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WHAT IS STRUCTURALISM?

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Primitive people, Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us, have a passion for naming, classifying and establishing relations between things, without much regard to the accuracy of the classifications or the objective validity of the relations. In this they resemble the French. It is no accident that Paris should be the world capital of fashion, one of the most complex and most arbitrary significative systems ever devised by man (and it is no surprise that the structuralist Roland Barthes should have devoted his latest book, *Système de la mode*, to a solemn analysis of this system). Nowhere is the preoccupation with system — or for that matter with fashion — more evident than in French intellectual life. Since World War II there have been two major fashions in French thought: the first was existentialism, which lasted until the early fifties, and the second, which took hold in the late fifties and early sixties and is now at its peak — or perhaps somewhat past it — is structuralism.

Neither existentialism nor structuralism has had the character of a movement in the strict sense of the term, in contrast to such prewar fashions as surrealism and Marxism. Marxism was naturally allied with the Party; surrealism was identified with André Breton and his followers. In both cases, of course, there extended from the center an intellectual region within which people wished to claim the title “surrealist” or “Marxist,” although they might be disowned by the hard-core disciples. The center, for existentialism, was much less well defined; unlike Breton, Sartre never assumed the role of pope. In the case of structuralism there is not really a center at all. The founding father is generally agreed to be Lévi-Strauss, but there are at least four other people who occupy essentially independent leading positions, namely Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Barthes and Michel Foucault. To make matters worse, structuralist habits and beliefs are quite consistent with those of many other intellectual movements. Movements succeed but do not replace one another; surrealism and Marxism are still very much alive, and Althusser is a prominent Marxist. Lacan, for his part, is a dedicated and fundamentalist Freudian who was strongly influenced by surrealism. The others have less striking doctrinal commitments, but they come from diverse professional fields — Lévi-Strauss from anthropology, Barthes from *belles lettres* and literary criticism, Foucault from philosophy. Little wonder that the standards of clarity and distinctness learned from Descartes by every student in the lycées have, confronted by the structuralist phenomenon, broken down completely. A kind of despair can now be detected on the part of French commentators on the intellectual scene; a recent article in the *Quinzaine Littéraire* entitled “Où en est le structuralisme?” begins as follows:

“... In the momentary world of commercialized concepts, eclecticism is the rule.” This statement of Alain Badiou characterizes

precisely the intellectual debauch to which the pseudo-school which has been named *structuralism* has given rise.

The article makes the point that while there is a more or less identifiable set of contemporary activities properly called structuralist, the indiscriminate use of the term has made it almost useless.

A careful examination of what lies behind the fashion, however, reveals a quite definite, and I think very important, common element in structuralist thought which fully warrants the view that men as different as those named above form a single school, not at all deserving of the *Quinzaine's* epithet "pseudo-"; the only trouble is that to call this school "structuralism," while not actually misleading, fails to indicate what is most significant about it and what binds its members together. The name says something interesting about the origins of the movement in structural anthropology and structural linguistics, but the line of thought that has emerged from the confrontation of those disciplines has more to do with linguistic and cultural products (myths, works of literature) and their relation to the problem of human subjectivity than with any concept of structure in the more obvious sense. Obviously there are structures in language and in culture, such as Navajo grammar or Tibetan marriage customs, and one might, to consider the anthropological case only, have expected that "structuralism" would have taken as its task the analysis of such objects in terms of the interrelation of their elements, by contrast to the "functionalism" of Malinowski, for example, which conducted its analyses in terms of social and psychological purpose. There is in fact an anthropological structuralism of precisely this sort, associated mainly with the name of Radcliffe-Brown. But the obvious structures, while not unimportant, are not what Lévi-Strauss is chiefly interested in. For him the really significant structures are beneath the surface, as it were — although all such spatial metaphors are dangerous — and may have a series of quite different embodiments at the level of apparent structure. A remark in his address to a Conference of Anthropologists and Linguists at Indiana in 1953 gives one of the clearest early indications of the line structuralist thought was to take. After commenting on the similarity of problems encountered in the two fields he said:

... we have not been sufficiently aware of the fact that *both* language and culture are the product of activities which are basically similar. I am now referring to this uninvited guest which has been seated during this Conference beside us, and which is *the human mind*.

