STRUCTURALISM AND MYTH
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IF THERE is one conviction that has been intimately borne upon me during twenty years devoted to the study of myths, it is that the solidity of the self, the major preoccupation of the whole of Western philosophy, does not withstand persistent application to the same object, which comes to pervade it through and through and to imbue it with an experiential awareness of its own unreality. For the only remnant of reality to which it still dares to lay claim is that of being a 'singularity', in the sense in which astronomers use the term: a point in space and a moment in time, relative to each other, and in which there have occurred, are occurring, or will occur events whose density (itself in turn relative to other events, no less real but more widely dispersed) makes possible its approximate definition, always remembering of course that this nodal point of past, present, and probable events does not exist as a substratum, but only in the sense that phenomena are occurring in it, and in spite of the fact that these phenomena, of which it is the place of intersection, originate from countless other sources, for the most part unknown.

But why, it may be asked, should one have such reservations with regard to the subject when dealing with myths, that is, with stories which could not have come into being unless at some moment—even though, in most cases, that moment is beyond the reach of enquiry—each of them had been conceived and narrated in the first instance by a particular individual? Utterance is a function confined to subjects, and every myth, in the last resort, must have its origin in an individual act of creation. This is no doubt very true, but, in order to achieve the status of myth, the created work must cease precisely to be individual and, in the process of generalization, must lose the essential part of those factors determined by probability with which it was infused at the outset, and which could be attributed to the particular author's temperament, talent, imagination, and personal experiences. Since myths depend on oral transmission and collective tradition, the probabilist levels they include are continuously eroded, because of their lesser resistance to

social attrition than those levels which are more firmly organized, through corresponding to shared needs. It will be readily agreed, then, that the difference between individually created works and myths which are recognized as such by a given community is one not of nature but of degree. In this respect, structural analysis can be legitimately applied to myths stemming from a collective tradition as well as to works by a single author, since in both cases the intention is the same: to give a structural explanation of that which can be so explained, and which is never everything; and beyond that, to seek to grasp, in varying degrees according to circumstances, another kind of determinism which has to be looked for at the statistical or sociological levels, that is, in the life-story of the individual and in the particular society or environment.

Let us recognize, then, that all literary creative work, whether oral or written, cannot, at the outset, be other than individual. When it is immediately taken over by oral tradition, as is the case in communities without writing, only the structured levels will remain stable, since they rest on common foundations, whereas the probabilist levels will be subject to extreme variability resulting from the personalities of successive narrators. However, during the process of oral transmission, these probabilist levels will rub against each other and wear each other down, thus gradually separating off from the bulk of the text what might be called its crystalline parts. All individual works are potential myths, but only if they are adopted by the collectivity as a whole do they achieve 'mythic' status.

The subject, while remaining deliberately in the background so as to allow free play to this anonymous deployment of discourse, does not renounce consciousness of it, or rather does not prevent it achieving consciousness of itself through him. Some people pretend to believe that the criticism of consciousness should lead, logically, to the renunciation of conscious thought. But I have never had any other intention than to further knowledge, that is, *to achieve consciousness*. However, for too long now philosophy has succeeded in locking the social sciences inside a closed circle by not allowing them to envisage any other object of study for the consciousness than consciousness itself. This accounts, on the one hand, for the powerlessness of the social sciences in practice, and on the other for their self-deluding nature, the characteristic of consciousness being that it deceives itself. What structuralism tries to accomplish in the wake of Rousseau, Marx, Durkheim, Saussure, and Freud, is to reveal to consciousness *an object other than itself*; and therefore to put it in the same position with regard to human phenomena as that of the natural and physical sciences, and which, as they have demonstrated, alone allows knowledge to develop. Recognition of the

fact that consciousness is not everything, nor even the most important thing, is not a reason for abandoning it, any more than the principles professed a few years ago by the Existentialist philosophers obliged them to lead a life of debauchery in the cellars of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Quite the opposite, in fact, since consciousness is thus able to gauge the immensity of its task and to summon up the courage to embark upon it, with the hope at last that it will not be doomed to sterility.

But this assumption of consciousness remains intellectual in character, that is to say it does not substantially differ from the realities to which it is applied; it is these very realities arriving at their own truth. There can be no question, then, of smuggling the subject in again, under this new guise. I could have no tolerance for a form of deceit in which the left hand slips under the table to restore to the worst kind of philosophy what the right hand claims to have taken from it aboveboard, and which, through simply replacing the Self by the Other and by sliding a metaphysics of desire under the logic of the concept, deprives this logic of its foundation. By substituting for the Self on the one hand an anonymous Other, and on the other hand an individualized desire (individualized, because, were it not so, it would signify nothing), one would fail to hide the fact that they need only be stuck together again and the resulting entity reversed for it to be recognized as an inversion of the very Self, whose abolition had been so loudly proclaimed. If there is a point at which the Self can reappear, it is only after the completion of the work which excluded it throughout (since, contrary to what might be supposed, it was not so much the case that the Self was the author as that the work, during the process of composition, became the creator of an executant who lived only by and through it); then, it can and must take an overall view of the whole, in the same way as the readers who will peruse the text without having found themselves in the dangerous situation of feeling prompted to write it.

We have to resign ourselves to the fact that myths tell us nothing instructive about the order of the world, the nature of reality, or the origin and destiny of mankind. We cannot expect them to flatter any metaphysical thirst, or to breathe new life into exhausted ideologies. On the other hand, they teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate, they help to lay bare their inner workings and clarify the *raison d'être* of beliefs, customs, and institutions, the organization of which was at first sight incomprehensible; lastly, and most importantly, they make it possible to discover certain operational modes of the human mind, which have remained so constant over the centuries, and are so widespread over immense geographical distances, that we can

assume them to be fundamental and can seek to find them in other societies and in other areas of mental life, where their presence was not suspected, and whose nature is thereby illuminated. In all these respects, far from abolishing meaning, my analysis of the myths of a handful of American tribes has extracted more meaning from them than is to be found in the platitudes and commonplaces of those philosophers—with the exception of Plutarch—who have commented on mythology during the last 2,500 years.

