# VIII

# Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp

T HE SUPPORTERS of structural analysis in linguistics and in anthropology are often accused of formalism. This is to forget that formalism exists as an independent doctrine from which structuralism—without denying its debt to it—separated because of the very different attitudes the two schools adopt toward the concrete. Contrary to formalism, structuralism refuses to set the concrete against the abstract and to recognize a privileged value in the latter. *Form* is defined by opposition to material other than itself. But *structure* has no distinct content; it is content itself, apprehended in a logical organization conceived as property of the real.

This difference deserves to be examined more thoroughly by means of an example. We can now do so, thanks to the publication in an English translation of an early work by Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*,[1] whose thinking remained very close to that of the Russian formalist school during the short period in which it flourished, roughly from 1915 to 1930.

The author of the introduction, Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, the translator, Laurence Scott, and the Research Center of the University of Indiana, have rendered a tremendous service to the social sciences with the publication of a far too neglected work, in a language accessible to new readers. Indeed, in 1928, the date of the Russian edition, the formalist school finds itself in a crisis, officially condemned in the Soviet Union and lacking communication with the outside. In his subsequent works, Propp himself was to abandon formalism and morphological analysis to devote himself to historical and comparative research on the relationships of oral literature to myths, rituals, and institutions.

The message of the Russian formalist school was not, however, to be lost. In Europe itself, the Linguistic Circle of Prague first took it up and spread it. Since about 1940, Roman Jakobson's personal influence and teachings have been carrying it to the United States. I do not mean to insinuate that structural linguistics, and modern structuralism within and outside linguistics, are only an extension of Russian formalism. As I have already mentioned, they differ from it in the conviction that, if a little structuralism leads away from the concrete, a lot of structuralism leads back to it. But although his doctrine cannot in any way be called "formalist," Roman Jakobson has not lost sight of the historical role of the Russian school and its intrinsic importance. In dealing with the antecedents of structuralism, he has always reserved a prominent position for it. Those who have listened to him since 1940 remained indirectly marked by this remote influence. If, as Mme Pirkova-Jakobson writes, the author of these words seems to have "applied and even extended Propp's method" (p. vii, *p. xxi*), it cannot have been consciously, since he had no access to Propp's book until the publication of this translation. But through Roman Jakobson, some of its substance and inspiration had reached him.

It is to be feared that, even today, the form in which the English translation was published will not help the diffusion of

Propp's ideas. I would also add that printing mistakes make it difficult reading, and so do the obscurities which may perhaps exist in the original but seem rather to result from the translator's difficulty with the author's terminology. It is thus not unhelpful to follow the work closely while attempting to condense its theses and conclusions.

Propp begins with a brief history of the problem. Works on folktales consist mostly of collections of texts, systematic studies remain scarce and rudimentary. Some invoke insufficient documents as a justification for this situation. The author rejects such an explanation because, in every other field of knowledge, the problems of description and classification have been laid down very early. Moreover, there is no failure to discuss the origin of folktales, but "one can speak about the origin of any phenomenon only after it has been described" (p. 4, *p. 5*).

The usual classifications (Miller, Wundt, Aarne, Veselovskij) have a practical utility. They always run into the same objection, namely, that it is always possible to find tales which come under several categories. This remains true, whether the classification is founded on the *types* of tales or on the *themes* brought into play. Indeed, the delineation of themes is arbitrary; it does not rest on real analysis, but on the intuitions or the theoretical positions of each author (the former being, as a general rule, better founded than the latter, as Propp remarks, pp. 5–6, 10; *pp. 5–6, 11*). Aarne's classification provides an inventory that is most helpful to researchers, but the delineation is purely empirical, so that it is only arbitrarily that a tale belongs under a particular heading.

The discussion of Veselovskij's ideas is particularly interesting. For him, the theme can be split up into motifs, to which the theme adds only a unifying, creative operation by integrating motifs which constitute irreducible elements. But in this case, Propp remarks, each sentence constitutes a motif, and the analysis of tales must be taken to a level which, today, would be called "molecular." However, no motif can be said to be indivisible, since an example as simple as "a dragon kidnaps the king's daughter" may be decomposed into at least four elements, each of which is commutable with others ("dragon" with "sorcerer," "whirlwind," "devil," "eagle," etc.; "abduction" with "vampirism," "putting to sleep," etc.; "daughter" with "sister," "bride," "mother," etc.; and finally "king" with "prince," "peasant," "priest," etc.). Smaller

units than motifs are thus obtained, according to Propp, with no independent logical existence. If we have lingered in this discussion, it is because in this affirmation of Propp's, which is only half true, lies one of the main differences between formalism and structuralism. We will come back to it later.

Propp gives Joseph Bédier full credit for the distinction between variable and constant factors within the folktales, with the invariants constituting the elementary units. However, Bédier was unable to define what these are exactly.

If the morphological study of tales has remained rudimentary, it is because it has been neglected in favor of research into origins. Too often, so-called morphological studies come down to tautologies. The most recent one (at the time of Propp's writing), that of the Russian R. M. Volkov in 1924,[2] would demonstrate nothing except that "similar tales give similar schemes" (p. 13, *p. 15*). Yet, a good morphological study is the basis of all scientific investigation. Moreover, "as long as no correct morphological study exists, there can also be no correct historical study" (p. 14, *p. 15*).

As formulated by Propp at the beginning of the second chapter, his whole undertaking rests on a working hypothesis, namely, the existence of "fairy tales" as a special category of folktales. At the beginning of the study, "fairy tales" are empirically defined as those tales classified by Aarne under numbers 300 to 749 in the following manner:

Given the statements

1. A king gives the hero an eagle, which carries him away to another kingdom.

2. An old man gives Sučenko a horse, which carries him away to another kingdom.

3. A sorcerer gives Ivan a little boat which takes him to another kingdom.

4. The princess gives Ivan a magic ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry Ivan away into another kingdom.

These statements contain both variables and constants. The dramatis personae and their attributes change, but the actions and the functions do not. The property of folktales is to attribute identical actions to various personages. It is the constant elements which will be used as a base provided that it can be shown that

the number of these functions is finite. Now, we see that they recur very often. Thus it can be stated that "the number of functions is startlingly small, compared with the great number of dramatis personae. This explains the twofold quality of a folktale: it is amazingly multiform, picturesque, and colorful, and, to no less a degree, remarkably uniform and recurrent" (p. 19, *pp. 20–21*).

In order to define the functions, considered as the basic components of the tale, the dramatis personae will first be eliminated, their roles being only to "support" the functions. A function will be expressed simply by the name of an action: "interdiction," "flight," and so forth. Secondly, in defining a function, its place in the narrative must be taken into account. A wedding, for instance, can have different functions, depending on its role. Different meanings are given to identical acts, and vice versa; and this can only be determined by replacing the event among others, i.e., by situating it in relation to preceding and succeeding events. This presupposes that the *sequence of functions is constant* (p. 20, *p. 22*); it is subject (as will be shown later) to the possibility of certain deviations which constitute secondary phenomena, exceptions to a norm which it must always be possible to restore (pp. 97–98, *pp. 107–108*). It is also taken for granted that each tale, taken individually, never shows the totality of the functions enumerated but only some of them without the order of succession being modified. The total system of functions—the empirical realization of which may well not exist—therefore seems to present, in Propp's thinking, the character of what would be called today "metastructure."

