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STUDY OF THE FOLKTALE: STRUCTURE AND HISTORY

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When The Morphology of the Folktale *was published in Russian in 1928, it elicited two kinds of reactions. Some folklorists, ethnographers, and literary scholars received it favorably, while others accused its author of being formalistic, an accusation that 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, had it not been rediscovered a few years after the war. Suddenly, it began to be discussed at congresses and in articles, and an English translation appeared in print. The explanation for this renewed interest lies in the extremely important discoveries being made in the exact sciences through the use of new, more exact methods of research and computation. The desire for exact methods extended to the humanistic sciences as well. Structural and mathematical linguistics sprang up, and other disciplines followed, among them, poetics. Hence arose the concept of art as a system of signs, the procedures of formalization and modelling and the possibility of* using mathematical calculation, all of which had been anticipated in Morphology, although at the time it appeared, the system of concepts and the terminology with which poetics operates today did not yet exist. And once again this work was evaluated in two different ways. For some it was useful and necessary in the search for new, more exact methods, while for others, as we saw before, it was formalistic and devoid of any extence of logical value.

Into this second category fall the reaction of the structuralist, Professor Claude Lévi-Strauss, despite the fact that the structuralists themselves have often been accused of formalism. Lévi-Strauss has used The Morphology of the Folktale, which he deems a basically formalistic book, to show the difference between structuralism and formalism. The resulting article, Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp, appears in International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics, 3, 1960. Let the reader decide whether or not he is right. But when one is attacked, it is natural to defend oneself. If the arguments of the adversary seem erroneous, one can oppose counterarguments that are demonstrably more correct, and such a polemic may be of general scientific interest. He has thrown down the gauntlet, and I am accepting his challenge. In this way the readers of Morphology will be witnesses to our duel and will be able to determine the winner, if indeed there is one.

Lévi-Strauss has, in comparison with me, the very important advantage of being a philosopher, while I am a mere empiricist, but a true empiricist, who, first of all, observes the facts carefully and studies them scrupulously and methodically, verifying his own premises and re-examining the situation at every stage of the reasoning. Nevertheless, even the empirical sciences differ. In some instances, the empiricist can or even must limit himself to describing, to identifying characteristic elements, especially if the object of the investigation is an isolated fact. These descriptions certainly are not devoid of scientific value, provided that they are correctly drawn. But if we are describing a series of facts and their relationships, then such a description becomes the discovery of a phenomenon, a discovery that is not only of special interest, but also invites philosophical consideration. In my work, such considerations are only alluded to, and are stated only in the epigraphs which open some chapters. Lévi-Strauss knows my work only in English translation; the translator, however, has taken an inadmissible liberty. Not having fully understood the function of the epigraphs, which, at first glance, do not seem to be connected to the text, he decided that they were useless ornaments and barbarously suppressed them. Yet all these epigraphs were taken from the series of Goethe's works assembled under the title of Morphology, or from his diaries; their purpose was to express some things that were not stated in the text of the book. The highest goal of every science is the discovery of laws. Where the simple empiricist sees only unconnected facts, the empiricist-philosopher recognizes the manifestation of a law. I have identified the law in a rather modest field, one type of folk tale, but it had already occured to me at the time that the discovery of this law could also have a more general importance. The term "morphology" was not taken from those manuals whose main purpose is classification, not from grammatical treatises, but from the works of

Goethe, who collected writings on botany and osteology under this title. With this term we discover in Goethe a new breakthrough in the study of the laws that permeate nature, and it is not by chance that Goethe was to progress from botany to comparative osteology. We can heartily recommend these works to the structuralists. And if the young Goethe, in the guise of Faust, seated in his dusty laboratory surrounded by skeletons, bones, and herbaria, sees nothing except the dust, the mature Goethe, accustomed to precise comparisons in the field of the natural sciences, sees through individual manifestations a great general system that permeates all of nature. But two Goethes, the poet and the scientist, do not exist; the Goethe of Faust, *who longs for knowledge, and Goethe, the naturalist, who reached it, are one and the same person. The epigraphs have another significance: the realm of nature and that of human activity are not separated from one another. There is something that unites them; there are laws common to both that can be studied by related methods. This idea, still scarcely delineated, is today the basis of the search for exact methods in the humanistic sciences which was mentioned above. This is one of the reasons that the structuralists have supported me. On the other hand, some did not understand that my goal was not to arrive at those broad generalizations alluded to in the epigraphs, and that the work was simply part of my professional work as a folklorist. Thus, Lévi-Strauss at least twice asks himself with evident perplexity what drove me to apply my method to the folk tale. Maintaining that there were several reasons, he explains to the reader that I am not an ethnologist and therefore could not avail myself of mythological material, since I am not acquainted with it, and that, moreover, I do not have the least idea of the actual relationships that exist between the folk tale and the myth (pp. 133, 135). Thus, I studied the folktale, he claims, because of my limited scientific horizons; otherwise, I would probably have tested my method on myths, not folk tales.*

