

"If only...."

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UTOPIAN REDUCTIONISMS

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On open letter to Melvin Yosso, creator of **Transcultural Allegories**, in response to his request that I revisit my Introduction to his 1980 book, **TRANSCULTURE**, Universal Heritage: 65 Timeless Allegories (NY: Transculture, Inc.)

Dear Mel,

Thank you for the opportunity to revisit my Introduction, toward your 2nd ed. (1995, I presume), 15 years after the 1st, which I was happy to be able to find the funding for. I have examined my text in detail, continuously asking "Do I want to change this?" All the changes I suggest are only errata in the 1st ed. Here's what I wrote, but didn't get accurately printed:

xvii: "What the Allegories (1) are and (2) are not, what they (3) are like and (4) not like."xix: "not a religion or leaning toward any particular religion."

xxi: "will to unity....necessary."

This serves notice that you will be subject to penalties if under my name you make any changes I have not authorized--as you propose to do.

I know it's a disappointment to you to discover that whereas through the intervening years you've moved miles, I've not budged an inch. In this open letter, I'm drawing on your writings since 1980: of course there's nothing of a private nature: you have "gone public" on everything I need to adduce in order to say to you what I believe I must now say.

1 For my readers, I should quote a bit from my Introduction: it's already late for them to have gone without a clue as to what this Thinksheet's about!

The Allegories "serve as a communication bridge between as well as within cultures, ethnic groups, subcultures, persons, academic disciplines, occupations, nations....The Allegories are life stripped to its basics presented in the art medium of drama stripped to its essentials....Amid life's disorienting forces, and in the dialectic of pain and joy, faith sees the calm Center of the storm and tells a story of hope through love....The Allegories are 'allegory,' a Greek word meaning 'in other words', literally 'speaking in other terms': a literary genre in which literal and abstract levels of meaning, particular and universal, are simultaneously sustained. The Allegories use this internal tension of the genre to invite the sharing of the particular visions and commitments present in the group within the sphere of the common human experience which is the objective content of the particular Allegory....a 'yes' said to both roots and reach....Meditation in dialectical mode....[The Allegories are] phrases in an emerging world-language of the imagination, an Esperanto of the spirit....Literally, 'paradigms' 'pointing to' everybody's common directly, and thus indirectly to everybody's particular....Explorations into the collective ground of our human beseeching....A school of peer learning in which all can affirm both the roots and the hopes of each, while each without embarrassment or arrogance can affirm her/his own vision-commitment-understanding....A shofar, church-bell, and muezzin calling to a common celebration and enervating a common commitment....A magnet for mythic elements toward do-it-yourself scripting of a common world-story parallel with, illuminating, and strengthening one's own cultural world-story (for me, the biblical story of the Creator-Redeemer)...we must find fresh ways to form coalitions of the spirit, mind, and muscle to deal with species-wide problems which our traditional processes and structures are plainly inadequate to handle. The threats have been expanding faster than the promises. Knowledge and power have been outrunning understanding and character....In a world of increasing power to dehumanize us, we must find gentle ways more powerful than 'the principalities and powers'....If we open ourselves to the cost and pain as well as the hope, a kindly Light will lead us to become what we together were always meant to be, what we have only glimpsed. And with gladness we shall come to know that we have been conquered by what alone can free us from our dark betrayals and nightmares."

2 Mel, I had to sound severe in the intro to this letter-Thinksheet. My integrity is at stake. In §1, the only underlined words (not underlined in the book) are a witness to my experience that Transculture--my whole exposure to it, including

the myriad of remarkable human beings (both genders, a wide age-spread, all races, most religions, many cultures & occupations, the humble mixed as equals with Manhattan-&-national eminences)--has indeed illumined & strengthened my Christian faith (or, as the current phrase has it, "faith-commitment").

My warning is against your expunging the confessional phrases in my Introduction. Without them, (1) I wouldn't have written the Introduction, for I took it as an opportunity to embed my Christian witness in an affirmation of your "thing," & (2) the Introduction wouldn't be me....Here, in addition to indirect allusions, is material you loath & I require: "my Lord Jesus on the cross he could have evaded....for me, the supreme parables being those of Jesus....one's own cultural world-story (for me, the biblical story of the Creator-Redeemer)....I, who am a committed Christian of the 'orthodox open' and 'evangelical radical' persuasion....When I see a sign reading 'Jesus saves', I say to myself, 'Yes, I believe that'....In helping develop and use such a sphere and process [as Transculture], I am not less but more of a man, a religious person, a Christian....God, the power of being and becoming, offers us ways of vision and motivation to bring our runaway powers under humane control....a kindly Light will lead us...."

