

THE STRUCTURE OF FAIRYTALES: PROPP VS LÉVI-STRAUSS

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Folklore is one of the main topics pursued by the Russian semioticians of the Tartu School. Even a cursory examination of their works in this field (and sometimes in other fields, as well), reveals the profound influence of Vladimir Ja. Propp (1895-1970) and the exceptionally high esteem he enjoys among them.

*Propp's popularity, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. His most influential work, *Morphology of the Folktale*¹, was published in 1929, but it did not become a seminal work until the 1960's. This came about in a curious way. *Morphology* was translated into English in 1958.² The eminent French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss read it (found it of enormous interest), and in 1960 published a devastating review.³ His review ironically promoted Propp from relative obscurity to a leading position in folkloristics, not only in the West, but also in the USSR.*

Propp was a folklorist whose chief interest was the study of fairytales. *Morphology of the Folktale*, his first major work on the subject, had several related purposes: to define the fairytale genre, to establish a coherent system of classification (something that had defied the efforts of earlier scholars), and to determine which elements in fairytales are constant and which are variable. After the publication of *Morphology*, Propp turned to the study of the origin and evolution of the fairytale, and this work resulted in the publication of the book, *The Historical Roots of the Magic Tale*.⁴ Propp explains his choice of priorities as follows:

1. Propp, V. Ja.: *Morfologija skazki*, Moscow, 1929; second edition: Moscow 1969, E. Meletinskij ed.

2. Propp, V.: *Morphology of the Folktale*, translated by Laurence Scott, edited by S. Pirková-Jakobson, *Part III, International Journal of American Linguistics*, 24: 4, 1958.

3. Lévi-Strauss, C.: "L'Analyse morphologique des contes russes," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, 3, 1960.

4. Propp, V. Ja.: *Istoričeskie korni volšebnoj skazki*, Leningrad, 1946.

It is scarcely possible to doubt that phenomena and objects around us can be studied from the aspect of their composition and structure, or from the aspect of those processes and changes to which they are subject, or from the aspect of their origins. Nor is it necessary to prove that one can speak about the origin of any phenomenon only after that phenomenon has been described.⁵

Thus, *Morphology* was to be a synchronic description of the genre, while *Roots* was to provide a diachronic study of its origins and historical development.

In *Morphology* Propp determined that Russian fairytales contain thirty-one invariant "functions" (actions such as villainy, beginning counteraction, departure, receipt of a magical agent, struggle, victory, etc.) distributed among seven invariable *dramatis personae* (the villain, the hero, the donor, etc.), and that these functions always follow a certain invariable sequence.

The reason Lévi-Strauss became interested in Propp was that in the course of his anthropological and ethnographical studies he had done a great deal of research in mythology, and his method bore a certain resemblance to that of Propp (Lévi-Strauss's "mythème" is a concept somewhat akin to Propp's function, Lévi-Strauss implied the existence of a primeval myth just as Propp presupposed a primeval fairy-tale, etc.). But there are, of course, profound theoretical and methodological differences between the two approaches. Perhaps one of the most important of these differences is that Propp, while analyzing the arrangement of functions within each fairytale, largely ignored the precise semantic content of each function, whereas Lévi-Strauss sought to explore the semantic relationships between various mythemes within each myth and from myth to myth. Propp's approach is thus generally syntagmatic, while Lévi-Strauss's is paradigmatic.

Lévi-Strauss begins his review of *Morphology* by recognizing the debt structuralism owes to Russian Formalism:

The message of the Russian Formalist School was not lost. First it was picked up and expanded in Europe by the Prague Linguistic Circle; after about 1949 the teachings and personal influence of Roman Jakobson brought it to the United States. I do not intend to imply that structural linguistics and modern structuralism, within as well as outside linguistics, is nothing more than an extension of Russian formalism. As I stated earlier, the two differ in the belief that while a little structuralism tends to take one away from the concrete, much structuralism brings one back to it. Yet, even though Roman Jakobson can in no way be called "formalist", he has never lost sight of the historical role of the Russian school nor its intrinsic value. In his expositions on the forerunners of structuralism, he has always reserved a special place for Russian formalism. Those who have listened to him since 1940 have become indirectly marked by this distant influence. If, as Mrs. Pírková-Jakobson [editor of the English translation of *Morphology*, in her preface] asserts, the present writer seems to have "applied and developed Propp's method," it could not have happened consciously, since Propp's book was not accessible to him until the publication of this translation. Nevertheless, through the intermediary of Roman Jakobson, something of Propp's substance and inspiration has reached him.⁶

5. *Op. cit.*, (2), pp. 4-5.

6. *Op. cit.*, (3), p. 123. (All the quotations from this work have been translated from French by S. Shishkoff.)