The preceding hypotheses lead to one last consequence (which will later be verified), although Propp admits that it seems at first glance "absurd or perhaps even savage": *All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure* (p. 21, *p. 22*).

Winding up the question of method, Propp wonders whether the research needed to verify or infirm his theory must be exhaustive. If so, it would be practically impossible to take it to its end. Yet, if one admits that functions constitute the subject of the study, the latter will be seen as ended only when its pursuit brings about the discovery of no new functions—provided, of course, that the sampling be random and as if "dictated from without"

(p. 22, p. 23). Linking up with Durkheim—no doubt unintentionally—Propp stresses that "we are not interested in the quantity of material but, rather, in the quality of the analyses of it" (p. 22, p. 24). Experience shows that a hundred tales constitute more than enough material. Consequently, the analysis will bear on a selection of the tales numbered 50 to 151 in Afanasyev's collection.

We will skim more rapidly over the inventory of functions, impossible to enumerate, and which forms the topic of Chapter III. Each function is summarily defined, then abridged into a single term ("absence," "interdiction," "violation," etc.), and finally given a coded sign, a letter or symbol. For each function, Propp distinguishes the "species" from the "genera," the former being sometimes subdivided into "varieties." The general scheme of the fairy tale goes as follows:

After the "initial situation" has been explained, a character goes away. This absence leads to some misfortune, either directly or indirectly (through the violation of an interdiction or obedience to an injunction). A villain enters the scene, receives information about his victim, and deceives him in order to cause him harm.

Propp analyzes this sequence into seven functions, coded with the first letters of the Greek alphabet to distinguish them from the subsequent functions (coded with capital Roman letters and diverse symbols). These seven functions are indeed preliminary in two ways. First, they set the action going and, secondly, they are not universally present, as some tales start directly with the first main function, which is the action of the villain himself: abduction of a person, theft of a magical agent, bodily injury, casting of a spell, substitution, murder (pp. 29–32, pp. 30–35). A "lack" results from this "villainy," unless the initial situation links up directly with the state of lack. The lack is perceived and a hero is solicited to remedy it.

There are now two possible paths. The victim may become the hero of the tale, or the hero may be distinct from the victim and come to his help. The hypothesis of the uniqueness of the tale is not thereby infirmed, because no tale follows both characters simultaneously. Consequently, there is only one "hero-function," which either one of the characters can "support." Nevertheless a choice is offered between two sequences: (1) appeal to the

seeker-hero, his departure on a quest; or (2) distancing of the victim-hero, and perils to which he is exposed.

The hero (victim or seeker) meets a "donor," willing or unwilling, eager or reticent, helpful at once or hostile at first. He tests the hero (in many varied ways, which can go as far as engaging him in combat). The hero reacts negatively or positively, on his own or by means of a supernatural intervention (there are many intermediate forms). The acquisition of supernatural help (object, animal, person) is an essential trait of the function of the hero (p. 46, p. 50).

Transferred to the place of his intervention, the hero joins in combat with the villain (struggle, competition, game). He receives a mark of identification, physical or other; the villain is defeated, and the initial need is liquidated. The hero starts on his way home, but is pursued by an enemy from whom he escapes through help received or some stratagem. Some tales end with the hero's return and his subsequent marriage.

But other tales go on to what Propp calls another "move." Everything begins anew—villain, hero, donor, tests, supernatural help—after which the narrative follows another direction. So a series of "*bis*-functions" must first be introduced (pp. 53–54, p. 59), which are then followed by new actions. The hero comes back in disguise and a difficult task is proposed to him which he successfully accomplishes. He is then recognized, and the false hero (who has usurped his place) is unmasked. At last, the hero receives his reward (bride, kingdom, etc.) and the tale ends.

The inventory we have just summarized leads Propp to several conclusions. In the first place, the number of functions is very limited: thirty-one altogether. In the second place, the functions implicate one another "with logical and artistic necessity"; they belong to the same axis so that any two functions are never mutually exclusive (p. 58, p. 64). On the other hand, some functions can be grouped in pairs ("prohibition"–"violation"; "struggle"–"victory"; "persecution"–"deliverance", etc.) and others in sequences (e.g., the group "villainy"–"dispatch"–"decision for counteraction"–"departure from home"). Pairs of functions, sequences of functions, and independent functions are organized in an unchanging system. This is a real touchstone, permitting the appreciation of each particular tale and the assigning of its place

in a classification. Indeed, each tale receives its formula, analogous to chemical formulae, which enumerates in the natural order of succession the letters (Greek or Roman) and the symbols used to code the various functions. Letters and symbols can receive an exponent denoting one variety within a specific function. For instance, the formula for a simple tale summarized by Propp will be:

$$a^1 \, \delta^1 \, A^3 \, B^1 \, C \uparrow H^1 - I^1 \, K \downarrow W^0$$

The eleven symbols assigned to it read, in order: "A king (father of) three daughters"—"the daughters go walking"—"stay late in the garden"—"a dragon kidnaps them"—"call for help"—"quest of three heroes"—"battles with the dragon"—"victory"—"rescue of the maidens"—"return"—"rewarding" (p. 114, *p. 128*).

The rules of classification being thus defined, Propp devotes the following chapters (IV and V) to the solution of various difficulties. The first of these, already mentioned, refers to the apparent resemblance of two functions. Thus, "the testing of the hero by the donor" may be told in a way that makes it indistinguishable from the "assignation of a difficult task." In such cases, the identification takes place—not by considering the intrinsic content of the function, which is ambiguous—but in relation to the context, that is, to the uncertain function among those which emcompass it. Conversely, a statement that appears to be equivalent to a single function, can in fact overlay two really distinct functions, as, for instance, when the future victim allows himself to be "deceived by the villain" and at the same time "breaks an interdiction" (pp. 61–63, *pp. 69–70*).

A second difficulty stems from the fact that, once the tale is analyzed into functions, some residual material is left to which no function corresponds. This problem troubles Propp, who suggests dividing what is left into two nonfunctional categories: the "connectives," on the one hand, and the "motivations," on the other.

The connectives consist most often of episodes explaining how character A learns what character B has just done, which he must know in order to act in turn. More generally, the connective serves to establish some immediate relation between two characters, or between a character and an object, whereas circumstances

in the story would have made possible only an indirect relation. This theory of connectives is doubly important. It explains how the functions may seemingly be connected in the tale despite the fact that they are not consecutive; and it makes it possible to reduce the phenomenon of trebling to a single function, in spite of connectives which do not have the nature of independent functions but serve only to make trebling possible (pp. 64–68, *pp. 74–75*).