I will not dwell on the logic of these arguments ("since the author does not know myths, he examines folk tales"), logic that seems feeble to me, since I think that no scholar can be forbidden to do one thing and urged to do another. But following this reasoning, Lévi-Strauss maintains that a scholar should first find the method and only then ask himself which phenomenon it can be applied to; in this case, it is applied, who knows why, to folk tales, which do not much interest the philosopher. But in the field of science it never happens this way, and it was not so in my case either. It all happened quite differently. In Tsarist times, Russian universities cared very little about the training of philologists in the field of literary studies. Folk poetry in particular was completely neglected. To fill that gap, I devoted myself, after finishing university, to the study of Afanasjev's well-known collection. In a series of folk tales whose common subject was the persecution of a stepdaughter, I noted an interesting fact: in the folk tale "Morozko" [Frost] (no. 95ª, according to the ennumeration in the Soviet edition) the stepmother sends her stepdaughter into the woods, to the spirit of frost, Morozko. He tries to freeze her to death, but she responds to him with such sweetness and forbearance that he spares her, gives her a reward, and lets her go. The old woman's real daughter, however, fails the test and perishes. In the following folk tale, the stepdaughter encounters not Morozko *but a wood sprite, and, in the one after that, a bear. But it is still the very same story. Morozko, the wood sprite, and the bear test the stepdaughter and reward her, each in his own way, but the development of the action is the same. The strange thing was that no one had ever noticed it before and that Afanasjiev and the others thought that they were dealing with different tales. It is very clear that Morozko, the wood sprite, and the bear performed the same action in a different guise. To Afanasjiev these were different tales because different characters performed the actions in them, but it seemed to me that they were the same, because the actions of the protagonists were the same. I became interested in this idea and began to study other folk tales from the point of view of the actions performed by the characters. As a result of analyzing the material–and not an abstraction–a very simple method of studying the folk tale was born, based on the actions performed by the characters, independent of the forms they assumed; to designate these actions, I adopted the term "functions." My observations on the folk tale of the persecuted stepdaughter were the clues permitting me to seize the end of the thread and unwind the yarn. It was possible to establish that other plots were also based on the repetition of functions, and that in the last analysis all the plots of the magic folk tale are based on identical functions and that all these folk tales had the same type of structure.*

But if the translator has served the reader badly by omitting the epigraphs from Goethe, the Russian editor who originally published the book had also distorted the author's intention, changing the title of the work, which was originally Morphology of the Magic Folktale. *To make the volume appear to be of wider interest, the editor suppressed the word "magic" and in this way led the readers (Lévi-Strauss among them) into the mistaken belief that it examined the general laws of the folk tale as a literary genre. A book with this title could be included in a series of studies like* The Morphology of Exorcism, The Morphology of Fable, The Morphology of Comedy, *and so forth. But the author did not at all intend to study all the types of the various and complex genre that is the folk tale, but examined only one that differed profoundly from all the others, that of the magic tale, and only those tales of folkloric origin. So what we are discussing is particular research dedicated to a specific folkloric question. It is, then, another matter as to whether the method of analysis of narrative types based on the functions of the characters could be used not only for the magic folk tale, but also for other types of tales, or in the study of works of a narrative character from world literature. But it is easy to foresee that in each of these cases the concrete results would vary. So, for example, cumulative tales are based on an altogether different principle from that of the magic folk tale. They are called "formula tales" in English folklore, and the kinds of formulas on which they are based can be recognized and defined, but the schemes thus singled out will not correspond at all to those of the magic folk tale. There are, therefore, several kinds of narratives which can still be analyzed by the same methods. Lévi-Strauss cites my statement that the conclusions I reached are not applicable to the tales of Novalis and Goethe and, in general, to artificial tales of literary origin–and then turns my words against me, maintaining that my conclusions must be erroneous. But they are not. They simply do not have that universal character that my* *esteemed critic wished to attribute to them. The method is broad; the conclusions, however, are valid only for the type of folkloric narrative to which these analyses owe their origin.*

I shall not respond to all the accusations advanced by Lévi-Strauss but shall dwell on only a few of the most important ones. If these prove to be unfounded, the other, less important ones derived from them will fall by themselves.

