Claude Lévi-Strauss, Chiasmus and the Ethnographic Journey

The point of departure of this paper is the intuition of a recurring hidden structure in Lévi-Strauss's works and the realisation of a correlation between this structure and the rhetorical figure of chiasmus. I propose to follow the trace of this structure in Lévi-Strauss's works and to try to understand its underlying significance. I will argue, in this connection, that the figure of chiasmus plays an important role in shaping Lévi-Strauss's conception of the anthropologist's relationship to his object of study and, by extension, of what constitutes a specifically anthropological form of understanding. I will also show that the figure of chiasmus provides a key to the poetics of ethnographic description.

I should make clear from the start that I will not be concerned with chiasmus as a figure of speech or style as such, i.e. not as a rhetorical figure in the classical sense. Rather, I will be concerned with chiasmus as a pattern of thought, an organising schema, a structure that determines, from behind the scenes, the form and content of a number of Lévi-Strauss's anthropological theories. To use the vocabulary of classical rhetoric, I will be concerned with chiasmic reversals not as a feature of *elocutio*, the part of rhetoric that studies the choice and arrangement of words (where chiasmus normally belongs), but as a feature of *dipositio*, the arrangement of the parts of an argument, and above all *inventio*, the invention of subject matter and the logical arguments that give form to it.

The rhetorical figure of chiasmus, as a figure of style, was named after the Greek letter *chi*, or X, i.e. a cross. It is essentially a type of inversion. A useful definition is provided by John Welch in his preface to a collection of essays that examines the uses of chiasmus in Antiquity: 'The basic figure of chiasm simply involves the reversal of the order of words in balancing clauses or phrases' ([1]). An example is Ovid's description of the Goddess Cardea (cited in Anthony Paul's study of chiasmus in *Macbeth*): 'Her power is to open what is shut; to shut what is open' ([2]). Welch, in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, cites Pope's 'A wit with dunces, and a dunce with wits' and Coleridge's: 'Flowers are lovely, love is flowerlike'. A more modern example is what the French erotic novelist Alina Reyes says about writing: 'J'ai toujours écrit pour dire que j'aimais. Dans mes cahiers [...] dans mes lettres, tous mes petits textes, mes romans... Au point de ne plus très bien savoir si j'écris pour mieux aimer, ou si j'aime pour mieux écrire' ([3]).

The basic structure of a chiasmic inversion is: ABBA. However, scholars today accept the existence of more complex forms of chiasm that can extend over many pages of prose or verse. Such forms of chiasmic reversals cannot be defined in terms of a simple grammatical inversion of the kind exemplified above. In ancient texts, these more complex chiasms are supposed to have had a mnemonic function or to have played a role similar to that of punctuation in texts in which punctuation was not yet used -- for example, to signal a conclusion ([4]). The bible, in particular, makes much use of an extended version of the ABBA structure, in the form of lists that conform to sequences of the following kind: A-B-C-D-E-E'-D'-C'-B'-A' ([5]). The key features of chiasmus -- whatever the level of organisation of a discourse where it occurs -- are inversion, balance and a certain foregrounding of the centre point around which the system inverts. Chiasmus consists in 'the appearance of a two-part structure or system in which the second half is a mirror image of the first, i.e. where the first term recurs last, and the last first' ([6]). On this basis, I propose to use the term chiasmus here to denote, in Lévi-Strauss's works, a form of inverted parallelism or *inverted symmetry*, an antithetical relationship between two terms so that each offers an inverted mirror image of the other. It is this figure of thought that I am suggesting is characteristic of a certain kind of Lévi-Straussian argument (its thematic structure, its way of unfolding), and whose deeper significance I propose to interpret here; my premise being that it has a significance or function and that it is not merely decorative or rhetorical, in a pejorative sense.

A good example of a chiasmic inversion of this kind is to be found in one of Lévi-Strauss's best known texts, the 'Ouverture' to the *Mythologiques*, his tetralogy on Amerindian mythology (the parts of this book are named after various musical forms).

Lévi-Strauss is someone who has been concerned with aesthetic questions as well as anthropological ones and in the 'Ouverture', at the same time as he introduces his theory of myth, he also develops a

typology of art forms. The gist of Lévi-Strauss's classificatory system is to establish the close affinity that exists between myth and music and to contrast these art forms with others such as painting. Myth and music on one side, painting, sculpture, poetry on the other. And the means of this division is the special logic of chiasmus.

All art forms, for Lévi-Strauss, may be seen as kinds of languages, which for him means that, like natural languages which combine phonemes and morphemes into higher order structures such as sentences, they articulate two systems. They possess primary level units, the equivalent of phonemes, which are integrated into higher order structures. In the case of music, for example, the primary level units are the notes of the scale. In the case of myths, they are the series of events, real or imagined, that will make up the plot. For painting, it is colour and shape.

It is here that chiasmus comes into play. For what distinguishes, according to Lévi-Strauss, music (and myth) from painting, is that painting derives its primary level units from nature, whereas the primary level units used by music are cultural artefacts. Musical scales -- which are different for different cultures -- are cultural artefacts, as indeed are the musical instruments that are necessary to create music. The result is the symmetrical but inverse relationship that each kind of art form has with nature. In Lévi-Strauss's own words:

> La peinture organise intellectuellement, au moyen de la culture, une nature qui lui était déjà présente comme organisation sensible. La musique parcourt un trajet exactement inverse: car la culture lui était présente, mais sous forme sensible, avant qu'au moyen de la nature elle l'organise intellectuellement. (7)

Music is a cultural invention (it is pure artifice), but is given body (brought into existence) as nature (sensible reality). In other words music is not sound, it *becomes* sound. Conversely, nature (sensible reality) is a given for painting, whose task is to use cultural codes (style) to re-organise it (transform it into an artefact). In other words, and to sum up the chiasmic structure of the argument: music is 'naturalized' culture whereas painting is 'culturalized' nature.