But philosophers pay little attention to the concrete problems that ethnographers themselves have striven with in vain so long that they have practically given up all hope of solving them; these problems have cropped up one after the other at every turn in my analysis, which has proposed for them solutions as simple as they are unexpected. Being incapable, through ignorance, of recognizing and appreciating these problems, philosophers have preferred to adopt an attitude whose real motives, however, are much more dubious than if they were the mere consequence of a lack of information. Without being fully conscious of this reaction, they hold it against me that the extra meaning I distill from the myths is not the meaning they would have liked to find there. They refuse to recognize and to accept the fact of their deafness to the great anonymous voice whose utterance comes from the beginning of time and the depths of the mind, so intolerable is it for them that this utterance should convey something quite different from what they had decided in advance should be its message. In reading my work, they feel a sense of disappointment, almost of grievance, at being supernumeraries in a dialogue—far richer than any so far entered into with the myths—which has no need of them and to which they have nothing to contribute.

Whither, then, philosophy, and in present circumstances, what can it possibly find to do? If the prevailing tendencies continue, it is to be feared that two courses only will be open to it. One, incumbent on the philosophers following in the wake of Existentialism—a self-admiring activity which allows contemporary man, rather gullibly, to commune with himself in ecstatic contemplation of his own being—cuts itself off from scientific knowledge which it despises, as well as from human reality, whose historical perspectives and anthropological dimensions it disregards, in order to arrange a closed and private little world for itself, an ideological *Café du Commerce* where, within the four walls of a human condition cut down to fit a particular society, the habitués spend their days rehashing problems of local interest, beyond which they cannot see because of the fog created by their clouds of dialectical smoke.

The other possibility for philosophy, when it feels stifled in this

confined space and longs to breathe a fresher air, is to make its escape into areas previously forbidden to it and where it is free to disport itself. Intoxicated with its new-found liberty, it gambols off, losing touch with that uncompromising search for truth which even Existentialism, the last embodiment of metaphysics in the grand style, still wished to pursue. Becoming an easy prey for all sorts of external influences, as well as a victim of its own whims, philosophy is then in danger of falling to the level of a sort of 'philosop'art' and indulging in the aesthetic prostitution of the problems, methods, and vocabulary of its predecessors. To seduce the reader, woo his interest, and win his custom, it flatters their common fantasies with shreds of ideas borrowed from a now antiquated but still respectable heritage, using them to produce surprise effects, more connected with the art of display than with the love of truth, and whose occasional felicities remain purely sensuous and decorative.

Between these two extremes, I may mention various phoney activities pursued by fishers in troubled waters: one example is that 'structuralism-fiction', which has recently flourished on the philosophico-literary scene, and whose productions, in relation to the work of linguists and anthropologists, is more or less equivalent to the contents of certain popular magazines dealing with physics and biology: a debauch of sentimentality based on rudimentary and ill-digested information. The question even arises whether this so-called structuralism did not come into being to serve as an alibi for the unbearable boringness of contemporary literature. Being unable, for obvious reasons, to defend its overt content, this structuralism may be trying to find hidden justifications for it on the formalistic level. But if so, this is a perversion of the structuralist aim, which is to discover why works capture our interest, not to invent excuses for their lack of interest. When we give a structuralist interpretation of a work which has had no need of our help to find an audience, we are supplying additional reasons in support of a successful effect which has already been achieved in other ways; if the work had no intrinsic interest on the levels at which it is immediately open to appreciation, the analysis, in reaching down to deeper levels, could only reduce nothingness to further nothingness.

It is unfortunately to be feared—and here we have a link-up with another kind of philosophy—that too many contemporary works, not only in the literary field but also in those of painting and music, have suffered through the naïve empiricism of their creators. Because the social sciences have revealed formal structures behind works of art, there has been a rush to create works of art on the basis of formal structures. But it is not at all certain that these artificially arranged and

conscious structures are of the same order as those which can be discovered, retrospectively, as having been at work in the creator's mind, and most often without any conscious awareness on his part. The truth is that the long-awaited renascence of contemporary art could only result, as an indirect consequence, from the clarification of the laws inherent in traditional works, and which should be sought at much deeper levels than those at which the analysis is usually content to stop. Instead of composing new music with the help of computers, it would be more relevant to use computers to try to understand the nature of existing music: to determine, for instance, how and why we need to hear only two or three bars by a particular composer to recognize his style and distinguish it from others'. Once the objective foundations had been reached and laid bare, artistic creation, liberated from its obsessions and phantasms by this new awareness and now face to face with itself, might embark on a new development. It will only succeed in doing so if it first realizes that not every structure can automatically have significance for aesthetic perception because of the mere fact that every aesthetic signifier is the sensory manifestation of a structure.

The social sciences have, then, an ambiguous status in the mainstream of contemporary thought: sometimes, philosophers reject them out of hand; at other times, like writers and artists, they presume to appropriate them and, by carving off fragments according to the dictates of their fancy, produce compositions as arbitrary as collages, while imagining that this dispenses them from reflecting on, or practicing, the social sciences, and above all from following the line which these sciences prescribe for themselves in the scrupulous search for truth.

Looked at in this perspective, the social sciences take on the appearance of a shadow theater, the management of which has been left to them by the natural and physical sciences, because the latter do not yet know the location or the constitution of the puppets whose silhouettes are projected onto the screen. As long as this provisional or definitive uncertainty lasts, the social sciences will retain their peculiar and double function, which is to soothe the impatient thirst for knowledge by approximate suggestions, and to provide the natural and physical sciences with an often useful, anticipatory simulacrum of the truer knowledge which it will one day be their task to formulate. Let us beware, then, of too hasty analogies: it may be that the attempt to decode the myths has a resemblance to the work of the biologist in deciphering the genetic code, but the biologist is studying real objects and can check his hypotheses by their experimental consequences. We are doing the same thing as he is, the only difference being that social

sciences worthy of the name are no more than the image-reflection of the natural sciences: a series of impalpable appearances manipulating ghost-like realities. Therefore, the social sciences can claim only a formal, not a substantial, homology with the study of the physical world and living nature. It is precisely when they try to come closer to the ideal of scientific knowledge that it becomes most obvious that they offer no more than a prefiguration, on the walls of the cave, of operations that will have to be validated later by other sciences, which will deal with the real objects of which we are examining the reflections. Neither philosophy nor art can, then, give in to the illusion that they have only to try to commune with the social sciences, often with predatory intent, to achieve their own redemption. Both of them, often so contemptuous of scientific knowledge, ought to realize that, in appealing to the social sciences, they are entering into a dialogue with the physical and natural sciences, and thus rendering homage to them, even if, for the time being, the homage is indirect.