Next, Lévi-Strauss goes on to summarize *Morphology* and eulogize Propp:

The most striking thing about Propp's work is his ability to anticipate future developments. Those among us who tackled structural analysis around 1950 did not know about Propp's attempt of a quarter of a century before. Yet we discover with amazement in our own work formulas, sometimes even entire sentences, identical to Propp's but which we know that we did not borrow from him. The idea of the "initial situation," the comparison of mythological matrix with musical composition, the need for reading "horizontally" and "vertically" simultaneously, the constant use of the notions of a substitution group and a transformation to resolve the apparent contradiction between the form, which is constant, and the content, which changes (*passim*), an effort—at least sketched out by Propp—to reduce the apparent specificity of functions to pairs of opposites, the special opportunity for structural analysis offered by myths, and, last but not least, the fundamental hypothesis that there exists, strictly speaking, only one single tale, so that some day, perhaps, the variations which have disappeared or are unknown will be figured out "just as we conjecture on the basis of general astronomical laws about the existence of those stars which we cannot see"—all these are so many intuitions whose astuteness and prophetic character must be admired and which make Propp worthy of the devotion of all those who became his continuers without knowing it.

Therefore, if we are forced to formulate certain reservations and voice some objections in the discussion which is to follow, they should not diminish in any way the immense contribution of Propp, nor dispute the priority of his discoveries.⁷

After paying such a high tribute to Propp, Lévi-Strauss proceeds to mount a rather ferocious attack on Propp's premises, method, and conclusions. His whole review is based on the opposition between formalism and structuralism:

Structuralism, in contrast to formalism, refuses to contrapose the concrete to the abstract, and to place the latter in a privileged position. Form is defined by opposing it to a content which is external to the form: structure, however, has no content: it is the content enclosed in a logical construct which is seen as being the property of reality.⁸

In short, Lévi-Strauss sees Propp as ". . . one of the main exponents of the Russian formalists"⁹.

One point which is very important for Lévi-Strauss is that of the relation of fairytale to myth. Propp believed that fairytales originated from myths and rituals at the moment when the system of beliefs on which they were based ceased to be dominant in a society, and the material thus liberated became available for a more mundane use. As a consequence, fairytales and myths dealing with the same events and personages cannot coexist within a society; Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, holds that the difference between fairytales and myths is one of degree and not substance, that they are both based on oppositions to be resolved: only in myths these oppositions are major, while in fairytales they are minor. Fairytales and myths, therefore, can and do coexist, and each is seen as a complementary part of a system.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

One of the recurrent charges against Propp is that of inconsistency. For example, while claiming to be doing a synchronic analysis of the fairytale, Propp occasionally comments on its origin and evolution. Lévi-Strauss takes him to task for it:

In this fashion Propp appears to be torn between his formalist outlook and an obsession with historical explanations. To a certain extent one can understand the misgivings which made him abandon the former in favor of the latter. As a matter of fact, the moment he focused on the folk tale, the contradiction became inevitable: it is clear that history is involved in tales, but this history is practically inaccessible since we know virtually nothing about the prehistoric civilization which gave birth to them. But is it really history that is lacking? The historical dimension appears to be a negative factor produced by the separation of the present-day tale from its ethnological context, which is lacking. The opposition is resolved if an oral tradition is viewed while it still operates in 'normal' conditions of the kind that ethnography deals with. In such circumstances the problem of history does not arise at all, or only a little, since the external references needed for interpreting an oral tradition are still current, like the tradition itself. However, when Propp launches into the study of this context after 1930, he sees it only in a purely historical perspective.

Propp is thus a victim of a subjective illusion. He is not torn, as he thinks, between the requirements of synchrony and diachrony; *it is not the past he lacks, it is the context*. He did not adopt the formalist dichotomy, which opposes form and material and defines them in antithetic terms, because it was inherent in his subject, but because he accidentally chose an area where only the form survived, while the material disappeared. However unwillingly, he must separate the two and, at the most crucial points of his analysis, he reasons as if the things that he did not find did, in fact, exist.¹⁰

The question of "context" is, of course, very important to Lévi-Strauss since he insists that certain structures manifest themselves across the cultural spectrum of a society and may be difficult to discover and understand if only one manifestation is considered at a time.

Lévi-Strauss perceives another inconsistency when Propp attempts to formulate a system of classification of fairytales:

The author analyzes them [the functions of the protagonists] into genera and species. Yet it is obvious that while the criteria used to define genera are purely morphological, those used to define species are, for the most part, not. Propp uses them, undoubtedly unconsciously, to reintroduce aspects which relate to content. Thus, for instance, the generic function "villainy": it is divided into twenty-two species and subspecies, such as, the villain "carries off a person," "steals a magic agency," "plunders or ruins a crop," "steals the light of day," "demands a cannibalistic meal," etc. All of the content of the tales gets gradually reintroduced thereby and the analysis oscillates between a formal statement so generalized that it applies to all the tales (that is the level of genera) and the simple reintroduction of raw material about which it was enunciated at the outset that only its formal features had an explicative value.

