

## Chapter Five.

# The Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale

*Morphology of the Folktale* was published in Russian in 1928 and elicited two kinds of reaction. Some folklorists, ethnographers, and literary scholars received it favorably, while others accused its author of formalism, and this accusation has often been repeated even in our day. The book, like so many others, would probably have been forgotten or remembered occasionally only by specialists, but a few years after the war it emerged again. It was frequently mentioned at congresses and in articles, and it was translated into English (Propp 1958a; 1968a). The cause of this renewed interest should be sought in the revolutionary discoveries made in the exact sciences through the use of much more advanced and reliable methods of research and computation. Attempts to apply similar methods extended to the humanities as well. Structural and mathematical linguistics sprang up, and other disciplines followed, poetics among them. Then it appeared that the concept of art as a system of signs, the procedure of formalization and modeling, and the possibility of using computation had been anticipated in *Morphology*, although at the time it was written the concepts and the terminology with which poetics operates today did not exist. Once again this work was evaluated in two different ways. Some considered it useful and necessary in the search for new methods, whereas others, just as before, found it formalistic and devoid of any epistemological value.

Among the opponents of the book is Professor Claude Lévi-Strauss. He is a structuralist, and the structuralists themselves have often been accused of formalism; Lévi-Strauss has used *Morphology*, which he takes for a basically formalistic book, to show the difference between structuralism and formalism (Lévi-Strauss 1960). Let the reader decide whether or not Lévi-Strauss is right; but when one is attacked, one tries to defend oneself. If the arguments of the adversary seem faulty, one can put forward counterarguments, and such a polemic

may be of general interest. Therefore I gladly accepted the invitation of the Einaudi Publishers to write a rejoinder. Lévi-Strauss has thrown down the gauntlet, and I am ready to pick it up. Readers of *Morphology* will thus witness our duel and will be able to determine the winner, should there be one.

Lévi-Strauss has a very important advantage over me: he is a philosopher, whereas I am an empiricist, indeed an incorruptible empiricist, who first scrutinizes the facts and studies them carefully, checking his premises and looking back at every step in his reasoning. However, the empirical sciences are also all different. In some instances the empiricist can and even must limit himself to a mere description, especially if the object under study is an isolated fact. Such descriptions, provided they are correct, are in no way devoid of value. But if we are describing a series of facts and their relationships, our description will bring out what is essential in the phenomenon, and, apart from being of interest to the specialist, will invite philosophical meditations. In my book such meditations were present too, but they were hidden in the epigraphs to some chapters. Lévi-Strauss knows my work only in an English translation; the translator, however, has taken an unpardonable liberty. He missed my point and did not understand the function of the epigraphs. At first glance, they do not seem to belong to the text, so he decided that they were useless embellishments and barbarously suppressed them. Yet the epigraphs were from Goethe's works collected under the title of *Morphology* and from his journals; their purpose was to express certain things not stated in the text of the book.<sup>1</sup>

The highest goal of every science is to discover laws. Where the naive empiricist sees only disjointed facts, the empiricist-philosopher recognizes a law. I noticed a law in a small and narrow area—one type of folktale, but it occurred to me even then that the discovery of this law could also be of some general importance. The word *morphology* was not borrowed from manuals of botany whose chief purpose is classification, or from grammatical treatises; it came from the writings of Goethe, who used this unifying term in the title of his works on botany and osteology. Behind Goethe's term, we can see the prospect of discovering general laws that permeate all nature. It is not by chance that Goethe went on from botany to comparative osteology. I can heartily recommend these works to the structuralists. And if the young Goethe, like his own Faust seated in a dusty laboratory among skeletons, bones, and herbaria, saw nothing in them except the mortal dust, the aging Goethe, a master of precise comparisons in the field of natural sciences, saw in individual phenomena the common and general principle that permeates all nature. But two Goethes, the poet and the scholar, do not exist; the Goethe of *Faust*, who longed for knowledge, and Goethe, the naturalist, who attained it, are one and the same person. By starting some chapters with epigraphs, I paid homage to him. The epigraphs also emphasized that the realms of nature and human creativity are not separated. Something unites them;

laws common to both can be studied by related methods. This idea, still vague at that time, now underlies the search for exact methods in the humanities. This is one of the reasons that the structuralists have supported me. On the other hand, some structuralists failed to understand that my goal was not to arrive at the broad generalizations alluded to in the epigraphs but to investigate a specific area of folklore. The puzzled Lévi-Strauss twice asked a question about what had made me apply my method to the wondertale. He himself stated these reasons, of which, he believes, there are several. He asserts that I am not an ethnologist and therefore could not avail myself of mythological material and that I have no idea of the relationships between the wondertale and myth. It turns out that I studied the wondertale because of my scholarly limitations; otherwise, I would probably have tested my method on myths, not on wondertales.