But my Introduction is no evangelistic tract! Half of it wasn't even written by me: it's Transculture-praising quotes I chose from eminences many of whom were of faith-commitments other than mine--e.g., the person who wrote the Preface, Dr. David Hyatt, "President, National Conference of Christians and Jews."

3 In the intervening years, something's happened to your "take" on your dramaturgic creations, the Transcultural Allegories. During the early years, you were satisfied with the result I expressed (p.xxi) as "3=1=3." Members of different "cultures" (in the broadest sense: religions, arts, ethnic histories, socio-economic locations, "sexual preferences," "races," nationalities) (here, 3) became one (here, 1) as a particular Allegory provided them the room & stimulus to tell their personal-&-social stories & be sympathetically heard: talking about the particular common human experience created community. What few now know is that such communities were born all over New York City (in government, public schools, hospitals, higher education, religion, and--especially--the arts). After the 3 (or whatever number; in my experience, an avg. of 15) had become 1, they returned to being 3, but now 3+: something had been added, a new dimension, an openness to others that **enriched instead of canceling** prior faith-commitments. (Of course occasionally someone would convert from one faith-commitment to another, but that was rare. I never experienced anyone as abandoning a faith-commitment. I did know of some who, not having had a faith-commitment, came to one through the Allegory experience of human unity.)....Sadly, I must now express your position as "3=1": you have come to despise the cultures (especially the religions).

4 I do not condemn you for your change: you are on your own journey, & it's of my religion & my nature to respect journeys, roads taken. But the road you have taken leads away from the road along which you persuaded many to follow you; & your new, censorious spirit is alien to your former, inclusive spirit. None of the eight quoted on the back cover of TRANSCULTURE is of your new spirit. Certainly not Norman Cousins, whose passion for peace was driven by an irenic spirit. And I'm quoted as favoring the Allegories for "enhancing instead of replacing" participants' faith-commitments.

5 Whence your bitterness? Not out of Transculture itself. Remember our search for a logo, & my getting the artist John Lefton to contribute his skill. The tree by the rivers of water & under stars is bearing fruit not bitter but sweet. As recently as three years ago I was seeking foundation support for your vision, & I wrote numerous money-raising letters. I was as proud of you as now I am ashamed & feel betrayed. But my sadness is small in comparison with my concern for you, & prayer that you will let God lift the bitterness out of you.

Whence, then, the bitterness? If we find its root, there will be hope; none otherwise ("a bad tree cannot bear good fruit," Matthew 7.18). I think the root is



your **disappointment** that all our efforts to find a promoter-manager for Transculture came to nought. You've always known that you're poet-dramatist-philosopher, a temperament antithetic to promoter. Yet you were ambivalent: you couldn't manage or promote, yet you feared your baby would be kidnapped. If the Transculture process had proved to be self-generating & self-sustaining, no organization would have been necessary. But the public is notoriously fickle about human-relations-improvement procedures, which come & go in a steady stream. Without steady promotion, they're a blip in the public eye. (Human-improvement schemes, in this individualistic culture, are somewhat more durable. Transculture promises both improvements, but it's a hard sell.)

6 How can I comfort you in your bitter disappointment? I could say there's still hope that somebody will pick up the Transculture ball & run with it; but it's no comfort to you that that "somebody," in my opinion, cannot be you--indeed, should not be you, for the world has enough bitterness without being sold any more. I could remind you of the failed-savior syndrome, but would that comfort you? (The syndrome is also called IFD disease: excessive Idealism, when Frustrated by reality [which always frustrate excess], turns into Disappointment [disillusionment, despair, sometimes even death or the dementation of megalomania].)

7 You may be wondering how the supertitle ("If only....") & the title ("Utopian Reductionisms") of this letter-Thinksheet fit its contents. They don't fit yet. Before showing how they do fit your present "thing," let me give an illustration of the category "utopian reductionisms." Radical feminism, my illustration, says utopia (the good society) would arrive "if only" the world would give up patriarchy (the primordial sin--so the myth goes--of the boys' violent take-over of the girls-led original peaceful earth). It's pathetic & pernicious. It idealizes "us" & confines sin to "them." In falsely reducing the situation, it fragments personal & societal relations, distorts history, & delays improved communication & community.

How, now, are you guilty of **utopian reductionism**?

