

THE HUMANITIES AT WORK
*International Exchange of Ideas in Aesthetics,
Philosophy, and Literature*

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Dedicated to Marjorie Perloff whose ideas have influenced my own notion of art and aesthetics.

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Publisher's Note

It is our immense pleasure to publish *The Humanities at Work*. Yubraj Aryal first approached us on behalf of Philosophical Society with the proposal of this book project. We accepted his proposal and made necessary financial arrangement to initiate the project of this valueable publication.

Our publication has a long tradition to work with the scholarly communities of Nepal. It is our understanding that a publication house like ours can play no lesser role to the enhancement of intellectual traditions of a country. We hope that our effort in bringing this book for publication testifies our commitment and responsibility to our country and her scholarly traditions as a publisher.

Finally, we would like to make an appeal to the international communities of scholars to give us opportunities to publish your books for Nepali readership. We are committed to work with you for the exchange of scholarly ideas. We hope your kind cooperation would be very fruitful to materialize our goal to emerge as one of the leading publication houses from our region.

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Foreword

I consider it a distinct honor to have been invited by the editor of this book, Yubraj Aryal, who is also the Secretary of the Philosophical Society of Nepal, to write a brief introduction. He first contacted me in connection with his young Society's interest in becoming a member society of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies, FISP in its common French acronym, of which I am the current Secretary General. Gradually, after the successful completion of that application process and approval by the FISP Steering Committee, I began to learn both about the journal of which Yubraj Aryal is editor and his ambitious project of interviewing contemporary experts, mostly (and in the end exclusively) based in my own country, in a wide range of areas of both philosophy proper and literature. The contents of the present book are the fulfillment of that project.

The result is, to my mind, very impressive. I cannot think of another collection of similar scope. It reflects most favorably on Yubraj Aryal, not only as the initiator of the project but also as the generator of the topics covered and of the questions asked: the interviewer *par excellence*. It also reflects favorably on those who accepted the responsibility of giving thoughtful answers to his questions. All are distinguished figures in the academic world, most if not all with wide international reputations. Such people tend to be very busy with many demands on their time, and as a group they have a reputation, at least in some circles, of being—to use the French expression used by my fellow students to characterize some of our professors during the exchange year that I spent in France after graduating from college—*grands seigneurs*, great lords—disdainful of any persons and/or activities other than those deemed most likely to enhance their own

self-esteem. Some such individuals undoubtedly still exist, although their relative numbers are probably diminishing, and of course it is true that participation in the interviews that make up the present book may ultimately prove to be a self-enhancing step for some if not all of the interviewees. Nevertheless, the extent of cooperation and willingness to engage in dialogue that is demonstrated in the contents of these pages is, I think, remarkable. Moreover, I find it to be very encouraging at a time when, by most reckonings of those who take the pulse of the global *Zeitgeist*, discouragement about the future is widespread.

One of the currently favorite expressions of those who seek actively to combat and overcome this attitude of discouragement is “global dialogue.” Underlying this expression are certain assumptions that vary in nuance from one individual to another, but that all concur in viewing the world as divided into cultural spheres which are ultimately discrete, in one way or another, and which would presumably each gain some advantage by learning from the others, while still retaining a core distinctiveness. Lying outside the range of this shared understanding of the value of global dialogue are, at one end, those who see the major cultures as inevitably in conflict, “clashing,” and at the other end those who favor the global absorption of all other cultures by a single one that is, they believe, inevitably achieving dominance—the “flat worlders,” as they are sometimes called. Among the leading advocates of each of these influential but in fact highly superficial views, the labels of both of which come from popular books, are, I am sorry to say, American writers, fellow-countrymen of mine. What they have in common that is not shared by most advocates of global dialogue is, as I have suggested in characterizing them, a belief in the idea of historical inevitability, an idea that was supposed to have gone out of fashion with the collapse

of the international bloc of states for which the historical inevitability of the worldwide triumph of their system had been a key component of the official ideology. Cultural dialogue by contrast, if it is genuine, must, I think, retain as one of its premisses a sense of openness concerning the future, a certain philosophical attitude of wonder. The present book is informed by that spirit.