I will not dwell on the logic of these arguments ("since the author does not know myths, he studies wondertales"). This logic seems poor to me, and I think that no scholar can be forbidden to do one thing and urged to do another. According to Lévi-Strauss, a scholar first finds the method and then begins to think where to apply it; in my case it has been applied, regrettably, to wondertales, an area of little interest to the philosopher. But things never happen so in science; nor did they happen this way in my case. Before the Revolution, Russian universities cared very little about the literary training of philologists. Folk poetry in particular was completely neglected. To fill that gap, I devoted myself after graduation to the study of Afanas'ev's famous collection. In a series of wondertales about the persecuted stepdaughter I noted an interesting fact: in "Morozko" [Frost] (No. 95 in Soviet editions) the stepmother sends her stepdaughter into the woods to Morozko. He tries to freeze her to death, but she speaks to him so sweetly and so humbly that he spares her, gives her a reward, and lets her go. The old woman's daughter, however, fails the test and perishes. In another tale the stepdaughter encounters not Morozko but a *lešij* [a wood goblin], in still another, a bear. But surely it is the same tale! Morozko, the *lešij*, and the bear test the stepdaughter and reward her each in his own way, but the plot does not change. Was it possible that no one should ever have noticed this before? Why did Afanas'ev and others think that they were dealing with different tales? It is obvious that Morozko, the *lešij*, and the bear performed the same action. To Afanas'ev these were different tales because of different characters in them. To me they were identical because the actions of the characters were the same. The idea seemed interesting, and I began to examine other wondertales from the point of view of the actions performed by the characters. As a result of studying the material (and not through abstract reasoning), I devised a very simple method of analyzing wondertales in accordance with the characters' actions—regardless of their concrete form. To designate these actions I adopted the term "functions." My observations of the tale of the persecuted stepdaughter allowed me to get hold

of the end of the thread and unravel the entire spool. It turned out that the other plots were also based on the recurrence of functions and that all wondertale plots consisted of identical functions and had identical structure.

If the translator has done the reader a bad turn by leaving out the epigraphs from Goethe, the original Russian publisher also violated the author's will, for he changed the title of the book. I called it *Morphology of the Wondertale*. To make the book more attractive, the editor replaced the word *wondertale* and in this way led everybody (including Lévi-Strauss) to believe that the book would concern itself with the general laws of the folktale. A work with this title could be included in a series of studies like *Morphology of the Charm*, *Morphology of the Fable*, *Morphology of Comedy*, and so forth. But my intention was not to study all the various and complex types of the folktale; I examined only one strikingly distinctive type, viz., the folk wondertale. The book is devoted to a specific area of folklore. The analysis of narrative genres according to the functions of the characters can perhaps be applied to other tales and even to any narrative. If so, in each case the results will be different. For instance, cumulative tales and wondertales are based on totally dissimilar principles. English folklorists call cumulative tales formula tales, and the types of formulas can be isolated and defined, but the schemes of the cumulative tale and the wondertale will not coincide. Thus, though several kinds of narrative occur, they can be analyzed by the same methods. Lévi-Strauss cited the statement in which I admit that my conclusions are not applicable to the tales of Novalis and Goethe and to the *Kunstmärchen* in general and turned it against me: allegedly, if my statement is true, my conclusions are wrong. But they are not wrong; they merely lack the universal character that my esteemed critic wished to attribute to them. The method is broad, but the conclusions are valid for the type of narrative that yielded them in the first place.

I will not respond to all of Lévi-Strauss's charges and will dwell only on some of the most important ones. If these prove to be unfounded, the other, less important ones, derived from them, will fall by themselves.

His main charge is that my work is of a formalistic stamp and for that reason alone cannot be of any epistemological value. Lévi-Strauss has not provided a precise definition of what he means by formalism; he just limits himself to some characteristics that he points out as he goes along. One of them is that the formalists study their data without reference to history. Lévi-Strauss attributed such a formalistic, ahistorical method to me too, but then, in a seeming attempt to mitigate his harsh judgment somewhat, informed the readers that I had renounced formalism and morphological analysis after I wrote my *Morphology* and devoted myself to the historical and comparative study of the relationships between oral literature (as he calls folklore) and myths, rites, and institutions. He did not, however, specify which study he meant. In my book *Russian Agrarian Festivals* (1963a) I used the same method as in *Morphology*. I discovered that all the prin-