The event which has brought structuralism most vividly to the attention of the English-speaking world has been the recent publication of a translation of Lévi-Strauss' *La Pensée sauvage*. It has been pointed out by a number of critics that the translation of the title (*The Savage Mind*) is unfortunate, and in fact it manages, with a single literalism, to throw the emphasis off to a quite extraordinary degree. The book is about systems of thought in so-called primitive societies, and the "savage" mind suggests a

contrast with the “civilized” mind to be found in more “advanced” societies. All the terms in quotes, at least to the extent that they suggest a hierarchy of value (as they inevitably do) would be rejected by Lévi-Strauss. The trouble with “savage” in English is that it now has only one level of meaning; while it was once possible to use the term in a more or less descriptive way (“the friendly savages”) it has come to mean hopelessly uncivilized or downright ferocious. “*Sauvage*,” on the other hand, has the connotations of “wild” in English as it applies to plants and animals which are not at all ferocious but on the contrary represent a special kind of natural value (*un canard sauvage* is a wild duck, not a savage duck). “*La pensée sauvage*” is therefore, as Lévi-Strauss himself remarks, “mind in its untamed state,” and it represents not just the mind of savages but the human mind, and therefore *our* mind. It is this relevance of his work to contemporary man’s understanding of himself that has placed Lévi-Strauss at the center of the current intellectual scene.

It is worth noting that the universality which Lévi-Strauss attributes to mind does not involve him in the absurdity, as some have suggested, of maintaining that there is no essential difference between primitive societies and modern ones. The difference, however, he sees as one of social organization and not as involving essentially a disparity of mental powers or even of patterns of thought. In an interview (one in a series with Georges Charbonnier, published as an issue of *Les Lettres nouvelles* in 1961) he compares the two types of society to two types of machine, clocks and steam engines: primitive societies, like clocks, use a constant input of energy and “have a tendency to maintain themselves indefinitely in their initial state, which explains why they appear to us as societies without history and without progress”; modern societies, on the other hand, like thermodynamic rather than mechanical machines, “operate in virtue of a difference of temperature between their parts . . . (which is realized by different forms of social hierarchy, whether slavery, serfdom, or class distinctions); they produce much more work than the others, but consume and progressively destroy their sources of energy.” This is not doctrinaire Marxism of the kind that is to be found in Althusser, for example, but it does represent a willingness, common to all the structuralists, to take Marx seriously and to admit the validity of many of his criticisms of Western civilization, an attitude which is in refreshing contrast to the polarity of disapproval and defiance which still clings, now somewhat vestigially, to discussions of such questions in the United States. In fact I think it is possible to account for the difference in other than social terms without abandoning the structuralist approach (and without, of course, mitigating the social consequences), but that is getting ahead of the exposition.

It has by now become a commonplace of linguistics that the oldest languages are not necessarily the simplest, from the point of view either of grammar or of vocabulary. The complexity of ancient (and of primitive) grammar has always been a puzzle, although in the structuralist context it is easy enough to see it as a manifestation of a constant mental complexity;

the standard account of the complex vocabulary, however, has been that it answered to certain strictly practical needs of the users of the language — as reflected in the fact, for example, that there are seven Eskimo words for “snow.” But Lévi- Strauss amasses a great quantity of evidence to show that the naming of details of variation in the natural environment, among primitive people, goes far beyond any possible considerations of utility and amounts to what he calls a “science of the concrete” — not always accurate by the standards of modern classification (although far more so than early ethnologists were prepared to believe), but having in the primitive intellectual world just the function that science, in its nonutilitarian aspect, has in ours, namely that of organizing the totality of experience into a coherent whole. Using the resources of this rich descriptive language the primitive mind shows a tendency to build intelligible structures on more abstract levels: magic, which corresponds to science in its practical aspect (and which sometimes works, although that is not of the first importance); myth, which corresponds to literature; totemism, which corresponds to morality in providing rules of conduct of a satisfyingly rigorous nature, offenses against which are suitably dangerous. Modern man thinks of these things as childish curiosities which he has long since outgrown, failing to see that science is his magic, literature and other forms of entertainment his myths, morality his totemism.