Lévi-Strauss further develops this classificatory system to include two minor art forms: Chinese calligraphic art, and so-called 'concrete' music. The effect is to add a further chiasmic reversal to the original system. For, according to Lévi-Strauss's schema, Chinese calligraphic art is not a form of painting, as one might think, but rather comes into the same category as music, because as in music, the primary level units with which it creates -- i.e. the system of ideograms -- is a product of culture not nature. Conversely, concrete music -- which rejects the musical scale created by culture and attempts to compose using elements of sound found in nature, i.e. noise -- is in a formally similar situation to painting since, like painting, it creates its primary level of articulation out of nature. The end result is that what is normally seen as a form of painting is attached to the category of music and what is normally seen as music, to the category of painting.

Typically, Lévi-Strauss uses chiasmic logic as a means of establishing typologies, of formalizing (and systematizing) the relationships between different objects, in particular when these objects appear to be different or distant, as with music and painting.

In *Histoire de Lynx*, Lévi-Strauss compares the role assigned to science and imaginative thinking in so-called primitive ('cold') societies and 'developed' (historicized or 'hot') societies. Lévi-Strauss argues, in opposition to the theories of evolutionary anthropology (which order the history of humanity according to a fixed succession of evolutionary stages), that these two kinds of societies do not assign radically different roles to these two modes of thought. Both types of society establish the same relationship between science and imagination, says Lévi-Strauss, *but for reasons that are the reverse of one another*:

> Si, dans les sociétés sans écriture, les connaissances positives étaient très en deçà des pouvoirs de l'imagination et qu'il incombait aux mythes de combler cet écart, notre propre société se trouve dans la situation inverse, mais qui, pour des raisons opposées certes,

conduit au même résultat. Chez nous, les connaissances positives débordent tellement les pouvoirs de l'imagination que celle-ci, incapable d'appréhender le monde dont on lui révèle l'existence, a pour seule ressource de se retourner vers le mythe. (8)

In 'primitive' ('cold') societies, mythological speculation is called upon to supplement scientific knowledge because the powers of the imagination (in particular in as much as they provide an insight into the realm of the supra-sensible) are ahead of positive understanding. In 'developed' ('hot') societies mythical thought is required to fulfil the same function (to supplement science) but for the inverse reason: scientific knowledge has so outstripped the powers of the imagination that contemporary scientific discoveries -- that an electron pulses seven million billion times a second, that it is at once a wave and a point –(9) are in effect incomprehensible to the layman except in the form of a myth (in the popular imagination, the story of the big-bang is modern man's version of the myth of the Creation).

Chiasmic logic here is the means of a reconciliation between 'cold' and 'hot' societies. The former are no longer considered to belong to an earlier, 'pre-scientific' stage in an evolutionary process which invariably leads to the latter. Rather both kinds of societies reflect one another, but in such a way that 'cold' societies provide a kind of inverted mirror image of 'hot' societies. The Lévi-Straussian message, here, is that what separates 'hot' and 'cold' societies is not time, or history, but a synchronic system of symmetrical relationships of correlation and opposition.

Chiasmic logic also plays an important part in the theory of ritual that Lévi-Strauss develops in *The Savage Mind* (it is worth noting that this is a very different theory to the one he later develops in *L'Homme nu*). He construes the nature and function of a ritual essentially as an inverted game. He takes the specific example of funerary rituals, such as those celebrated by the Fox Indians, whose function is to regulate the relationship between the living and the dead after the disruption caused by a death. In what sense are these rituals inverted games?

The Fox perform 'adoption' rituals whose aim is to ensure the departure of a dead person from the land of the living and his 'adoption' into the world of the dead. Such rituals often incorporate contests which oppose two camps, one which represents the living, the other the dead. However, unlike the games that are played in 'hot' societies, the outcome of these ritual contests is predetermined: the dead must always win. According to the principles of reciprocity and gift exchange, by granting the dead a final victory -- and, in a sense, letting them 'kill' the living by defeating them -- the dead become indebted to the living and, henceforth must be grateful to them. In this way, the ritual ensures that, in the future, dead ancestors will fulfil the role that society gives them, namely to protect the living and bring them wealth.

A game, because of its rules and conventions, may be described as a structure. An essential principle of every game is that the rules are the same for everyone; in other words, says Lévi-Strauss, the starting point of every game is symmetry. The aim of a game is to engender asymmetry: it produces a winner. This 'asymmetry' is the product of non-structural factors: individual skill or talent, chance, accident, in any case, an 'event'. Conversely, what gives rise to a funerary ritual of the kind described above is a death that brings about an asymmetrical relationship between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane. The purpose of the ritual is to perform a series of pre-ordained 'actions' (which are different from the 'actions' or events that make up a game; since they are pre-determined they constitute an integral part of its structure), and thereby ensure that *all* the participants to the ritual end up being 'winners'. At least in the sense that the social imbalance -- disruption -- that gave rise to the ritual is morally remedied or compensated for. When the Gahuku-Gama from New-Guinea were taught to play football they devised a tournament in which they played as many games as was necessary for both sides to draw. In doing so, Lévi-Strauss comments, they were treating a game as if it were a ritual.