cial agrarian festivals consist of identical elements organized differently. This work could not at that time have been known to Lévi-Strauss, so he is evidently referring to my *Historical Roots of the Wondertale*, which appeared in 1946. If he had taken a look at that volume, he would have realized that it begins with an exposition of the theses developed in *Morphology*. There the wondertale is defined not through the plot, but through composition. In fact, once the unity of the composition of the wondertale was established, I could do no less than ask myself the cause of this unity. It was clear to me from the beginning that the cause would not be found in immanent laws of form and that it should be sought in early history, or prehistory, that is, in the stage of human society studied by ethnology and ethnography. Lévi-Strauss is perfectly right when he says that morphology is sterile if it is not bound directly or indirectly to data from ethnology. For this very reason I did not abandon morphological analysis but set myself the task of searching for the historical foundations and historical roots of the system revealed by a comparative study of wondertale plots. *Morphology* and *Historical Roots* represent, so to speak, two parts, or two volumes, of a single work—the second proceeds directly from the first, the first is the premise of the second. Lévi-Strauss cited my statement that morphological research should be connected with historical inquiry and once again turned my words against me. Insofar as this research is absent from *Morphology*, he is right, but he has underestimated the fact that these words were the expression of a specific principle. In addition, they represented a promise to do this historical research in the future, a bill that I honestly paid, even if many years later. So when he says that I am torn between the “formalist vision” and the “obsession with historical explanations,” he is simply wrong. Using the most rigorously consistent means possible, I went from the scientific description of the phenomena and facts to an explanation of their historical roots. Lévi-Strauss knows nothing of all this and even claims to have detected some sort of repentance in me that presumably made me abandon my formalist illusions for historical investigations. But I do not feel any remorse and do not have the least twinge of conscience. Lévi-Strauss maintains that a historical explanation of wondertales is impossible “because we know very little about the prehistorical civilizations in which they sprang up” and regrets the lack of texts for comparison. But the problem is not confined to texts (which, incidentally, exist in quite sufficient quantity); what really matters is that plots are engendered by the life of the people and the forms of thought at the early stages of social development and that the appearance of these plots is historically determined. It is true that we still know little about ethnology, but scholars have gathered enough data to make such inquiries reliable.

Clearly, questions of principle are more important than the ways in which *Morphology* was conceived. It is inadmissible to separate formal inquiry from the historical approach and juxtapose them. On the contrary, formal analysis, that is, a careful systematic description of the material, is the first condition, pre-

requisite, and the first step of historical research. Individual plots have been studied in great detail: cf. the works of the Finnish school. But their authors see no connection among the plots; they do not even suspect that such a connection exists or is possible. This is the characteristic orientation of the formalists, for whom the whole is a mechanical conglomeration of disjointed parts. Consequently, the wondertale is represented by them as so many individual plots. The structuralist, on the other hand, detects a system where the formalist inevitably fails to see one. The method elaborated in *Morphology* makes it possible to rise above the plots and study the genre of the wondertale as a whole, rather than pass from plot to plot, as is done by the Finnish school, which has been justly accused of formalism, all its merits notwithstanding. The comparative study of plots opens up wide historical perspectives. What needs historical explanation is not individual plots but the compositional system to which they belong. This approach will bring out the historical connections among them and pave the way for the study of individual plots.

The relation between formal and historical analysis covers only one aspect of the question. Another aspect is the relation between content and form and the methods of studying them. The term *formalistic* usually implies the study of form divorced from content. Lévi-Strauss even speaks of the two as being juxtaposed. His conclusions do not differ from those of contemporary Soviet literary scholars. Thus, according to Jurij Lotman (1968, 11), one of the most active literary structuralists, the principal flaw of the so-called formal method was the view of literature as a sum total of devices, a mechanical conglomeration. To this can also be added that for the formalists form is governed by its own independent laws and its development is free from the pressure of social history. Literary development is treated as an immanent process subject to the laws of form.

If this is what is meant by formalism, *Morphology of the Folktale* cannot possibly be defined as formalistic, even though Lévi-Strauss is far from being my only accuser. Not every study of form is formalistic, and not every scholar who examines form in oral and visual art is a formalist.

I have already cited Lévi-Strauss's statement that my observations regarding the structure of the wondertale are an illusion, *une vision formaliste*. This is not a casual opinion; the author is deeply convinced that I am a victim of illusions. Out of many tales I allegedly constructed one that never existed, and this one is "an abstraction so vague and general that it tells us nothing about the causes of the existence of so many tales." That my abstraction, as Lévi-Strauss calls my scheme, does not reveal the causes of diversity is true; only historical research can do that. But it is not true that the scheme is vague and represents sheer illusion. Lévi-Strauss's words suggest that he failed to understand my empirical, concrete, and detailed investigation. How could that have happened? Lévi-Strauss complained that my work was in general difficult to understand. It happens quite often that people who have many ideas of their own have difficulty following

those of other people. They do not see what is clear to any unprejudiced person. My approach is at variance with Lévi-Strauss's, and that is one of the reasons for the misunderstanding. Another is related to me. I wrote the book when I was young; I believed that it was enough to put forward an observation or an idea for everyone to grasp and share it immediately. My style was terse; I expressed myself in theorem form and did not care for detailed proofs, because I thought that even in that form they would be clear at first view. I was wrong about that.

