

IN THE MIDST OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Claude Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, translated by Felicity Baker, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, 89 pages, £4.95.

Levi-Strauss's text is the introduction to a collection of Mauss's writings published in 1950 under the title Sociologie et anthropologie. It has not been printed before in any of the translations of Levi-Strauss's work, despite its acknowledged significance in the development of his work. Its appearance should be welcomed not least for the excellence of Felicity Baker's translation, which produces a conceptual clarity in a text which is elliptical and condensed.

The text is divided into three parts, each of which pretends to comment upon an aspect of Mauss's work. Although it can be read in this way, it can also be read as a secretive conspectus for the human sciences whose parts work as chapters upon the nature of social relations, upon the relation between experience and knowledge, and lastly upon the issue of signification and its energy. Read like this, it makes a sketch for the human sciences which the past forty years have done little to domesticate. Levi-Strauss's introduction has kept the freshness of a secret, perhaps most vividly so in its implication that there is no real difference between anthropology and psychoanalysis, as long as the latter be purged of any psychology.

I

The first chapter starts in the middle of things by commenting on Mauss's writings upon the techniques of the body, and the consequences of those writings for the way in which the relation between the group and the individual be conceived. At first glance it seems to repeat Mauss's insistence upon the priority of social relations and representations even over the movements of the human body. But Levi-Strauss is concerned with something more than, other than, the proof of the force and the strange extent of social relations; he is concerned with the question of what social relations are. He does this through a route which repeats psychoanalysis, through the twin issues of the body and of madness. These issues raise for him not just the

empirical question of the relation between the group and the individual, but the nature of symbolic relations as such.

He finds permission in Mauss himself to draw anthropology and psychoanalysis together through the question of the body. Mauss had spoken of finding himself, 'in the midst of psychoanalysis here probably quite well founded'. Levi-Strauss claims that Mauss's interest in the question of the body was in advance of many of his professional successors, for whom the body was of interest to the extent that it showed how the group moulded individuals in its own image. For Mauss had decided that he wished to show how the body was not just a reflection or index of social relations, but that the body was itself a product of techniques and representations. The body is not simply a tablet upon which social relations are written but is itself a set of symbolic relations. This might seem too generous a projection on to Mauss of a concern which is more properly Levi-Strauss's, but then the whole text abounds in such projections and feints. It provides a moment for Levi-Strauss to call an ambitious programme of research into the body and its symbolic economies, what he calls an 'archaeology of body habits'. This corpus might open to us not just the question of cultural integration, of the social mark upon the body in general, but the capacity to discern the thresholds of excitability and limits of resistance which differentiate the body in one culture from the body in another. What efforts are possible? What pains are intolerable? What pleasures are unheard, of? These are boundaries which construct the body symbolically. This is why the 'body' as a symbolic entity rather than just a psycho-physiological system or register becomes a privileged site of investigation in the human sciences. It is the exemplary demonstration of the force and mechanisms of symbolic relations, exemplary in the same way that the senses, and defects of sense, were privileged in the eighteenth century to philosophers seeking to extend a philosophy of sensationalism.

The body opens the question of symbolic relations; madness opens that of the question of the group and the individual, and of the question of the relation of normality and abnormality. There are two ways into this that Levi-Strauss eschews. He is not concerned with that sociological question of madness as a form of deviance from a norm. Nor is he concerned with the use by Ruth Benedict and others of the language of psychopathology to characterize cultural forms. For this type of analysis sets up interminable disputes about the priority of the social and the psychical in describing the combinations between the group culture and individual psychological structure. The question of whether a society gets its institutional forms from the individual modalities of its members' personalities, or whether these personalities are to be explained by aspects of, say, child-rearing, is a question which sets up an insoluble circularity. Levi-Strauss claims that Mauss is in advance of either a simple sociology of normality, or a cultural psychopathology. Mauss both insists upon the primacy of the social and that the psychical, rather than being subordinate to it, is a *translation* of it. Normal modes of behaviour are by definition collective and are represented as a symbolic system. Normal psychological responses, however, are not symbolic in and of themselves; they are elements out of which a symbolic system builds itself. In

formal terms, individual psychical responses are translations of a collective symbolic system but are not in an isomorphic relation to it.

