

Lévi-Strauss: Myth's Magician

The Language of Anthropology

by Roger Poole

By the language of anthropology I mean Lévi-Strauss's language of anthropology, and in particular, the language used by Lévi-Strauss in the three volumes of his *Mythologiques* which have appeared to date, *Le Cru et le Cuit* (*The Cooked and the Raw*) 1964; *Du Miel aux Cendres* (*From Honey to Ashes*) 1966; and *L'Origine des Manières de Table* (*The Origin of Table-Manners*) 1968. Since these three thick books have been produced with such amazing rapidity, and since they are little known here in England as yet, and since they represent a radical new departure in anthropological language, it seems useful to make a preliminary estimate of their contents and probable significance.

Lévi-Strauss's 'debts' to structural linguistics, especially that of Jakobson and the Prague School, have been enormously over-estimated. The time has come to suggest another view of things, to suggest in what ways the language of anthropology as used by Lévi-Strauss is *not* tied down by an unrelenting linguistic method, is *not* co-extensive with present tendencies in the linguistics of, say, Chomsky. Lévi-Strauss's language of anthropology is a breakthrough entirely *sui generis* whose importance is certainly underestimated if it is compared to current linguistic models.

For Lévi-Strauss regards structural analysis as the *discovery* of a language which is inherent in the materials he studies, not *imposed* upon them from above by reference to some artificial linguistic schematism. In fact, even by 1952, when he and Jakobson and others met at Bloomington, Indiana, at a Conference of Anthropologists and Linguists, Lévi-Strauss had already found the methods of Jakobson insufficient and partly irrelevant to the work he wanted to do himself. Speaking of his own work at that Conference he said, for instance:

Are such formalisations able to be transposed onto the linguistic level? I do not see in which form they could be. It is clear however that in this case, the anthropologist is using a method which is closely allied to the linguist's. Both are concerned to organise constituent unities into systems. But it would be vain to push this parallel further.¹

Again:

'My theory takes then a middle course: certain correlations are probably to be revealed between certain aspects and at certain levels, and it is our job to find out what are these aspects and what are these

¹Supplement to the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, Vol. 19, April 1953, Mem. 8.

levels. Anthropologists and linguists can collaborate in this task.¹

In the *Overture to The Cooked and the Raw*, Lévi-Strauss says that mythical thought 'manifests itself in a burst of rays; it is only by measuring directions and calculating angles that we arrive at the possibility of a common origin, an ideal point where all the rays reflected elsewhere by the myth's structure would be rejoined'. It is evident from this, from the attitude of *visual respect* implied in it, that linguistic analysis as such will in fact be to some degree irrelevant—Saussure's and Jakobson's as much as Chomsky's. For if it is true that Lévi-Strauss was already thrown on his own methodological resources by 1952 (if not in fact much earlier) it is equally true that, far from working towards Chomsky's theories of a primal grammar which would underlie all specific grammars, Lévi-Strauss has in fact worked past it a long time ago, and, in shifting his enquiry on to the *visual* level, has already illustrated richly enough in what ways Chomsky's theories are themselves still only theories having to do with a sub-section of human communication systems, that of language precisely. As an anthropologist whose view of language transcends the study of written or spoken languages, in order to approach the 'virtual source' of human communication, Lévi-Strauss has a freedom and a precise immediacy which the linguist is forever doomed to lack.

In *Mythologiques*, then, Lévi-Strauss undertakes the first full-scale 'working-out' of 'structuralist' language analysis, with a study of myth. But the language of the myth-makers themselves, the Indians of South and North America, and the language of the anthropologist, must be taken in harness, for the second is a 'phenomenological' description of the first.

This might be clarified slightly by saying that, for Lévi-Strauss, myths and their description have to be *isomorphic*. He therefore arranges his material mythically, by disposing it according to the classical patterns of music and rhetoric. By these means he seeks to recapture the original thrill of myth itself. Lévi-Strauss wants to tell us a story. Most of the myths as Lévi-Strauss recounts them (he treats of over 500 to date) begin with the magic words: Once upon a time . . . or, There was once a time when . . . The language of *Mythologiques* is the language of consciousness, which is bound up in the language of story, incantation and reverie. This is what I meant by calling Lévi-Strauss's description of myth 'phenomenological': the description is not *of* something, it is *in* something. It is myth described in the language of myth. It is the coming to consciousness of consciousness itself, in a kind of *pas de deux*.