Contemporary philosophy, being imbued with a mysticism that is rarely openly admitted and more often concealed under the appellation of humanism, and always hoping to discover a gnosis that would allow it to mark out for itself a private area inaccessible to scientific knowledge, has taken fright on seeing mythology, which it wanted to be full of hidden meaning, reduced to what some people take to be the vacuity of a series of translations without any original text. This is to fail to see that the same might be said about an area where, however, mystical aspirations and sentimental outpourings are given fairly free rein; I am referring to music. The truth is that the comparison between mythology and music, which was the leitmotif of the 'overture' to my *Introduction to a Science of Mythology,* and which was condemned as arbitrary by many critics, was based essentially on this common feature. The myths are only translatable into each other in the same way as a melody is only translatable into another which retains a relationship of homology with it: it can be transcribed into a different key, converted from major to minor or vice versa; its parameters can be modified so as to transform the rhythm, the quality of tone, the emotive charge, the relative intervals between consecutive notes, and so on. Perhaps, in extreme cases, it will no longer seem recognizable to the untutored ear; but it will still be the same melodic form. And it would be wrong to argue, as some people might be inclined to do, that in music at least there is an original text: famous composers have proceeded in the way I have just described; starting from the works of their predecessors, they have created works stamped with the mark of their own style, which it is impossible to confuse with any other. Research into the recognition of

forms, which is henceforth feasible thanks to computers, would no doubt make it possible, in many instances, to discover the rules of conversion that would show styles of popular music or those of different composers to correspond to various states of the same transformational group.

But while one can always, and almost indefinitely, translate one melody into another or one piece of music into another piece, as in the case of mythology one cannot translate music into *anything other than itself* without falling into the would-be hermeneutic verbiage characteristic of old-fashioned mythography and of too much musical criticism. This is to say that an unlimited freedom of translation into the dialects of an original language forming a closed system is bound up with the radical impossibility of any transposition into an extrinsic language.

The fundamental nature of myth, as it has been revealed by my enquiry, confirms, then, the parallel between mythic narrative and musical composition that I indicated at the beginning. Now that my study has been brought to a close, it would seem that the relationships between them can be formulated more clearly and convincingly. I propose to assume, as a working hypothesis, that the field open to structural study includes four major families of occupants: mathematical entities, the natural languages, musical works, and myths.

It would seem that the point at which music and mythology began to appear as reversed images of each other coincided with the invention of the fugue, that is, a form of composition which, as I have shown on several occasions, exists in a fully developed form in the myths, from which music might at any time have borrowed it. If we ask what was peculiar about the period when music discovered the fugue, the answer is that it corresponded to the beginning of the modern age, when the forms of mythic thought were losing ground in the face of the new scientific knowledge, and were giving way to fresh modes of literary expression. With the invention of the fugue and other subsequent forms of composition, music took over the structures of mythic thought at a time when the literary narrative, in changing from myth to the novel, was ridding itself of these structures. (In *The Raw and the Cooked,* when I was not yet looking to musical forms for anything more than what might be called methodological inspiration, I suggested that they preceded mythic forms, and it is true that these forms were first clarified in musical theory.) It was necessary, then, for myth as such to die for its form to escape from it, like the soul leaving the body, and to seek a means of reincarnation in music.

In short, it is as if music and literature had shared the heritage of myth between them. Music, in becoming modern with Frescobaldi and

then Bach, took over its form, whereas the novel, which came into being about the same time, appropriated the deformalized residue of myth and, being henceforth released from the constraints of symmetry, found the means to develop as a free narrative. We thus arrive at a better understanding of the complementary natures of music and the novel, from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries to the present day: the former consists of formal constructions which are always looking for a meaning, and the latter of a meaning tending towards plurality, but disintegrating inwardly as it proliferates externally, because of the increasingly obvious lack of an internal framework; the New Novel tries to remedy the situation by external buttressing, but there is nothing left for the buttressing to support.

With the death of myth, music becomes mythical in the same way as works of art, with the death of religion, are no longer merely beautiful but become sacred. The aesthetic enjoyment they afford, even in the supreme cases, is out of all proportion to the exaggerated prices paid for them; at the same time, the category of the artistic is broadened at the lower end so as to include all sorts of utilitarian objects belonging to the pre-industrial era, or even to the early phase of industrialism when it still respected the traditional canons and strove to follow them in practice—or, as with Art Nouveau, to revitalize them—instead of obeying the dictates of economy and functionalism, as has been the case since. Following the pattern of communities without writing who, in their most sacred rituals, do not use European or even local instruments if they are man-made, but knives consisting of a sharp stone, a mollusc shell, or a splinter of wood, and utensils cobbled together out of scraps of bark or twigs, of the sort that mankind must have used when still living in the state of nature, contemporary man, in similarly surrounding himself with precious objects or antique junk to which he accords an identical sacred status, is soothing his nostalgic longing for the secondary natural state that was lost after the primary one, and which is recalled by these surviving remnants of ages that have now become venerable through the sheer fact that they are gone forever. The different phases of culture take over from each other and each, when about to disappear, passes on its essence and its function to the next. Before taking the place of religion, the fine arts were in religion, as the forms of contemporary music were already in the myths before contemporary music came into being.

It was doubtless with Wagner that music first became conscious of the evolutionary process causing it to take over the structures of myth; and it was also at the same point that the art of development began to flag and mark time, while waiting for a renewal of the forms of

composition to be initiated by Debussy. This assumption of consciousness also marked the beginning, and was perhaps even the cause, of a new stage of development, in which music was to have no other choice but to rid itself in turn of the mythic structures which now became available so that myth could assume self-consciousness in the form of a discourse on itself. This being so, there is a correlational and oppositional relationship between my attempt to retrieve myths for modern thought and the endeavors of modern music which, since the serial revolution, has on the contrary broken definitively away from myth by sacrificing meaning, and through a radical decision in favor of asymmetry. But, in so doing, it is perhaps only repeating a previous phase of development. Just as the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took over the structures of a dying mythology, might it not be the case that serial music, in preparing more recent developments, was simply taking over the expressive and rhapsodic forms of the novel, at the point at which the latter was preparing to empty itself of them in order to disappear in its turn?