Let us begin with the terms. I must admit that Goethe's term *Morphology*, which was once so dear to me and to which I attributed a meaning not only scientific but in part philosophical and even poetic, was not a good choice after all. I should have spoken not of morphology but of a much more narrow and accurate concept, that of composition, and should have entitled the book *Composition of the Folk Wondertale*. But even "composition" ought to be defined, because it can mean many things. So what do I mean?

As stated above, my analysis originated in the observation that in the wondertale different characters perform identical actions, or, what is the same thing, that identical actions can be performed in very different ways. I have cited as evidence the tales of the persecuted stepdaughter, but this observation is valid not only for the variants of this plot but for every wondertale plot. So, for example, if the hero leaves home in quest of something, and the object of his desires is far away, he can reach it by magic horse, eagle, flying carpet, flying ship, astride the devil, etc. I will not enumerate all the possibilities. It will be easily seen that in each case we are dealing with the transfer of the hero to the place where the object of his search is located, but that the forms in which the transfer is realized are different. We have both constants and variables. Let us take another example. The princess does not wish to marry, or her father does not want her to marry a suitor he or she dislikes. The suitor is required to perform impossible tasks: to jump to her window on horseback, bathe in a cauldron of boiling water, solve the princess's riddle, procure a golden hair from the sea king, etc. To the uninitiated listener all these variants seem completely different, and in a way he is right. But to the sophisticated scholar this diversity conceals a logically determinable unity. In the first series of examples we are dealing with the transfer to the place of the search, whereas in the second we have the motif of difficult tasks. The content of the tasks varies, but the presence of a task is something stable. I called such stable elements the functions of the characters. The goal of my investigation was to establish which functions appear in the wondertale, to determine whether they are limited in number and what sequence they follow. In my book I discussed the results of this analysis. The functions turned out to be few, their forms many, the sequence always the same. A picture of surprising regularity has been obtained.

It seemed to me that all this was simple enough and easy to understand. I still think so. I did not, however, take into account that the word "function" has many

different meanings in the languages of the world. It is used in mathematics, mechanics, medicine, and philosophy. Those who do not know all these meanings understand me easily. Function, according to my definition of the term (as used in *Morphology*), denotes the action of the character from the point of view of its significance for the progress of the narrative. If the hero jumps to the princess's window on horseback, we do not have the function of jumping on horseback (such a definition would be accurate only if we disregarded the advance of the narrative as a whole) but the function of performing a difficult task as part of courtship. Likewise, if an eagle takes the hero to the country of the princess, we do not have the function of flying on a bird but one of transfer to the place where the object of the search is located. The word "function" is a conventional term that was to be understood in this and no other sense.

I deduced the functions from detailed comparative analyses. Therefore, I cannot agree with Lévi-Strauss when he says that the functions were established in an altogether arbitrary and subjective way. On the contrary, they were established through the comparison, juxtaposition, and identification of hundreds and thousands of cases. But Lévi-Strauss gives the term "function" a meaning completely different from the one adopted in *Morphology*. To show that the functions were arbitrary, he refers to the example of different people guarding a fruit tree: one would consider fertility most important, another, deep roots, whereas a savage would attribute to it the function of joining heaven and earth (the tree can reach up to heaven). From the point of view of logic, fertility can indeed be defined as one of the functions of a fruit tree, but fertility is not an action, much less an action of a character in a narrative. I devote myself only to narratives and their specific laws. Lévi-Strauss gives my terms a generalized, abstract meaning that they do not have and then rejects that meaning.

We can now turn to composition. By composition I mean the sequence of functions as given in the tale itself. The resultant scheme is not an archetype or the reconstruction of a single imaginary tale (as my critic thinks) but something altogether different: it is the compositional scheme underlying all wondertales. Lévi-Strauss is right about one thing: this compositional scheme has no real existence. However, it is realized in the narrative in many different forms: it is the basis of the plot and is, so to speak, its skeleton. To make my idea clearer and avoid further misunderstandings, I will give one example of what is meant by the plot and by composition. Let us imagine that a dragon has carried off the king's daughter. The king appeals for help, and a peasant's son decides to search for her. He sets out and on the way meets an old woman who asks him to look after a herd of wild horses. He does so, and she gives him one of the horses, which carries him to the island where the dragon guards the abducted princess. The hero kills the dragon and returns, and the king rewards him by bestowing upon him the hand of his daughter. This is the plot of the tale, whereas the composition can be outlined as follows: a misfortune occurs; the hero is asked to



help; he sets off; on the way he meets someone who puts him to the test and rewards him with a magic tool; with its help he finds the sought-for object; the hero returns and is rewarded. The same composition can lie at the bottom of many plots and, conversely, many plots are based on the same composition. Composition is a constant factor; the plot, a variable one. But for a danger of further terminological misunderstandings, I could have referred to the plot and composition together as the structure of the wondertale. Composition has no real existence, just as all general concepts have no existence in the world of things: they are found only in man's mind. But with the use of these general concepts we explore the world, discover its laws, and learn to control it.