By motivations are meant "all reasons and aims of characters which give rise to their deeds" (p. 68, *p. 75*). But it often happens in the tales that the actions of the characters are not motivated. Propp concludes that when the motivations exist, they may result from a secondary formation. In fact, the motivation for a state or for an action sometimes takes the form of a real tale, developing within the main tale and acquiring an almost independent existence. "The folktale, like any living thing, can only generate forms that resemble itself" (p. 70, *p. 78*).

We have seen that the thirty-one functions, to which all fairy tales are reducible, are "supported" by a certain number of dramatis personae. When the functions are classified according to their "supports," each character is discovered bringing together several functions in a "sphere of action" which characterizes him. Thus, the functions "villainy"–"struggle"–"pursuit" form the sphere of action of the villain. The functions "transference of the hero"–"liquidation of lack"–"rescue"–"solution of a difficult task"–"transfiguration of the hero" define that of the magical agent, and so forth. It results from this analysis that the dramatis personae of the tale, like the functions, are limited in number. Propp notes seven protagonists: the villain, the donor, the magical agent, the sought-for person, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero (pp. 72–73, *pp. 79–80*). Other characters exist, but they are part of the "connectives." Between each protagonist and his sphere of action, the correspondence is rarely unequivocal. The same protagonist can intervene in several spheres and a single sphere can be shared among several protagonists. Thus the hero can do without a magical agent if he himself has supernatural power; and in certain tales, the magical agent assumes functions which are elsewhere the attributes of the hero (pp. 74–75, *pp. 82–83*).

If the tale is to be conceived of as a whole, is it not possible

all the same to distinguish several parts of it? Reduced to its most abstract formula, the fairy tale can be defined as a development which starts with villainy and ends with a wedding, a reward, a liquidation of lack or harm, the transition being made by a series of intermediate functions. Propp designates such a whole by a term which the English translator renders as "move" and which we prefer to call "*partie*" in French, which means both the principal division of a tale and a card or chess game. We are indeed dealing with both things at once, since, as we have seen, the tales containing several "*parties*" are characterized by the non-immediate recurrence of the same functions, as in successive card games one periodically shuffles, cuts, deals, calls, plays, and takes the tricks. In other words, *one repeats the same rules* in spite of *different deals*.

A tale can comprise several moves. But do these not constitute as many tales? This question can only be answered once the relations among the moves are morphologically analyzed and defined. The moves may follow each other, or one be inserted in another, momentarily interrupting its development while it is itself subjected to the same type of interruption. Two moves may also be introduced simultaneously and one held over shortly until the other is ended. Two successive moves can also reverse a single conclusion. Finally, it does happen that certain dramatis personae are split into two, the transition between the two being effected by a recognized sign.

Without going into details, we will just note here that for Propp, there is one single tale (in spite of the plurality of the moves), when a functional relation exists among these latter, if they are logically disjointed, the narrative is analyzed as several distinct tales (pp. 83–86, *pp. 92–96*).

After giving an example (pp. 86–87, *pp. 96–98*), Propp comes back to the two problems he formulated at the beginning of his book: the relationship between the fairy tale and the folktale in general; and the classification of fairy tales, constituted as an independent category.

We have seen that a fairy tale is nothing more than a narrative that puts into words a limited number of functions in a constant order of succession. The formal differences between several tales result from the choice, made by each, among the thirty-one

functions available and the possible repetition of some of them. But nothing prevents the making up of tales where fairies have a role, without the narrative's conforming to the previous norm. This is the case with fabricated tales, of which examples are found in Andersen, Brentano, and Goethe. Conversely, the norm may be respected in the absence of fairies. The term "fairy tale" is thus improper on two counts. For lack of a better definition and not without misgivings, Propp accepts the formula "tale with seven protagonists," as he feels he has shown that these seven protagonists form a system (pp. 89–90, *pp. 99–100*). But if one day we were able to give the investigation a historical dimension, the term "mythical tales" would then be suitable.

An ideal classification of tales would be based on a system of incompatibilities among functions. But Propp has recognized a principle of reciprocal implication (p. 58, *p. 64*) which, on the contrary, presupposes an absolute compatibility. Now—and with one of the second thoughts so frequent in his book—he reintroduces incompatibility, restricted to two pairs of functions: "struggle with the villain"–"hero's victory," on the one hand; "assignation of a difficult task"–"solution," on the other. These two pairs are so rarely encountered within the same move that the cases contrary to the rule can be considered as exceptions. It results from this that four classes of tales can be defined: those using the first pair; those using the second pair; those using them both; and those rejecting them both (pp. 91–92, *pp. 101–102*).

As the system reveals no other incompatibility, the classification is to be pursued according to the varieties of specific functions everywhere present. Only two functions present this universality: "villainy" and "lack." The tales will thus be distinguished according to the forms taken by this function within each of the four categories previously isolated.

The problem becomes yet more complex when one attempts to classify the tales into several moves. However, the privileged case of the tales in two moves makes it possible, according to Propp, to solve the apparent contradiction between the morphological unity of fairy tales (postulated at the beginning of the work) and the incompatibility of the two pairs of functions (introduced at the end) as offering the only possible basis for a structural classification. In effect, when a tale comprises two

moves (of which one includes the pair "struggle"–"victory," and the other "difficult task"–"solution") these pairs are always in the order in which they have just been cited, i.e., "struggle"⟶"victory" in the first move, "difficult task"⟶"solution," in the second. Moreover, the two moves are linked by an initial function, common to both (p. 93, *p. 103*).

By integrating all the typical formulae, a canonical formula is obtained:

$$\text{A B C}\uparrow\text{D E F G}\ \frac{\text{H J I K}\downarrow\text{Pr–Rs}^0\text{ L}}{\text{L M J N K}\downarrow\text{Pr–Rs}}\ \text{Q Ex T U W}$$

from which the four fundamental categories are easily drawn, corresponding, respectively, to:

1. First group + upper group + last group.
2. First group + lower group + last group.
3. First group + upper group + lower group + last group.
4. First group + last group.

The principle of morphological unity is thus intact (p. 95, *p. 105*).

The principle of the invariable succession of functions is equally intact, subject to the permutation of the function (L): "claims of a false hero," in the final or in the initial position, depending on the choice between two incompatible pairs (HI) and (MN). Furthermore, Propp accepts other permutations of isolated functions, and even sequences.

The typological unity and the morphological kinship of all fairy tales is not brought into question by these permutations, since they imply no difference in the structure (p. 97–98, *p. 106*).

The most striking aspect of Propp's work is the vigor with which it anticipates further developments. Those among us who first approached the structural analysis of oral literature around 1950, without direct knowledge of Propp's attempts a quarter of a century earlier, recognize there, to their amazement, formulae —sometimes even whole sentences—which they know well enough they have not borrowed from him: the notion of an "initial situation"; the comparison of a mythological matrix with the rules of musical composition; the necessity of a reading that is at once "horizontal" and "vertical" (p. 107, *p. 119*); the constant use of the notion of a group of substitutions, and of transforma-

tion, in order to resolve the apparent antinomy between the constancy of the form and the variability of the content (*passim*); the effort—at least sketched by Propp—to reduce the apparent specificity of functions to pairs of oppositions; the privileged case of myths in structural analysis (p. 82, *p. 90*); and, finally and above all, the essential hypothesis that there exists, strictly speaking, but a single tale (pp. 20–21, *p. 22*)—that the collection of known tales must be treated as a series of variants of a unique type (p. 103, *p. 113*) so that one may one day discover, through calculations, vanished variants or unknown ones, exactly as one can infer the existence of invisible stars as functions of the laws of astronomy.

