-mindedness: serendipity. The character who demonstrates serendipity, who shows an open-minded readiness to engage with the world, is neither empty nor full. If he was full, he would not need to seek for what is lacking in him and he would feel that he already has within him everything he needed to be recognized for his true worth by the princess. If he was empty, he would only be interested in what could fill the void, the princess, but he would have none of the qualities needed to be recognized by her. Thus, being neither empty nor full, he is not absorbed by the need to be recognized for his true worth, and this leaves his mind open to taking an interest in what he comes across on his way. And so he causes the life force, the gift, be it poisoned or not, which he has received from the previous generation, to fructify.

IV. READINESS TO ENGAGE WITH THE WORLD AND THE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

Readiness to engage with the world, or serendipity, comes to the fore not only in stories about suitors ; it also has an essential role to play in other types of tales. The following is one such example. It is frequently to be found right across Western Europe, and is generally entitled *The Two Hunchbacks*[4].

On certain nights of the year, the fairies come together to sing and dance, always to the same song: "Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday; Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday". One evening, a hunchback hears them, comes nearer, and joins in their dance. As an improvement on the words, he sings: "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday". The fairies are very pleased: in the new version, the song sounds a lot better. And they all sing it together. Then, as a reward, they take away his hump.

On returning home, the hero is repeatedly questioned by another hunchback, and eventually tells him what has happened to him. The second hunchback goes off to look for the fairies, and when he finds them he joins in their dance. And he adds, "...and Friday!" to the litany of the first four days of the week. But this time the fairies are furious: they shout, "That's all wrong!", and give the poor wretch the hump that they had removed from the first hunchback.

The first hunchback does not join in with the fairies with the aim of obtaining something. He establishes contact with them for no particular reason, for the pleasure of taking part in their dancing and singing. His spontaneous pleasure leads to the word that he contributes; this explains the warm welcome extended to him by the fairies. He has had the good grace to forget about his deformity, and it is removed from him as a result of his behaviour. Thus he unintentionally attains wholeness and finds himself set free from what was preventing him from being himself.

The fate reserved for the second hunchback rings out like a criticism of jealous imitation. When he imitates the first hunchback, the second one acts with the deliberate intention of getting rid of his deformity. Thus he is not capable of self-effacement and, as

4 It is a tale of type 503. Grimm gives a somewhat moralizing version of it with the title, *The Gifts of the Little People* (Number 182).

a result, is not ready to be in harmony with the situation. In wanting to reproduce what has happened once before, he goes against the normal course of events, and introduces a discordant element. Thus he prevents himself from acceding to the wholeness which he so desired to attain.

This criticism of imitation is not of the same order as that introduced by Romanticism at the same time as the valorisation of genius and of an inborn self; for neither this folk tale, nor those alluded to above, oppose imitation to a supposed inborn originality. The characters who find a way forward to self-development are, of themselves, in no way different to anyone else. Imitation, for its part, is harmful when inspired by jealousy, but can be beneficial when disinterested; hence, the fairies imitate the first hunchback by adding the name of the fourth day of the week to their song, and are very pleased.

V. A BRIDGE TO OTHER CULTURES

In the above pages I have sought to call into question the conception of the human being which is tacitly accepted by Western modernity and to explore, as offering an alternative, the pre-philosophical domain of the popular tale.

This approach obviously implies a questioning of the universal nature of Western thought. The latter, however rational it claims to be, remains dependent upon a pre-conceptual or pre-philosophical bedrock, and these background options have imprinted upon Western thought a cultural specificity which is more pronounced than it generally tends to recognize. It is therefore all the more necessary to question this background today as the globalization of thought linked to the extension of a university system based on the Western model presents us with a new responsibility: can we continue to export our knowledge with the same good conscience as that which inspired the proponents of the West's "civilizing mission" during the period of colonial expansion? Could it not be the case that other cultures may have pinpointed aspects of the human condition which we ourselves underestimate?

While modern Western man, as Louis Dumont[5] stresses, has seen himself as an individual substance and favoured the control he has developed in his relationship with things, popular tales, for their part, belong to a universe of thought in which the relationship with other people remains crucial. Unlike those forms of conceptual thought which are familiar to us, popular tales depict intersubjective processes in which our own patterns of rational action (setting oneself a goal to reach, choosing the requisite means to achieve it) lose their validity. The characters in them are not in a position of control that allows them to already be what they ought to become. As they are confronted with other people, they have to find their way among processes of interdependence which have an influence upon what they are.