In studying the wondertale we note that some functions (actions of the characters) are binary. For example, a difficult task implies its solution, pursuit ends with rescue, the battle leads to victory, the initial misfortune or disaster is liquidated at the conclusion, and so forth. According to Lévi-Strauss, binary functions are complementary and should be reduced to one. That may be true on a logical plane. In a certain way, battle and victory do form one whole. But for the study of composition such mechanical associations are unsuitable and misleading. The binary functions are performed by different people; e.g., the difficult task is imposed by one character and resolved by another. The second half of a binary function can be positive or negative. In the wondertale we encounter a true hero and a false one: the first accomplishes the task and is rewarded, the second fails and is punished. Again, binary functions are separated by intermediate ones. Thus, the abduction of the princess (the initial misfortune) is found at the beginning of the tale, while her return takes place only at the end. Therefore, in the study of composition, that is, of the sequence of functions, reduction of the binary elements to a single one will not reveal the laws that govern the development of the plot. A logical arrangement of functions is detrimental to our search.

For the same reason I cannot accept another recommendation. I tried hard to discover the order in which narrators arranged their functions. It turned out that the order is always the same, a very important discovery to the folklorist. The narrative action develops in time, and therefore the functions are ordered in sequence. Lévi-Strauss does not approve of this method of analyzing and ordering the functions. He uses the letters of the alphabet A B C D for designating the sequence. Instead of a natural order, he proposes a logical system. He would like to arrange the functions vertically and horizontally. This sort of arrangement is one of the requirements of the structuralists' technique, and it is present in *Morphology*, only in another form. Probably my critic did not pay enough attention to the end of the book, to the appendix entitled "Materials for the Tabulation of the Tale." The rubrics given there represent the horizontal. The table is a detailed compositional scheme of what is designated in the text by letters. Under these rubrics one can put the actual material of the tale, and this would constitute the vertical. There is no need to replace this completely concrete scheme

derived from the comparison of texts with another, which is the result of pure abstraction. The difference between my way of reasoning and that of my critic is that I draw my abstractions from the data, whereas Lévi-Strauss draws abstractions from my abstractions. He asserts that there is no way back from my abstract schemes to the material, but if he had taken any collection of wondertales and compared them with my scheme, he would have found that the scheme does indeed correspond to the material and that the structure of the wondertale is a fact. Moreover, with the scheme as a starting point one can compose an infinite number of tales, all constructed according to the same law as the folktales. If we leave out certain incompatible varieties, we can calculate mathematically the number of possible combinations. If one wishes to call my scheme a model, this model reproduces all the constructive elements (constants) of the wondertale and passes over the nonconstructive elements (variables). My model corresponds to what was modeled and is based on a study of data, whereas the model Lévi-Strauss proposes does not correspond to reality and is based on logical operations not imposed by the data. An abstraction drawn from data serves to explain them; an abstraction drawn from abstractions is an end in itself; it is divorced from data, may find itself at odds with the facts of the real world, and hence is incapable of explaining it. Lévi-Strauss carries out his logical operations in total disregard of the material (he is not in the least interested in the wondertale, nor does he attempt to learn more about it) and removes the functions from their temporal sequence. The folklorist is unable to endorse such a procedure, because the function (act, behavior, action), as it is defined in my book, is played out in time and cannot be removed from it. Incidentally, the concepts of time, space, and number in the wondertale are completely different from those to which we are accustomed and which we tend to consider absolute. This is a special problem, and I have alluded to it only because the forced removal of the functions from the temporal sequence destroys the artistic fabric of the narrative, which, like a fine and elegant web, falls apart at the slightest touch. This is another reason for setting the functions in time, as the narrative itself demands, and not in an atemporal series (*structure a-temporelle*), as Lévi-Strauss would have it.

The folklorist and the literary scholar are mainly interested in the plot. In Russian the term *plot* (*sjuzhet*) has a well-defined meaning; it refers to all actions and incidents developed in the course of the narrative. The English translator has rendered *sjuzhet* quite accurately by the word *plot*, and, as we know, the German periodical devoted to narrative art is entitled *Fabula*. But the plot is of no interest to Lévi-Strauss, and he translated this word into French as *thème*. Evidently he preferred *thème* because the plot is a temporal category, whereas *thème* is not. No student of literature will ever accept this substitution. The terms *plot* and *theme* can be understood in very many ways but they can never be used interchangeably. This lack of interest in the plot and narrative is also seen in other instances of imprecise translation. Thus, when the hero encounters an old woman

(or another character) who puts him to the test and gives him an object or a magic device, this character, in exact accord with his function, was defined in my work as *daritel'* (giver). The magic objects that the hero receives have been called magic gifts (Germ. *Zaubergaben*) by folklorists. This is a specific term. The English translator has rendered the word *daritel'* as *donor*, which fits the wondertale perfectly and perhaps is even better than *daritel'*, because the gift is not always voluntary. Lévi-Strauss translated it as *bienfaiteur*, which once again lends the term such a general and abstract sense that it becomes meaningless.