This lends 'pathological' behaviour a double aspect. On the one hand pathological behaviour represents an abnormality in a statistical sense, a margin of 'desocialized' behaviour, individual, that is in contrast to a collective normality. But this observation is merely preliminary. For whatever is pathological, whatever forms pathology takes, is always already mapped out in socially prescribed destinies. There are proper ways to be normal and there are proper ways to be mad. Each culture has its own preferred forms of madness and these are the function of a collective order which is never neutral even in respect to exceptions. Such a perception is generally used in the human sciences to dissolve any universal language of the signs of madness; to deny, for example, any connection between the shaman and the madman. Interestingly, Levi-Strauss does not take this line of argument. He does take seriously the possibility of a connection between the shaman and the madman, but it is not a connection which rests upon some observational resemblance. The connection is more radical and edged with terror. It is that the shaman and the madman testify to a fact that does not arise for those who function as normal: the fact of the *impossibility of society*.

Levi-Strauss supposes that what we call society is a set of overlapping symbolic systems - language, matrimonial rules, arts, sciences, etc. These systems never achieve an expression which makes each of them equivalent to the others, and they remain in some sense incommensurable. There is no reason to suppose that a culture takes the form of an expressive totality. Moreover, 'history' and the contiguity of other cultures continuously erode any promise of a completed symbolism. Societies wander in and out of each other scattering nonsense in their wake. Discrepancy and discontinuity are the conditions of the concept of culture, not deductions from it. Now the 'normal' person is such by being able to alienate himself from consistency and live out these discrepancies in a fluent oblivion, as if, as it were, society existed. But some will find themselves 'off system'. From the point of view of the cultural system these are not individuals who are simply desocialized, or who are even acting out a desocialized pathology. They are the conditions of an imaginary normality.

The group seeks and even requires of these individuals that they figuratively represent certain forms of compromise which are not realisable on the collective plane; that they simulate imaginary transitions, embody incompatible syntheses. So in all their apparently aberrant modes of behaviour individuals who are ill are just transcribing a state of the group and making one or another of its constraints manifest. The fact that they are peripheral to the local system does not mean that they are not integral parts of the total system.

Indeed the 'abnormal', functionally speaking, have the task of making rather than just inheriting a symbolic order, order from which they can then be exiled to the margins.

As a consequence of this the relation between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal' must not be thought of simply as a relation between the collective and the individual, or between the socialized and the desocialized. Rather it is a relation of complementarity, in which the margins of a culture perform the work of producing a 'normality', the illusion of society, from whose point of view normality can then deploy itself as a norm. It is for this reason that Levi-Strauss refuses the ordinary anthropological distinction between the shaman and the madman. Of course the distinction is understandable in the face of psychiatry which has on occasion declared witches to be undiagnosed schizophrenics. But this merely demonstrates what Levi-Strauss dubs a 'somewhat timorous goodwill'. Far from thinking that shamanistic societies put themselves under the rule of madmen, we should rather think how our category of pathology, at the level of culture, codes certain symbolic relations.

These remarks upon the body and madness, for all their ellipses, have a direct bearing upon the idea of social relations. For Levi-Strauss, there are not two realms - the social and the psychical - which can be weighted for their relative causal efficacy. Rather, both are translations of something which is social and unconscious. But this 'social' is not a homogeneous collective pressure upon the group. It is a bundle of incommensurable symbolic systems. The reactions to this will produce a 'normal' form of representation and a set of 'abnormal' forms of representation, each of which differentially works out a representation of the world and its connections. They challenged, and still challenge, conventional conceptions of the relation between the social and the psychical, between the individual and the group, between symbolic systems and a naturalized concept of society. But the demonstration of these proposals depends upon two things. First, a methodological protocol; that is, how the anthropologist may know this; in particular, what is the relation of experience and knowledge for the anthropologist? Second, how can the notion of a symbolic system, or more properly signification, be accommodated to the problem of discrepancy?