The main accusation is that my work is of a formalistic stamp and for that reason alone cannot have epistemological value. Lévi-Strauss has not provided a precise definition of what he means by formalism, but limits himself to some characteristics he pointed out in the course of his study. One of them is the fact that formalists study the material without reference to history. Lévi-Strauss attributes such a formalistic, a-historical method to me too but then, desiring, it seems, to mitigate his harsh judgment a little, informs the readers that I renounced formalism and morphological analysis after I wrote Morphology *in order to devote myself to a historical and comparative study of the relationships that connect oral literature (as he calls folklore) to myths, rites, and institutions (p. 122). He does not, however, specify which study he means. In my book* Russkie agrarnye prazdniki [Russian Agrarian Festivals] *(1963) I have, on the contrary, used precisely the same method as in* Morphology, *establishing that all the principal agrarian festivals consist of identical elements organized differently. But this work could not at that time have been known to Lévi-Strauss, who is evidently referring to the work,* Istoričeskie korni volšebnoj skazki [The Historical Roots of Magic Tales], *which appeared in 1946. If he had taken a look at this volume, however, he would have realized that it began with an exposition of the theses developed in* Morphology, *and that the magic folk tale is defined, not in relation to plot, but to composition. In fact, once the unity of the composition of the magic folk tale was established, I could do no less than ask myself the reason for it. It was clear to me from the start that it would not be found in immanent laws of form but should be sought in the first stages of history or, as some prefer, prehistory, that is, in the stage of the development of human society that is the subject of 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 (*observation ethnographique, *p. 146). Precisely for this reason I have not abandoned morphological analysis but have set myself the task of searching for the historical foundations and the historical roots of the system revealed to me by a comparative study of the plots of the magic folk tale.* Morphology *and* The Historical Roots *represent, so to speak, two parts or two volumes of a single broad work—the second issues directly from the first; the first is the premise of the second. Lévi-Strauss quotes my contention that morphological research "is connected with historical inquiry" (p. 135), but once again he turns my words against me. Insofar as this research does not appear in* Morphology, *he is right, but he has not given full value to the fact that these words were expressions of a specific* principle. *They represent, in addition, a promise to develop this historical research in the future and are, in their way, a debt that I have honestly paid, even if many years later. If he says, therefore, that I am torn between the "formalist* *vision"* (vision formaliste) *and the "obsession with historical explanations"* (l'obsession des explications historiques)*, (p. 136), he is simply wrong. Using the most rigorously consistent means possible, I have* passed *from the scientific description of the phenomena and the facts to an explanation of their historical roots. In ignorance of all this, Lévi-Strauss even claims that my abandoning of formalist illusions and devotion to historical research was some kind of atonement. But, in fact, I do not feel any remorse and do not have the least twinge of conscience. Lévi-Strauss himself maintains that a historical explanation of folk tales is not really possible "because we know very little about the prehistorical civilizations in which they were born" (p. 136) and bewails further the lack of texts for comparison. The issue is not, however, a matter of texts (which, by the way, exist in quite sufficient quantity) but the fact that the plots originate* in the usages and the life *of the people and in the forms of thought that emerge from them in the first stages of the development of human society, and that the appearance of these plots corresponds to historical necessity. It is true that we still know little about ethnology but nonetheless scholars throughout the world have already gathered a large enough amount of factual material to make such inquiries completely reliable.*

But it is clearly questions of principle that are important here, and not the ways in which Morphology *was conceived nor the vicissitudes of the author. One cannot separate formal inquiry from the historical approach nor oppose one to the other. The opposite is true: formal analysis, the precise, systematic description of the objective material studied, is the condition and the premise of historical research and is at the same time the first step in it. There is no shortage of isolated examinations of individual plots; they are found in great numbers in the works of the so-called Finnish School. Still, proceeding in this way, the representatives of this persuasion are not able to perceive any connection between the plots; they do not even suspect that one exists or is possible. This is the characteristic orientation of the formalists, for whom the whole is a mechanical conglomeration of heterogeneous parts. From this point of view, the genre of the magic folk tale would take the form of a collection of isolated individual plots. The structuralist, on the other hand, examines the parts as elements of a whole and the whole/part relations; the structuralist sees a whole, a system, where the formalist cannot perceive one. The method elaborated in* Morphology *makes it possible to study the genre as a unique whole, as a system, by comparing the plots, rather than dismembering them and studying them separately, as is the custom of the Finnish School, which it seems to me, notwithstanding its merits, is justly accused of formalism. The comparative examination of plots opens up wide historical perspectives. One cannot explain individual plots historically, but only the system of composition to which they belong. Only then is the historical interplay among them revealed and hence the basis for studying them separately.*

But the problem of the relation between formal analysis and the historical approach is only one aspect of the question. Another arises from the conception of the form-content relation and the different methods of studying them. What is usually meant by the term "formalistic" is the study of form independent of content.

