LEVI-STRAUSS' STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF MYTHS: A STUDY IN METHODOLOGY

MATTHIEU CASALIS

Claude Lévi-Strauss' enterprise raises important methodological questions which should concern everyone involved in the study of religion in general and of myth in particular: can the linguistic model, especially structuralist, be legitimately applied to the study of myth? To what extent would such an attempt infirm or confirm the hermeneutics of myths?

I. The linguistic model

One of Lévi-Strauss' major innovations consisted in applying to the study of myth a linguistic model borrowed from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics.*[1] Lévi-Strauss establishes a close parallelism between mythology and linguistics: the traditional pattern of interpretation which aims at deciphering an intrinsic, "archetypal" meaning of myth is as outdated as pre-Saussurian linguistics according to which "certain sequences of sounds were associated with definite meanings."[2] This linguistics belongs to the "prose of the world" age, as Michel Foucault calls it,[3] which believed in an intrinsic resemblance between signs and things. Now signs and things have dissolved their former alliance, the resemblance principle has been shaken by the Saussurian principle of difference: when Saussure states that "in language there are only differences,"[4] he means that meaning no longer results from the resemblance between signs and things, but from the difference between elements of language.

Since myth is part of language, Lévi-Strauss feels entitled to extend the Saussurian principle from linguistics to mythology: meaning is no more tied to a given element of myth than it is to an isolated sound. As in language, where meaning results solely from the combination of elements between themselves, the meaning of the basic units of myth or "mythemes"[5] should similarly result from their combination to each other. This overcoming of the "prose of the world" by structural semiology occurs at the level of the mythemes as well as at the level of myths themselves.

Lévi-Strauss establishes a parallelism between the structure of myth and that of the Saussurian "langue" (language), i.e., the collective, unconscious and reversible system which makes the individual, conscious and irreversible event of "parole" (speaking) possible. Like Saussure's "language," which is composed of basic units, phonemes and morphemes, myth is

constituted by mythemes, i.e., the shortest possible sentence or subject-predicate relation (e.g., "Oedipus kills his father"). However, there is not simply a parallelism, but a relationship of increasing complexification: the mythemes are to the morphemes what the latter are to the phonemes. Thus mythic "speaking" is so to say copying the structure of "language," which it repeats at another level, but without radically differing from it, as it ought to, according to Saussure's fundamental "language" vs. "speaking" distinction. This distinction is being abolished, since an example of "speaking" is said to have the same structure as "language."

Thus we reach a paradox: how can the irreversible occurrence of mythic "speaking" share the reversible time of "language"? "Speaking" and "language" are not at the same level, and these two levels cannot be confused. The upper limit of the "language" level is the "syntagm,"[6] i.e., a fixed, sterotyped combination of morphemes, such as "How do you do? ", which does not leave any room to individual initiative. A mytheme is obviously more than a mere syntagm and should therefore belong to the level of "speaking" rather than of "language."

Even though Lévi-Strauss' abolition of Saussure's distinction raises a serious methodological problem, it has the advantage of revealing a remarkable property of mythic discourse: myth has a dual structure. It is at the same time irreversible like "speaking" and reversible like "language." Myth belongs to a given time, the "arche," but the mythic "arche" has a permanent effectiveness. In short, myth is both submitted to time and transcending time. This conclusion allows Lévi-Strauss to define the level of myth as intermediary between the levels of "language" and "speaking," the contradictory characteristics of which it brings together and reconciles. Myth shares its dual structure, both temporal and atemporal, with music. Hence the "musical" analysis of myth which was first illustrated in Lévi-Strauss' famous analysis of the Oedipus story.

This myth is being read both horizontally and vertically, like an "orchestra score,"[7] in which the horizontal dimension reflects the "diachronic" irreversibility of time, whereas the vertical dimension expresses the "synchronic" reversibility of the musical system. The mythemes are accordingly being classified in four columns, or "bundles of relations."[8] Mythemes such as "Oedipus marries his mother" or "Antigone buries her brother" are classified under the heading "overrating of blood relations," whereas relations such as "Oedipus kills his father" or "Eteocles kills his brother" belong to a second column titled "underrating of blood relations." These first two columns stand clearly in opposition to each other.

The sorting of elements into the last two columns raises more questions: the third column which gathers mythemes describing the slaying of

monsters, like the dragon and the Sphinx, is titled "denial of the autochthonous origin of man."[9] Lévi-Strauss acknowledges himself that the chthonian nature symbolized by the Sphinx might seem surprising.[10] Furthermore, since the dragon is a chthonian being which must be killed "in order that mankind be born from the Earth,"[11] doesn't it follow that the slaying of the dragon should pertain to the affirmation of man's autochthony rather than to its denial? The fourth column lists names such as Labdacos, Oedipus, etc., which would share a connotation of clumsy walking. Relying upon an argument which does not seem to differ that much from the archetypal method—the description by Pueblo myths of the emerging beings' clumsy walking—Lévi-Strauss titles his last column "persistence of the autochthonous origin of man," which sets it in perfect opposition to column three.