II

Levi-Strauss approaches the first through an examination of Mauss's conception of the *total social fact*. He is concerned to demonstrate that for Mauss the social must be conceived as 'reality'; that is, to use a formulation from Marx, a synthesis of many determinations. The social fact contains various registers - different modes of the social (economic, juridical, etc.), the different moments of a life, and a corporeal register of expression, 'such as reflexes, secretions, decreased and increased ratios of movement, to unconscious categories and conscious representations, both individual and collective'. These registers are all social but can become a social fact only by being synthesized, by becoming global, by becoming reality. And this reality can exist only on condition, in a Kantian sense, that it is reality for a subject, a subject in whom reality is synthesized. Far from the social being a pressure upon a subject there is simply no difference between psychological and social phenomena. In Mauss's terms the 'mental' is 'social', and the proof of the

social cannot be other than mental. We cannot grasp the meaning of function of an institution without including within it its effect upon the individual. Now this is saying much more than the bland claim that the mental and the social are complementary. It contains a substantive claim and a methodological one. The substantive claim is that the psychical is an element of signification which transcends the mental and which can be grasped only at the cultural level where its system is made manifest in language, in religion, and so forth. For it is only at this manifest level that the system of signification can be constructed. Indeed we must reverse the usual values assigned to the pair latent/manifest. The manifest of culture provides the conditions of psychical latency. But if this should sound as if there is a reduction of the psychical to culture, the methodological protocol works the other way around. This asserts that the psychical is the sole means of verification of a reality whose manifold aspects can only be grasped as a synthesis within it. Psychical signification depends upon symbolic systems that are manifestly exterior and anterior to it. But those systems can be verified only within the psyche.

This has definite consequences for the elaboration of anthropology as a distinct form of knowledge. Obviously if the above be true, anthropology will not fit into any scheme of positive knowledge, which draws in one way or another a distinction between objective qualities of an object and the subjective experience of them, and which proposes to dispense with the latter. Anthropology cannot make this move. Of course, there is a range of arguments which are available in this context - forms of neo-Kantianism and hermeneutics which pretend to adjust the subjectivity of experience to the canons of knowledge. What is distinctive about Levi-Strauss's reconstruction of Mauss is that he offers a solution which makes anthropology one side of a coin whose reverse is psychoanalysis. He starts from the simple imperative that ethnographical analysis requires both an 'objective' and 'subjective' entry into a social fact.

An appropriate social fact requires that it be grasped 'totally', that is from outside, like a thing but like a thing which comprises within itself the subjective understanding (conscious or unconscious) that we would have of it if, being inexorably human, we were living the fact as indigenous people instead of as ethnographers.

This problem is not to be overcome by a facile notion of putting oneself in the other's place, through the naive humanist play of identification. For identification begs the question of validation which it seeks to answer. Indeed the problem could not be overcome were it not for one condition, that is the capacity of the subject to split itself into a subject *and* an object, to objectify a part of itself. This capacity of the subject is, for Levi-Strauss, the fact which is the condition of ethnographic knowledge.

Alienation is usually conceived as a privation, as a deduction from possible knowledge. But for Levi-Strauss the alienation of the subject is the possibility of knowledge.

The subject itself - once the object/subject distinction is posited - can then be split and duplicated in the same way without end, without ever being reduced to nothing. Sociological observation, seemingly sentenced by the insurmountable antinomy that we isolated . . . [that is where what pertains to the realm of the subject and what pertains to the object, appear to be incommensurable registers] *extricates itself* by virtue of the subject's capacity for infinite self-objectification . . . for projecting outside itself ever diminishing fragments of itself. Theoretically at least this fragmentation is limitless, except for the persistent implication of the two extremes as the condition of its possibility.

In other words, the subject/object relation is not a relation between two realms. Rather the subject/object relation is a distinction, the terms of two poles of a continuum. The subjective is that which has not yet been analysed by **the** subject, that is transformed into an object. Analysis transforms subjective experience into an object that is known, capable of being referred to. That is the alienation of the subject. What is lost as experience returns as knowledge.

Anthropology offers unlimited scope for this process, a process whose anguish for the individual does not fail to cast its melancholy shadow upon the human sciences. As humans we can indeed *imagine* being a member of any culture, for there is an imaginary subjectivity which connects us to any culture. At the same time, all those other cultures appear to us, even our own culture, as objects. The distinction subject/object is a distinction between where we refer from and what we refer to. This may be from our culture to another culture. But this division is without end - our own culture, our own experience, can also be made an object, can join the class of Object:

all of them taken together (as compared to any one of them on its own) attest to the subject's capacity to objectify himself in practically unlimited proportions since the society which is the reference group, which constitutes only a tiny fraction of the given, is always exposed to being subdivided into two societies one of which promptly joins the enormous mass of that which, for the other one, had and always will have the status of object; and so it goes on indefinitely. Any society different from our own has the status of object; any group of our own society other than the group we come from is object; and even every custom of our group to which we do not adhere.