Part of what conceals from us our interior link with the primitive is a habit, inculcated by the development of modern science, of looking for the *proper* way of building these various structures, on the assumption that the main function of language is to communicate truth and that consistency is a greater virtue than creativity (except, of course, within the carefully marked-off region known as “art”). We have all become engineers with concepts, working from plans and anxious to get the structure right. The primitive however is not an *ingénieur* but a *bricoleur* (a word for which there is no really satisfactory English equivalent). He puts together his structures from whatever comes in handy, without special concern for the congruity of their elements. *Bricolage* is the kind of thing that is made out of tar paper and baling wire; the *bricoleur* is the handyman, the tinkerer, who gets surprisingly practical (and often aesthetic) results from the most unlikely material. One of the fundamental theses of *La Pensée sauvage* is that the structure is all-important, the material largely irrelevant; it is as though the mind had to busy itself about something of sufficient complexity, but cared very little about the nature (or the logical level) of its components. Lévi- Strauss gives many examples of homologous mythical structures in which elements and relations change places from one tribe to another, sometimes arriving at what in Western eyes would be a complete contradiction; the native informer, however, recognizes the same structure beneath the contradiction and cannot understand why an apparent inconsistency matters.

Although the “same” structure can sustain different embodiments, that does not mean that the primitive mind apprehends it as disembodied. This is one of the most elusive but most important points in structuralist theory. As Jean Pouillon puts it in his “Essai de définition,” at the beginning of a

recent issue of *Les Temps modernes* devoted to structuralism:

Structuralism is not formalism. On the contrary, it challenges the distinction between form and matter, and no matter is *a priori* inaccessible to it. As Lévi-Strauss writes, “form defines itself by opposition to a content which is exterior to it; but structure has no content: it is itself the content, apprehended in a logical organization conceived as a property of the real.”

The world becomes intelligible as it becomes structured, primarily through the agency of language, secondarily through the agency of magic, totem and myth. There are many languages and many myths; structuralism finds that they are homologous, and capable of being generated out of one another by means of suitable transformations. Language, myth, and so on represent the way in which man has been able to grasp the real, and for him they constitute the real; they are not structures *of* some ineffable reality which lies behind them and from which they are separable. To say that the world is intelligible means that it presents itself to the mind of the primitive as a message, to which his language and behavior are an appropriate response — but not as a message *from elsewhere*, simply as a message, as it were, in its own right. I am aware that this way of talking seems obscure, and uncomfortably reminiscent of McLuhan, but it is the way Lévi-Strauss has chosen to express the natural assumption of intelligibility with which mind confronts the world. The message, furthermore, is unitary, a fact which modern man easily forgets:

... we prefer to operate with detached pieces, if not indeed with “small change,” while the native is a logical hoarder: he is forever tying the threads, unceasingly turning over all the aspects of reality, whether physical, social or mental. We traffic in our ideas; he hoards them up.

And in this way he avoids the fragmentation we frequently lament in our own lives. But it would be a mistake to suppose that he has access to a kind of conceptual stability denied to us, by virtue of some now lost insight into things as they are. He looks for no such insight and therefore does not miss it; it is enough to be engaged in the structuring activity, whatever form it may take, to be relieved of any uneasiness about lack of foundations or of meaning or of the other things for which modern man, anguished and alienated as he is, often yearns so eloquently.

If mind in its natural state finds this psychic equilibrium so easily, how does it come about that modern man has such difficulty in adjusting himself to the conditions of his existence? We may have moments of equilibrium, significantly enough when we are wholly engaged in some activity (as might by now be expected, it doesn't matter much *what* activity, whether athletic, intellectual or artistic), but left to our own reflective devices we tend to be a bewildered and discontented lot. This bewilderment and discontent manifest themselves in all sorts of projects for self-improvement, self-realization, even self-discovery, all of which the primitive would find completely mystifying. He is in the fortunate condition of not knowing that he has a self, and therefore of not being worried about it. And the

structuralists have come to the conclusion that he is nearer the truth than we are, and that a good deal of our trouble arises out of the invention of the self *as an object of study*, from the belief that man has a special kind of being, in short from the emergence of humanism. Structuralism is not a humanism, because it refuses to grant man any special status in the world. Obviously it cannot deny that there are individual men who observe, think, write and so on (although it does not encourage them in the narcissistic effort of “finding themselves,” to use the popular jargon). Nor does it deny that there are more or less cohesive social groups with their own histories and cultures. Nothing concrete recognized or valued by the humanist is excluded, only the theoretical basis of humanism. In order to clarify this point it is necessary to consider the central question of structuralism, which comes to dominate all discussions of it (as for example it did most strikingly a year ago at the Johns Hopkins conference), namely the status of the *subject*.