According to Lévi-Strauss, however, it means their opposition, and therefore he is not is disagreement with contemporary Soviet literary historians. Thus Ju. M. Lotman, one of the most active literary structuralists, writes that the principal defect of the so-called "formal method" is the fact that it often leads the researcher to consider literature as a mass of techniques, a mechanical conglomeration. To this can also be added that for the formalists form has its own independent laws and, in particular, immanent laws of development not subordinated to social history. According to this concept, development in the field of literature creation is autonomous and is determined by the laws of form.

But if this is what is meant by formalism, the Morphology of the Folktale *cannot possibly be defined as formalistic, even if Lévi-Strauss is far from being my only accuser. Not every study of form is formalistic, and not every scholar who examines the form of the products of oral or figurative art has to be, perforce, a formalist.*

I have already reported Lévi-Strauss's statement that my conclusions regarding the structure of the magic tale are an illusion, a formalist vision—une vision formaliste *(p. 214). We are not dealing here with a casual opinion but with the author's deeply rooted conviction that I should consider myself a victim of subjective illusions (p. 137). Out of many folk tales I supposedly construct one that never existed, and this one is "an abstraction so vague and general that it tells us nothing about the objective reasons for the existence of a great number of particular folk tales" (p. 140). That my abstraction, as Lévi-Strauss calls the scheme I created, would not reveal the reasons for their variety is accurate, and only historical investigation can do that, but it is not true that it is vague and represents sheer illusion. Lévi-Strauss's words indicate simply that he seemingly does not understand the completely empirical, concrete, particularized character of my research. How could that have happened? Lévi-Strauss maintains that my work is difficult to understand, but it is often the case that people who have many concepts of their own have difficulty comprehending those of other people and do not understand what is clear to anyone who has no preconceptions. My research lies outside Lévi-Strauss's general conceptions, and that is one of the reasons for the misunderstanding. Another is related to my treatment. I wrote the book when I was young and therefore convinced that it was enough to offer an observation or an idea and everyone would immediately understand and share it. I proceeded thereupon with the greatest conciseness and expressed myself in theorem style, judging the development and particularized demonstration of my ideas to be superfluous, as if even in that form they should appear clear and comprehensible to everyone at first view. But I was wrong about that.*

Beginning with terminology, I should have recognized that the term "morphology," which was once so dear to me and which I had borrowed from Goethe, attributing to it a meaning that was not only scientific but in part philosophical and even poetic, was not after all a good choice. To be truly correct, I should not have spoken of "morphology," but of a much more limited concept, that of "composition," and therefore to have entitled the book The Composition of the Magic Folkloric Tale. *But even the "composition" ought to be defined, because it can be* *understood in various ways. Let's see, then, how it is to be used here. It has already been said that our analysis originates in the observation that in the magic folk tale different characters perform identical actions, or, what is the same thing, that identical action can be executed in very different ways. We have offered as evidence the variants of a group of tales dealing with the persecuted stepdaughter, but this observation is valid not only for the variants of this plot but for all the plots of the genre of the magic folk tale. So, for example, if the hero leaves home to search for something, and the object of his desires is very far away, he can reach it by flying on an enchanted horse or on the back of an eagle, or else on a flying carpet, a flying ship, the back of a devil, etc. We will not ennumerate all the possible examples here. It can easily be perceived that in all these cases 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 is different. Thus we have a large number of constants and variables. Another example is that of the princess who does not wish to marry or the father who does not want to give her up to a suitor he or she dislikes. The suitor is required to perform absolutely impossible undertakings: leaping up to her window on horseback, bathing in a cauldron of boiling water, solving the princess's riddle, procuring a golden hair from the king of the seas, etc. To the uninitiated listener all these variants seem to be completely different, and from a naive point of view he is right, but to the alert researcher this multiplicity discloses a logically determinable unity. In the first series of examples one deals with the transfer to the place of the search, while in the second the motif of the imposition of difficult tasks appears. Although the nature of these tasks is diverse and changeable and represents something variable, their being assigned is a constant element. I have named these elements the constant functions of the characters, and the goal of the investigation was to establish which functions appeared in the magic folk tale, to determine whether they are more or less limited in number and what sequence they follow. In my volume I deal precisely with the results of this analysis. The functions turned out to be few, their forms many, the succession always the same; a picture of surprising regularity is thus obtained.*

It seemed to me that all this was simple enough and easy to understand, and I still think so. I did not, however, take into account the fact that the word "function" has many different meanings in all the languages of the world and is used in mathematics, mechanics, medicine, philosophy. Those who do not know all these meanings understand me very easily. Function, according to my definition of the term (as used in Morphology*), means the action of the character determined from the point of view of its significance for the progress of the narrative. Thus, if the hero leaps up to the princess's window on the back of a horse, we do not have the function of leaping on horseback (this definition would be accurate independently of the advancement of the narrative as a whole) but the function of executing a difficult task related to asking the hand of the princess. In the same way, if the hero flies on the back of an eagle to the country where the princess is to be found, we are not dealing with the function of flying on the back of a bird but that of transfer to the place where the object of the search is located. The word "function" is there-*

fore a conventional term that, in our work, is to be understood in this and no other meaning.