(1) In your new analysis of what's wrong with the world, you've reduced culture to culture's root, viz. religion.

(2) You've reduced cultures to a presupposed single, pan-human core culture.

(3) You've reduced religions to a presupposed single, pan-human religion, or rather religiousness, sense of the sacred.

(4) You've reduced religion to ethics.

() You've reduced ethics to a single virtue, viz. **"unselfishness, creation's noblest lifepath....the only true worship--God's holiest wisdom made flesh."** Ever since preaching this in the Church Chapel for the U.N. 3 Sept 93, you've claimed that this message is "all ye need to truly perfect thyself." This you ram home by an attack on the Bible, accusing it of "never once using the word Unselfishness--never once says 'Become unselfish.'"

(6) You've reduced a virtue--viz., self-giving love--into an **antivice**, & then defamed the Bible, which powerfully preaches the virtue (e.g., the Good Samaritan & the Crucifixion) instead of the antivice! You are preaching a negative, viz., UNselfishness, as though it were a positive: you prefer the negative because it expresses your cynicism about institutions, esp. religious institutions, "religions," all of which you condemn as hopelessly selfish. Cheers for your benevolent impulse, which offers (as did Jesus), as love's criterion, how one treats the outsider (more severe in Jesus than in you: how one treats the enemy); but boos for your sourness upon finding the world cold to your sermon. (Not as cold as the world was to Jesus, whose trust in God saved him from cynicism.)

(7) You've reduced "unselfishness" to your idiosyncratic meaning, viz. "Holy Unselfish Transreligious Adulthood," i.e., your one-man religion, above all others: "None of the great religious founders have been Transreligious."

(8) You've reduced "transreligious," whose primary meaning is communication "across" religions--as "transculture" is communication "across" cultures--to meaning "beyond" religions, i.e., post-religions (though not post-religious, as [Eliade] religiousness, the sense of the sacred, is structural-essential, not superficial-disposable, to humanity).

(9) You've reduced hermeneutics to your "discovery" (actually, eisegesis) of the "unselfishness" hypotext underlying sacred-books' texts as your idea of hypo- or real-religion underlies the religions. E.g., you frequently render Wisdom 7.28 as "None but those who embody unselfish wisdom...."--though in the original, & in the published translations, there's not a whiff of the unselfishness theme. It's not there, you put it there, then you complain that I'm spiritually insensitive in not seeing it there! What profoundly disturbs me here in your cocooning of yourself these past few years is the internal contradiction: you speak unselfishness, but live solipsism, which is its extreme opposite: "nothing counts except my ego, in which all else is reflected" & interpreted (p.706, Hinsie & Campbell, PSYCHIATRIC DICTIONARY [4th ed., Ox/70], in defining "Solipsism").

8 In both your reductionisms & your **utopianism**, you are closest, among the giants of intellectual history, to Nietzsche: your ideal worshiper is an Übermensch, or Overman (not Superman!), committed to living over-above-beyond ordinary mortals with their commitments to traditional morality-culture-religion-tribe. When the world refused to embrace his elitist-utopian vision, his consciousness spun down a narrowing spiral into solipsism, which he pathetically tried to counter with grandiose megalomania, from which the Lord deliver you.

9 The Transculture process was/is negative only about social solipsism, the pessimist doctrine that cultures/religions can't find a common ground for communication & joint action. On your cover-p.4, Rabbi Chaim Stern states the affirmative: "Open ground, unpossessed and unthreatening, because the ground belongs to none, it belongs to all." Such ground the world desperately needs, & God gave you the gift of providing it. But when the movement to spread the Transculture process dried up, impatience inflated your practicality into self-canceling perfectionism (historical parallels: Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysus). This hubris then split your vision off from the imperfect, embattled stuff of history (as anthropo-dualism splits soul off from body).

10 Artists are in danger of self-seduction, their products as it were pushing them further than they originally intended to go. E.g., Braque created cubism, then found his three-dimensional cubes collapsing into two dimension, so he wound up making posters! Insignificant, even humorous, in comparison with what's happened to you. In your Allegories, you created ahistorical-acultural-areligious characters, stripped to their bare humanity, like naked dolls which children variously dress. (Once I went briefly to teach in a place where clothing was not permitted: clothing makes cultural/class statements which, it was thought (correctly), pollute pure-&-simple human self-presentation.)