These are so many intuitions, the penetration of which—the prophetic character of which—compel our admiration. They earn for Propp the devotion of all those who, unknown to themselves, were his followers. Then, if in the following discussion we are led to formulate certain reservations and to offer some objections, they can in no way diminish Propp's tremendous merit, nor contest the right of priorities of his discoveries.

This made clear, one can wonder about the reasons which made Propp choose folktales, or a certain category of tales, to test his method. These tales should not be classified as separate from the rest of oral literature. Propp writes that, from a certain point of view ("historical" according to him, but we think also psychological and logical), "the fairy tale, in its morphological bases, amounts to a myth. We, of course, realize," he adds immediately, "that, from the point of view of contemporary science, we are stating a totally heretical idea" (p. 82, *p. 90*).

Propp is right. There is no serious reason to isolate tales from myths; although a difference between the two is subjectively felt by a great many societies; although this difference is objectively expressed by means of special terms to distinguish the two genres; and finally, although prescriptions and prohibitions are sometimes linked with one and not the other (recitation of myths at certain hours, or during a season only, while tales, because of their "profane" nature, can be narrated any time). These native distinctions present a great interest for the ethnographer, but it is not at all certain that they are founded on the nature of things. On the contrary, it is observed that tales, which have the character of

folktales in one society, are myths for another, and vice versa. This is a first reason to beware of arbitrary classifications. Moreover, the mythographer almost always realizes that, in an identical or transformed form, the same tales, the same characters, the same motifs reappear in the tales and myths of a given population. In constituting the complete series of transformations of a mythical theme, one can seldom limit oneself to the myths (so qualified by the natives); some of these transformations must be sought in the tales, although it is possible to infer their existence from the myths proper.

One cannot question, however, that almost all societies perceive the two genres as distinct, and that the constancy of this distinction can be explained by some cause. We believe that this foundation exists, but reduced to a difference of degree which is twofold. In the first instance, the tales are constructed on weaker oppositions than those found in myths. The latter are not cosmological, metaphysical, or natural, but, more frequently, local, social, and moral. In the second place—and precisely because the tale is a weakened transposition of the myth—the former is less strictly subjected than the latter to the triple consideration of logical coherence, religious orthodoxy, and collective pressure. The tale offers more possibilities of play, its permutations are comparatively freer, and they progressively acquire a certain arbitrary character.

But if the tale works with minimized oppositions, these will be so much more difficult to identify. And the difficulty increases because the already very small oppositions indicate a lack of precision which allows the shift to literary creation.

Propp saw this latter difficulty very clearly. He saw "that the purity of folktale construction"—indispensable for the application of his method—"is peculiar only to the peasantry—to a peasantry, moreover, little touched by civilization. All kinds of foreign influences alter and sometimes decompose a folktale." In this case, "it is impossible to make provision for all details" (p. 90, *p. 100*). Nonetheless, Propp admits that the teller has a relative freedom in the choice of certain characters, in the omission and repetition of such and such a function, in determining the modalities of retained functions, and, finally, in a more complete manner still, in the nomenclature and the attributes of the char-

acters, who are themselves imposed: "a tree may show the way, a crane may give a steed a gift, a chisel may spy, and so forth. This freedom is a specific peculiarity of the folktale alone" (pp. 101–102, *pp. 112–113*). Elsewhere, he mentions the attributes of these characters, such as "their age, sex, status, external appearance (and any peculiarities of same), and so forth," which are variable because they "provide the folktale with its brilliance, charm and beauty." Thus, external causes alone can explain why, in a tale, one attribute is substituted for another: transformation of real-life conditions, influence of foreign epic literature, of scholarly literature, of religion and superstitions. "The folktale has gradually undergone a metamorphic process, and these transformations and metamorphoses are subject to certain laws. These processes create a multiformity which is difficult to analyze" (p. 79, *p. 87*).

All this really means that the tale lends itself imperfectly to structural analysis. This is no doubt true to a certain extent, but less so than Propp believes, and not exactly for the reasons he gives. We shall come back to this. But we must first find out why, in these conditions, it is the folktale which he chose to test his method. Should he not rather have used myths, the privileged value of which he recognizes several times?

The reasons for Propp's choice are many, and are of varying importance. As he is not an ethnologist, one can suppose that he had no access to mythological material collected by him or among peoples known to him, and which he knew fully how to handle. In addition, he started on a path on which others immediately preceded him. It is precisely tales, rather than myths, which constituted his predecessors' topic of discussion and which provided the ground where certain Russian scholars had sketched the first plans of morphological studies. Propp takes up the problem where they left it, using the same material: Russian folktales.

But we believe that Propp's choice can also be explained by his lack of knowledge of the true relationship between myth and folktale. If he has the great merit of seeing in them *species* of a same *genus*, he nonetheless remains faithful to the historical priority of the former over the latter. He writes that, to be able to start studying myth, one would have to add to the morphological analysis "a historical study which, for the present, cannot enter

into our task" (p. 82, *p. 90*). A little further on, he suggests that "very archaic myths" constitute the realm where folktales have their distant origin (p. 90, *p. 100*). "Everyday life and religion die away, while their contents turn into a folktale" (p. 96, *p. 106*).

An ethnologist will beware of such an interpretation, because he knows that, in present times, myths and folktales coexist side by side. One genre cannot then be held to be a survival of the other, unless it is postulated that tales preserve the memory of ancient myths, themselves fallen into oblivion.[3] But, besides the fact that the proposition could not be demonstrated most of the time (since we are ignorant of all, or almost all, of the ancient beliefs of the peoples we are studying, and call them "primitive" precisely for this reason), the usual ethnographic experience leads one to think that, on the contrary, myth and folktale exploit a common substance, each in its own way. Their relationship is not that of anterior to posterior, of primitive to derived. It is rather a complementary relationship. Tales are miniature myths, where the same oppositions are transposed to a smaller scale, and it is this which makes them difficult to study in the first place.

The preceding considerations certainly must not make one wave away the other difficulties evoked by Propp, although one could formulate them in a slightly different manner. Even in our contemporary societies, the tale is not a residual myth, but it certainly suffers from subsisting alone. The disappearance of myths has broken the balance. Like a satellite without a planet, the tale tends to get out of orbit, to let itself be caught by other poles of attraction.