But any attempt to understand what music is stops halfway if it does not explain the deep emotions aroused by works which may even be capable of moving the listener to tears. We can guess that the phenomenon has an analogy with laughter, in the sense that in both cases a certain type of structure external to the subject—in the one instance a pattern of words or actions, in the other of sounds—sets in motion a psycho-physiological mechanism, the springs of which have been tensed in advance; but what does this mechanism correspond to, and what is happening exactly when we weep or laugh with joy?

The phenomenon is even more curious; as Proust shows so well, the pleasure of music does not stop with the performance and may even achieve its fullest state afterwards; in the subsequent silence, the listener finds himself saturated with music, overwhelmed with meaning, the victim of a kind of possession which deprives him of his individuality and his being: he has become the place or space of the music, as Condillac's statue was a scent of roses. Music brings about the miracle that hearing, the most intellectual of the senses, and normally at the service of articulate language, enters into the sort of state that, according to the philosopher, was peculiar to smell—of all senses the one most deeply rooted in the mysteries of organic life.

Meaning, escaping from the intellect, its habitual seat, is directly geared on to the sensibility. The latter is, then, invested by music with a superior function, unhoped for on the part of the subject: hence his feeling of gratitude towards the music flooding him with joy, since it suddenly transforms him into a being of a different kind, in whom

normally incompatible principles (incompatible, at least, according to what he has been taught) are reconciled with each other and, in the process, arrive at a sort of organic unanimity. This organizing function with regard to the sensibility was made most clearly manifest in Romantic music, from the time of Beethoven, who raised it to incomparable heights; but it was present in Mozart and had begun to appear in Bach. The joy of music is, then, the soul's delight in being invited, for once, to recognize itself in the body.

Music brings to completion, in a relatively short space of time, something that life itself does not always manage to achieve and, when it does, only after months or years or even a whole existence: the union of a project with its realization, and this, in the case of music, allows the fusion of the two categories of the sensory and the intelligible, thus simulating in an abbreviated form that bliss of total fulfilment which is only to be attained over a much longer period through professional, social, or amorous success, that has called into play all the resources of one's being; in the moment of triumph, tension is relaxed and one experiences a paradoxical sensation of collapse, a happy sensation, the opposite of that produced by failure, and which also provokes tears, but tears of joy.

Koestler, I think, was the first person to explain the mechanism of laughter; it arises from a sudden and simultaneous awareness of what he calls 'operational fields' between which experience suggested no connection. An example that has often been used, but always wrongly interpreted, is that of the mirth aroused by the sight of a formally dressed gentleman, walking along with great dignity, who is suddenly sent sprawling into the gutter. What actually happens is that the two immediately juxtaposed states in which the gentleman appears to us could not occur in normal conditions without being connected by a complicated series of intermediary states, which have been eliminated or short-circuited by the treacherous presence of a banana skin. The onlooker's symbolic faculty, which is subconsciously brought into play to reconstruct and interpret what has happened, and which is prepared to make great efforts to arrive at a synthesis of the two disjoined images, grasps in a flash the unexpected term which allows it to reconstitute the logical chain most economically.

The human mind is always, potentially, in a state of tension and at any moment it has reserves of symbolic activity at the ready to respond to any kind of speculative or practical stimulus. In the case of a comic anecdote, a witticism or an amusing conundrum—all of which allow the interconnection of two semantic fields, which seemed very remote from each other, by means of a link-up that the listener cannot

suspect—this surplus energy (which the skillful teller of a funny story seeks in the first place to condense) has nothing to which to apply itself: having been suddenly released and not being able to expend itself in intellectual effort, it is deflected into the body where the ready-made mechanism of laughter can allow it to exhaust itself in muscular contractions. This is the function of spasms of mirth, and the state of well-being which accompanies them is caused by the gratification of the symbolic faculty, which has been satisfied at a much smaller cost than it was prepared to pay.

Laughter, thus explained, is the opposite of anguish, the feeling we experience when the symbolic faculty, far from being gratified by the unexpected solution of a problem that it was prepared to struggle with, feels itself, as it were, being strangled by the need, in vitally urgent circumstances, to achieve a synthesis between operational or semantic fields, when it is without the means of doing so. The cause may be an immediate threat of aggression or the urge to restore the balance of a way of life that has been upset by the death of an irreplacable loved one. Instead of a theoretically laborious roundabout journey being avoided by the short cut of the comic, what happens is that the inability to find a short cut produces the kind of painful paralysis which grips the mind, when it is terrified by the inevitable difficulties and vicissitudes of the stages of life blooming ahead.

Once we have managed to work out an adequate relationship between laughter and anguish, we can see that musical emotion is the result of a third possibility, which borrows something from each of them. It is true that this emotion causes tears, like mental suffering, but, as is also the case with laughter, the shedding of tears is accompanied by a feeling of joy. We weep with laughter, when the muscular contractions, which at first were limited to the area of the mouth, spread to the eyes and the whole face through the effect of a feeling of jubilation aroused by some particularly rapid and telling ellipsis. But the tears of joy produced by listening to music result, on the contrary, from the course that the music has actually followed, and brought to a successful conclusion, in spite of the difficulties (which are only such from the listener's point of view) that the inventive genius of the composer, his need to explore the resources of the world of sound, has caused him to accumulate, together with the answers he has found for them. Carried along panting in his wake, the listener, by every melodic or harmonic resolution, seems to be put in possession of the result and hurried forward. And since he has not himself had to discover or invent these keys that the composer's art furnishes him with, ready-made at moments when he is least expecting them, it is as if an arduous path had

been followed with an ease of which the listener, left to his own devices, would have been incapable—as if it had, in fact, through some special favor, been by-passed thanks to a short cut. Every arduous path has existential connotations, on the conscious or the subconscious level. The real arduous path, the one against which the listener measures all others, is his life, with its hopes and disappointments, its trials and its successes, its expectations and its achievements. Music offers him the image and the pattern of his life, but in the form of a model, which not only simulates its events but also speeds them up, crowding them into a period of time that the memory can grasp as a whole, and which moreover—since we are dealing with masterpieces such as life itself rarely knows how to produce—leads them to a successful conclusion.