It has been pointed out by an American cultural anthropologist that in the novels of Jane Austen, independence is achieved not by breaking free of ties, but by putting them to good use, and by striving to make the transition from an interdependence which subjugates to one in which it is possible to enable one's personal choices to prevail. What emerges in these novels is that independence "is a relationship between two or more, and not—contrary to the professed cultural model—a property or essence within a person[6]". One could quote numerous other examples illustrating the same idea. Before even turning to examine the conceptions of the person offered by other cultures, we can find works within Western culture which invite one to conceptualize identity as relational.

The specific interest of popular tales doubtless lies in their elementary nature (elementary, that is, in the positive sense of the word), and in the narrative fund dating from time immemorial to which they belong, a stock which is shared by cultures that are, in other respects, quite unlike each other.

It is not difficult, for instance, to pick out, in Chinese culture, narratives and themes of thought that echo several of the tales we have come across in the pages above. A case in point is the story of the *Two Jugglers*, which presents striking analogies with the tale of *The Two Hunchbacks*:

There was a vagabond who lived in the land of Song. One day he offered his

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5 See *Homo aequalis I. Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique*, Gallimard, 1977.

6 Richard Handler: "Is 'Identity' a useful cross-cultural concept?", in John R. Gillis editor, *Commemorations. The politics of national identity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, pp.30-37. Citation, *ibid.* p.37.

services as a juggler to Yuen, the prince of Song. So Yuen asked him to give a demonstration of his talent.

The juggler tied a pair of stilts, twice as tall as him, to his legs. On his stilts he ran about and leapt in the air. He took seven swords in his hands, and threw them up in the air and juggled with them, keeping five of them in the air at the same time. Prince Yuan was very impressed and rewarded him with gold and bales of precious cloth. When another vagabond who could perform various perilous leaps heard of this, he also asked to see Prince Yuen. The prince was irritated and said: "A circus performer asked to see us a few days ago. Now, this skill is of no general interest. But the first juggler came when we were well-disposed. That is why we gave him gifts of gold and bales of precious cloth. This new fellow must have heard about it, and that is why he has come running to me in the hope that I will load him with presents."

He had the guards seize him and punish him, and only set him free after a month.

This story appears in the *Classic of the Perfect Emptiness* or *Liezi*[7], which is generally considered to be a compilation dating from the 3rd and 4th centuries of our era. I have cited it *in extenso* so as to include the prince's commentary. The purpose of the latter is to stimulate the reader of the *Liezi* to reflect by allowing him to relate the plot of the narrative to the themes of literate thought. What is thus pinpointed is the impossibility of repeating what has once taken place: doing something for the first time and doing it in a context in which it has already occurred is not at all the same thing, for the context of the action is not the same; hence, the outcome cannot be the same. Especially as the second performance, motivated by the desire to achieve a certain aim, is not the result of a state of readiness to engage with the world which alone could enable it to be appropriate to the situation. Now, it is this very appropriateness to the situation which leads the sage to self-fulfilment. It is a matter of, to quote François Jullien, "being in phase"; it is not by making one's mind up to achieve a particular aim that one reaches one's goal, but rather by promoting collaboration between both one's own spontaneity and the changing situation[8]. The tale of the two jugglers is one which, in the Chinese

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7 Book VIII, Chapter 14. See: *Philosophes taoïstes*, Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1980, p.585.

8 *Nourrir sa vie à l'écart du bonheur*, Seuil, 2005, p.110. See also p.100. F. Jullien has repeatedly come back to this theme in his different works, in particular in his *Traité de l'efficacité*, Grasset, 1996, pp.90-91, 119, 140-141 [English translation: *A Treatise on efficacy: between Western and*

tradition, invites us to understand how, by seeking to be directly what one would like to be, one in fact hinders the possibility of achieving this end.

As is the case with popular tales, Chinese thought addresses the relationship with others rather than the relationship with things. The situation to which one has to adapt, with its specific course and its opportunities, is above all a relational one. Thus it is not surprising that one finds it to include, in relation to self-realization, the various themes which attach to serendipity. We have just seen one instance of this, the readiness to engage with the world which makes adaptation to the situation possible. The position of non-control, proper use of the void, is another instance of the phenomenon (here we are reminded of the opposition between those characters who have a head start and the one who does not, but who takes advantage of whatever happens to turn up along the way). As Laozi puts it: "With less one can find, with too much one goes astray", while Zhuangzi remarks: "The void confers upon the soul a readiness to engage with the world such that every action which is accomplished is effective"[9]. "It is undoubtedly the Void," writes François Cheng of Chinese painting, "which enables the process of interiorization and transformation by which each thing is realized as itself and as other, and thereby attains totality. Thus, painting in China is, in a full sense, philosophy in action; ...its objective is nothing less than the total realization of man."[10]