These are added reasons for calling upon civilizations where myth and tale have coexisted until a recent period, and sometimes continue to do so; where, consequently, the system of oral literature is total and can be apprehended as such. The point is not to choose between tale and myth, but to understand that they are the two poles of a field that also includes all sorts of intermediate forms and that morphological analysis must be considered in the same way, if one does not want to leave out elements belonging, like the others, to one and the same system of transformations.

Thus, Propp reveals himself torn between his formalist vision and the obsession with historical explanations. One can, to some

degree, understand the regret which made him give up the former to return to the latter. As soon as he had settled on the folktales, the antinomy became overpowering. Clearly, there is history in the tales, but a practically inaccessible history, since we know very little about the antehistoric civilizations where they originated. But is it really history which is lacking? The historical dimension appears rather as a negative modality, resulting in the lack of correspondence between the present tale and a missing ethnographic context. The opposition is resolved when one envisages an oral tradition still "in situation," like those studied by ethnography. Then, the problem of history is irrelevant, or only relevant in exceptional cases, since the external references are just as present as the oral tradition to whose interpretation they are indispensable.

Thus, Propp is the victim of a subjective illusion. He is not torn, as he thinks, between the demands of synchrony and those of diachrony. *It is not the past that he lacks, it is context.* Formalist dichotomy, which opposes form and matter and which defines them by antithetic characters, is not imposed on him by the nature of things, but by the accidental choice which he made in a domain where form alone survives while matter is abolished. Reluctantly, he resigns himself to dissociating them and at the most decisive moments of his analysis, he reasons as if what escapes him de facto also escapes him de jure.

Except for certain passages—prophetic, but how timid and hesitating, and to which we will come back—Propp divides oral literature in two: a form, which constitutes the essential aspect because it lends itself to morphological study; and an arbitrary content to which, because it is arbitrary, I think he only gives an accessory importance. We will be permitted to insist on this point which sums up the whole difference between formalism and structuralism. For the former, the two domains must be absolutely separate, since form alone is intelligible, and content is only a residual deprived of any significant value. For structuralism, this opposition does not exist. There is not something abstract on one side and something concrete on the other. Form and content are of the same nature, susceptible to the same analysis. Content draws its reality from its structure and what is called form is the "structural formation" of the local structure forming the content.

The limitation, which we believe to be inherent in formalism, is particularly striking in the main chapter of Propp's work, dealing with the protagonists' functions. The author categorizes them in *genera* and *species*. It is clear, however, that whereas the former are defined by exclusively mythological criteria, the latter are only partly so; unwittingly, no doubt, Propp uses them to reintroduce some aspects pertaining to content, such as the generic function "villainy." It is subdivided into twenty-two species and subspecies, such as: the villain "abducts a person," "steals a magical agent," "plunders or spoils the crops," "steals the daylight," "makes a threat of cannibalism," (pp. 29-32, *pp.* 31-34). The whole content of the tales is thus progressively reintegrated, and the analysis oscillates between formal terms—so general that they can be indistinctly applied to all tales (this is the generic level)—and a simple restitution of the raw material, the formal properties of which alone have an explanatory value (as mentioned at the beginning).

The ambiguity is so flagrant that Propp desperately seeks a middle position. Instead of systematically cataloguing what he maintains are "species," he is content to isolate some, putting together, pell-mell, in a single "specific" category all those not frequently encountered. "It is technically more useful," he writes, "to isolate several of its most important forms while, on the other hand, generalizing about those remaining" (pp. 29, 33, *pp.* 31-32, 35). But either one deals with specific forms and cannot formulate a coherent system without cataloguing and classifying them all, or there is nothing there but content and—according to the rules set by Propp himself—one must exclude it from the morphological analysis. In any case, a drawer where one is content to pile up unclassified forms does not constitute a "species."

Why, then, this compromise, which seems to satisfy Propp? For a very simple reason, which explains another weakness of the formalist position. Unless the content is surreptitiously reintegrated into the form, the latter is condemned to remain at such a level of abstraction that it neither signifies anything any longer nor has any heuristic meaning. *Formalism destroys its object.* With Propp, it results in the discovery that there exists in reality but one tale. Henceforth, the problem of explanation is only displaced. We know what *the tale* is, but as experience puts before us not an archetypal tale but a great number of concrete tales,

we do not know how to classify them anymore. Before formalism, we were certainly unaware of what these tales had in common. Since formalism, we have been deprived of any means of understanding how they differ. One has passed from concrete to abstract, but can no longer come down from the abstract to the concrete.

Concluding his work, Propp quotes an admirable page from Veselovskij:

Is it permissible in this field also to consider the problem of typical schemes . . . schemes handed down from generations as ready-made formulae capable of becoming animated with a new mood, giving rise to new formations? . . . The Contemporary narrative literature, with its complicated thematic structure and photographic reproduction of reality, apparently eliminates the very possibility of such a question. But when this literature will appear to future generations as distant as antiquity (from prehistoric to medieval times) seems to us at present—when the synthesis of time, that great simplifier, in passing over the complexity of phenomena, reduces them to the magnitude of points receding into the distance, then their lines will merge with those which we are now uncovering when we look back at the poetic traditions of the distant past—and the phenomena of schematism and repetition will then be established across the total expanse" (quoted by Propp, p. 105, *p.* 116, from A. N. Veselovskij, *Poetika*, Vol. II).

These views are very profound but, at least in the passage quoted, one cannot perceive on what basis the differentiation will take place when, beyond the unity of literary creation, one will want to determine the nature of and the reason for its modalities.

Propp sensed this problem and the last part of his work consists of an attempt, as fragile as it is ingenious, to reintroduce a principle of classification. There is but one tale, but this tale is an archtale, composed of four groups of functions, logically articulated. If we call them 1, 2, 3, 4, the concrete tales will be divided into four categories, depending on their concurrent use of the four groups; or into three groups, which can only be (because of their logical articulation) 1, 2, 4 or 1, 3, 4; or into two groups, which must then be 1, 4 (see p. 126).

But this classification into four categories leaves us practically as far from real tales as does the single category, since each category still includes dozens or hundreds of different tales. Propp

knows this so well that he continues: "Further classification can also be made according to the varieties of this obligatory element. Thus at the heading of each class will come the folktales about the kidnapping of a person, then folktales about the stealing of a talisman, etc., on through all the varieties of element A (villany). Folktales with *a* (i.e., folktales about the quest for a bride, for a talisman, etc.) appear thereafter" (p. 92, *p. 102*). What does it mean, if not that morphological categories do not exhaust reality, and that the content of the tale, after being banished as unfit to form a classification, is reintegrated because the morphological attempt has failed?

There is a more serious matter still. We saw that the fundamental tale, of which all tales only offer a partial realization, is formed of two moves, certain functions of which are recurrent —some being simple variants of others and others belonging specifically to each move (see p. 125). These specific functions are (for the first move) "struggle," "branding of the hero," "victory," "liquidation of lack," "return," "pursuit of the hero," "rescue"; and (for the second move) "the hero's unrecognized arrival," "difficult task," "success," "recognition of the hero," "exposure of the false hero," and "transfiguration of the hero."