The determination of the functions is the result of specific comparative analyses of the material, and it is therefore impossible to agree with Lévi-Strauss when he says that the functions were established in an altogether arbitrary and subjective way. They were, on the contrary, the product of the comparison, correlation, and identification of the logical structure of hundreds and thousands of cases. But Lévi-Strauss gives the term "function" a completely different meaning from that adopted in Morphology. *Therefore, to show that the functions were arbitrarily established, he refers to the example of different people guarding a fruit tree: one would consider most important the function of productivity, another, the existence of deep roots, while a savage would attribute to it the function of joining heaven and earth (the tree reaches up to heaven). From the point of view of logic, productivity could be correctly defined as one of the functions of a fruit tree, but productivity is not an action, much less the action of a character in a narrative. On the contrary, I devote myself precisely to narratives and to the investigation of their specific laws. Lévi-Strauss gives my terms a generalized, abstract meaning that they do not have, and then refutes them. The functions were not arbitrarily defined.*

We now turn to the consideration of what is meant by composition. By this term I mean the succession of functions as given in the tale itself. The scheme derived from it is not an archetype nor the reconstruction of a single tale that never existed (as my critic thinks) but something altogether different: it is the unitary compositional scheme that is the basis of the magic folk tale. Lévi-Strauss is indeed right about one thing: this compositional scheme has no real existence. However, it is embodied in the narrative in many different forms; it is the basis of the plot and is, so to speak, its framework. To make this idea clearer and avoid further misunderstandings, we shall illustrate what is meant by plot and by composition through somewhat simplified examples. Let us imagine that a dragon carried off the king's daughter. The king asks for help, and a farmer's son decides to search for her. He sets out and on the way meets an old woman who asks him to take care of a herd of wild horses. He does so, and the old woman gives him one of the animals, who carries him to an island where the abducted princess is. The hero kills the dragon and returns, and the king rewards him by giving him the hand of his daughter in marriage. This is the plot of the tale, whereas the composition can be outlined as follows: a misfortune occurs; the hero is asked for help; he goes on the search; on the way he meets someone who puts him to the test and rewards him with a magic object; with the help of that magical tool he finds the sought-for object; the hero returns and is rewarded. This is the composition of the tale. It is clear that the same composition can lie at the bottom of many plots. The composition is a constant factor; the plot, a variable one. If there were not a danger of further terminological misunderstandings, we could call the structure the totality of the plot and the composition. It has no real existence, in the same sense as, in the world of things, general concepts do not exist and are found only in the consciousness of man. But it is precisely because of these general concepts that we know the world, discover its laws, and learn to control it.

Before we get into the heart of the problem of form and content, it is necessary to dwell a little longer on some particulars.

In studying the folk tale we can note that some functions (actions of characters) can readily be considered as pairs. For example, the imposition of a difficult task implies its solution, the pursuit ends with rescue, the battle leads to victory, the misfortune or disaster with which the tale begins is removed at the conclusion, and so forth. Lévi-Strauss maintains that the paired functions are really a single function and can be reduced to it. That may be so on a logical plane too. In a certain way the battle and the victory do form one whole. But for the determination of the composition these mechanical associations are useless and can only give a false image. The paired functions are performed by different people: the difficult task is imposed by one character and resolved by another. Furthermore, the second half of a paired function can be positive or negative. In folk tales we encounter an authentic hero or a false one: the first executes the task and is rewarded; the second does not succeed and is punished. Likewise, intermediate functions are inserted between the paired functions. Thus the abduction of the princess (the initial misfortune, the first element of the exordium) is found at the beginning of the tale, while her return (resolution) takes place only at the end. For this reason, in the study of composition, which is the succession of the functions, reducing of the paired elements to a single one would not lead us to an understanding of the laws that regulate the progress of the intrigue *and the development of the plot. It is not possible to subordinate these functions to further logical operations in disregard of the material.*