Seen in this light, the nature and function of a ritual is the reverse of that of a game, hence the chiasmic system of correlations and oppositions that link, in Lévi-Strauss's mind, these two forms of social interaction. In Lévi-Strauss's own words:

Le jeu apparaît [...] comme *disjonctif*: il aboutit à la création d'un écart différentiel entre des

joueurs individuels ou des camps, que rien ne désignait au départ comme inégaux. Pourtant, à la fin de la partie, ils se distingueront en gagnants et perdants. *De façon symétrique et inverse* [my italics], le rituel est *conjonctif*, car il institue une union (on peut dire une communion), ou, en tout cas, une relation organique, entre deux groupes [...] qui étaient dissociés au départ. [...] Le jeu produit des événements à partir d'une structure: on comprend donc que les jeux de compétition prospèrent dans nos sociétés industrielles; tandis que les rites et les mythes, à la manière du bricolage, [...] décomposent et recomposent des ensembles événementiels [...] et s'en servent comme autant de pièces indestructibles, en vue d'arrangements structureaux [...]. ([10])

In other words, and to spell out the chiasmic structure of Lévi-Strauss's argument: games use structures to create events (and generate asymmetry); rituals, events to create structures (and generate symmetry).

There are many other examples of this kind of chiasmic logic in Lévi-Strauss's works, which I cannot all detail here. A recent article published in *L'Homme* is particularly telling. Its theme, as stated by the abstract, is that: 'Circumcision and the bestowal of the penis sheath sustain a relationship of inverted symmetry' ([11]). I could also have mentioned here Lévi-Strauss's work on Caduveo body painting which is centrally concerned with the chiasmic structure of the designs (similar to those on playing cards) painted onto the faces of Caduveo women. Or his analysis in *Regarder écouter lire* (1993) of Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds*, which he sees as the transformation of an earlier painting on the same theme by Guercino: Lévi-Strauss identifies three painting which correspond to three stages in a sequence of transformations in the course of which Guercino's original composition is gradually assimilated by Poussin and re-organised, according to the logic of chiasmic inversion, to be re-born as Poussin's *Arcadian Shepherds*. My main point is that the figure of chiasmus -- or at least a logical structure analogous to it -- is a distinctive feature of Lévi-Strauss's works, a stylistic particularity of his way of thinking and constructing arguments. The recurring idea in Lévi-Strauss's works that corresponds to this rhetorical figure is that two seemingly disparate objects (myth and music, 'primitive' societies and 'developed' societies, games and rituals, a painting by Guercino and another by Poussin) are in fact connected in such a way that one may pass from the one to the other by the means of a logical inversion.

What is the underlying significance of this figure of thought and the reason for its recurrence? There are no easy answers to these questions: they relate to Lévi-Strauss's creativity as a writer and the secret affinities that link, in Lévi-Strauss's mind, certain ideas to the chiasmic form.

My reading is that, at the level of the imaginary, Lévi-Strauss construes anthropology itself -- the process of anthropological understanding -- in terms of a figure of chiasmic inversion. In the Lévi-Straussian paradigm, the anthropological journey, real or in the mind, is construed in terms of a chiasmic switching of positions of self and other. This is something that is revealed not so much in Lévi-Strauss's explicit formulations about the nature of the ethnographic journey but, indirectly, through what he writes about Amerindian myths and what *they* have to say about the nature of travel.

One of Lévi-Strauss's major contributions to contemporary thought is his theory of the genesis of primitive myths. Lévi-Strauss's basic hypothesis is that myths (oral myths) come into being by a process of transformation of one myth into another. Lévi-Strauss's role, as mythographer, is to decipher the hidden logic that explains the transformation of one element in one myth into another element in another. For example, how malicious grandfathers become helpful grandmothers; how a woman who is a frog in one South American myth, in another North American myth becomes a torso affixed to her husband's back, starving him to death by stealing his food. Lévi-Strauss explains this last transformation in terms of the conversion of metaphor into metonymy (see *Mythologiques*, vol. III, 'Le Mystère de la femme coupée en morceaux').

The myths that are linked in a series of transformations are treated as forming a cognate group. Each myth in the group, however dissimilar it appears to be from other myths in the group, is related to a common armature, a logico-sensible schema that is like the matrix of that transformational series. The

matrix has no concrete existence; it is a logical system whose features are deduced by the mythographer. It is, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, the virtual chess board on which the myths of a given transformational group play out their respective games.

One such transformational group is made up of a series of myths that all incorporate the story of a journey, made in a canoe, by a married couple consisting of the moon and the sun (see *Mythologiques*, vol. III, 'Le Voyage en pirogue de la lune et du soleil'). The canoe and its journey are the key to the logical matrix underlying this particular series of myths.

The canoe, according to Lévi-Strauss's analyses, is a logical operator that can be positioned along the horizontal axis of the mythical journey in one of three basic positions: far, near or intermediary. Each myth of the transformational group chooses a different point along this scale, thereby realizing one of the possible variants allowed by the matrix (i.e, some myths relate to the departure from the pole of the near, others to the journey itself and a third kind to the arrival at the pole of the far). The key to the schema as a whole is that as one travels from one pole of the continuum to the other -- as one passes from the 'near' to the 'far', or vice-versa -- the values associated with that pole inverse. The schema, as Lévi-Strauss describes it, is none other than a geometrical representation of a chiasmic inversion, a conversion into spacial terms of the grammatical inversion that characterises the rhetorical figure. How is this?