After all these digressions necessary for a better understanding of what follows we can get down to form and content. As has been mentioned earlier, it is customary to call the study of form divorced from content formalistic. I must admit that I do not understand what all this means and understand neither the statement nor its practical application. Perhaps I would understand it if I knew where, in a work of art, to look for form and where for content. One can indulge in endless discussions of form and content as philosophical categories, but the arguments will be fruitless as long as they concern form and content in general, without reference to the data.

In folklore aesthetics, the plot makes up the content of a work. For the people the content of the tale "Firebird" is the story of how this bird flew into the king's garden and stole the golden apple and how the prince went in search of it and returned not only with the firebird but with a horse and a beautiful bride. What happened in the tale constitutes the entire interest. Let us assume for the moment the point of view of the people (incidentally, a very clever point of view). If the plot is the content, then composition is not. Thus, we reach the conclusion that composition belongs to form. If that is true, different kinds of content can be put into a single form. But I said earlier that composition and the plot are inseparable: the plot cannot exist without composition, nor composition without the plot. On our own data, we have arrived at the well-known truth that form and content are inseparable. Lévi-Strauss himself says: "Form and content have the same nature and are subject to the same analysis." This is without doubt so, but if form and content are inseparable and even identical in nature, he who analyzes the one necessarily analyzes the other. Where then is the sin of formalism and what is my crime when I analyze the plot (content) and composition (form) in their indissoluble union?

Yet this idea of content and form is not so common after all, and it is not clear whether it can be applied to other kinds of verbal art. Form usually means genre; therefore, the same plot can take the form of a novel, a tragedy, a film script, etc. Lévi-Strauss's idea is brilliantly confirmed by attempts to rewrite a narrative work for the stage or adapt it for the screen. A novel by Zola as a book and on the screen are two different works that usually have very little in common. Again, content in most cases refers not to the plot but to the message, to the author's idea, world outlook, and views. Innumerable attempts have been made

to study and appraise the writer's outlook but in most cases they have been hopelessly amateurish. Leo Tolstoy used to deride such attempts. When asked what he intended to say in his novel *Anna Karenina*, he answered, "If I wished to say in words all that I intended to express in the novel, I would have to write from the very beginning the same novel that I had already written. And if critics understand and can express in a newspaper article what I want to say, I must congratulate them" (Tolstoy 1953, 268-69). If in literature the work of art is the form in which an idea is expressed, it is all the more so in folklore. Here we have such strict laws of form (in composition) that ignoring them results in great mistakes. According to his own political, social, historical, and religious conceptions, the scholar will attribute to the tale and folklore his own view of the world and discover mystical, atheistic, revolutionary, or conservative attitudes in them. This in no way means that ideas of folklore cannot be studied, but it does mean that idea ("content") can be analyzed scientifically and objectively only after the formal laws have been clarified. I quite agree with Lévi-Strauss when he demands research into history and literary criticism. However, he demands them as a substitute for what he calls formal study, and I am convinced that preliminary form analysis is the prerequisite for both historical and critical inquiry. If *Morphology* is, in a certain sense, the first volume of a broad investigation and *Historical Roots*, the second, the third could have been literary criticism. Only when the wondertale has been studied formally and its historical roots have been determined is it possible to analyze objectively and scientifically the growth of folk philosophy and folk morality as they are found in the tale. This analysis will reveal a stratified organization, a structure similar to that of geological sediments in which ancient layers are combined with the more recent and even modern ones. We will examine all variable elements, all the colors of this structure, for the tale's artistry is not restricted to its composition. To study and understand all this, we must first know the foundation underlying the amazing variety of the wondertale.

I cannot respond to all of Lévi-Strauss's observations; however, I would like to dwell on a specific but interesting question, that of the relationships between the wondertale and myth. For the present discussion this is not a very important problem, because my research is devoted to the wondertale rather than to myth, but Lévi-Strauss is an expert in mythology, and here again he does not agree with me.

In my book, I said very little—and that concisely and without proof—about the relationships between the wondertale and myth. I made the mistake of expressing my ideas apodictically, but unproven concepts are not always wrong. I believe that myth as a historical category is older than the wondertale; Lévi-Strauss maintains the opposite. This is no place for going into the problem, but it deserves at least a brief mention.