The subject, first of all, is a linguistic category, the “vantage” (to use an expression due to Benveniste) of verbs in the first person. As such it is important only for purposes of clarity in reference: it avoids confusion between persons. (Strictly speaking the first person refers to the subject “*I*”; the other “personal” subject *you* and the “nonpersonal” subject *he*, however, do not lend themselves as readily to overinterpretation.) The subject is a vantage-point in nonlinguistic senses too: *I* look at the world from a particular point of view, *I* act upon it from a particular strategic location. So far there is no difficulty about the matter. But — whether under the influence of Greek philosophy, or Christianity, or Renaissance humanism — Western man began to look for a more substantial embodiment of the subject than that provided by his own contingent and transient body as percipient and agent, or by his linguistic habits as a mere point of reference. Just as the assertion that the world is a message now elicits the immediate response “from whom?” so the intelligibility of the world seems to be addressed to something more basic and more permanent than the momentary and evanescent subject of particular utterances or particular actions. If God had to be invented to originate and sustain the world, man had to be invented to perceive and understand it. Men therefore began to ask “What am I?” in a nonlinguistic sense, much as they also asked “What is matter?” or “What is gravity?” They began, in other words, the long and frustrating attempt to get the subject out into the world so that it could be examined objectively. But this involves a logical mistake and can easily lead to a psychoanalytic disaster.

The psychoanalyst among the structuralists is of course Lacan, and he has devoted a large part of his work to the problem of subjectivity. Lacan’s career began at least as early as Lévi-Strauss’, and it is evident from his collected writings (*Ecrits*, 1966) that he represents a genuinely independent source for structuralism. His reputation in France rests mainly on his Seminar at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, whose members hold him in a regard reminiscent of that in which Wittgenstein was reputedly held by his students at Cambridge. Lacan has been in no special hurry to get his

ideas into general circulation, and there is no systematic development to be traced. Starting always from Freud, he wanders by circuitous paths, and in a highly personal, extremely difficult and often irritating style, compounded with verbal preciosity, hermetic allusions and a kind of half-concealed amusement at the whole enterprise, into various problematic corners of contemporary thought. The impressive thing is that (once the barrier of style has been surmounted) he consistently throws light on them from a completely original angle.

What makes Lacan a structuralist is his insistence on the central place of language. "Whether it wishes to regard itself as an agent of cure, of development, or of inquiry," he writes,

psychoanalysis has but one medium: the word of the patient. . . . We shall show that there is no word without response, even if it is greeted only with silence, as long as there is a hearer, and that that fact is the clue to its function in analysis. . . .

This shows at once the parallel with Lévi-Strauss, although with a difference of scale: the message is particular rather than universal. The structure of language is, as before, the key to the structure of mind. On the opening page of *Écrits*, in a short introduction to the collection as a whole, Lacan provides a characteristic example of his own style and a characteristically involuted formulation of a problem:

"Style is the man himself," we repeat, without seeing in it any malice, nor being troubled by the fact that man is an uncertain reference. . . .

Style is the man, let us adopt the formula, only to extend it: the man to whom one addresses oneself?

This would simply be to satisfy the principle we have put forward: that in language our message comes to us from the Other, and to enunciate it to the limit: in an inverted form. (And let us remember that this principle is applied to its own enunciation. . . .)

But if man were reduced to being nothing but the point of return of our discourse, would not the question come back to us what is the point of addressing it to him?

Once the urge to dismiss this as pretentious rubbish has been overcome it begins to reveal a preoccupation which, as much as anything else, is the hallmark of structuralist activity. The reference to self-reference, the idea of language doubling back on itself, are examples of that *dédoublement* of which recent French writers have become so fond.

(It would not be improper, according to Levi-Strauss, to think of his own work as "the myth of mythology.") They are important because the subject, for Lacan, turns out to *be* a kind of *dédoublement*, a matching of consciousness with the world, of speaker with hearer, of the signifier with the signified. The latter terms are from the linguistics of Saussure, and are of crucial significance to the structuralists. Whereas the civilized mind thinks itself capable of taking an objective stance and judging the adequacy

of language or symbol (the signifier) to their meanings (the signified), the view of mind which emerges from ethnology and psychoanalysis suggests that the two realms are autonomous and that mind *is* precisely this adequacy, so that such objectivity is impossible.