There is a wondrous aspect to the publication of a book like this one at this time in Nepal, a country that not long ago connoted, to the typical modern Western (American or European) mind, remoteness and exoticism. But now we are all living, in some sense, in a **post**-modern period. To be sure, questions about the precise meaning of this expression and even about its validity as a distinct label for some recent developments in philosophy and literature are raised or at least implied in more than one of the interviews in this volume, and rightly so. Nevertheless, the fact that an enterprise such as this one could, when supported by sufficient commitment and effort on the part of its initiator, be successfully carried out within a relatively short period of time is a testimonial to the existence of expanded global intellectual horizons and new technical possibilities that are qualitatively different from the normal range of expectations of just one generation ago. In other words, ours **is** a new world, in any case; it will be a braver and more orderly one to the extent that dialogues like this are allowed to flourish.

And so, thanks to Yubraj, thanks to the other contributors, and let us continue!

William L. McBride
Arthur G. Hansen Distinguished
Professor of Philosophy
Purdue University

Preface

The Humanities at Work is prepared under the auspices of the Philosophical Society of Nepal (PSN). The emergence of a new globalism has made it imperative that we become informed about the recent state of ideas, thoughts, and knowledge in the human sciences. In today's world no one can really afford to remain aloof from these ideas. In the west these ideas have more or less percolated into the masses, but in Asia a majority of the people still remains untouched by these new ideas. This book seeks to redress that lacuna. However, it is hoped that it will be of interest to all kinds of readers who are interested in some of the major ideas in the humanities in the early years of the twenty-first century.

An international exchange of ideas contributes to global peace and mutual understanding because it provides a community an opportunity to know and thereby respect the thoughts and ideas, values and belief systems of others. Therefore, it is hoped that the interviews will be of great value in contributing to cross-cultural understanding and exchange of ideas between and among intellectuals in this global village.

I think that by producing, in the words of Charles Bernstein, this "fabulous book," we scholars of Asian and American communities have shown our commitment to participate in the global dialogue. As William L. McBride, Secretary General of the FISP, rightly calls for us in his Foreword to this book—let us keep this tradition alive and continue it.

With my own interest and faith in philosophy, literature, and the arts, I have chosen to interview scholars in these three disciplines. My focus has been on specifically debated questions, and so I have tried to do away with generalities as far as possible. I have deliberately tried to take a controversial position in the debates with my interviewees so as to focus on the knotty

issues of literature, philosophy, and the arts. I hope the book will be useful to those who would like to look at the specific controversies that surround the disciplines of philosophy, literature, and the arts.

If on one hand, postcolonial theories exhort us to resist the strategic mindsets embedded in western systems of thought, on the other we need knowledge and strategies not only to properly resist them but also to pay reverence to the humanistic contents and beauty of western humanistic traditions and to absorb them in order to create and enrich our own humanistic traditions. It is only proper understanding that can lead to healthy appreciation and fruitful criticism. Herein lies the significance of this interview project.

My thanks go to all the eminent scholars who kindly and in the best humanistic tradition accepted my request and participated in this interview project. I am very grateful to the generosity of Professors Charles Bernstein, Johanna Drucker, Tyrus Miller, Jerome McGann, John Searle and Charles Altieri. My mind always recalls the assistance extended by the Executive Director of American Philosophical Association (APA) Professor David E. Schrader, without whose cooperation and encouragement I could not have completed an intellectual project of this magnitude. My debt of gratitude similarly extends to Professors Marjorie Perloff and William L. McBride. On the home front I am eternally grateful to the advisors Professors Shreedhar Prasad Lohani, Govinda Raj Bhattarai, Krishna Chandra Sharma and Arun Gupto. Likewise I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professors Abhi Subedi, Nirmal Man Tuladhar, Sanjeev Uprety, Devi Prasad Sharma Gautam, Beerendra Pandey, Nagendra Bhattarai, Puspa Damai, Anirudra Thapa, Bed Giri, my friend avant-garde poet Dharmendra Bikram Nembang and my senior colleague Gregory B. Sadler for their many acts of kindness and assistance.

Yubraj Aryal

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