What is the basis for differentiating these two series? Could one not treat them, as well, as two variants, where the "assigning of a difficult task" would be a transformation of the "struggle,"[4] the "false hero," a transformation of the "villain," the "success" a transformation of the "victory," and the "transfiguration," a transformation of the "branding"? In this case, the theory of the fundamental tale in two moves would collapse and, with it, the weak hope of beginning a morphological classification. There would be then, truly, a single tale. But it would be reduced to such a vague and general abstraction that nothing would be learned from it about the objective causes of a multitude of particular tales.

The proof of the analysis is in the synthesis. If the synthesis is shown to be impossible, it is because the analysis is incomplete. Nothing can be more convincing of the inadequacy of formalism than its inability to reconstitute the very empirical content from which it was itself drawn. What then has it lost on the way?

Precisely the content. To his great credit, Propp discovered that the content of tales is *permutable*. But he too often concluded that it was *arbitrary*, and this is the reason for the difficulties he encountered, since even permutations conform to rules.[5]

In the myths and tales of the Indians of North and South America, the same actions are attributed—depending on the tales —to different animals. To simplify, let us consider birds: eagle, owl, raven. Will we distinguish, as Propp does, between the function (constant) and the characters (variable)? No, because each character is not given in the form of an opaque element, confronted with which structural analysis should come to a stop, telling itself to go no further. When, after the fashion of Propp, the narrative is treated as a closed system, one could no doubt believe the opposite. In effect, the narrative does not contain any information about itself, and the character is comparable to a word encountered in a document but not appearing in the dictionary, or even to a proper noun, i.e., a term deprived of context.

But to understand the meaning of a term is always to change it in all its contexts. In the case of oral literature, these contexts are at first provided by the totality of the variants, that is, by the system of compatibilities and incompatibilities that characterize the permutable totality. That the eagle appears by day and that the owl appears by night in the same function already permits the definition of the former as a diurnal owl and of the latter as a nocturnal eagle, and this signifies that the pertinent opposition is that of day and night.

If the oral literature considered is of an ethnographic type, other contexts exist, provided by the ritual, the religious beliefs, the superstitions, and also by factual knowledge. It is then to be noticed that the eagle and the owl together are put in opposition to the raven, as predators to scavenger, while they are opposed to each other at the level of day and night; and that the duck is in opposition to all three at the new level of the pairs sky–land and sky–water. Thus, a "universe of the tale" will be progressively defined, analyzable in pairs of oppositions, diversely combined within each character who—far from constituting a single entity —is a bundle of differential elements, in the manner of the phoneme as conceived by Roman Jakobson.

In the same manner, the American narratives sometimes men-

tion trees, designating them, for example, as "plum tree" or as "apple tree." But it would be equally false to believe that only the concept "tree" is important and that its concrete realizations are arbitrary, or again that one function exists of which a tree is regularly the "support." The inventory of contexts reveals that, philosophically speaking, what interests the native about the plum tree is its fecundity, while the apple tree attracts his attention because of the strength and depth of its roots. The one introduces a positive function, "fecundity," the other a negative function, "earth-sky transition"; and both are a function of vegetation. The apple tree, in its turn, is opposed to the wild turnip (a removable plug between the two worlds), itself realizing the function: positive "sky-earth transition."

Inversely, by carefully examining the contexts, we can eliminate false distinctions. Among the Plains Indians, mythical narratives about eagle hunts refer to an animal species sometimes identified as "wolverine," sometimes as "bear." One can decide in favor of the former, after noticing that, of the wolverine's habits, the natives especially remember the fact that it makes game of traps dug into the ground. The eagle hunters, however, hide in pits, and the opposition eagle-wolverine becomes that of a celestial prey and a chthonic hunter, the strongest one conceivable in the order of hunting. By the same token, this maximum amplitude between terms generally less remote explains why eagle hunting is subjected to a particularly exacting ritual.[6]

To maintain, as we do, that the permutability of contents is not arbitrary comes down to saying that, unless the analysis is carried to a sufficiently deep level, constancy reappears through diversity. Inversely, the so-called "constancy of form" must not hide from us the fact that functions are also permutable.

The structure of the folktale, illustrated by Propp, is seen as a chronological succession of qualitatively distinct functions, each constituting an independent "genre." One can wonder whether—as in the case of dramatis personae and their attributes—he does not stop the analysis too soon, seeking the form too close to the level of empirical observation. Among the thirty-one functions which he distinguishes, several appear reducible, i.e., assimilable to the *same* function, reappearing at *different* moments of the narrative, but after undergoing one or a number of *transformations.*

We have suggested that this could be the case with the false hero, a transformation of the villain; with the assigning of a difficult task, a transformation of the test, etc. (see p. ooo); and that, in this case, the two moves constituting the fundamental tale would themselves be a transformation of each other.

There is nothing to prevent pushing this reduction even further, and analyzing each part, taken separately, in such a way that several of Propp's functions would in reality constitute the grouping of transformations of one and the same function. Thus one could treat the "violation" as the reverse of the "prohibition," the latter as a negative transformation of the "injunction." The "departure" of the hero and his "return" would appear as the same function of disjunction, negatively or positively expressed. The "quest" of the hero (he pursues someone or something) would become the converse of his "pursuit" (he is pursued by something or someone), etc. In other terms, instead of Propp's chronological scheme—where the order of succession of events is a property of the structure

$$A, B, C, D, E, \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots M, N, H, \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots T, U, V, W, X,$$

another scheme should be adopted, which would present a model of structure defined as the group of transformations of a small number of elements. This scheme would appear as a matrix with two or three dimensions or more:

$$
\begin{array}{ccccc}
w & -x & \dfrac{1}{y} & 1-z & \cdots \\[2mm]
-w & \dfrac{1}{x} & 1-y & z & \cdots \\[2mm]
\dfrac{1}{w} & 1-x & y & -z & \cdots \\[2mm]
1-w & x & -y & \dfrac{1}{z} & \cdots \\
\end{array}
$$

and where the system of operations would be closer to Boolean algebra.

In Vol. I of *Structural Anthropology*, p. 209, I have shown that this formulation alone can give an account of the double aspect of time representation in all mythical systems: the narrative is both "in time" (it consists of a succession of events) and

"out of time" (its significant value is always current). But in confining ourselves here to the discussion of Propp's theories, this formulation offers another advantage, which is to conciliate— much better than Propp himself succeeds in doing it—his theoretical principle of the permanence of the order of succession, with the empirical evidence of the shifting among certain functions or groups of functions observed from one tale to the next (pp. 97–98, *p. 108*). If our conception is adopted, the order of chronological succession is reabsorbed into an atemporal matrix structure, the form of which is indeed constant. The shifting of functions is then no more than one of their modes of permutation (by vertical columns or fractions of columns).

These criticisms are no doubt valid for the method used by Propp and for its conclusions. However, it cannot be overemphasized that he himself raised them, and that in certain passages he formulates with perfect clarity the solutions which we have just suggested. Let us take up again, from this view point, the two essential themes of our discussion: constancy of content (in spite of its permutability) and permutability of functions (in spite of their constancy).