A third theme which has already been mentioned here in relation to serendipity, is that of self-effacement. This in no way means abnegation, or sacrificial devotion, but rather a connection between 'being oneself' and 'being in phase with'; self-consciousness on the other hand prevents one being in tune with the situation and is an obstacle to the maturation of the infra-conscious from which spontaneity and naturalness arise. The desire to recover awareness, in full consciousness, of what one is, to enjoy a full, well-defined self-image, like that produced by a mirror, represents a narcissistic trap, a refusal of incompleteness, which, paradoxically, causes one to fail to achieve fulfilment, and to

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Chinese thinking, trans. Janet Lloyd: University of Hawai'i Press, c2004.]

9 Laozi: Chapter XXII, Zhuangzi, Chapter XIII. The citations are after François Cheng: *Vide et plein*, Seuil, 1991, p.63. In the Pléiade [French] edition, the translation is: "Whoever embraces little will acquire knowledge, whoever embraces much will sink into doubt," and: "When empty, they (the king and the sage) may remain tranquil; however they can still move effectively."

10 *Vide et plein*, p.48.

miss out on being what one might have been. In China, an encouragement to meditate upon this theme lies at the heart of considerations about self-fulfilment. An example of this can be found, in particular, in the well-known tale of Quing the carpenter, which is so often quoted. Before beginning work, the carpenter spends such a long time getting ready that he forgets about possible future congratulations, criticisms and rewards: what he seeks for, what he is completely absorbed by, is, he says, "harmony between my own nature and that of the wood". The equally well-known tale of Ding the butcher is similar: having to cut up an ox, he follows the joints of its body so closely that the blade of his knife never wears out and his work makes him happy. The duke who comes to question him exclaims, "Magnificent! Listening to you, I have learned how to nourish the life within me[11]."

Is "nourishing one's life" not a question of causing the life force within us to fructify? Does "self-cultivation" not imply both an effort upon oneself and a quest for harmony with our environment?

It would also doubtless be possible to show that there are correspondences between the worlds of the stories collected in Europe and the cultures of Africa, the Middle East or India. The bedrock that grounds the tales may prove to be much more homogenous and widespread than the specific cultural orientations of the different cultures suggest. But we should be wary of labelling this common stock as "universal" since the very concept itself is a Western one! We should, instead, acknowledge, as does the Sinologist François Billeter, the fundamental unity of human experience[12]. It is then possible to turn towards both the common stock of practices, narratives and thought which bring together several cultures, and the specific "forms of life" which have been developed by each of them in reaction to the human condition.

European written culture has to a considerable degree distanced itself from this common stock. It was shaped more by breaking away from the latter than by building upon it. For its part, Chinese literate culture (as demonstrated, for instance, by the story

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11 Zhuangzi: Chapter XIX, "The Full Understanding of Life" and Chapter III "Opinions on Nurturing Life". See *Traités chinois de peinture et de calligraphie*, trans. and commentary Yolaine Escande, Vol. I, *Les Textes Fondateurs*, Klincksieck, 2003, pp.34-42. See also Anne Cheng: *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Seuil, 1997, p.120.

12 *Contre François Jullien*: Allia, 2006, p.82.

of the two jugglers in the *Liezi*) is largely built upon modes of thought for which the way had already been paved by popular culture. It is for just this reason that Marcel Granet advised that, in order to understand Chinese thought, one should "pay as much attention to the data provided by myth and folklore as to accounts taken from the 'philosophical works'.[13] "As much could not be said of Western thought. The concept was not created in the wake of the image, nor is Reason a fruit of narrative thought: rather, they have taken their place. Nor can the question of self-fulfilment be thought of as developing out of earlier Eastern Mediterranean cosmologies, fertility cults and traditional forms of piety: self-fulfilment requires, says Plato, a veritable conversion.

Admittedly, Western thought now claims to be secularized, and to be all the more "universal" as it has, so it believes, set itself free from the religious framework in which it had been steeped for so many centuries. Yet, this—real or apparent?—secularization has still not led it to re-establish contact with the fund of pre-conceptual knowledge which it shares with other cultures. This is not to say that such a fund of knowledge is the guarantor of a truth which is, at long last, valid for all. But it is no longer possible to consider this stock as null and void. Building bridges to non-Western cultures may, we suggest in conclusion, help us step back from our own culture, learn from those of others, and achieve a better understanding of our relationship to the human condition.

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