What constitutes the difference between the wondertale and myth for the

folklorist and in what respects are they alike? One of the properties of the wonder-tale is that it is based on poetic fiction and is a distortion of reality. In most languages the word *tale* is a synonym for *lie* or *falsehood*. "The tale is over; I can't lie any more"—thus do Russian narrators conclude their stories. Myth, on the other hand, is a sacral narrative; not only is it believed to be true, it also expresses the faith of the people. Consequently, the difference between them is not formal. Myths can take the narrative form that should be studied, even though this has not been done in my book. According to Lévi-Strauss, "myth and the wonder-tale exploit a common substance," which is perfectly true if by substance is meant the advance in the narrative or the plot. There are myths based on the same morphological and compositional system as the wonder-tale. Such are, for example, classical myths of the Argonauts, Perseus and Andromeda, Theseus, and many others. At times they correspond, down to minute details, to the compositional system studied in *Morphology of the Folktale*. In some cases, myth and the wonder-tale have the same form. But the correspondence is by no means universal: a great number of myths from antiquity (actually, most of them) have nothing in common with the wonder-tale system. This is even more true of the myths of primitives. The cosmogonical myths, myths of the creation and origin of the world, animals, men and things are totally different from the wonder-tale and cannot be transformed into it; they are based on a morphological system of their own. Many such systems exist, and mythology has been studied very little from this point of view. Where the wonder-tale and myth are based on the same system, myth is always older than the wonder-tale, as follows, for instance, from the history of the plot of Sophocles' *Oedipus* (Propp 1944). In Hellas it was a myth. In the Middle Ages the plot acquired a sacral Christian character, and its protagonist became the great sinner Judas or a saint such as Gregory, Andrew of Crete, or Alban, who were redeemed from great sin by their great virtue. But when the hero loses his name and the story loses its sacral character, myth and legend are transformed into a wonder-tale. Lévi-Strauss is of another opinion. He does not agree that myth is older than the wonder-tale and says that they can coexist and do coexist to this day. "In present times, myths and folktales exist side by side. One genre cannot then be held to be a survival of the other" (Lévi-Strauss 1976, 130).<sup>2</sup> The example of *Oedipus* shows, however, that in the course of historical development plots can shift from one form (myth) to another (legend) and from that to a third (wonder-tale). Any folklorist knows that plots very often migrate from genre to genre (the plots of the wonder-tale end up in epic poetry, etc.). But Lévi-Strauss is not referring to actual plots. He uses the words *myths* and *wonder-tale* as vague cover terms, that is, myth "in general" and the wonder-tale "in general"; he considers the genre as such, without distinguishing types and plots. Therefore he speaks of their coexistence up to the present day. In this instance he is not thinking like a historian. Of importance are not the centuries but historical periods and social structures (formations). Study of the most ar-

chaic and primitive peoples shows that *all* their folklore (as well as visual art) is of sacral, or magical, character. What is passed off in popular publications and, at times, even in scholarly editions as wondertales of primitives very often has nothing to do with the wondertale. It is well known that animal tales were once told not as tales but as magic stories whose purport was to contribute to a successful hunt. Such material is abundant. The wondertale originated later than myth, and for a certain time they can indeed coexist, but only if the plots of myths and wondertales belong to different systems of composition and represent different plots. Classical antiquity recognized both wondertales and myths, but their plots differed. The myth of the Argonauts and the wondertale of the Argonauts cannot coexist among the same people. There could be no wondertales about Theseus where his myth was alive and where he was the object of a cult. Finally, in present-day advanced social formations, the existence of myths is no longer possible. The role of sacred tradition that they played at one time has been taken over by sacral legends and religious narrative. In the socialist countries even these last remnants of myths and sacral legends are disappearing. So the problem of the relative antiquity of myth and the wondertale and the possibility or impossibility of their coexistence cannot be solved in a general way. The solution depends on the stage of historical development. It is necessary to know and understand different morphological systems and to know how to distinguish them in order to be able to determine affinities and differences between the wondertale and myth and to judge their relative antiquity and the possibility or impossibility of their coexistence. The question is more complex than Lévi-Strauss seems to think.

We can now draw some conclusions. The philosopher will consider correct those statements that correspond to a particular brand of philosophy. The scholar will consider correct those that follow from the study of the data. Lévi-Strauss says that my conclusions do not correspond, as he puts it, to the nature of things; yet he does not mention a single instance in which my conclusions concerning the wondertale were found to be wrong, though only such concrete objections are the most dangerous to the scholar and also the most desirable, useful, and valuable.

Another important problem is method. According to Lévi-Strauss, my method is wrong because actions can be transferred from one person to another and the same actions can be performed by different characters not only in the wondertale. This observation is quite correct, but it argues for, rather than against, my method. Thus, if in cosmogonical myths the crow, the mink, and the anthropomorphic creature or divinity can assume the role of the demiurge, this means that myths can and must be studied by the same methods as the wondertale. The conclusions will differ, and many morphological systems will emerge, but the methods can remain the same.