There is then a limitless series of objects which can and must appear to analysis and which constitute, for Levi-Strauss, the Object. They range from the distant horizon of exotic societies to the internal shore of our own language and sexuality, whatever the subject separates from in order that knowledge becomes possible. And yet the subject never quite forgets that, within this world of proliferating objects, their condition as objects is this separation the subject has made; that objects proceed from the subject whose immediate reality they once were; 'that all these objects proceed from him and that the most objectively conducted analysis of them could not fail to reintegrate them

inside the analyst's subjectivity'. Now this is not to embrace Idealism but to insist that the status of an object is indistinguishable from knowledge of it, and that both depend upon a separation from the object, knowledge of which always returns as a loss to the subject.

Of course, logically, this could give rise to universal misunderstanding. It could be that the anthropologist's subjective grasp has nothing in common with that of the indigenous individual beyond the barren fact of being subjective. Subjectivities could be radically incommensurable and incommunicable, in which case the human sciences would be defeated on the plane of scepticism and solipsism. For Levi-Strauss the only guarantee that this is not the case is that there is a ground upon which the opposition between subjective and objective, between the self and others, is surmounted. It is the *unconscious*. The existence of the unconscious means that we can know subjectivity only as an object, while at the same time providing the means which determines its own subjective intelligibility. Interpretation is a hypothesis about an object, which is validated in a subjective register (or not). This validation is not a proof, or even a fact; rather it is a sign to go one way rather than another. The laws of unconscious activity are by definition outside the grasp of spontaneous awareness. We can become conscious of them only as objects. Yet at the same time it is only as a condition of those laws that we can know objects as those things from which we are separated, which can make intelligible to us the division of subject and object.

III

Levi-Strauss thinks that Mauss was the anthropological Moses of this promised psychoanalytical land, which, like Moses, he was destined not to enter. Doubtless this claim is more complicated than it seems, and involves placing Mauss in a position he himself acts out, in propelling anthropology towards psychoanalysis, while subtly withdrawing from it. The central issue for Levi-Strauss is Mauss's conception of *mana*. He finds in this problem an attempt by Mauss to think a kind of fourth dimension of the mind, a level which as it were supplements and subverts the Kantian *a priori*, a level of unconscious categories, a point where unconscious categories and the category of collective thinking are synonymous. The analysis of collective thought is always an analysis of unconscious thought. At the most general level this analysis

without requiring us to move outside ourselves, enables us to coincide with forms of activity which are at once *ours* and *other*, which are the condition of all the forms of mental life of all men at all times. Thus the grasp, which can only be objective of the unconscious forms of mental activity, leads, nevertheless, to subjectivisation, since in a word it is the same type of operation in psychoanalysis which allows us to win back our most arranged self, and in ethnological inquiry gives us access to the most foreign other as to another self. In both cases the same problem is posed: that of a communication sought after, in the one instance between a subjective and an

objective self, and in the other between an objective self and a subjective other.

This inverts the common formula, that what is other is object. From the point of view of knowledge the other is what is subjective.

This restates in a psychoanalytical way something which is obscured in anthropological debates about identity and difference. What problems does difference pose for anthropological knowledge? How do we know that we are not reducing difference by using our own categories? Is there not some chasm of difference which knowledge cannot bridge? These are philosophical anxieties which have little practical implication. In fact no one ever returns from fieldwork blank with incomprehension, nullified by the experience of pure difference. For pure difference is outside that which could ever be experienced, or indeed be suffered. The shadow cast by nothing is the sentence of death. The question is not one of identity and difference, where the greater the difference the weaker becomes the sense of communication. On the contrary, the stronger becomes the experience of communication. Within twentieth-century anthropological commentaries the utterance of some Bororo who said to von Steinem, 'We are red parakeets', resounds with a raging subjectivity intensity of communication. The most foreign utterance is not only still one, it is perhaps pre-eminently the one which communicates its subjective force. The problem is how to separate ourselves from it, so that we may know it, know what it signifies.