Despite this groping, the treatment of the myth illustrates remarkably the structuralist principle of difference: even though relations or bundles of relations cannot be considered totally devoid of any meaning by themselves, Lévi-Strauss' solution brilliantly illustrates the fact that they acquire their full meaning only by virtue of their opposition to each other. The structure of the myth is made out of a double set of oppositions: column I vs. column II, and column III vs. column IV. Moreover, the differences within each pair of opposites parallel each other: I is to II as III is to IV, the overrating of blood relations is to their underrating as the denial of man's autochthony is to its affirmation. Thus the whole structure of the myth would reflect a question raised by an archaic society: is man born from two parents, or is he born directly from the Earth? Both possibilities are being weighed: the denial of man's autochthony is confirmed by the overrating of blood relations while, in turn, the affirmation of man's autochthony is supported by the underrating of blood relations. Far from being mediated, this conflict is lasting, and the myth reflects a basic inability to choose in favor of either solution. We are faced here with one of Lévi-Strauss' favorite ideas: myth arises out of a logical conflict which it tries to escape unconsciously by substituting the level of spontaneous creativity to that of a logical impasse. In short, myth is a "logical tool"[12] aimed at overcoming contradictions. Lévi-Strauss has remained faithful to this definition, which is still ruling his analyses of hundreds of myths as performed in *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*.[13]

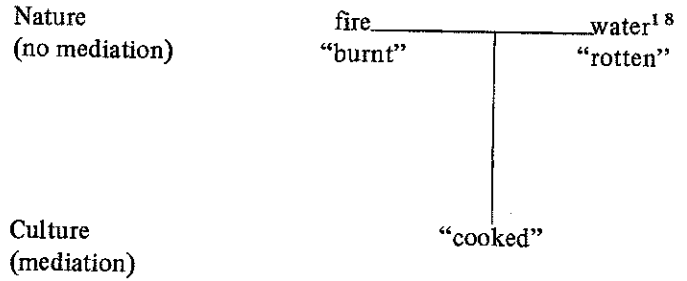
II. The cycle of myths

What was true of the elements of myths, which cannot be understood outside of their relationship to each other, also holds true of whole myths: a whole myth has no full meaning by itself. Reading a myth only

according to a two-dimensional system, as it was the case for the Oedipus myth, is insufficient. This insufficiency leads Lévi-Strauss to suggest the possibility of adding a third dimension by taking into account variants of the Oedipus story: Theban, Athenian and even Freudian! Lévi-Strauss claims that the psychoanalyst's interpretation of Oedipus is but one more version, since it centers around the same basic structure: "how can the one be born from two?"[14]

By superposing several two-dimensional charts one will obtain a three-dimensional system, which can be read from left to right, top to bottom and front to back.[15] And by including not just variants of the same myth, but different related myths, one would obtain a multi-dimensional system. Thus the "paradigmatic" axis of language, which Saussure defined as potential and relying upon substitution processes[16] (as opposed to the syntagmatic axis, the actual, conjunctive chain of a sentence), is being applied to mythic analysis. Lévi-Strauss contends that this multi-dimensional analysis is the only way to reach the full meaning of myth. This contention represents simply an extension of the linguistic principle of difference which was ruling the analysis of the Oedipus myth: an isolated myth has no more meaning than an isolated mytheme or phoneme.

This multi-dimensional analysis is being carried out in *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* where "syntactic sequences" in their totality,[17] i.e., whole myths, are being paradigmatically superposed. This process results in a "meaning" which isolated myths were totally lacking. The whole structure of Lévi-Strauss' last work is paradigmatic: several Bororo myths at the beginning of *The Raw and the Cooked* deal with the origin of water, but this meaning appears limited and incomplete as long as these myths are being considered only for themselves. Lévi-Strauss ascribes its full meaning to the Bororo sequence only after it has been paradigmatically related to other sequences, especially the Ge myths which tell the origin of fire. The unveiling of the structure fire vs. non-fire results from this paradigmatic superposition, and this will enable one to realize the full meaning of these myths. The Bororo myths are thus being connected to the origins of fire, cooking and culture. This may seem paradoxical as these myths did not tell a word about the origins of fire, but the two terms of the structure fire vs. non-fire belong together despite, or rather thanks to, their opposition. This structure is made out of two extremes, between which culture established the mediation of cooking:



Here again, Lévi-Strauss interprets myth as an unconscious attempt to overcome oppositions.