Each melodic phrase or harmonic development proposes an adventure. The listener, in embarking on it, entrusts his mind and his sensibility to the initiative of the composer; and if, at the end, he sheds tears of joy, this is because the adventure, which has been lived through from start to finish in a much shorter time than any actual adventure would have taken, has also been crowned with success and ends with a felicity less common in real-life adventures. When a melodic phrase appears beautiful and moving, this is because its form seems homologous with that of an existential phase of life (doubtless because the composer, in the act of creation, made the same projection, but in the opposite direction), while showing itself capable of solving with ease, on its own level, difficulties homologous with those that life, on its level, often struggles against in vain.

This being so, there are grounds for maintaining that music, in its own way, has a function comparable to that of mythology. The musical work, which is a myth coded in sounds instead of words, offers an interpretative grid, a matrix of relationships which filters and organizes lived experience, acts as a substitute for it, and provides the comforting illusion that contradictions can be overcome and difficulties resolved. This entails a consequence: at least during the period of Western culture when music takes over the structures and the functions of myth, every musical work must assume a speculative form, must look for and find a solution to the difficulties which constitute its true theme. If what has just been said is correct, it is inconceivable that there should be any musical work that does not start from a problem and tend towards its resolution—this word being understood in a broader sense, consistent with its meaning in musical terminology.

MYTHIC thought operates essentially through a process of transformation. A myth no sooner comes into being than it is modified through a change of narrator, either within the tribal group, or as it passes from one community to another; some elements drop out and are replaced by others, sequences change places, and the modified structure moves through a series of states, the variations of which nevertheless still belong to the same set. Theoretically, at least, there is no limit to the possible number of transformations, although, as we know, myths too can die; and this being so, it must be possible, without in any way relinquishing the principles of structural analysis, to detect on occasions, within the myths themselves, the seeds of their decay. However, from the purely theoretical point of view, there is no way of deriving, from the concept of transformation considered in the abstract, any principle from which it would follow that the states of the group are necessarily finite in number: any topological figure lends itself to alterations as small as the imagination cares to make them and, between any two distortions taken as boundaries, we may suppose an unlimited series of intermediary states, which are an integral part of one and the same transformational group. If, between one variant and another of the same myth, there always appear differences expressible, not in the form of small positive or negative increments, but of clear-cut relationships such as contrariness, contradiction, inversion or symmetry, this is because the 'transformational' aspect is not the whole story: some other principle must come into play to determine that only some of the possible states of the myth are actualized, and that only certain apertures, not all, are opened up in the grid which, theoretically, could accommodate any number. This additional constraint results from the fact that the mind, which is working unconsciously on the mythic substance, has at its disposal only mental procedures of a certain type: if it is not to wreck the logical armature which supports the myths, and therefore to destroy them instead of transforming them, it can only subject them to discrete changes, discrete in the mathematical sense of the term, which is the opposite of its psychological meaning: the characteristic of a discrete change is to be indiscreet. In addition, each discontinuous change necessitates the reorganization of the whole; it never occurs alone but always in correlation with other changes. In this sense, it can be said that mythic analysis is in a symmetrical and inverted relationship to statistical analysis: it tends to replace quantitative precision by qualitative precision, but in either case precision is only possible as an aim because of the multiplicity of other cases which display a similar tendency to organize themselves spontaneously in space and time.

With the discovery of the genetic code, we can now see the objective reality behind this theoretical requirement for a principle of discontinuity operating in the processes of nature and in the constructions of the human mind, to limit the infinite scale of possibilities. Only in a mythic universe could the species be so numerous that the differential gaps between them became imperceptible. And if the myths themselves conform to a similar principle of discontinuity, this is because, in reconstituting the properties inherent in the world of the senses, but whose objective foundations they could not be aware of, they were simply making a general application of the processes according to which thought finds itself to be operating—these processes being the same in both areas, since thought, and the world which encompasses it and which it encompasses, are two correlative manifestations of the same reality.

But thought can never be directly in mesh with the external world. To consider for a moment only the faculty of sight, a process of analysis occurs even in the retina, and precedes the reactions of the brain. The eye does not simply photograph visible objects; it codifies their relationships, and what it transmits to the brain is not so much figurative images as a system of binary oppositions between immobility and movement, the presence or absence of color, movement occurring in one direction rather than in others, a certain type of form differing from other types, and so on. On the basis of this range of discrete information, the eye or the brain reconstructs an object that, strictly speaking, they have never seen. No doubt, this is especially true in the case of the eyes of certain vertebrates with no cortex, such as the frog; but even in the case of cats or primates, in which the analytical function is largely taken over by the cortex, the brain cells merely follow up operations, the original seat of which is in the sense organ.

In other words, the operations of the senses have, from the start, an intellectual aspect, and the external data belonging to the categories of geology, botany, zoology, and so on, are never apprehended intuitively in themselves, but always in the form of a *text,* produced through the joint action of the sense organs and the understanding. Its production occurs simultaneously in two divergent directions: through progressive decomposition of the syntagm and increasing generalization of the paradigm. One corresponds to what may be called a metonymical axis; it replaces each relative totality by the parts it discerns in it, and treats each of the parts in turn as a subordinate relative totality on which the same operation of decomposition can be performed. Thus, behind each primary oppositional couple, there appear secondary couples, and then, behind these, tertiary couples, and so on, until the object of

analysis is those infinitesimal oppositions, beloved of ritual. The other axis, which is specifically that of myth, is related rather to the category of metaphor; it subsumes individualities under the heading of the paradigm, and simultaneously broadens and thins out the concrete data by obliging them to cross the successive, discontinuous thresholds separating the empirical order from the symbolic order, then from the order of the imagination, and lastly from schematism.