For the very same reason I must also refute another recommendation. For me it was very important to establish the order in which the people arranged the functions. It turned out that the order is always the same, and this was a very important discovery for the folklorist. The narrative action develops in time, and therefore the functions are ordered in sequence. Lévi-Strauss does not, however, approve of this method of analyzing and ordering the functions. He refers to the order of succession using the letters of the alphabet A B C D, etc. adopted by me, and proposes, instead of this chronological series, the use of a logical system. He would arrange the functions according to how they are distributed in two dimensions, one vertical and one horizontal. This distribution is one of the requirements of the structuralists' analytical technique, but it had already appeared in Morphology, *only in another guise. Probably my critic did not pay enough attention to the end of the volume, the appendix entitled* Materials for the Tabulation of the Tale. *The rubrics given there represent the horizontal, and the table is the detailed composition of scheme which is designated in the text by letters. Under these rubrics can be inscribed the actual material of the tale, and this would constitute the vertical. There is no need here 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 generalizations from the material, while Lévi-Strauss makes abstractions out of my generalizations. He deplores the fact that it is not possible to revert from my abstract schemes back to* *the material, but if any collection of magic folktales were to be taken and compared with my scheme, it would correspond precisely with the material, and one would be fully convinced of the structural laws of the folktale. What is more, proceeding from the scheme, it would be possible to compose an infinite number of tales which would all be constructed according to those same laws of the folktale. Ignoring the incompatible varieties among them, one could calculate mathematically the number of possible combinations. If we wish to call my scheme a model, this model reproduces all the constructive elements (constants) of the tale, setting aside the non-constructive elements (variables). My model corresponds to what was modelled and is based on a study of the material, while the model proposed by Lévi-Strauss does not correspond with reality and is based on logical operations not imposed by the actual materials. The abstraction derived from the material serves to explain it; the abstraction of abstractions is an end in itself, has no connection with the material, may find itself at odds with the facts of the real world, and is hence incapable of explaining it. Carrying out his logical operations in a completely abstract way and without bothering in the least with the material (Lévi-Strauss is not at all interested in the folk tale nor does he attempt to become acquanted with it) he removes the functions from their temporal sequence (p. 143). For the folklorist this is not possible because the function (act, behavior, action) as it is defined in the volume, takes place in time and cannot be removed from it. In this regard we can note here that in the folk tale a concept of time, space, and number dominates, which is completely different from that to which we are accustomed and which we tend to consider now. I have alluded to it here only because the forced removal of the functions from the temporal sequence destroys the delicate thread of the narrative, which, like a subtle 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 a-temporal series (*structure a-temporelle*) as Lévi-Strauss would have it.*

*For the folklorist and the literary historian the center of interest is the plot. In Russian the word "plot" (*sjuzet*), as a historico-literary term, has a well-defined meaning: the entirety of the actions and the incidents that are actually developed in the course of the narrative. The English translator has rendered it rather well by the word "plot," and it is not by chance that a German magazine dedicated to popular narrative art is entitled "Fabula." But plot has no interest for Lévi-Strauss, and he translates this word in French as *thème* (p. 124). Evidently he prefers this term because plot is a category that has reference to time, while "theme" does not have this characteristic. But no student of literature would ever accept this substitution. So the term "plot" and the term "theme" can be understood very differently but can never be identified with one another and used interchangeably. This lack of interest in plot, in narrative, is reflected 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 magical device, this character, in exact accord with his function, was defined in my work as the "donor." The magic objects that the hero receives have been called the "magic gifts" (*Zaubergaben*) by folklorists. We are dealing, therefore, with a specific scientific term. The English translator* *has rendered the word "davitel' " as "donor," which fits the folk tale perfectly and perhaps is even better than "davitel'," because the gift is not always voluntary. But Lévi-Strauss translates it as* bienfaiteur *(p. 127) which once again gives the term such a general and abstract sense as to make it lose all meaning.*

After all these digressions, necessary for a better understanding of what follows, we can get to the heart of the problem of form and content. As has been mentioned earlier, the study of form abstracted from content is said to be formalistic. I must admit that I do not understand what all this means and I do not comprehend its real significance or the possibility of its practical application. Perhaps I would understand it if I knew where, in a work of art, to look for form and where to look for content. One can discuss form and content in general as philosophical categories as much as one likes but the arguments are fruitless if, from the beginning, the object of the discussion is designated as the categories of form and content in general, without actual reference to the material in all its variety.