The paradigm of the canoe journey has a number of different significances; it is a logical schema, a tool, that can be used by different populations to encode different kinds of human concerns. As such, it provides a key to how the Amerindians conceptualise travel, and, beyond that, how they use the metaphor of travel -- and of distance -- to conceptualise a range of other problems, including cosmological and sociological problems. It is also a key to Lévi-Strauss's own conception of the ethnographic journey.

The long and narrow canoes used by the American Indians require a minimum of two passengers: at the front the stroke, whose action keeps the boat moving, at the back, the steersman who directs it. The canoe is constructed in such a way that, once in place, neither passenger can get up or move without threatening to overturn it. They are seated at a fixed distance from one another in an unalterable relationship of interdependence. It is this special feature of the canoe that is the key to the mythological use of this motif.

Life in the canoe -- that is, when the canoe is at the mid-point in its journey between the poles of the near and the far -- represents a cosmological and a marital ideal whereby husband and wife, moon and sun, are placed at exactly the right distance from one another. They are neither too far nor too close and therefore guarantee, on the one hand, the proper alternation of night and day (compared to such states as eternal night or eternal day, which existed in earlier times), and on the other, marital concord.

Now, in Amerindian thought night-time is construed as a *disjunction* between the sky and he earth and day-time as a *conjunction* of the sky and the earth. At the level of its logical armature, the function of the canoe paradigm, Lévi-Strauss argues, is to keep 'conjunction' and 'disjunction' themselves at the right distance from one another. This is what happens when the canoe is positioned at the mid-point in its journey.

However, as the journey progresses and time goes by, the situation of the canoe and its passengers changes. And it changes according to the logic of chiasmic reversal. As Lévi-Strauss writes:

> Au départ, la pirogue est si près du port que la distance du proche reste pratiquement nulle; en revanche, les risques imprévisibles de l'aventure rendent pratiquement infinie celle du lointain. Mais le voyage commence; jour après jour, *le proche s'éloigne et le lointain se rapproche*. Que la pirogue arrive a destination, et les valeurs initiales des deux termes se trouveront inversées. (12) (The italics are mine)

If, at mid-point in the canoe's journey, day and night, 'conjunction' and 'disjunction', are kept at the

right distance from one another, when the canoe reaches the pole associated with the 'far', 'disjunction' has increased to the point of becoming absolute Myths that play out their games at this end of the virtual pole of the transformational series, tell the story of a total divorce between light and darkness, resulting in either eternal day or eternal night. All forms of natural phenomena that temper the opposition between absolute lightness and absolute darkness are abolished: moon- and starlight, the Milky Way, rainbows, the shadow of clouds all disappear (13). At the pole of disjunction, the pole of the far, *the possibility of mediating between night and day, light and dark, is lost*. And the result, according to mythical thought, is a world that has become literally rotten. Differences become absolute and can longer be overcome. In terms of the marital code contained in Amerindian myths, this pole corresponds to marriages contracted with excessively distant spouses, those chosen beyond the limits of exogamy, among enemy populations or even the animal kingdom.

Conversely, when the canoe is at the pole associated with the near, it is 'conjunction' that is at its greatest. At this pole of the canoe's journey, myths tell stories that thematically *inverse* those outlined above. These are stories about the merging of night and day and the abolition of the myriad distinctions that make daily life possible. Here, it is not the divorce between the sun and the moon that threatens the world but their excessively close relationship, resulting in such phenomena as eclipses, a symbol for the abolition of the opposition between the distant and the near. Here, mediation becomes hyper-mediation and *differences are abolished*. The result is not a rotten world, but a burnt world. In terms of the marital codes, this pole corresponds to the sociological threat of excessively close -- i.e. incestuous -- marriages.

What have these mythological themes got to do with the problem of the significance of the figure of chiasmus in Lévi-Strauss's thought?

Lévi-Strauss's mythemes are overdetermined. They relate back not only to their sources in Amerindian thought, but also their sources in Lévi-Strauss's thought. The paradigm of the canoe journey, as described by Lévi-Strauss, constitutes an allegory of Lévi-Strauss's own conception of the ethnographic journey and *its* chiasmic structure.

This becomes apparent when one reveals the hidden intertextual connections that link the above analysis of the canoe paradigm in Amerindian mythology to a passage in Lévi-Strauss's autobiographical account of his first field experiences, *Tristes tropiques* (13), a book published some thirteen years before the above work on myth (in *Mythologiques*, III: *L'Origine des manières de table*). The schema of the canoe journey, its mytho-poetic theorization of the concept of distance in terms of the dialectical relationship between the poles of the near and the far, 'conjunction' and 'disjunction', correspond, point by point, to Lévi-Strauss's conception of the nature of the ethnographic journey -- more specifically its *contradictory* nature -- such as it is theorized in the *Tristes tropiques* passage that I have just mentioned.

Lévi-Strauss carried out most of his field work among the Nambikwara and Caduveo Indians (indiginous populations of the Matto Grosso region of Brazil) but in 1935 he also spent one week with another Brazilian population, the Mundé, that, at the time, was virtually unknown to anthropologists. Instead of using the mules and oxes that constituted their normal mode of transport, this time, and for the very first time, Lévi-Strauss and his expedition travelled... by canoe. Indeed, the first of the two chapters devoted to his encounter with the Mundé is entitled: 'En pirogue'. And various clues in these chapters suggest that this journey, for Lévi-Strauss, had the value of a journey to the pole of the far, to the furthest most point of exoticism.