It has already been said that laughter expresses an unhoped for gratification of the symbolic faculty, since a witticism or a comic anecdote spares it the trouble of making a long, roundabout effort to link up and unify two semantic fields. On the other hand, anguish—a persistent constriction of the internal organs, and thus morphologically in opposition to the external and spasmodic relaxation of the muscles in laughter—appears, we said, as the contrary emotional state, resulting from an unavoidable frustration of the symbolic faculty. But, in either case, the symbolic faculty, whether gratified or inhibited, inevitably comes between the world as it is thought and the world as lived experience.

I am not, then, ignoring emotional states in assigning them their true position—or, what amounts to the same thing, the only position in which they are comprehensible—a position which does not precede the apprehension of the world by thought, but on the contrary is posterior and subordinate to it, and which is seen to be theirs, once we have grasped the contradiction, inherent in the human condition, between two inevitable obligations: living and thinking.

WHEN linguists emphasize that language, even when reduced to a finite set of rules, can be used to generate an infinite number of statements, they are putting forward a thesis which, although approximate, is nevertheless legitimate from the strictly operational point of view, since the wealth of possible combinations is such that, in practice, it is as if the relative formula had absolute validity. The situation is not the same when philosophers try to draw metaphysical inferences from this methodological principle. Strictly speaking, a finite set of rules governing a finite vocabulary, used to produce sentences the length of which is not definitely limited but which, at least in the spoken language, rarely if ever exceeds a certain extent, can only generate a discourse which is itself finite, even if successive generations, each consisting of millions of speakers, do not exhaust the possible combinations.

The fact that a finite set of rules can generate a practically infinite series of operations is interesting, but no more so than the fact that individuals endlessly different from each other are engendered through the operation of a finite genetic code. By shifting the center of interest from the finite nature of the code to the infinite number of operations, the philosophers seem to believe that, when it is a question of human thought, the code becomes secondary in comparison with the relatively indeterminate nature of its effects: as if, to study and understand the human make-up, it were less important to know that each individual has a heart, lungs, a digestive tract, and a nervous system, than to pay particular attention to certain statistical fluctuations, such as the fact that one individual is five foot ten inches and another six feet, or that one has a rather round, and another a rather long face, and so on. Such details, however interesting their explanation might be, are not of prime importance, and biologists, quite rightly, do not pay much attention to them, being content to conclude provisionally that every gene does not determine a characteristic with strict accuracy, but only the approximate boundaries between which the characteristic will vary according to external contingencies.

As in genetics, the practically unlimited number of possible utterances, that is, of verbal combinations, is in the first place a consequence of the fantastic range of elements and rules that can be brought into play. The statisticians tell us that two pairs of chromosomes determine four possible genomes, and that n pairs of chromosomes will give a corresponding potential total of 2^n genomes which, in the case of man, is 2^{23}. All things being supposed equal, the probability of two parents giving birth to two identical children is, then, of the order of $(1/2^{23})^2$, or one chance in millions of millions. The combinatory system of language is richer still than that of life, so that even if it is admitted to be theoretically finite, there is no possibility whatever, within observable limits, of the recurrence of two identical statements of a certain length, even if we leave out of account the diachronic changes which take place, independently of the conscious awareness or intentions of the speakers concerned, through the effect of the grammatical and phonological mutations involved in the evolution of language, and of the biological mutations and other accidents, such as the crossing, overlapping, and translocation of chromosomes, involved in the evolution of life, with the result that, after a certain lapse of time, the same sentences and the same genomes cannot reappear, for the simple reason that the range of genetic and linguistic possibilities has altered.

But we can also see the fundamental reasons for the epistemological perversion resulting from the change of perspective advo-

cated by the philosophers; disregarding their primary duty as thinkers, which is to explain what can be explained, and to reserve judgment for the time being on the rest, they are chiefly concerned to construct a refuge for the pathetic treasure of personal identity. And, as the two possibilities are mutually exclusive, they prefer a subject without rationality to rationality without a subject. But although the myths, considered in themselves, appear to be absurd narratives, the interconnections between their absurdities are governed by a hidden logic: even a form of thought which seems to be highly irrational is thus contained within a kind of external framework of rationality; later, with the development of scientific knowledge, thought interiorizes this rationality so as to become rational in itself. What has been called 'the progress of consciousness' in philosophy and history corresponds to this process of interiorizing a pre-existent rationality which has two forms: one is immanent in the world and, were it not there, thought could never apprehend phenomena and science would be impossible; and, also included in the world, is objective thought, which operates in an autonomous and rational way, even before subjectivizing the surrounding rationality, and taming it into usefulness.

Through the acceptance of these postulates, structuralism offers the social sciences an epistemological model incomparably more powerful than those they previously had at their disposal. It reveals, behind phenomena, a unity and a coherence that could not be brought out by a simple description of the facts, 'laid out flat,' so to speak, and presented in random order to the enquiring mind. By changing the level of observation and looking beyond the empirical facts to the relations between them, it reveals and confirms that these relations are simpler and more intelligible than the things they interconnect, and whose ultimate nature may remain unfathomable, without this provisional or definitive opacity being, as hitherto, an obstacle to their interpretation.

Secondly, structuralism reintegrates man into nature and, while making it possible to disregard the subject—that unbearably spoilt child who has occupied the philosophical scene for too long now, and prevented serious research through demanding exclusive attention—involves other consequences that have not been sufficiently noted, and the implications of which ought to have been understood and appreciated by those who criticize linguists and ethnologists from the point of view of religious faith. Structuralism is resolutely teleological; finality, after being long banned by a form of scientific thought still dominated by mechanism and empiricism, has been restored to its true place and again made respectable by structuralism. The believers who criticize us in the name of the sacred values of the human person, if they

were consistent with themselves, would argue differently: they ought to be putting the question: if the finality postulated by your intellectual method is neither in the consciousness nor in the subject, since you attempt to locate it on the hither side of both, where can it be, except outside them? And they would call upon us to draw the logical consequences. . . . The fact that they do not do so shows that these timorous spirits attach more importance to their own selves than to their god.