This point is made again and again, in different forms and different occasions, in the writings of Lacan. The subject is an activity, not a thing; the Cartesian *cogito* comes closer to representing it correctly than any view of the self as substance, but even the *cogito* gives too strong a sense of continuity and permanence, so that it would perhaps be better to say "*cogito ergo sum*" *ubi cogito, ibi sum*. The subject produces itself by reflecting on itself, but when it is engaged on some other object it has no being apart from the activity of being so engaged. The idea that it had objective being and could be studied scientifically, according to Lacan, was a direct consequence of the success of science in throwing light on the rest of the world. The troubled Viennese came to Freud because he was a scientist and had the prestige that went with that identification; but when Freud looked for the subject in the light of science he found instead the unconscious, the Other, as Lacan puts it. Freud's own subjectivity, of course, was engaged on this quest, and its discovery by itself would have been, again, a case of impossible self-division. Although Lacan never quite puts it this way one could sum up the conclusion of his argument against the possibility of a science of the subject by saying: *the subject cannot be the object of science because it is its subject*. When the analyst tries to get at "the subject which he calls, significantly, the patient," what he finds is not the true subject at all, but only something called into being by his questioning: "that is to say, the fish is drowned by the operation of fishing. . . ." The final image of the subject, in the most recent writings, is the Moebius strip, or as Lacan calls it "the interior eight," which from two surfaces produces one, or from one two, depending on the starting-point. What Lacan seems to be saying is that the subject cannot give an analytic account of itself, only paradoxes, hints and images; and this being the case "there is no science of man."

There is no science of man, because the man of science does not exist, only its subject.

It is known that I have always felt a repugnance for the term *sciences humaines*, which seems to me a call to slavery itself.

One of the most powerful structuralist blows against traditional humanism was administered by the publication in 1966 of Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses*. The starting-point for the reflections which resulted in the book, he says in the preface, was a text of Borges, which is worth quoting for itself as well as for the light it throws on the structuralist enterprise.

This text cites "a certain Chinese encyclopedia" where it is written that "animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) suckling pigs, e) mermaids, f) fabulous, g) dogs running free, h) included in the present classification, i) which behave like madmen, j) innumerable, k) drawn on camel-skin with a very fine

brush, l) et cetera, m) which have just broken their leg, n) which from a distance look like flies.”

And Foucault continues:

In our astonishment at this taxonomy what strikes us with sudden force, what, because of its setting, is presented to us as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own: the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.

Why, Foucault asks, do we find Borges' imaginary Chinese classification so preposterous? Into what intellectual straitjacket has our own history forced us? And he concludes that our resistance to this kind of spontaneous absurdity, our demand for logical coherence even where it is unnecessary, is again a product, of the invention of *man* as an embodiment of analytic reason. Until early modern times individual and collective subjectivity were absorbed in Discourse, a human activity (a linguistic one, which in context amounts to the same thing) constituting the world as intelligible and summing up all that could be said about it. The rise of science led to the fragmentation and dissolution of this conceptual and linguistic unity, by drawing attention to separable properties of the world — biological, economic, philological — and pursuing them independently. But it then became apparent that in some sense all these enquiries were about the same thing; only instead of recombining into a single activity, they were thought of as pointing to a single entity — Man. Man thus appeared to have achieved his own objectification. The present perplexity of the so-called “humanities” indicates, however, that that conclusion was premature; the picture of man which they present to us turns out to bear little resemblance to the real thing. Humanism has been a detour from which we may be beginning to return to the main track: Foucault concludes with a more or less confident prediction that man will disappear “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”