The expedition was fated to be a disillusioning one. Lévi-Strauss and his expedition, due to a lack of time before their departure, had been unable to learn the language spoken by the Mundé. So when Lévi-Strauss did finally encounter the mysterious Mundé, he found himself unable to communicate with them. Lévi-Strauss recorded what he could about this virtually unknown tribe, but left disappointed and disillusioned. Nevertheless, the experience was not lost on Lévi-Strauss who, reflecting upon it later, was lead to reflect more generally on the nature of the ethnographic journey and the conditions under which a specifically anthropological form of understanding is possible.

The problem that the Mundé experience brought to the fore was the problem of the perception of that which is different, what Victor Segalen, in his 'Essai sur l'exotisme', calls 'la perception du Divers' ([14]), and which he describes as 'la sensation d'Exotisme: qui n'est autre que la notion du différent; [...] la connaissance que quelque chose n'est pas soi-même [...] l'ivresse du sujet à concevoir son objet; à se connaître différent du sujet; à sentir le Divers' ([15]).

How does the anthropologist apprehend and comprehend (and as a writer, describe) what is 'different' or 'other', and what does it mean to be engaged in such a project? The question is a fundamental one for Lévi-Strauss who explicitly rejects any definition of anthropology in terms of a particular object of study (such as 'primitive' societies) and explains the specificity of anthropology in terms of its distinctive epistemological approach, which is to always 'see from afar'. For Lévi-Strauss, the principle tool of anthropological understanding is distance itself. The anthropologist -- the 'astronomer of the social sciences' as he once put it –([16]) gains access to the significance of what he observes precisely because his point of view is always a distant point of view.

The Mundé experience taught Lévi-Strauss that anthropology, conceived of in these terms, contains an inherent contradiction. It is worth recalling that *Tristes tropiques*, as the title suggests, is a pessimistic work, in which Lévi-Strauss, in the sceptical tradition of a Montaigne unable to answer his famous 'Que sais-je?', chose to put into question his motives for becoming an anthropologist, the value of what he has learnt from his travels and the legitimacy of his profession as a whole. (As we shall see, other aspects of his work adopt a more positive point of view.) Here are Lévi-Strauss's reflections on his experience among the Mundé:

> J'avais voulu aller jusqu'à l'extrême pointe de la sauvagerie; n'étais-je pas comblé, chez ces gracieux indigènes que nul n'avait vu avant moi, que personne peut-être, ne verrait plus après? Au terme d'un exaltant parcours, je tenais mes sauvages. Hélas, ils ne l'étaient que trop. Leur existence ne m'ayant été révélée qu'au dernier moment, je n'avais pu leur réserver le temps indispensable pour les connaître. [...] Ils étaient là, tout prêts à m'enseigner leurs coutumes et leurs croyances, et je ne savais pas leur langue. Aussi proches de moi qu'une image dans le miroir, je pouvais les toucher, non les comprendre. Je recevais du même coup ma récompense et mon châtiment. Car n'était-ce pas ma faute et celle de ma profession, de croire que des hommes ne sont pas toujours des hommes? Que certains méritent davantage l'intéret et l'attention parce que la couleur de leur peau et leurs mœurs nous étonnent? ([17])

And Lévi-Strauss concludes, formulating the essential contradiction that he places at the heart of anthropology:

> Que je parvienne seulement à les deviner, et ils se dépouillent de leur étrangeté: j'aurais pu aussi bien rester dans mon village. Ou que, comme ici, ils la conservent: et alors, elle ne me sert à rien, puisque je ne suis pas même capable de saisir ce qui la fait telle. Entre ces deux extrèmes, quels cas équivoques nous apportent les excuses dont nous vivons? ([18])

It is this fundamental contradiction that, with hindsight, we can see lies behind Lévi-Strauss's decoding of the canoe paradigm used in Amerindian mythology. The mythological significance of the journey of the moon and the sun does not only express Amerindian concerns about the nature of marriage or the alternation of night and day but Lévi-Strauss's concerns about the nature of anthropology itself.

As I have already indicated, the particularity of the *Amerindian* conception of travel is to see it in terms of a chiasmic inversion of the poles of the far and the near: the far becomes near and the near, far. At the end of the journey, the values of each pole are reversed (at the same time, in a number of versions of the canoe myth, its occupants, the moon and the sun, switch position, so that by the end of the journey the latter is in front, in the position of the stroke, the former at the rear). It is this chiasmic switching of positions -- other becomes self, self other -- which explains the contradiction inherent to anthropology: if the other remains other, I have no way of understanding him; but if I understand him, he is no longer

other. The poles of what one might term the 'anthropological paradox' correspond to the poles of the journey of the moon and the sun. For the ethnographer, the problem of the relationship between self (near) and other (far) is also that of how to mediate between 'excessive conjunction' and 'excessive disjunction'. His problem is not: what is the right distance to establish between man and wife in order to ensure the proper functioning of the institution of marriage? but: what is the right distance to establish between self and other in order to ensure the proper functioning of the institution of anthropology?

At one end of the continuum of the journey of ethnographic understanding -- the pole which corresponds to the mythological pole of the total divorce between night and day, light and dark -- what is abolished is the possibility of *mediation* between self and other. This is the pole of 'disjunction', symbolised by the Mundé experience, where the illusion of otherness is maintained, but so perfectly that no exchange is possible. In Amerindian myths, the elements that disappear at this end of the journey, to be replaced by eternal night or eternal day, are all forms of *tempered* light, such as rainbows or moonlight.

Conversely, at the other end of the continuum, at the pole of the close, the pole of incest, the pole where the earth burns, what threatens ethnographic understanding is an excessive 'conjunction' between self and other. What is abolished here is the *opposition* between far and near. Differences are reduced to sameness and, in terms of the ethnographer's paradox, the other becomes another self.