Then what happened to you? You committed the amnesia error of treating as reality the metaphor you had created. Your second take on your Allegories finds the characters "transreligious" in the sense of being beyond "adolescent" commitment to any specific religion. Wrong! Rather, they are, as you created them, nonreligious, as they are noncultural, & thus (§9) nonhistorical. You have misunderstood your own creation, or rather given it a **spin** that cuts you off from support you had before you went negative.

11 But I can understand your going negative on the religions (& their fruits, the cultures): you yourself have never been religious (i.e., wholeheartedly committed to any religion). You are a highly sophisticated dilettante in the religions & a frequent attender of their rituals, but still always only an **outsider**, like millions of your generation unable to comprehend the experience of us insiders.

Me, e.g. From my Introduction you want to expunge my statement that I am an "orthodox open" Christian. Both adjectives applied to me long before you devised Transculture, from which I learned nothing religiously, theologically, philosophically, culturally, or methodologically. To take the last first, I put on tape for you 30 methods of group process, for whatever use you might want to make of them gratis. I'm grateful to you that Transculture got me swimming in the same pool as hundreds of wonderful, caring, capable, high-achieving people I'd not otherwise have met, heard, & spoken to. But for all that experience, including knowing you, I'm not less "orthodox" or more "open" than I was before. I had my thing, you created

your thing, then we used each other to do our things. That puts the matter crassly but precisely. Now you've a new thing, Transreligion, which you claim--& I disclaim--is what Transculture "was really about." Your new thing revulses me as much as your old thing attracted me. There's nothing left for it but prayer, always the ultimate possibility.

I continue to advise you not to waste time & energy trying to persuade to your Transreligion those who are happy in their religious commitments. What then? You may try for converts among your own kind, viz. the religionless (i.e., never-committed) &/or among the disenchanting-disgruntled religious. Or you may commit yourself to some religion, as you appear to have done in being ordained (21 Oct 94) as a "minister" of the Church of Inner Wisdom (or is that only an extrapolation from your own insides?). But church folk never will be a happy huntingground for you as long as you come on as an enemy of "church" (i.e., organized, institutional religion).

12 If you could divest yourself of your animus, & recloth yourself with your original irenic spirit, you would cease being an enemy of your Allegories. Let's stay with the clothing metaphor. Twice St. Francis divested himself, disrobed: his rich clothing he took off & threw at his father's feet, then his poor clothing he took off to give to a leper. The **kenosis** (self-emptying) theme is integral to Christianity, which teaches it's something God himself did out of sacrificial (yes, "unselfish"!) love of humanity (Philippians 2.7). In the Allegories, you divested humanity of cultural/religious particulars so that participants could deal with the universal, what we all have/are, in the World Council of Churches phrase "the humanum." I hope history will credit you with this achievement, which is now obscured by Lethe (the go of culture's come) & threatened by your present hieratic behavior as "world teacher," sanctifier of "Unselfishness" as salvific, the particular way of universal salvation.

13 Might this help? Human beings hunger for roots & reach, particular & universal, (in my upcoming booktitle) FLOW OF FLESH & REACH OF SPIRIT. The Allegories are luminous blicks of dailiness (particularities) translated into universals without denying, but rather affirming, the dailiness. The tension doubly teases. We ask "What are these people [in this Allegory]?" The answer "Everybody" fails to satisfy our thirst for concreteness. (Our question was specific, & we got a general answer.) We ask "What is the abstract-philosophical-general meaning of this Allegory?" and we're told "Everything: it's in the action." (Our hunger for a universal gets a specific answer.)

Is the defect in the Allegories? To some extent, perhaps. But more important is the revelation of our human nature: whichever end (particular or universal) we position ourselves at, we are teasingly tugged by the opposite end. When we realize & accept the fact this dynamism is of "the humanum," our human nature/mind, the Allegories come alive, living, for us....Can you now see how all this obtains in my self-affirmation as an "orthodox open" Christian? As canonical-classical-orthodox-evangelical, my religion is particular; but it also supplies my hunger & thirst for the universal, directing me to be open to my neighbor, my world neighbor, in the spirit of love & truth.