As an expression of societies which have not entered "history" in the western sense, myth displays both a reversible and irreversible time pattern; this assumption already accounted for the "musical" reading of the Oedipus myth. The musical metaphor becomes overwhelming in *The Raw and the Cooked*, the whole structure of which is musical. The work is composed of an "overture," "theme," "variations," "cantatas," etc. Why does Lévi-Strauss use this musical pattern? Because he thinks that myth and music share an essential characteristic: both are "instruments for the obliteration of time."[19] While written speech, because of its merely linear dimension, is unable to express the reversible dimension of myth, musical language, which possesses the two dimensions, appears as the privileged tool of the structural analysis of myth.

Structural oppositions and "transformations" must not be viewed as actual and irreversible, but rather potential and reversible. They illustrate the infinite number of combinations the system of myths can produce. Since myth belongs to societies "without history," Lévi-Strauss does not study the actual direction in which transformations may be happening. From the structural point of view, the cycle of myths is basically reversible, there is no starting point. The cycle of *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* happens to start from the Bororo myths telling the origin of rain. After having explored hundreds of myths, the cycle ends where it had started, the circle is completed, but it could perfectly have been run over in the opposite direction.

At this point, we can measure to what extent the structural principle of

opposition differed initially from Marxist and Sartrean dialectic.[20] The structural opposition is mainly spatial, instead of temporal. In the structural perspective neither of the two terms constituting a structure surpasses the other, whereas the Hegelian negation implied "Aufhebung," i.e., the diachronic passage to a next step. The structural opposition is merely synchronic, both terms of the structure remaining equal. If the balance between them is brokem, the structure splits. The attempts to overcome oppositions in which Lévi-Strauss sees the main function of myth do not entail an irreversible event.

Yet, Lévi-Strauss seems to have become increasingly aware of the impossibility to reduce myths to their merely synchronic dimension and of the need to pay more attention to diachrony. The *Story of Asdiwal*[21] was studied not only synchronically, but also diachronically, following the succession of its sequences. In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss states that some transformations "can be conceived of in one direction only."[22] Lévi-Strauss' emphasis on synchrony does not totally exclude diachrony. It only means that synchrony comes first and that diachrony is always to be considered in relationship to synchrony, as the passage from one synchrony to another. The end of *From Honey to Ashes* is centered around the notions of passage and history: through a specific event, a formerly symmetrical and balanced system may have become dissymmetrical and out of balance, thereby opening itself to history. Lévi-Strauss views an event of this kind as producing the passage from myth to science in which western history began. Conversely, this type of event never took place in Indian societies, the structures of which remained mainly reversible.

III. Conclusion

Lévi-Strauss' use of the linguistic model has decisive methodological implications with respect to our understanding of myth, since it unveils its systematic, reversible dimension, which hermeneutics tends to overlook. Lévi-Strauss' reaction against hermeneutics may seem excessive, but there is no reason why today's mythologist could not work at two levels, combining the structural and the hermeneutic approaches instead of having them exclude each other. For example, Edmund Leach's structural analyses of Biblical scholars as bases for hermeneutic studies of the Bible. Such an inclusive approach should considerably enrich the study of myth.

Lévi-Strauss' method may not only renew our understanding of myth, but of written texts in general. Following Lévi-Strauss' analyses, the written text in general may appear to share the characteristics of mythic text: instead of a merely one-dimensional, "surface-text," the possibility is

now suggested of a multi-dimensional, "in-depth" structure of the text, consisting of the superposition of distinct layers. This structure of the text in general, which was remarkably revealed by Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myth in particular, is currently being verified by scholars such as Roland Barthes[24] and Julia Kristeva.[25] This makes Lévi-Strauss' insights really prophetic.

NOTES

[1] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, W. Baskin trans. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966).

[2] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, C. Jacobson & B. C. Schoepf trans. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., 1967).

[3] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1970).

[4] *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 120.

[5] *Structural Anthropology*, p. 207.

[6] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, M.E. Meek trans. (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971), chap. X.

[7] *Structural Anthropology*, p. 209.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 207.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

[10] *Ibid.*, p.227, n. 6.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 212.

[13] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, J. & D. Weightman trans. Vol. I: *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1970); (Vol. II: *From Honey to Ashes*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

[14] *Structural Anthropology*, p. 213.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 214.

[16] *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 123.

[17] *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 307.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 294.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[20] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, G. Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd. trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 247.

[21] Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Story of Asdiwal," N. Mann trans., *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, Edmund Leach, ed., (London: Tavistock, 1967). pp. 1-47.

[22] *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 223, n. 12.

[23] Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Grossman Publishers, Cape Editions, 1969).

[24] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970).

[25] Julia Kristeva, *Recherches pour une semanalyse* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969).

University of New Mexico