If I understand what makes the Mundé other, they are no longer other, and the whole ethnographic journey appears to be futile. Conversely, if they retain their otherness, I have no way of understanding them and again, the ethnographic experience is rendered null and void. In the equation that relates the journey of ethnographic understanding to the journey of the moon and the sun, the canoe, i.e., the mediating term between near and far, self and other, is language. And the problem evoked by the ethnographer's paradox is essentially that of the use of language as a means of understanding distant cultures. The pole of 'disjunction' is the pole of interrupted communication, where translation is impossible, that of 'conjunction', of an excessive communication that reduces all languages to one language, through a kind of hyper-translation. The dilemma here is the one raised by the myth of Babel.

From the pessimistic vantage-point that characterises *Tristes tropiques*, the chiasmic switching of positions of the near and the far that occurs in the journey of ethnographic understanding is revealed to harbour a contradiction which undermines anthropology. The ethnographic project -- to understand the other as other -- appears as an impossibility. Standing in the Brazilian rain forest, Lévi-Strauss tries to identify the source of the strangeness of the virgin land that surrounds him. 'Je prélève des scènes, je les découpe; est-ce cet arbre, cette fleur? Ils pourraient être ailleurs' (19). He restricts his vision to the smallest possible detail, the blade of grass at his feet, and then imagines a succession of increasingly distant points of view, each of which place the blade of grass (and him) in a larger context. His conclusion: the same blade of grass might well have been surrounded by the woods of the Paris suburb of Meudon (20).

However, in other parts of his works, Lévi-Strauss gives the same chiasmic inversion a positive instead of negative value. The switching of positions of self and other, far and close, is seen, on the contrary, as the basis of the constitution of a specifically anthropological form of understanding and hence as one of the principle epistemological tools of anthropology.

Because the Mundé experience is an extreme ('polar') experience, the general theory that Lévi-Strauss derives from it is accordingly negative. Anthropology only appears to be an impossible task when theorized in terms of the two polar situations hypothesised by the paradox: absolute otherness or absolute sameness. Ordinarily, the ethnographer does speak the other's language, and mediation *is* possible. Here, as with the journey of the moon and the sun, there is a third position between the two polar extremes, a mid-point in the anthropologist's journey where self and other -- like the moon and the sun when day alternates regularly with night -- are at the right distance from one another to be able to engage in a meaningful exchange. This 'mid-point' -- that of a 'tempered' anthropology -- is not evoked in the pessimistic passage from *Tristes tropiques* but is theorized in many other parts of Lévi-Strauss's

works. In particular, Lévi-Strauss identifies 'distance' as the anthropologist's principle tool of understanding: it enables the anthropologist, an outsider to the culture that he studies -- and, as will be seen, to his own -- to see what remains hidden to those, too close, who are active participants in that culture and who experience rather than observe, live rather than interpret (distance provides access to the *unconscious* dimension of the institutions of another culture). Neither too close, nor too far, the anthropologist is between cultures: his point of view is comparative. His aim is to observe the differences that distinguish one culture from another in order to bring to light the hidden features, fewer in number, that are common to all cultures (which is what Lévi-Strauss does, for example, when he shows that the many different types of kinship systems observed by anthropologists are reducible to a small number of recurring elementary structures whose purpose is the exchange of women).

But more significantly still in the present context, the chiasmic switching of positions between self and other is not only, when viewed positively, a source of knowledge about the other but about the self. Two symmetrical processes take place during the journey of ethnographic understanding. On the one hand, as the far gets closer, the other, through a process of identification, becomes assimilated to the self (21). This requires that the anthropologist transform himself, and his understanding of the nature of this transformation is a source of positive knowledge about the other. But, at the same time, the inverse process also takes place, i.e., what was once near, becomes distant. The understanding of the other requires a decentering (distanciation) of the self.

It is this final reversal, whereby the anthropologist comes to see and apprehend his own culture from the point of view of the distant other -- as if he were foreign to it -- that, I propose, constitutes the original figure of chiasmic inversion from which the other figures of inversion that I have evoked so far may be seen to derive. Because the story of this inversion -- of how the far becomes near, and, as a result, *the near far* -- is one of the fundamental stories that Lévi-Strauss's works tell, one of the grand narratives of structural anthropology.

This comes out at a number of different levels. First of all, that of the poetics of ethnographic description. In *Tristes tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss describes life in a Bororo village (the Bororo are from central Brazil). He is struck by the attention that the Bororo pay to what they wear and the way in which they decorate their bodies, whether in daily life or for ceremonial or ritual purposes. Men and women are constantly collecting materials with which they improvise the Bororo equivalent of fashion accessories:

> Les hommes portent [...] les jours de fête, des pendentifs en croissant formés d'une paire d'ongles du grand tatou [...] agrémentés d'incrustations de nacre, de franges de plumes ou de coton. Les becs de toucans fixés sur des tiges emplumés, les gerbes d'aigrettes [...] hérissent leur chignons -- naturels ou artificiels. (22)

The men's house has a religious function but is also a work-shop in which the Bororo men, whom Lévi-Strauss compares first to dressers ('dans tous les coins, on découpe, on façonne, on cisèle, on colle') and then milliners, make the costumes they wear (23). Among the accessories made in this way, Lévi-Strauss describes a ceremonial headdress worn by Bororo men during ritual dances. What is striking about the description of this artefact is not so much its strangeness but its uncanny familiarity. In describing its elaborate construction, its rococo exuberance, Lévi-Strauss evokes other headdresses which are more familiar to his reader, those worn by the dancers at the Folies-Bergères or those created by fashion designers for display on catwalks. Here is the description:

> [La parure] se compose d'un diadème en forme d'éventail; d'une visière de plumes couvrant la partie supérieure du visage; d'une haute couronne cylindrique entourant la tête, en baguettes surmontées de plumes de l'aigle-harpie; et d'un disque de vannerie servant à piquer un buisson de tiges encollées de plumes et de duvet. L'ensemble atteint presque deux mètres de hauteur. (24)

This descriptive passage functions like a two-way mirror, which may be either transparent or reflective.