It can perhaps be seen how important it is, if one has taste (and Lévi-Strauss is an Augustan in the extreme finesse of his taste), not to reduce the study of myth to something boring, to something pseudo-scientific. It is essential to keep near to the living springing source. This Lévi-Strauss does by keeping his language of myth close to

¹Supplement to the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, Vol. 19, April 1953, Mem. 8.

the original mood and intention in which myth is created. Kierkegaard said, in his famous essay on Mozart's *Don Juan* in *Either/Or*, that the immediate-sensuous is musical expression itself. Don Juan *is* sensuousness. Music *is* sensuousness. Therefore, Don Juan *is* music. Mozart has, according to Kierkegaard, carried out the extreme miracle of art: he has made two sorts of sensuousness co-incide.

There are many parallels between Kierkegaard's essay on *Don Juan* and Lévi-Strauss's *Overture to The Cooked and the Raw*: enough for a whole anthropological/philosophical aesthetic. The main thing to grasp is that the language of myth must be described in the language of the sensuous. If the language of the anthropologist is 'about' the language of myth, the co-incidence of mode must be absolute. And so it is. Lévi-Strauss's vast symphony deploys the language of immediacy as if he were himself writing a myth: the myth of myth itself.

The language of *Mythologiques* is one of accretion. The first Bororo myths of the origin of water are juxtaposed with the Ge myths of the origin of fire. An initial opposition pair water/fire is thus set up. But these are 'rays' coming from a virtual source, not merely phonetic oppositions in a linguistic chain. The jaguar enters the story. He is the owner of fire, and he has a human wife. In order that fire be transmitted to man, the human wife (the middle term of a relationship nature/culture) has to be suppressed. *The Sonata of Good Manners* thus starts with a *Profession of Indifference*. It is indifferent to the jaguar that he lose his human wife, for he is concerned to deliver fire to men. The myths of the origin of cooking-fire as such thus get taken up into the sonata. The opposition pairs raw/cooked, jaguar/man are enriched by the appearance of tobacco and wild pigs. While they are both submitted to the process of fire, tobacco is smoked and not eaten, wild pigs are cooked and eaten.

Two key myths, M 15 and M 16, tell us of the origin of wild pigs. There is discovered to be an isomorphism between the myths of the origin of cooking and myths of the origin of wild pigs. We might have expected as much. But this has been deduced from an analysis of the myths *themselves*, compared over a wide geographical area.

Lévi-Strauss now proposes himself a feat of virtuosity. If the myths 15 and 16 can be distilled from the 'virtual' contents of M 1, the myth of reference, could we not now proceed in reverse order, and by analysing the 'residues' of the myths, move from M 15 and M 16 back to M 1? Lévi-Strauss re-describes this in a remarkable meta-analysis in *Tuning Up* (Vol. 2, p. 14 ff.), but his original procedure is in fact not identical with that later description.

For in fact the irruption at this point of *The Cooked and the Raw* of the opposition pair tobacco/honey brings into play (in a 'virtual' way, of course) the entire orchestral score of the second volume. Tobacco/honey brings up a problem in mythical thought which is an indirect form of the problem nature/culture.

Myths of the origin of tobacco then succeed (M 23 to M 27). These myths are disposed in a *Rondo* form, for, as Lévi-Strauss points out on page 115, the origins of meat, fire and tobacco are mutually self-implicating. The 'variations' of the *Rondo* incorporate the materials of the 'theme' every time.

The origin of women comes next. Why are they young or old, fat or thin, pretty or ugly? The origin of women, retold in terms of their own children and of the stealing of cooked meat, brings up the origin of the constellations. 'As a punishment for their bad hearts, the children, transformed into stars, contemplate every night the sad condition of their mothers. It is their eyes that are seen shining up there' (M 34, *Origin of the Stars*, p. 123).

A Fugue of the Five Senses tells of the origin of the shortness of life. Lévi-Strauss has recourse to 'a purely visual code' (p. 164) which bears out our claim that the analysis of the language of myth is operating at a different level from that of linguistic analysis, is operating at the level of the comprehension of the visual aspect of the world of myth.

With *The Well-Tempered Astronomy*, the origin of the constellations is brought in explicitly, even though it has been there, 'virtually', all the time, as an indirect ray. There are two sorts of water: heavenly and earthly, in other words, beneficent and destructive water. In *A Double Canon a contrario*, the correlation and the opposition of Orion and the Pleiads are deduced. All values in the myths have reference to the constellations, for with them are associated good and bad weather, work and leisure, abundance and famine, meat-diet and plant-diet and so on (p. 232). 'The only constant element is the form of opposition itself: but the ways in which one interprets it, the contents which one gives to it, vary according to the groups from one hemisphere to the other.'