The ambiguity is so flagrant that Propp desperately searches for a middle position. Instead of making a systematic inventory of what he calls "species," he contents himself with isolating a few and lumping together all those that are rarely encountered into a single "specific" category, or, as Propp puts it: "From a technical point of view, it is more useful to isolate the few more im-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 136-137.

portant forms, and generalize about the remaining ones.” But only one of the two positions is possible: one either deals with specific forms, in which case one cannot formulate a coherent system without listing and classifying all of them, or else there is nothing but content, and according to Propp’s own rules, it should be left out of morphological analysis. In any event, a pigeonhole where one stashes away all the forms not classified does not make up a “species.”¹¹

This is a particularly serious charge since Propp, at the very beginning of *Morphology*, complains that the fairy tale classifiers who came before him (W. Wundt, R. Volkov, A. Aarne, J. Bolte and G. Polívka, etc.) did not have a consistent standard of classification—they sometimes classified tales according to *dramatis personae*, sometimes according to the plot, and sometimes according to some other salient feature. Lévi-Strauss presses this point emphatically:

Why then is Propp satisfied with this ill-fitting garment? For a very simple reason: namely, unless content is surreptitiously reintroduced into the form, form is bound to remain at such a high level of abstraction that it no longer has any meaning, nor any heuristic value. *Formalism annihilates its own object*. In Propp it leads to the discovery that, in fact, there exists only one tale. Thereafter the problem of explaining is simply shifted. We know what the tale is, but since observation furnishes not one archetypal tale but a multitude of tales, we do not know how to classify them. Before formalism we probably did not know what tales had in common. After it we are left without any means of understanding how they differ from each other. One certainly has gone up from the concrete to the abstract, but there is no way now to go back from the abstract to the concrete. ¹²

Elsewhere Lévi-Strauss generalizes his criticism as follows:

The proof of analysis is in synthesis. If the synthesis proves to be impossible, it means that the analysis was incomplete. Nothing demonstrates the deficiency of formalism more than its inability to restore the empirical content, the very same content that it started from. What did it lose along the way? The content, precisely. Propp has discovered—and that is his great merit—that the content of tales is *permutable*; all too often he concluded from this fact that it was *arbitrary*, and that is the reason for the difficulties he ran into, since even permutations are subject to laws.¹³

The most fundamental criticism of Propp’s method (and of formalism in general) is, perhaps, to be found in these lines:

The mistake of formalism is dual. Because it concentrates exclusively on the rules which govern the arrangement of propositions, it loses sight of the fact that in no language can the vocabulary be deduced from its syntax. A study of any linguistic system requires the cooperation of a grammarian and a philologist, which is to say that when one is dealing with oral tradition, morphology is sterile unless it is fertilized directly or indirectly by ethnological observation. To imagine, like Propp, that it is possible to dissociate the two tasks, to attack the grammar first and put the vocabulary off for later, is to be condemned never to produce anything other than a disembodied grammar, and a lexicon where anecdotes replace definitions. In the final account, neither will fulfill its mission.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

This primary error of formalism is explained by a lack of understanding of the complementary nature of the signified and the signifier, which is recognized, since Saussure, in every linguistic system. Yet he compounds this error by an inverse error, which is to treat the oral tradition as a linguistic expression like any other, i.e., unequally suitable for structural analysis, depending on the level considered. It is recognized that language is structural on the phonological level, and one becomes more and more convinced that it is structural on the grammatical level as well. But it is less certain that it is so on the lexical level.¹⁴

The controversy between Propp's and Lévi-Strauss's positions is continuing. Lévi-Strauss saw it as a dispute between the formalists and the structuralists, while Propp thought of it as one between the empirical and philosophical approaches. Be that as it may, both scholars have greatly influenced folkloric research and inspired many people to continue work along the lines they had set out. Some tend to follow the Propp line (these include most Soviet folklorists, such as E. M. Meletinskij, S. Ju. Nekljudov, E. S. Novik, etc., but also many in the West, e.g., T. Todorov, A. Dundes, L. Dolezel), while others prefer the approach of Lévi-Strauss (C. Bremond, A. J. Greimas, et al.). Some, however, have come to the conclusion that the two approaches are in no way incompatible.

When the publication of an Italian translation of *Morphology of the Folktale* was contemplated,¹⁵ the publisher, Einaudi, decided to include Lévi-Strauss's essay, and asked Propp to write a reply if he wished. Propp, aware of the importance of the issues raised, readily accepted. His reply, translated from Propp's Russian manuscript, which has been made available to us, is published on the following pages:

14. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

15. Propp, V.: *Morfologia della fiaba*. Con un intervento di Claude Lévi-Strauss e una replica dell'autore. Torino, 1966.