It is at once what descriptions have always been, namely a window onto the world, here a distant world that is brought closer and made familiar. And at the same time, it also provides a (distant) reflection of a familiar world which, distorted, is made unfamiliar. In this last function -- to defamiliarize the world by putting it at a distance -- the anthropological point of view rejoins an essentially aesthetic or poetic point of view. Lévi-Strauss's description works according to the logic of chiasmus, requiring its reader to switch places with the distant object of his gaze and see himself from afar.

The above description illustrates what Lévi-Strauss formulates in more general terms in *La Pensée sauvage* when he discusses the nature of ethnographic curiosity:

> La fascination qu'exercent sur nous des coutumes, en apparence très éloignées des nôtres, le sentiment contradictoire de présence et d'étrangeté dont elle nous affectent, ne tiennent-ils pas à ce que ces coutumes sont beaucoup plus proches qu'il ne semble de nos propres usages, dont elle nous présentent une image énigmatique et qui demande à être décriptée? ([25](#))

Behind the image of the dancers in the Bororo ritual, Lévi-Strauss's description conjures up an 'enigmatic' image of the erotic dancers of the famous Paris revues and, in doing so, establishes a distance between us and that image. What the description of the Bororo headdresses distances (and defamiliarises) is a certain sensory image that we have of our own culture (taken from the stock of images that we associate with it), and a certain idea of femininity that goes with it (the Bororo dancers are men not women). In the *Mythologiques* -- a more complex work than critics often realise --, the same effect of distancing takes on an altogether more significant role. How is this?

As we have already seen, what Lévi-Strauss does in the *Mythologiques* is to dismantle the structural relations that link one myth to another and demonstrate that mythological sequences which seem absurd or incoherent on their own make sense if they are viewed as the end product of a series of logical manipulations applied to other mythological sequences.

However, what Lévi-Strauss discovers, as he excavates the hidden structures contained in myths, is that these reflect structures that are inherent to productions that belong to our own culture. The result of the structural dismantling of Amerindian myths is a series of 'enigmatic images' of the kind evoked in the passage from *La Pensée sauvage*, distant images of familiar objects. Amerindian mythology becomes a mirror in which the anthropologist views his own culture from afar, projects it *en abyme*. This reversal of points of view is one of the keys to the *Mythologiques* as a literary creation, as Lévi-Strauss's mytho-poem. I would like to give two examples here, the first relating to music, the second, the birth of philosophy.

Lévi-Strauss discovers, in the course of his analysis of the transformation of one myth into the next, that the patterns according to which myths are transformed correspond to known musical forms, such as the fugue, the sonata or the rondo. (In an interview, Lévi-Strauss explains that he used books on musical composition to understand how systems of interrelated myths were structured.) Lévi-Strauss finds that Amerindian myths contain structures that are analogous to those which emerged in Western music around the beginning of the 16th century, and which they mirror. The journey on which Lévi-Strauss takes us through the distant rain forests of America and the imaginative universe of its indigenous populations, affords a view not of new and unfamiliar mental structures, but a panorama of identifiable musical structures in which a Western composer would be able to recognise the image of his own creations. Through the lens of myth we contemplate musical structures. This is not all. It is these secret correspondences between mythological and musical structures -- the far and the near -- that prompt Lévi-Strauss to invite his reader to view the *Mythologiques* itself as a creation analogous to a symphony, more precisely as the 'negative' of a symphony -- a symphony in words -- which, he continues, some composer could legitimately be tempted, one day, to convert into its 'positive' musical equivalent ([26](#)). The *Mythologiques* are a kind of antithetical, mirror image of a symphony, its chiasmic transformation into another code.

It is not only musical structures that Lévi-Strauss sees reflected in the mirror of myth but logical structures. Here, the exploration of the imaginative world of Amerindian myths, the journey to the pole of the far, becomes a return home, a journey to the origins of Western thought.

In Lévi-Strauss's conception, a myth is always the projection of a logical schema. What matters is not the sequence of events that it narrates but the system of logical correlations and oppositions between the elements of the story. In a myth about a jaguar, a coyote and a hunter, what matters from the point of view of structural analysis, is that the first character is a predator that eats raw food, the second a scavenger that eats rotten food, and the last a human-being who eats cooked food. Each element (mytheme) becomes a signifier in a code that can be used to formulate various messages. In this way, the story of how man stole for the first time from the jaguar the fire he now cooks with (condemning the jaguar to eat raw food), becomes the story of the emergence of culture (signified by cooked food) from a state of nature (raw food).