This must not be misunderstood as a prophecy of doom. *Men* will still be here, facing the same problems in the same way, with the exception that the particular aberration called *man* will have been done away with. All attempts to classify and predict individual human behavior quickly encounter limits which show them, in all but a few cases (and all these to some extent pathological), to be futile. Rational, humanist aesthetics, for example, yielded when put into practice a wooden imitation of art; art began to revive in this century when the surrealists and others preached liberation from orthodox canons and advocated the free play of the unconscious. The havoc that the social sciences are capable of wreaking surrounds us on every side. There is nothing wrong with the social sciences, of course, if they are enquiries into group behavior or even individual behavior carried on by somebody for whom that behavior constitutes an object; they become dangerous only when ignorant people believe what they are told about themselves *and become what the social scientist says they are*. Structuralism, in effect, advocates an engagement with the world, an abandonment of too much self-examination in favor of participation in some significant activity, which in structuring the world will bring the subject

into equilibrium with it. *What* activity is a matter of wide choice. There is nothing particularly worthy, as the existentialists thought, in political or even in artistic activity; any number of others are capable of embodying the structure of mind.

Art and politics, nevertheless, as two of the most comprehensive structures available, have come in for special attention, and above all literature, since it employs directly the very archetype of structure, namely language itself. But there is more than one kind of structuralist criticism, and the overlap with other preoccupations is greater here than anywhere else. The great triumph of the structural method, which imitated the sciences in producing new knowledge, remains in fact the work of the Marxist critic Lucien Goldmann on Pascal and Racine, in the course of which he was able to reconstruct some parts of the Jansenist movement which had been forgotten, and furthermore to find evidence that they had in fact existed (the relevant works are of course *Le Dieu caché* and *Correspondance de Martin de Barcos, abbe de Saint-Cyran*). I have not included Goldmann in the list of structuralists because much of what I have taken to define the movement does not apply to him, and his own method, which he calls “genetic structuralism,” rests very heavily on the notion of literature as an embodiment (often in spite of the intentions of the writer) of some collective social attitude appropriate to a class or a period. Structuralist criticism in the wider sense does not limit itself to collective or social or historical considerations, although it does not ignore them either. The work *is* a structure; the critic uses it as a point of departure. One of the striking things about this criticism, in fact, is its habit of getting a great deal more out of a work than the author or for that matter his historical period could possibly have put into it. Foucault, in *Les Mots et les choses*, spends the whole first chapter on a painting of Velázquez, “The Maids of Honor,” from which he extracts by hindsight and free elaboration a whole theory of the “absence of the subject” (another pivotal concept of structuralism). And Althusser, who has applied structuralist techniques to a “rethinking” of Marx, is said in a recent essay in *Aletheia* to have developed a complete apparatus “for putting oneself in condition to read Marx so as to think profitably not only what Marx wrote but also what he thought without writing.”

This last claim, it should be noted, is not made by Althusser himself, and was not necessarily meant kindly. The same article calls Althusser’s works (*Pour Marx; Lire Le Capital*) “limiting cases of interpretation,” and suggests that what is presented there is not just Marx but something much more, which Marx indeed could not have created, since he did not enjoy the advantages of the intervening hundred years. And this is quite in keeping with the principles of structuralist criticism. The clearest statement of these principles is to be found in Barthes’s *Critique et vérité*, a response to Picard’s *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture*, in turn an attack on Barthes’s *Sur Racine*. Picard, a typical humanist, had become indignant at the way in which Barthes had, in his view, tampered with literary and historical objectivity, with the “facts” about Racine. (Another common element in structuralist thought is its distrust, in the so-called *sciences*

humaines, of the flat empiricism, of the natural sciences, principally because in the human context a great deal of interpretation goes into deciding what the facts are.) Barthes points out that there could be a “science” of literature only if we would be content to regard the work simply as a “written object,” disregarding its sense in favor of all its possible senses, disregarding its author in favor of its more generalized linguistic origins — treating it, in fact, as the ethnologist treats a myth. What criticism does, by contrast, is to produce *one* of the possible senses of the work, to construct alongside it, as it were, another work (the interpretation) as a hypothesis in the light of which the details of the original become intelligible. “The book is a world,” says Barthes. “The critic confronted by the book is subject to the same conditions of utterance as the writer confronted by the world.” But the critic can never replace the reader; the individual also confronts the book at a particular time, in a particular context; it becomes part of his experience, presents itself to him with a certain intelligibility, as a message (from whom?); it engages him in another episode of the structuring activity which makes him what he is. An old book is not (unless the reader takes pains to make it so) a bit of antiquity, it is a bit of the present; consequently Racine can still be read, and new critical views about Racine, possible only in the light of contemporary events, can find in him without distortion meanings which he and *his* contemporaries could not even have understood. Similarly Althusser is justified in his rethinking of Marx; indeed all works have constantly to be rethought if they are to be more than archaeological curiosities.