In popular esthetic judgment the plot as such constitutes the content of a work. For the people the content of the folk tale "Firebird" is the story of how this bird flew into the king's garden and stole the golden apple there, and how the prince went in search of it and returned with not only the firebird but a horse and a beautiful fiancée. What happened is of interest. Let us assume for the moment the point of view of the people, which is a sensible thing to do. If plot is taken to be the content, then composition cannot be the content. Thus we must logically reach the conclusion that it is part of the field of the form of prose production. From this point of view different contents can be put into a single form. But we said earlier and are here forced to demonstrate that composition and plot are inseparable: plot cannot exist without composition, and composition without plot. Commencing with our material we have thus arrived at an affirmation of the well-known truth that form and content are inseparable. Lévi-Strauss says the same thing: "Form and content have the same nature and are subject to the same analysis" (p. 137). This is without doubt true, but let's reflect on this affirmation: if form and content are inseparable and even identical in nature, the person who analyzes the first necessarily analyzes the second also. But what then is the sin of formalism and what is my crime when I analyze plot (content) and composition (form) in their indissoluble union? Yet this concept of content and form is not so usual, after all, and it is difficult to say if it can be applied to other kinds of oral art as well. Form usually means participation in a defined genre; therefore, the same plot can take the form of a novel, a tragedy, a film scenario. In this regard Lévi-Strauss's belief is brilliantly confirmed by attempts to place a narrative work on the stage or adapt it for the screen. Zola's romance in the pages of a book and on the movie screen are two different works which for the most part have very little in common. Content, then, usually means not the plot but the idea that shapes the work, the one that the author wants to express, his vision of the world, his concepts. There have been innumerable attempts to study and appraise the writer's concept of the world, but in the majority of cases they have had an absolutely dilettantish character. Leo Tolstoy used to deride these attempts. When he was asked what he intended to say in his novel Anna Karenina, *he answered, "If I wished to say in words all that I had intended to express in the novel, I would have to rewrite the same novel that I had already written once. And if, by this time, critics understand and succeed in recapitulating in an article what I want to say, I shall congratulate them." If, in literature, the work of art as such is the form of expression of an idea, it is all the more so in folklore. Here we have formal laws (of composition) so strong that to ignore them means committing egregious errors. According to his own political, social, historical, and religious conceptions, the researcher will attribute to the folk tale or to folklore his own vision of the world, showing that it is the expression of mystical or atheistic, revolutionary or conservative attitudes. This does not really mean that the world of folkloric ideas cannot be studied, it means the opposite, that this world of ideas ("content") can be analyzed scientifically and objectively only after the formal laws of artistic work have been clarified. I agree perfectly with Lévi-Strauss when he demands historical and critico-literary research (*investigation historique *and* critique littéraire*), but he demands them as a* substitute *for what he calls formal study. On the contrary, preliminary formal analysis is the prime condition not only of historical enquiry but also of critico-literary investigation. If* Morphology *is, in a certain sense, the first volume of a broad investigation and* Historical Roots, *the second; the third could be literary criticism. Only after a formal study of the system of the folk tale and the determination of its historical roots will it be possible to analyze objectively and scientifically, in its historical development, that world of popular philosophy and popular morality that is one of the most interesting and significant components of the folk tale. It would show, looked at this way, a stratified structure similar to that of geological sediments. There the most ancient layers are combined with the more recent and present layers. At this point all the variable elements, the layers, can be examined, since the folk tale is not a work of art only because of its composition. But in order to study and understand all this, it is necessary to know the foundation upon which the variations within the popular folk story have developed.*

I cannot respond to all of Lévi-Strauss's observations but I would nevertheless like to dwell on a still more specific but very interesting question, that of the relationships between the folk tale and myth. For our purposes this is not a very important problem, because our research is dedicated to the folk tale and not to myth, but Lévi-Strauss has occupied himself at length with the latter and here, as well, he does not agree with me.

In my book I have said very little—and that concisely and without proof—about the relationships between folk tale and myth. I was heedless enough to express my ideas apodictically, but unproven concepts are not always wrong. I maintain that the myth as such, as a historical category, is older than the folk tale; Lévi-Strauss maintains the opposite. It is impossible to develop the problem fully here but I cannot do less than examine it briefly.