However, it should not be assumed that I am trailing my coat, since this would be inconceivable on the part of someone who has never felt the slightest twinge of religious anxiety. Structuralism is attentive, of course, to the purely logical arguments put forward by mathematicians to reveal the inadequacy and the contradictions of the Neo-Darwinism that is still accepted by most biologists. But even the clumsy, slow, obstinate, anonymous drive by which we might be tempted to explain the fact that, since its creation thousands of millions of years ago, the universe, and man with it, are, to quote the cautious terms used by Piaget "in a state of constant construction," would not provide any common ground with theology. Although structuralism does not herald any reconciliation of science with faith and argues still less in favor of any such reconciliation, it feels better able than the naturalism and empiricism of previous generations to explain and validate the place that religious feeling has held, and still holds, in the history of humanity: religious feeling senses confusedly that the hiatus between the world and the mind, and between causality and finality, does not correspond so much to things as they actually are as to the limit beyond which knowledge strains in vain to reach, since its intellectual and spiritual resources will never be commensurable with the dimensions of the essence of the objects it studies. We cannot overcome this contradiction, but it is not impossible that we shall more easily adjust to it, now that the astronomers have accustomed us to the idea of the expanding universe. If an explosion, a phenomenon that sensory experience allows us to perceive only during a fraction of a second, and without being able to distinguish any of its details because of the suddenness and rapidity with which it occurs, can be the same thing as cosmic expansion, which appears infinitely slowed down in comparison with the scale of the phenomena in which we live our daily lives, and which we cannot imagine but can only translate into the abstract formulae of mathematics, then it does not seem so incredible that a project conceived in a flash by a lucid consciousness, together with the appropriate means for its realization, might be of the same kind, on an infinitely reduced scale, as that obscure drive which, over millions of

years and with the aid of tortuous and complicated devices, has ensured the pollinization of orchids, thanks to transparent windows allowing the light through to attract insects and guide them towards the pollen enclosed in a single capsule; or has intoxicated them with the secretions of the flower so that they wobble, lose their balance and slide down an artfully directed slope or fall into a little pool of water; or again sets a trap, the mechanism of which is touched off unwittingly by the insect so that it is held for the necessary length of time against the pollen; or deceives it by giving the flower a shape reminiscent of the female insect, so that the male attempts a sterile copulation which results in genuine fertilization for the plant; or places a tiny trigger so that the foraging bee inevitably bumps against it with its head, thus releasing a sticky capsule of pollen that, all unknowingly, it will carry off to another flower. . . .

Nothing could seem more unacceptable, then, than the compromise suggested by Sartre, when he says he is prepared to allow structure a place in the practico-inert, provided we recognize that "this thing outside man is at the same time material worked upon by man, and bearing the trace of man." He goes on to say further:

> You will not find, in nature, oppositions such as those described by the linguist. In nature there are only independent forces. The material elements are linked to each other and act upon each other. But this link is always external. It is not a matter of internal links, such as that which posits the masculine in relation to the feminine, or the plural in relation to the singular, that is, of a system in which the existence of each element conditions that of all the others.

These dogmatic assertions leave one bewildered. As if the opposition between, and complementarity of, male and female, positive and negative, right and left—which, as has been known since 1957, have an objective existence—were not written into biological and physical nature and did not bear witness to the interdependence of forces! Structuralism, unlike the kind of philosophy which restricts the dialectic to human history and bans it from the natural order, readily admits that the ideas it formulates in psychological terms may be no more than fumbling approximations of organic or even physical truths. One of the trends of contemporary science to which it is most sympathetic is that which, validating the intuitions of savage thought, already occasionally succeeds in reconciling the sensory with the intelligible and the qualitative with the geometrical, and gives us a glimpse of the natural order as a huge semantic field, "in which the existence of each element conditions that of all the others." It is not a type of reality irreducible to language but, as Baudelaire says, "a temple in which living pillars from time to time emit confused words"; except that, since

the discovery of the genetic code, we know that the words are neither confused nor intermittent.

Binary distinctions do not exist solely in human language; they are also found in certain animal modes of communication; for instance, the chirring of crickets uses a simple reversion of rhythm (x, y/y, x) to alter the nature of the message from a warning cry from male to male to a mating call from male to female. And what better illustration of the interdependence of forces could one ask for from nature than the marvelously geometrical evolution of flower forms from the Triassic to the end of the Tertiary, which shows a development from amorphous structures at the beginning, first to two-dimensional radial symmetry, then to four or five detector-units arranged on the same plane, then to three-dimensional structures, and lastly to bilateral symmetry, all of which involved a complementary development of the pollinating insects, constantly adjusting to botanical evolution through a process one would have no hesitation in calling dialectical, were it taking place in the realm of thought.

In another area closer to man, communication usually appears to us to be at the opposite extreme from hostility and war. And yet it would seem that a hormone, whose function in mammals is to ensure communication between the cells during certain physiological processes, is identical with acrasin, which brings about the social aggregation of the amoebae; the basic cause of this phenomenon is, apparently, the attraction of the protozoa to bacteria on which they feed, and which secrete acrasin. This represents a remarkably dialectical transition from communication as a form of sociability to the conception of sociability itself as the lower limit of predatoriness. In the lower organisms at least, social life is the result of a chemical threshold high enough to allow individuals to attract each other, but just below the level at which, through an excess of desire, they would begin eating each other. While awaiting further progress in biochemistry, we can leave it to the moralists to decide whether there are any other lessons to be drawn from these observations.

Stereochemical theory reduces the range of smells—which one would have thought inexhaustible and indescribable—to seven 'primary odors' (camphoraceous, musky, floral, peppermint, ethereal, pungent, and putrid) which, when variously combined like the constituent elements of phonemes, produce sensations, both indefinable and immediately recognizable, such as the smells of roses, carnations, leeks, or fish. According to the same theory, these sensory values can be related to the corresponding simple or complex geometrical forms of the odorous molecules, each of which fits into the olfactory receptor-site

specialized to receive it through having a similar form. The theory has not yet been generally accepted, but it may well be elaborated and refined through comparison with the chemistry of taste, which explains the sensation of sweetness by a change of form of one of the proteins of the body, through contact with certain molecules. Information about this geometrical change, when relayed to the brain, is expressed by the recognition of the appropriate sensation. Bird songs illustrate the opposite situation. Their inexpressible beauty eludes all attempts at description in acoustic terms, since the modulations are so rapid and complex that the human ear cannot perceive them, or does so only fragmentarily. But their hidden richness is directly seen in geometrical form in the oscillograms that have been made of them; expressed as graphs, the songs of the different species can be completely apprehended as incredibly delicate and refined shapes, as if they were extraordinary masterpieces, in ivory or some other precious material, turned on a lathe.