Chapter VII of *Morphology of the Folklore* is entitled: "On the Attributes of Dramatis Personae *and Their Meaning*" (italics added). In rather obscure terms (at least in the English translation), Propp reflects upon the apparent variability of elements, which does not exclude repetition. Thus one can recognize some fundamental forms, and other, derived or heteronomous forms. On this basis, one distinguishes an "international" model, "national" or "regional" models, and finally models characteristic of certain social or professional groups. "By grouping the material of each heading, we are able to define all methods, or, more precisely, all aspects of transformation" (p. 80, *p. 89*).

But in reconstituting a typical tale from fundamental forms peculiar to each group, one sees that this tale harbors certain abstract representations. The tests imposed by the donor on the hero can vary, depending on the tales. Nevertheless, they imply a constant intention of one dramatis persona toward another. The same applies to the tasks imposed on the kidnapped princess. Among these intentions, expressible in formulae, a common trait

can be seen. In comparing "these formulae with other attributive elements, we unexpectedly come upon a connective link in both the logical and the artistic plans. . . . Even such details as the golden hair of the princess . . . acquire a completely special meaning and may be studied. The study of attributes makes possible a scientific interpretation of the folktale" (pp. 81–82, *p. 90*).

As he does not have at his disposal an ethnographic context (which ideally an historic and prehistoric inquiry could alone procure), Propp gives up this program as soon as he has formulated it or postpones it until better times (which explains his return to the search for survivals and to comparative studies): "Everything we state, however, is in the form of a supposition." Nevertheless, "the study of the attributes of dramatis personae, as we have outlined it, is of great importance" (p. 82, *p. 90*). Even if it is reduced provisionally to an inventory (of little interest in itself), the study is an incentive to look at "the laws of transformation and the abstract notions which are reflected in the basic forms of these attributes" (p. 82, *p. 90*).

Here Propp gets to the bottom of the problem. Behind the attributes, at first disregarded as arbitrary, residual, and deprived of significance, he foresees the intervention of "abstract notions" and a "logical plan," the existence of which (if it could be established) would allow us to treat the tale as a myth (p. 82, *p. 90*).

As far as the second theme is concerned, the examples gathered in Appendix II show that Propp does not hesitate at times to introduce notions such as the negative function or the reverse function. He even uses a special symbol for the latter ($=$). We have seen (p. 125) that certain functions are mutually exclusive. There are others which implicate each other, such as "interdiction" and "violation," on the one hand, "deception" and "submission" on the other; these two pairs are most often incompatible [7] (p. 98, *p. 108*). Thence the problem explicitly stated by Propp: "Are the varieties of one function necessarily linked to the corresponding varieties of another function?" (p. 99, *p. 109*). Always, in some cases ("interdiction" and "violation," "struggle" and "victory," "branding" and "recognition," etc.); in other cases, only sometimes. Certain correlations can be univocal, others reciprocal (the act of throwing down a comb always appears in

the context of flight, but the reciprocal is not true): "in this light, unilaterally and bilaterally substitutable elements would appear to exist" (p. 99, *p. 110*).

In a previous chapter, Propp studied the possible correlations between the different forms of "testing" of the hero by the donor and the forms which the "transmission of the magical agent" to the hero can take. He concluded that two types of correlations exist, depending on whether or not bargaining characterizes the transmission (pp. 42–43, *pp. 46–47*). In applying these rules and others like them, Propp foresaw the possibility of verifying all his hypotheses experimentally. To apply the system of compatibilities, of implications and correlations (total or partial) to the making of synthetic tales would be sufficient. One would then see these creations "come alive and become folktales" (p. 101, *p. 112*).

Obviously, Propp adds, that would only be possible if the functions were distributed among dramatis personae borrowed from tradition or invented, and if motivations, connections "and other auxiliary elements" were not omitted, the creation of which is "absolutely free" (p. 102, *p. 112*). Let us insist, once more, that it is not, and that Propp's hesitations on this subject explain that his attempt first appeared—and appeared to himself as well—unsuccessful.

The origin myths of the western Pueblo Indians start with the account of the first men's emergence from the depths of the earth where they lived at first. This emergence must be motivated, and it is in two ways: Either the men become conscious of their miserable condition and wish to escape from it, or the gods discover their own loneliness and call the men to the surface of the earth in order to have these men address their prayers to them and worship them. One recognizes the "situation of lack" described by Propp, but one motivated either from the point of view of the men or from that of the gods. But this change of motivation from one variant to the other is so far from being arbitrary that it entails the correlative transformation of a whole series of functions. In the last analysis, it is linked to different ways of posing the problem of the relationship between hunting and agriculture.[8] But it would be impossible to reach this explanation

if the ritual, the technique, the knowledge, the beliefs of the peoples concerned could not be studied sociologically and independently from their mythical incidence. Otherwise, one would be trapped in a closed circle.

The error of formalism is thus twofold. By restricting itself exclusively to the rules which govern the grouping of propositions, it loses sight of the fact that no language exists in which the vocabulary can be deduced from the syntax. The study of any linguistic system requires the cooperation of the grammarian and the philologist. This means that in the matter of oral tradition the morphology is sterile unless direct or indirect ethnographic observation comes to render it fertile. Imagining that the two tasks can be dissociated, that the grammatical study can be undertaken first and the lexical study postponed until later, one is condemned to produce nothing but an anemic grammar and a lexicon in which anecdotes replace definitions. In the end, neither would accomplish its purpose.

This first error of formalism is explained by its misunderstanding of the complementarity of signifier and signified, which has been recognized since Saussure in all linguistics systems. But to this error another one is added in formalism; namely, the treating of oral tradition as a linguistic expression similar to all the others—in other words, unequally propitious to structural analysis, depending on the level considered.

It is currently accepted that language is structural at the phonological stage. We are gradually becoming convinced that it is also structural at the level of the grammar, but less convinced about the vocabulary stage. Except perhaps for certain privileged domains, we have not yet discovered the angle under which vocabulary would give a handle to structural analysis.

The transposition of this situation to oral tradition explains Propp's distinction between a single, truly morphological level—that of functions—and an amorphous level where characters, attributes, motivations, and connections all pile up; this latter level being amenable only (as it is believed of vocabulary) to historical investigation and literary criticism.

This assimilation disregards the fact that, as its modes, myths and tales use language "hyper-structurally," it could be said that they form a "metalanguage" in which structure operates at all

levels. They owe to this property their immediate perception as folktales or myths (and not as historical or romantic narratives). As language, they naturally use grammatical rules and words. But another dimension is added to the usual one, because rules and words are used in narratives to build images and actions which are both "normal" signifiers, in relation to what is signified in the text, and elements of signification, in relation to a supplementary signifying system located at another level. Let us say, to clarify this thesis, that in a tale a "king" is not only a king and a "shepherdess" a shepherdess, but that these words and what they signify become tangible means of constructing an intelligible system formed by the oppositions: *male/female* (with regard to *nature*) and *high/low* (with regard to *culture*), as well as all possible permutations among the six terms.