What, for the folklorist, constitutes the difference between the tale and myth, and in what respects are they alike? One of the characteristic properties of the folk tale is the fact that it is based on poetic invention and is a fabrication 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 a Russian narrator concludes his story. The myth is, rather, a sacred narrative whose veracity is believed and which, moreover, expresses the sacred faith of the people. The difference between them is not, therefore, formal. Myths can take the form of a story whose diverse forms can be studied, even if this has not been done in my book. Lévi-Strauss maintains that "myth and tale exploit a common substance" (p. 135-136), which is perfectly true if, by substance (*substance*), is meant the forward movement of the narrative or the plot. There are myths based on the same morphological and compositional system as the folk tale, as, for example, those from classical antiquity–the myths of the Argonauts, Perseus and Andromeda, Theseus, and many others. They correspond at times even in particulars to the compositional system studied in the* Morphology of the Folktale. *There are, therefore, some cases in which myth and folk tale have the same form, but this observation is by no means a universal rule. A whole series of myths from antiquity, even a majority of them, have nothing in common with this system, and that is even more true of the myths of primitive people. The cosmogonical myths, myths about the creation and the origin of the world, animals, men, and things, have no connection with the system of the magic folk tale and cannot be transformed into it; they are based on an absolutely different morphological system. There are many such systems, and mythology has been studied very little to date from this point of view. Where folk tale and myth are based on the same system, the myth is always older than the folk tale, as can be demonstrated by the example of the history of the plot of Sophocles'* Oedipus. *In Hellas it was a myth, but in the Middle Ages the plot acquired a sacred Christian character, and its protagonist became the great sinner Judas or one of the saints like Gregory or 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 sacred character, myth and legend are transformed into folk tale. But Lévi-Strauss is of another opinion and does not hold that myth is older than the folk tale, because he says they can coexist and that they actually do coexist to this day. "At present myths and folk tales exist side by side: therefore one form cannot be considered the predecessor of the other" (p. 135). The example of* Oedipus *shows, however, that in the course of historical development, plots can move from one form (myth) to another (legend) and from that to a third (folk tale). Any folklorist knows very well that the plots very often move from one genre to another, very different one (the plots of the folk tale end up in the epos, etc.), but Lévi-Strauss is not referring to actual plots and prefers to use the words "myth" and "folk tale" in a generalized sense as myth "in general" and the folk tale "in general" and therefore to consider the genre as such without distinguishing types and plots. Therefore he speaks of their coexistence up to the present day but in this instance he is not thinking like a historian. It is necessary to consider not the centuries but historical periods and social structures. The study of the past archaic and primitive peoples leads to the conclusion that all their folklore (like their figurative art) has an exclusively sacred or magical character. What is passed off in popular publications and, at times, even in scientific journals as "folk tales of primitive peoples" very often have nothing to do with the folk tale. It is well known, for example, that the* *so-called animal folk tales were once told not as folk tales but as stories of a magical character that should contribute to a successful hunt; the pertinent material is very abundant. The folk tale originated later than the myth, and a moment arrives when for a certain time they can indeed coexist, but only in cases in which the plots of myths and folk tales are different and belong to different systems of composition. Classical antiquity recognized both folk tales and myths, but their plots were different. The myth of the Argonauts and the folk tale of the Argonauts cannot exist contemporaneously among the same people. There could not be folk tales about Theseus where the myth thrived and where a cult offered tribute to him. Finally, in present-day advanced social structures the existence of myths is no longer possible. The role of the sacred tradition of the people that they played at one time has been taken over by sacred writing or ecclesiastical narrative. In socialist countries even these last remnants of myths of the sacred tradition are disappearing. So the problem of the respective antiquity of the myth and the folk tale and the possibility or impossibility of their coexistence cannot be summarily resolved without taking into account the degree of development of the people. It is necessary to know and understand the morphological systems and to know how to distinguish them in order to succeed in determining not only the affinities but the differences between the folk tale and the myth, as well as to resolve the problem of their relative antiquity and the possibility or impossibility of their coexistence. The question is more complex than appears to Lévi-Strauss.*

We can now draw some conclusions. The philosopher will consider correct those general judgments that correspond to this or that philosophical system, while the scholar will consider correct those that are the result of the study of the material itself. Lévi-Strauss reproaches me because my conclusions do not correspond, as he says, to the nature of things; yet he does not mention a single substantiated instance in the field of the folk tale in which my conclusions were found to be wrong, and such objections are the most perilous for the scholar and also the most proper, useful, and valuable.

Another extremely important problem for any scholar in any specialty is that of method. According to Lévi-Strauss, my method is wrong because the phenomenon of the transferability of the action from one person to another or the persistence of identical actions, even if different executors are involved, does not belong to the magic folk tale alone. This observation is absolutely correct, but instead of arguing against the method proposed by me, it rather speaks in its favor. Thus, if in cosmogonical myths the crow, the mink, and the essence or the anthropomorphic divinity can assume the same role of founders of the world, this means that myths not only can but on the contrary must be studied by the same methods elaborated for the magic folk tale. The conclusions will certainly be different, a great number of morphological systems will result, but the methods can remain the same.

It is very possible that the method of analyzing narratives according to the functions of the characters will turn out to be useful for the narrative forms of literature as well as for folklore. Still, the methods proposed in this volume before the appearance of structuralism, as well as the methods of the structuralists who aspire *to the objective and precise study of literature, also have their limits in application. They are possible and profitable where one faces repetitions on a wide scale, such as exist in language and folklore. But when the art becomes the field of action of a unique genius, the use of precise methods will yield positive results only if the study of repetitive elements is accompanied by the study of that which is unique and which till now we have regarded as the manifestation of an unknowable miracle. Under whatever heading* The Divine Comedy *or Shakespeare's tragedies are listed, the genius of Dante and that of Shakespeare are unrepeatable and cannot be understood by exact methods alone. And if, at the beginning of this writing, we placed in relief the affinity between the laws studied by the exact sciences and those studied by the humanistic disciplines, we will conclude by remembering their fundamental, specific difference.*