14 In rejection of the religions & affirmation of your current thing, you say no religion will ever take over the world. Your implication is (1) that the world should be taken over by something & (2) that your thing is the ideal candidate. I reply: (1) If anything ever takes over the world, WC (world-correct) tyranny, on the model of campus presently taken over by PC. A teacher of mine, Rich. P. McKeon said (as qtd. Dec/94 U. OF CHICAGO MAG., p.34) "ideological agreement on one philosophy by all mankind is neither possible nor, if it were possible, desirable. It would probably put us into a kind of intellectual sleep in which we need do no further thinking....With the solution of any problem, a large number of unsuspected problems arise; and therefore, the ^{more} problems you answer, the more problems you have. This is not discouraging; rather, it would indicate that as thinkers, you have a future." (2) My eschatology, as in the Lord's Prayer I pray daily, is that Providence, God's Presence-Rule, undergirds nature, overgirds history, & will "take over" in due time in such manner as will not diminish but rather enhance humanity, in Jesus' name. Divine universalism, not human imperialism!

15 "The Church of Inner **Wisdom**," is it? Jesus was a Sage, but was not so utopian as to imagine that wisdom can save (nor did Paul: 1 Corinthians 1.20). Your "Wisdomlife Foundation" rests on the false premise that (1) people want wisdom & (2) will come to you for it. But it is true that people want "church," i.e., salvific community, & so may come to your "Church of Inner Wisdom." In my 8 Jan 94 to you, I said you are utopian "in imagining that your impulse will not take on 'the trappings' of a religion. You mention Isaiah 61.1 as condemning 'religiosity,' but it became a major text of a religion, viz. mine (Luke 4.18-19). In history, given human nature, every religious impulse either dies out or becomes a religion: only the body of a religion can carry the soul of a religious impulse such as yours. Previous...efforts to exalt unselfishness above theology have produced only feeble results."....So you have become a religion (or joined one). When a new religion appears, it self-identifies by setting itself over against the other religions. Evidence that you are into a religion now is that you have powerfully set yourself over against all the other religions, something you had a need **not** to do when you were faithful to Transculture. And your new religion has a slogan: "Unselfishness, the only true holiness" ("only" excludes all other religions, & "true" proclaims that all the other religions are false). (Formerly, you abused John 16.13, "the Spirit...will guide you into all the truth," in context the Jesus-truth, by making it universal truth: now you abuse it by making it your particular "Wisdomlife-Unselfishness" truth.)

16 Another perspective that could help you out of the hole you've dug for yourself & jumped into: the **romantic-ascetic** reaction throughout history & 'round the world. Buddhism began as just such a counterculture against Hinduism, Gautama (unselfishly?!) fleeing his domestic & political responsibilities to sit under the Bo tree till "enlightenment" came. In the West, the "Enlightenment" was countercultural to medievalism; the "Age of Reason" had Diderot's mind & Rousseau's noble-savage heart, with positivism & the socialisms in the wings. Then came the romantic critics of rationalism--Fichte, Shelling, Schleiermacher, exalting (as you do) experience above reason. And the breakdown of classical art (painting, sculpture, music) into modernism & postmodernism. Then such reactions as structuralism & foundationalism....All of these, including your Transreligion, had/have an "if only" tone; all are utopian reductionisms. You may see yourself in their mirrors.

17 Another factor pressing you to become a religion is the environing secular pressures to erode all religion-unaligned spirituality into **humanism**. The Humanist Manifesto of 1932 designed the take-over of America's public schools, & its HC (humanistically correctness) has succeeded. So your average public-school graduate would read the Allegories as having nothing to do with being religious, a reading you rightly find intolerable, as you are profoundly-intoxicatedly-incurably religious. You haven't admitted it, but you'd rather have your thing become a religion than dry up into humanism, which has always failed to achieve sustainable motivation (so the public schools have played around with "values" & now are wondering whether they might risk doing something with "virtues"--without recognizing that without religious roots, values & virtues are cut flowers).

18 Time, Mel, for me to reaffirm my **agreement** with "what you are yearning for, longing for" (I'm quoting from §7 of a former open letter to you, #2651): "some way to get to what human beings need, in themselves & in unselfishness toward others, without going through the particular religions, which by their very diversity, & even more by their mutual coldnesses & even animosities, frustrate the very human unity that fulfilling the goal of humanization demands." This bypass was the genius of the Allegories. Increasing numbers are becoming aware of that need, & some are creating media parallel to Transculture. Vaclav Havel's dramas, e.g., in line with his assertion (28Nov94 NW 62) that the world desperately needs to evolve a "global spirituality."....May I remind you of your ambivalence toward the Bible on unselfishness, saying both (1) "The religions can't train unselfish people" & (2) The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) has it all: "You get it all there." And you become radiant over some passages in the OT, e.g. Isaiah 58.10. We may not be as far apart as it feels to both of us that we are.

Grace & peace,