The consideration of structuralist criticism brings us back to Lévi-Strauss. The critic never says all there is to be said about a book; his reading is always an approximation which we know to be inadequate, even if we do not know what would constitute an adequate reading — even if it makes no sense to imagine such a reading. Similarly language never formulates the world adequately; nor does myth; nor does science, in spite of its (now abandoned) aspiration to completeness in principle; nor does history. These structures change in time (they can, to use structuralist jargon, be considered in diachronic as well as in synchronic aspects); also, which is not the same thing, they are dynamic, having complex interrelations among themselves. The respect in which I think Lévi-Strauss does not exploit the full resources of his own method in distinguishing between primitive and modern societies has to do with this complexity of interrelation of structures. If mind emerged, as it surely did, under evolutionary pressure which required an order of complexity in behavior greater than that of any other form of life, if when the evolutionary pressure was off it devised language as a means of keeping that complexity in dynamic equilibrium with its world, then it seems to me the way was opened for a kind of amplification of complexity by shifting language from the side of the object to the side of the subject, where mind (now ramified with language) became capable of handling an even greater objective complexity, and indeed required it in order to maintain equilibrium. We are perhaps today in one of the later stages of such an exponential development.

If that should be the case we might well cultivate the totalizing quality of the primitive mind, of which Lévi-Strauss speaks at the end of *La Pensée sauvage*. It is there (in the course of a polemic against Sartre) that he refers also to “this intransigent refusal on the part of the savage mind to allow anything human (or even living) to remain alien to it.” This allusion to one of the oldest mottoes of humanism may seem an odd conclusion, to a discussion of an anti-humanist point of view; but I think the truth is that here again Lévi-Strauss does not go far enough. To restrict the sphere of concern to the human, or even to the living, does not do justice to mind as its own history has revealed it. The structuring activity which keeps the subject in balance with the world is and must be all-encompassing. To quote Pouillon once more, “structuralism forbids us to enclose ourselves in any particular reality.” The fact that we abandon a restrictive humanism, however, does not mean that we cease to be men. If structuralism had a motto it might well be: *Homo sum, nihil a me alienum puto*.

The danger with attitudes as generous as this is, of course, that they may in the end become completely uncritical. A theory that applies to everything does not distinguish between different things and might as well apply to nothing; if every human activity allows a structuralist interpretation, the fact that any particular activity does so ceases to be instructive. The structuralist thesis seems to me to bear the stamp of truth, but there is a penalty for arriving at the truth, namely that in at least one important respect nothing remains to be done. Here again there is an illuminating parallel with existentialism, and one that I think throws a good deal of light on the difference in habits of thought between French intellectuals and Anglo-American ones (especially philosophers). Once one sees that the conscious subject is isolated and alone, or that the variety of human activity is to be accounted for by an inveterate urge to build intelligible structures, everything appears in a new light, nothing is ever the same again — but for the most part the old problems remain problematic, at any rate from the analytic point of view. The fact that existentialism and structuralism do not lend themselves to theoretical elaboration may account for their unpopularity with Anglo-American thinkers whose tastes run to the technical and the abstract.

The French, on the other hand, never seem to tire of elaboration in the direction of the discursive and the concrete: literary philosophy permits the repetition of the same truth in a variety of ways, philosophical literature and *belles lettres* permit its demonstration in a variety of contexts. The best Structuralist writers have developed these forms to a point of great finesse. Jacques Derrida, the most recent star of the movement, exemplifies the philosophical mode brilliantly in his collection *L'écriture et la différence*, published in Paris last summer; Barthes remains the master of the literary mode, and his lecture on “La Mythologie de la Tour Eiffel,” given during his stay in the U.S. this winter, was a perfect example of it. In the vein of his earlier *Mythologies*, it showed that while structuralism may leave unchanged the structure of the world at large, it *structures* for us the various

parts of the world with which we come in contact — a process, in Barthes' own words, of "conquest by the intelligible." Its great contribution has been to provide a strategy for this conquest, to claim once again for intellect a territory we had all but abandoned to the absurd.



Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss et Roland Barthes
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