It is very possible that the method of analyzing narratives according to the func-

tions of characters will prove useful both for the narrative forms of literature and folklore. However, the methods proposed in my book before the appearance of structuralism, as well as the methods of the structuralists who aim at the objective study of literature, have their limitations. They are possible and profitable where recurrence is the norm, as in language and folklore. But when art becomes the product of a unique genius, the use of exact methods will yield positive results only if the study of recurring elements goes hand in hand with the study of the unique, which to us is simply a miracle. It matters little how we will classify *The Divine Comedy* or Shakespeare's tragedies: Dante and Shakespeare stand alone, and exact methods will not explain their genius. At the beginning of this article I emphasized the affinity between the laws of the exact sciences and the humanities. I would like to conclude it by stressing the fundamental specific difference between them.

### 5. *The Structural and Historical Study of the Wondertale*

First published as Propp 1966a (in Italian). Serge Shishkoff had Propp's Russian text at his disposal, and his translation appeared in 1976 (see Propp 1976c). At the same time the Russian version was published in the Soviet Union: Propp 1976a, 132-52. Our text is based on Shishkoff's translation.

1. As is customary, Propp gave no references to his epigraphs, which were, moreover, cited in Russian. All of them have been identified in Breymayer 1972a, 60. See Goethe 1887-1918: II-6:298-99, II-8:221-22, I-35, 16 and IV:8, 232-33. The works cited are: "Vorarbeiten zu einer Physiologie der Pflanzen," "Versuch einer allgemeinen Knochenlehre," *Tag- und Jahreshefte 1780*, and a letter to Charlotte von Stein 9 June 1787. Some titles of Goethe's works have been supplied by editors and vary slightly from edition to edition. In the present book all the epigraphs have been translated into English from German; the ellipses stand for lacunas in Propp's text. See Steiner and Davydov 1977 and the literature cited there, Cassirer 1945, 105-8, and Ivanov and Toporov 1976, 264-66, for a discussion of Goethe's morphological views and their role in modern structuralism and semiotics.

*To the Foreword.* [Morphology] has to achieve the status of a special science by choosing as its main subject what other sciences treat by chance and in passing, by collecting what is scattered in other sciences and establishing a new standpoint that would allow it to examine nature with convenience and ease. . . . It concerns itself with the phenomena that are very important; the procedures of the mind (*die Operationen des Geistes*) by which it juxtaposes phenomena are in keeping with human nature and pleasant, so even an unsuccessful attempt can combine utility and beauty.

*To Chapter 1.* The history of science always presents a nice picture from one's point of vantage. Indeed, we respect our predecessors and are, to a certain extent, grateful to them for the service they have rendered us, but no one likes to view them as martyrs irresistibly driven to dangerous, sometimes even desperate situations; and yet, our ancestors who have laid the foundation of our existence were often more earnest than the descendants who enjoy and usually fritter away their legacy.

*To Chapter 2.* I was quite convinced that a general type based on transformations goes through all organic creatures and that at certain middle stages of development it can be well observed in all its parts.

*To Chapter 9.* The protoplant will be the most wonderful thing in the world, which nature itself will envy me. With this model and a key to it, one can produce an infinite number of plants, all of which will be consistent; plants that, though they do not exist, could have existed. They are not just artistic or poetical shadows or illusions, for they possess an inner truth and necessity. The same law will be applicable to everything that lives.

2. The English text of this quotation has been taken from p. 178 of the present volume.

### 6. *Transformations of the Wondertale*

First published as Propp 1928b; reprinted in Propp 1976a, 153-73. Translated into English by C. H. Severens: Propp 1971a, reprinted in 1981. The text in this volume is a revised version of Severens's translation.

1. Antti A. Aarne (1913) warns against such an "error" [Propp's note].

2. See Propp 1928a; 1958a; 1968a; and cf. Propp 1927 [a modified note by Propp].

3. The ancient Egyptian tale of two brothers, recorded in the so-called Orbiney Papyrus, must have been current about the time of the Nineteenth Dynasty. Its content is as follows. Once there were two brothers. The elder brother owned a house and was married, and the younger brother lived with him. One day, when both were out in the field plowing, they ran out of grain, and the younger brother was sent home to fetch some. At home his sister-in-law tried in vain to seduce him. Fearing disclosure, she calumniated the young man and said to her husband that she had been attacked. AT 318.

4. "The Firebird," AT 550. In this tale a clever thief steals the king's apples. Two elder brothers



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# Theory and History of Folklore

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Vladimir Propp

Translated by  
Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin  
and several others

Edited, with an Introduction and Notes,  
by Anatoly Liberman

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