In fact, structural analysis, which some critics dismiss as a gratuitous and decadent game, can only appear in the mind because its model is already present in the body. I have already mentioned the exhaustive research that has been done on the mechanism of visual perception in various animals, from fish to cats and monkeys. It shows that each cell in the appropriate area of the cortex continues the processing already begun by several types of retinal or ganglion cells, each of which reacts to a particular stimulus: the direction of movement, the size of the moving object, or the relative rapidity of the movement of small objects, and so on. Consequently, in the first place the eye, and then the brain, do not react to objects which are independent of each other, and independent of the background against which they are seen. What we might call the raw material of immediate visual perception already consists of binary oppositions: simple and complex, light and dark, light on a dark background and dark on a light background, upward and downward, straight and slanting movement, and so on. Structuralist thought, by following procedures that have been criticized as being too intellectual, rediscovers, then, and brings to the surface of the consciousness, profound organic truths. Only its practitioners can know, from inner experience, what a sensation of fulfilment it can bring, through making the mind feel itself to be truly in communion with the body.

THE preceding remarks do not amount to a theory, and still less are they meant as the preliminary outline of a philosophy; I hope they will be taken for what they are: the free-ranging intellectual

musings, tinged with confusion and error, that the subject indulges in, during the short time when, having been released from one task, he does not yet know in what new one he will again dissolve his identity. As I cast a last look over the outcome of eight years' labor on my *Introduction to a Science of Mythology,* which will soon be as foreign to me as if it had been the work of someone else, I think I can understand, and to some extent excuse, the mistrust with which it has been received in various quarters. The reaction is to be explained, I should say, by the doubly paradoxical nature of the undertaking. If any result emerges from it, it is, in the first place, that no myth or version of a myth is identical with the others and that myth, when it appears to give gratuitous emphasis to an insignificant detail, and dwells on it without any stated reason, is in fact trying to say the opposite of what another myth said on the same subject: no myth is like any other. However, taken as a whole, they all come to the same thing and, as Goethe says about plants: "their chorus points to a hidden law."

The second paradox is that a work I know to be packed with meaning appears to some as the elaboration of a form without meaning. But this is because the meaning is included, and as it were compressed, within the system. Those who cannot enter into it through lack of knowledge of the immense anthropological storehouse represented by the native cultures of the New World are doomed to grasp nothing of its inner significance; seen from the outside, this significance cancels itself out. It is not surprising, then, that the philosophers do not feel themselves to be involved; they are not involved, in fact, because the scope of the undertaking is beyond their apprehension, whereas, being more directly concerned, semiologists may be interested in the form and anthropologists in the content.

I myself, in considering my work from within as I have lived it, or from without, which is my present relationship to it as it drifts away into my past, see more clearly that this tetralogy of mine, now that it has been composed, must, like Wagner's, end with a twilight of the gods; or, to be more accurate, that having been completed a century later and in harsher times, it foresees the twilight of man, after that of the gods which was supposed to ensure the advent of a happy and liberated humanity. At this late hour in my career, the final image the myths leave me with—and not only individual myths but, through them, the supreme myth recounted by the history of mankind, which is also the history of the universe in which human history unfolds—links up with that intuitive feeling which, in my early days and as I explained in *Tristes Tropiques,* led me to see in the phases of a sunset, watched from the point in time when the celestial spectacle was set in place until, after

successive developments and complications, it finally collapsed and disappeared into the oblivion of night, the model of the phenomena I was to study later and of the problems of mythology that I would have to resolve: mythology, that huge and complex edifice which also glows with a thousand iridescent colors as it builds up before the analyst's gaze, slowly expands to its full extent, then crumbles and fades away in the distance, as if it had never existed.

Is this image not true of humanity itself and, beyond humanity, of all the manifestations of life: birds, butterflies, shellfish, and other animals, as well as plants and their flowers? Evolution develops and diversifies their forms, but always in view of their ultimate disappearance, so that in the end nothing will remain of nature, life, or man, or of his subtle and refined creations, such as languages, social institutions and customs, aesthetic masterpieces and myths, once their firework display is over. My analysis, by proving the rigorous patterning of the myths and thus conferring on them the status of objects, has thereby brought out the mythic character of those objective realities: the universe, nature, and man which, over thousands, millions, or billions of years, will, when all is said and done, have simply demonstrated the resources of their combinatory systems, in the manner of some great mythology, before collapsing in upon themselves and vanishing, through the self-evidence of their own decay.

The fundamental opposition, the source of the myriad others with which the myths abound and which have been tabulated in the four volumes of my *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* is precisely the one stated by Hamlet, although in the form of a still over-optimistic choice between two alternatives. Man is not free to choose whether to be or not to be. A mental effort, consubstantial with his history and which will cease only with his disappearance from the stage of the universe, compels him to accept the two self-evident and contradictory truths which, through their clash, set his thought in motion, and, to neutralize their opposition, generate an unlimited series of other binary distinctions which, while never resolving the primary contradiction, echo and perpetuate it on an ever smaller scale: one is the reality of being, which man senses at the deepest level as being alone capable of giving a reason and a meaning to his daily activities, his moral and emotional life, his political options, his involvement in the social and the natural worlds, his practical endeavors, and his scientific achievements; the other is the reality of non-being, awareness of which inseparably accompanies the sense of being, since man has to live and struggle, think, believe, and above all, preserve his courage, although he can never at any moment lose sight of the opposite certainty that he was not

present on earth in former times, that he will not always be here in the future and that, with his inevitable disappearance from the surface of a planet which is itself doomed to die, his labors, his sorrows, his joys, his hopes, and his works will be as if they had never existed, since no consciousness will survive to preserve even the memory of these ephemeral phenomena, only a few features of which, soon to be erased from the impassive face of the earth, will remain as already canceled evidence that they once were, and were as nothing.

— *Translated from the French by*
John and Doreen Weightman