In *Toccata and Fugue*, the periodicity of the year is set over against the synchronic organization of the starry sky. 'The myths are constructed on a basis of a logic of sensuous qualities which does not make a sharp distinction between states of subjectivity and the properties of the cosmos' (p. 246).

The end of *The Well-Tempered Astronomy* introduces us to a concept which will become crucial in the third volume, 'the reign of little intervals'. Nature and Culture here appear in chromatic closeness. Chromatism is 'a visual code', distrusted by the Western tradition, including Rousseau (whom Lévi-Strauss quotes at this point) as being expressive of human suffering. This 'gives one to reflect on the profound causes of the chromatism of *Tristan*'. The 'little intervals' we meet in *The Well-Tempered Astronomy* link forward to the discussion of the proper distance of marriage partners, exemplified in the distances between the sun and the moon, which awaits us in the third volume.

In volume two, within the first part called *The Dry and the Wet*, we have a 'dialogue between honey and tobacco'. What are they dis-

cussing? The origin of honey itself. Its arrival, like that of cooking fire, tobacco, the temporality of the seasons, is mysterious. Tobacco, as a kind of semantic elder statesman, throws honey into a quest for its origins. The fox here takes over the initiatory functions as the jaguar did with the providing of fire.

The original oppositions which were in question in defining the values of tobacco and honey in the system (raw/cooked, wet/burnt, infra-culinary/super-culinary), are no longer sufficient. 'Good' and 'bad' honey, 'good' and 'bad' tobacco now are split up still further, no longer according to their natural properties, but according to what *cultural use* is made of them (*Honey to Ashes*, p. 55).

The seasons are also in question. For the Chaco, the greater part of the wild fruits available during the dry season are either poisonous or bitter, and therefore necessitate complicated preparations before they can be safely eaten (p. 84). The seasons are therefore encoded in *The Story of the Girl who is Mad about Honey*, and a myth about honey or about fish is in fact therefore necessarily a myth about the dry and the wet seasons.

What is there in common then between the search for honey, the constellation of the Pleiads, and the character of the badly-brought-up girl? Such is the new integration of the problem (p. 228). Firstly Lévi-Strauss sets out to connect the food-code with the astronomical code, then to connect the food-code with the sociological code, and finally to connect the sociological code with the astronomical code. These three codes are 'homologous'.

At what level of language, however, is this demonstration to be carried out? There is a constant reference, as we have said before, to the forms of rhetoric. On page 253, we are told that these myths 'do not limit themselves to expressing the ambiguity of honey through the means of semantic equivalences. They also have recourse to metalinguistic procedures, when they play on the duality of a proper name and a common name, when they play on metonymy and metaphor, on contiguity and resemblance, on the literal and the figurative sense of something.'

This emphasis on the purely metaphorical and metonymic will be more clearly significant in the third volume of the series, but Lévi-Strauss never pulls back from the 'immediate' formalization of his materials, that is to say, when he recreates a 'pun', a metaphor or a resemblance, *in terms of* the culture which created a myth and *in terms of which* a certain 'bricolage' will give an amusing or an instructive effect. Significance is in the materials themselves. A bit of rummaging around will always show up the connection.

One 'code' which has been significantly missing, and which Lévi-Strauss introduces at this point in the argumentation (he admits himself that it is rather late to do so), is the *acoustic* code. This code is distributed on three levels (p. 280). And in the section which follows, called evocatively enough *Din and Stink*, Lévi-Strauss shows

how the instruments of music and the opposition sound/silence in significant situations actually illuminates from within the mythical problem with which we are involved. The 'din and stink' of ceremonial jubilation give way to *The Harmony of the Spheres*, where (p. 364) it is shown that the instruments used in this din are actually used to effect 'a conjunction *with* conjunction and disjunction themselves: they conjoin the group or the world to the possibility of one or other of these relationships, which have in common the characteristic of excluding mediation'. This amazing feat of the instruments of music leads us forward in anticipation to the most remarkable 'intersections of conjunction and disjunction' which we are to meet in the third volume. But their time is not yet come. We are still dealing with a logic of elements, and these elements are telling us different, though related, stories. The origins of water, fire and tobacco, and the struggle between the values accorded in the myths to tobacco and to honey, define a field of reference whose contours we are beginning to see, but which remains as yet a field without a final meaning. It is overdetermined.