The description of the formal logic that is the basis of such codes -- in other words, the writing of the grammar of mythical thought -- is one of Lévi-Strauss's main tasks in the *Mythologiques*. According to Lévi-Strauss's analysis of it, mythical thought uses three kinds of logical languages that are of increasing complexity (each corresponds to a different level of semantic organisation in mythical thought). The first kind is analyzed in the first volume of the *Mythologiques*, *Le Cru et le cuit* and consists of what Lévi-Strauss describes as a 'logic of qualities'. It uses structural oppositions between sensible ('secondary') qualities -- raw/cooked, fresh/rotten, dry/humid -- to formulate its messages. Put differently, it is distinctions such as these that, at the semantic level of the logic of qualities, are invested with meaning (made operative or functional within the semantic system that is a myth). The second logic, described in volume two of the *Mythologiques*, *Du Miel aux cendres*, is a 'logic of forms' which is based on oppositions such as: empty/full, contained/container, internal/external, included/excluded. These are the categories that are operative at the semantic level of the 'logic of forms'. The third kind of logic, described in the third volume of the *Mythologiques*, *L'Origine des manières de table*, is a 'logic of propositions' that establishes relationships not between single elements, but composite elements, i.e. elements that are already themselves bound in a system of relationships. This is the case, in particular, when the dimension of time is introduced into mythical thought. Here, what are opposed (made meaningful) in the codes used by myths, are different kinds of periodicities: slow/fast, equal duration/unequal duration, night/day (the formal logic that underpins the canoe myths that I have discussed above is of this kind).

From an anthropological point of view, Lévi-Strauss's objective in describing the logic that underlies mythical thought is to show that myths are the product of a mind that is no less rational or logical than our own (the idea of a 'primitive mentality' fundamentally different from our own is a nonsense). This is the anthropological lesson that Lévi-Strauss learns from his journey to the pole of the far. But in accomplishing this journey he also learns something about his own modes of thought. For in the course of the second volume of the *Mythologiques* a series of transformations occur in Amerindian myths that, as Lévi-Strauss sees it, reflect the emergence in ancient Greece, of abstract thought and with it philosophy.

The particularity of the logic that characterises mythical thought is its dependence on concrete images. It is a logic that adheres to -- is immanent to -- the images (mythemes) that myths string together, which also means that it is a logic that is not reflexively apprehended or theorized by those who use it (mythical thought is a non-reflexive mode of thought). Each of the three kinds of logic described above is rooted in a different aspect of sensible experience: the perception of secondary qualities, of forms or of temporal intervals. As Lévi-Strauss puts it in the 'Ouverture', with the study of myths, '[nous] espérons [...] atteindre un plan où les propriétés logiques se manifesteront comme attribut des choses aussi directement que les saveurs, ou les parfums' (27).

However, the formalization of the 'logic of forms' in *Du Miel aux cendres* reveals that in order to understand the relationship that connects certain myths it is necessary to use a number of geometrical concepts and that, furthermore, the operations that lie behind the transformations between these myths

constitute a form of algebra. These transformations can no longer be described in terms of concrete logic alone (i.e. a logic that adheres to sensible reality). Lévi-Strauss analyses reach a point where:

> La pensée mythique se dépasse elle-même et contemple, au-delà des images encore adhérantes à l'expérience concrète, un monde de concepts affranchis de cette servitude et dont les rapports se définissent librement: entendons, non plus par référence à une réalité externe, mais selon les affinités ou les incompatibilités qu'ils manifestent les uns vis-à-vis des autres dans l'architecture de l'esprit. (28)

And Lévi-Strauss continues: 'Or nous savons où un tel bouleversement se situe: aux frontières de la pensée grecque, là où la mythologie se désiste en faveur d'une philosophie qui émerge comme la condition préalable de la réflexion scientifique' (29).

The chiasmic switching of positions of the near and the far reveals here, at the heart of Amerindian mythology, the image -- the anticipatory image -- of the transformation that in ancient Greece led to the birth of philosophy from the matrix of myth when myth attained a reflexive understanding of its own modes of operating and gave rise, for the first time, to logic. In this way, Amerindian myths send back to the anthropologist an 'enigmatic image', a distant image of the passage that occurred, in ancient Greece, from a mytho-poetic mode of thought, anchored in concrete images and still turned towards the Neolithic era from which it emerged, to a rational (logocentric) mode of thought, based on concepts and turned towards modern science, which it made possible.

I have tried to show, in what precedes, that chiasmic inversion is a recurring feature of Lévi-Strauss's thought and that the source of this inversion, or at least one of its possible sources, is to be found in the switching of positions between the near and the far that characterises, in the Lévi-Straussian imaginary, the journey of ethnographic understanding: the far becomes near and the near becomes far. A final piece of evidence in support of this hypothesis is to be found in the title that Lévi-Strauss gave to one of his collections of essays, *Le Regard éloigné* (1983). The title comes from Zeami, the creator of Japanese *nô* theatre (30). Zeami says that a good actor must be able to see *himself* in the way that his spectators see him -- through their distant eyes -- and this is what he calls 'regard éloigné'. Testifying again to the connection that links the anthropological view of the word to a poetic one, the same expression is used by Lévi-Strauss to stand for the particular way in which the anthropologist sees his own society as if he were a distant observer, far away in space and time, a point of view that, I would like to suggest, is one of the distinctive marks of the Lévi-Straussian text.

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NOTES

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20. *Tristes tropiques*, p. 397.

21. *Tristes tropiques*, p. 398.

22. 'Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss', p. XXXI.

23. *Tristes tropiques*, pp. 262-3.

24. *Tristes tropiques*, p. 263.

25. *Tristes tropiques*, p. 263.

26. *La Pensée sauvage*, p. 251.

27. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, 4 vols (Paris: Plon, 1964-71), IV: *L'Homme nu* (1971), p. 580.

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