The language and metalanguage which, united, constitute folktales and myths can have certain levels in common. These levels are, however, displaced in them. While remaining terms of the narrative, the words of myth function in it as sheaves of differential elements. From the point of view of classification, these mythemes are not located at the level of the vocabulary but at the level of the phonemes, with the difference that they do not operate on the same *continuum* (resources of perceptible experience, in one case, and of the phonatory apparatus, in the other); and with this similarity also: that the *continuum* is decomposed and recomposed according to the rules—binary and ternary—of opposition and correlation.

The problem of the vocabulary is then not the same, depending on whether language or metalanguage is considered. The fact that in American tales and myths the function of the trickster can be "carried out" sometimes by the coyote, sometimes by the mink, or sometimes by the raven, poses an ethnographic and historical problem comparable to a philological investigation of the current form of a word. And yet, it is altogether a different problem from that of knowing why a certain animal species is called *vison* in French and "mink" in English. In the second case, the result can be considered as arbitrary; all that is involved is the reconstruction of the development that led to such and such a verbal form. In the first case, the constraints are much stronger because the constituent elements are few and their possible combinations limited. The choice is thus limited to a few existing possibilities.

If one looks a little more closely, however, one perceives that this apparently quantitative difference is not really related to the number of constituent units—which is not of the same order of magnitude, according to whether phonemes or mythemes are considered—but to the nature of these constituent units, qualitatively different in both cases.

According to the classical definition, phonemes are elements deprived of signification, but the presence or absence of which serves to differentiate terms—the words—which themselves have a signification. If these words seem arbitrary in their phonetic form, it is not only because they are the product—to a great extent problematical (although possibly less than it is believed)—of possible combinations between phonemes, of which a considerable number are allowed by every language. The contingency of verbal forms comes mostly from the fact that their constituent units (phonemes) are themselves undetermined with regard to signification. Nothing predisposes certain combinations of sounds to convey such and such a meaning. As we have tried to show elsewhere (*S.A.*, Chapter V), the structuralization of vocabulary appears at another stage: a posteriori and not a priori.

It is a different matter with mythemes, since they result from a play of binary or ternary oppositions (which makes them comparable to phonemes). But they do so among elements which are already full of signification at the level of the language—the "abstract representation" of which Propp speaks—and which can be expressed by words of the vocabulary. Borrowing a neologism from the building technique, one could say that, unlike words, mythemes are "prestressed." Of course, they are still words, but with a double meaning of *words of words*, which operate simultaneously on two levels: that of language, where they keep on having their own meaning, and that of metalanguage, where they participate as elements of a supersignification that can come only from their union.

If this is true, it is then understandable that there is nothing in folktales and myths which can remain foreign or refractory to structure. Even the vocabulary—i.e., the content—is seen there stripped of this character of "naturing nature" in which one feels authorized (wrongly perhaps) in seeing something being made in a contingent and unforeseeable manner. Through the tales and the myths, the vocabulary is apprehended as "natured nature." It

is a given fact, with its laws which force a certain delineation of contours upon the real and mythical vision itself. For the latter, there only remains to find out what coherent arrangements are possible between the pieces of a mosaic for which number, meaning, and shapes have been determined beforehand.

We have denounced the error of formalism, which is the belief that the grammar can be tackled at once and the dictionary postponed. But what is true for some linguistic systems is even more true for myths and tales. This is so because in this case grammar and vocabulary are not only closely linked while operating at distinct levels; they virtually adhere to each other on all surfaces and cover each other completely. As opposed to language, where the problem of vocabulary still exists, metalanguage has no level where elements do not result from well-determined operations, effected according to the rules. In this sense, everything in it is syntax. But in another sense everything in it is vocabulary, since the differential elements are words. Mythemes are still words; functions—these mythemes to the second power—are denoted by words (as Propp perceives very well). And it is likely that languages exist in which an entire myth can be expressed in a single word.

## Postscript

In the Italian edition of his work,[9] Propp had responded to the text which has just been read with an offended harangue. Invited by the Italian publisher to answer, but concerned not to prolong what seemed to me to be a misunderstanding, I restricted myself to a brief comment. Not having kept the original, I can reconstruct the text approximately from the translation on page 164.

> All those who read the essay which I wrote in 1960 about Propp's prophetic work, included in this volume by the Italian publisher, cannot have failed to take it for what it was meant to be: a homage rendered to a great discovery which preceded by a quarter of a century all the attempts made by others and myself in the same direction.
>
> This is why I note with surprise and regret that the Russian scholar, to whose deserved fame I thought I had modestly contributed, saw something quite different in my words: not a cour-

teous discussion on some theoretical and methodological aspects of his work, but a perfidious attack.

I do not wish to engage with him in a polemic on this subject. It is clear that, treating me as a philosopher, he shows that he ignores all my ethnological work, whereas a profitable exchange of views could have been founded on our respective contributions to the study and the interpretation of oral traditions.

But, whatever conclusions better informed readers can draw from this confrontation, Propp's work will, to them and to me, forever keep the merit of having been the first.

## NOTES

1. See V. Propp, "Morphology of the Folktale," Part III, trans. L. Scott, *International Journal of American Linguistics*, XXIV, No. 4 (October 1958); also published, under the same title, for the American Folklore Society and the Indiana University Research Center for the Language Sciences, Publication 10 (October 1958). A second edition was revised and edited by L. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

[*Translator's note:* The page numbers in Prof. Lévi-Strauss's text refer to the first edition (1958). As the second edition (1968) is now more commonly used, we have added in italics the page references to this latter edition when it is cited in the text.]

On the Russian formalist school, see: V. Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1955); B. Tomashevsky, "La Nouvelle École d'histoire littéraire en Russie," *Revue des études slaves*, VIII (1928).

2. R. M. Vólkov, *Skazka: Rozyskanija po sjužetosloženiju narodnoj skazki* [The tale: investigations on the theme composition of the folktale] (Kiev: 1924), Vol. I, Skazka velikorusskaja, ukrainskaja, belorusskaja [The Great Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian Tales].

3. For the discussion of a definite example of hypotheses of this type, see Chapters X and XIV.

4. Or, rather, of the "testing" of the hero, which takes place before.

5. For an attempt at joint restitution of form and content, see Chapter IX.

6. On these analyses, see *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études* (Sciences religieuses), *1954-1955*, pp. 25-27 and *1959-1960*, pp. 39-42; see also *La Pensée sauvage*, 1962, pp. 66-71.

7. This second system of incompatibilities pertains to functions that Propp called preparatory, because of their contingent character. Let us remember that, for Propp, the main functions have only one pair of incompatibilities.

8. *Structural Anthropology*, Chapter XI; see also *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études* (Sciences religieuses), *1952-1953*, pp. 19-21, *1953-1954*, pp. 27-29.

9. V. Propp, *Morfologia della fiabra*, ed. G. L. Bravo, with a commentary by C. Lévi-Strauss and a reply by the author (Turin, 1966).