The Mystery of the Woman cut into pieces opens the third volume, *The Origin of Table Manners*. It concerns a woman who 'sticks' to her man, the *femme cramponne*. She brings up the problem of how far abroad from the tribe a man should go to find a wife. *The Voyage in a Canoe of the Moon and the Sun* gives us many of the answers. The sun and the moon are symbolic of the correct distance apart. If they were nearer, there would be 'incest, eclipse and the subversion of daily periodicity'. If they were farther apart, we should see perpetual day and absolute night, the tides, seasons and periods of menstruation would all fail to succeed one another in their correct order.

Cosmic order in its turn has spatial correlates. It takes hours, perhaps days, to go up-stream in a canoe, where it might take only minutes to go downstream the same distance. Distance and time are relative, then, and are themselves involved in the problem proposed: what is correct and comprehensible proximity between human beings and between the elements in the universe?

Finally, the origin of table manners themselves. An examination of the sacred character of making embroideries with the quills of porcupines shows us (p. 207) that 'it is not only necessary that girls have good manners and that they know how to embroider, but they must also bring children to birth in the correct span of time and have their periods at the correct intervals'. The porcupine has a double-affinity with the female sex: 'He forestalls, because he is also a periodical animal, the delays or the disorders which menace the vital rhythms.'

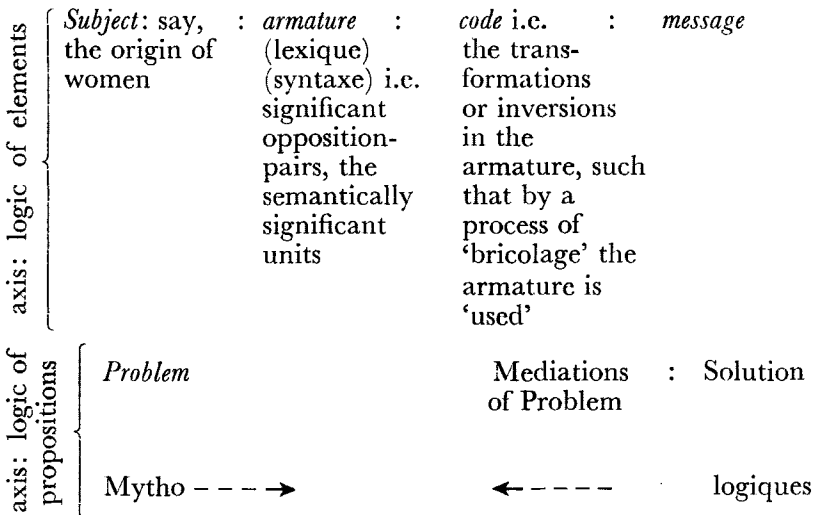
Out of this meditation on the necessity of good manners which echo the proper ordering and distancing of things in the universe, Lévi-Strauss passes, by way of an analysis of ornamental dress (the extension of the theme of the embroidery of porcupine-quill cloaks), to a consideration of the ethical values involved in the whole, ending

in a passage of tremendous power and dignity (a passage which has impressed all the reviewers to date and which deserves careful meditation in view of the philosophical undercurrent of the whole) on the necessary ‘modesty and discretion’ which is laid upon us by a correct understanding of the myths of the South and North American Indians. Lévi-Strauss seems to be saying, following Rousseau, that the anthropological enquiry is itself a moral act, and a full understanding of the meaning of myth implies and enforces a proper humility before the materials. It is the world itself which is sacred, and we have no right to ‘appropriate’ it as a mere thing and to use it irresponsibly. It is the Indians and their myths which show us in what way we ought to respect it and the Divine ordering which it shows through every crack and crevice.

Of such a kind, then, is the matter of the three volumes. Here is a brief indication of their manner, of the technical devices used by Lévi-Strauss in extracting these meanings from his materials. I quote a typical passage from the middle of *Le Cru et le Cuit* (p. 205):

‘Let us call an ensemble of properties, which remain invariant in two or several myths, by the name of *armature*; let us call the system of functions assigned by each myth to these properties by the name of *code*; let us call the content of any given myth by the name of *message*. If we then take up again those considerations upon which we finished our third part, we can more precisely define the relation between the Bororo myth (M 1) and the Sherente myth (M 12) if we say that, in passing from one myth to the other, the *armature* remains constant, the *code* is transformed and the *message* is inverted.’

This, then, as far as can be deduced from the actual practice of Lévi-Strauss across the three volumes, is a scheme of how the language of myths is broken down:



These two axes are parallel. The first interests Lévi-Strauss the anthropologist, the second interests Lévi-Strauss the philosopher and disciple of Rousseau.

The actual symbolism used by Lévi-Strauss accretes over the three volumes, certain symbols take on ever greater richness and suppleness, and new ones are introduced to cope with new conceptual difficulties encountered on the way. No doubt the fourth volume will also have its terminological surprises. One of the symbols which is most essential to the method is, of course, Transformation, represented by \rightarrow and new symbols of great importance, introduced only in the third volume are \cap for 'intersection' and Σ for 'summation'.

In fact the use of these two latter symbols can well be illustrated by producing an argumentation on the second axis (the logic of propositions) which occurs towards the middle of *L'Origine*, and which forms a logical climax in that section of the book:

$$\left| \begin{array}{l} \text{heaven } \cup \text{ earth (spatial)} \\ \Sigma \end{array} \right| \left(\cup \cap // \right) \left| \begin{array}{l} \text{(heaven//earth (spatial)} \\ \Sigma \\ \text{male } \cup \text{ female (temporal)} \end{array} \right| = 1$$

(where \cup = union, $//$ = disjunction, \cap = intersection and Σ = summation).

'In other words', adds Lévi-Strauss helpfully, 'the mytheme of the dug-out canoe operates the intersection of conjunction and disjunction, both of which it affirms to be present, while it keeps them separated. This logical operation provides middle values to conjunction and to disjunction, while keeping these latter within the same semantic register' (*L'Origine des Manières de Table*, p. 159).

I said that this operation took place in the second axis, the logic of propositions, and it can now perhaps be seen more clearly what was meant by that. The terms which we have used, decoded and transformed from one myth to another in the chain of myths about the sun and the moon and the dug-out canoe, are here used, not as *elements* any more, but as *functions* within a logical proposition, where the extremes of abstraction are being combined with extremes of concrete reality, a real 'logic of the concrete' as Lévi-Strauss called it in *La Pensée Sauvage*. But here the 'logic of the concrete' is as it were a screen on which play images of enormous abstraction, like proximity and distance, the relativity of distances and of times depending from which point they are estimated, the proper distance between marriage-partners, the proper distance between the seasons, earthly time as it is lived and cosmic duration. These abstractions can, thanks to this meta-symbolism which Lévi-Strauss has invented, give very precise results in their own terms, though the logic we are dealing with is often 'a logic of sensible qualities' (as described in *La Pensée Sauvage*) and therefore the operations of this logic are very often more a visual, auditory or tactile matter than a purely formal one. It is the formal logic of the world of the senses that is involved.

It is, so to speak, when a square myth reminds you of a rectangular one that the internal coherence, the logic, forces itself upon you as decoder. It is not the contents of a myth which is important, but its arrangement and the relation of its arrangement with other arrangements of other myths.

The formulae reproduced above may seem rather formidable. The intersection of conjunction and of disjunction is rather like the 'union of union and non-union' which the young Hegel proposed himself as his life's task in his *Fragment of a System* of 1800 and which issued out, as we know, in the necessity of dialectic. There is in Lévi-Strauss an entirely *absorbed philosophical preoccupation with his materials*. *The language of myth* gives rise to the *logic of myth*, and the logic of myth (mythologiques) gives rise to the *logic of propositions* of which we have given a striking example above.

Language, then, has been freed from saying something we can check up on, in order to assume its traditional role of calling into question what we would like to know about. Language has ceased to be a kind of block of cheese which linguistic philosophers can pare endlessly. Language has been freed once again, after a servitude of half a century, to question what there is and where it came from. We are asked to experience. We are required to learn, and from precisely those peoples whom we are in danger of regarding as 'behind us' intellectually. We are quite simply invited to participate as equals in the human adventure of understanding. This is an ethical task, and we may not opt out of it if we are going to talk about anthropology in Lévi-Strauss's language.

(This article, presenting the thought of one of the leading 'structuralists' in France, will be followed by another one, vigorously criticizing the second generation of structuralists. This second article will appear in the July issue, after our special issue on The Foundations of Morality in the June issue.)

ANY book of interest to CATHOLICS can be obtained from:
BURNS OATES RETAIL LTD, 129 Victoria Street, S.W.1

Prompt service given to postal orders