Levi-Strauss argues that this issue of communication is partially grasped by Mauss in the *Essay on the Gift*. Here, he claims, 'for the first time the social ceases to belong to the domain of pure quality - anecdote, curiosity, material for moralising description or for scholarly comparison - and becomes a system among whose parts, connections, equivalences and independent aspects can be discovered'. He argues that Mauss's analysis could have led to the rise of a combinatorial analysis in anthropology as an analogue to the phonological researches of Troubeckoj and Jakobson which laid the foundations for modern linguistics. But Levi-Strauss thinks that Mauss was prevented from doing this. On the one hand, in the essay on the Gift, he is convinced that it is exchange which is the common denominator of a large number of apparently disparate social activities. But on the other hand purely empirical observation cannot discern exchange as such. Mauss himself recognizes that what we *observe* are 'three obligations, giving, receiving, returning'. Experience finds only fragments, not the structure or rule, of exchange. But if exchange is not a given, but is, as it were, a constructed structure, what constructs it? Only by the hypothesis of a source of energy can we account for what motivates and synthesizes the elements into a structure. Levi-Strauss argues that 'one can prove that in the exchanged objects there is a property which forces the gift to circulate, to be given, to be returned'. But what is it? Either exchange is nothing but the name for the acts of exchange as they are represented in indigenous thought or this exchange has a structural character in which case the act of exchange becomes, in relation to this power, a secondary phenomenon. If it is the first then ethnography will stop short, and rest with the

reconstruction of indigenous categories. Indeed Levi-Strauss in effect accuses Mauss of attempting to construct a general theory of the Gift, through the category *hau*. This is probably more interesting than doing it using anthropological categories of animism, myth, or the law of participation. But *hau* is not itself the object one needs to identify, 'it is the conscious form whereby men of a given society, in which the problems had particular importance, apprehended an unconscious necessity whose explanation lies elsewhere'. Levi-Strauss describes Mauss as hesitating and fumbling before the decision, which must be taken, as to whether one is drawing an image of indigenous theory or constructing a theory of indigenous reality. Levi-Strauss has no such hesitation: the scope of the human sciences cannot be restricted to recoding indigenous theories. If it were, it would be stuck at the level of what he calls a 'verbose phenomenology'.

Levi-Strauss proposes to resolve this by considering the category of *mana* and its analogues. Mauss's rationalism had led him to treat *mana* as answering to a logical function. In the essay on magic he claims that '*mana* plays the role of the copula in a proposition'. But for Levi-Strauss such notions of *mana*, *wakan*, *orenda*, far from being marginal curiosities of anthropological investigation, are 'a function of the way that the mind situates itself in the presence of things'. They make their appearance in all cultures. Mauss quotes a Father Thavenet on the Algonquian notion of *manitou*. 'It more particularly designates any being which does not yet have a common name, which is unfamiliar; of a salamandar, a woman said she was afraid; it was a manitou; people laughed at her, telling her the name salamander.' Levi-Strauss claims that this mechanism is at work whenever we qualify an unknown object, or one whose function is unclear, by the French term *machin*, behind which lies the idea of force or power. The same operation is at play in English when we say of someone that he or she has really 'got' something. He claims that

always and everywhere, these types of notions, somewhat like algebraic symbols, occur to represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all; their sole function is to fill a gap between signifier and signified, or more exactly to signal the fact that in such a circumstance, on such an occasion, or in such a one of their manifestations, a relation of non-equivalence becomes established between signifier and signified to the detriment of the prior complementary relationship.

This relation is not a property of magical thinking, but rather is a property of thinking as such. Everywhere and always

a fundamental situation perseveres which arises out of the human condition: namely that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier/totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified. . . . There is always a non-equivalence or an 'inadequation' between the two, a not -fit, an overspill which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So in

man's effort to understand the world he always disposes of a surfeit of signification. . . . That distribution of the supplementary ration is absolutely necessary to ensure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity which is the condition of symbolic thinking.

So this function is famously identified as the *floating signifier*. It is what makes symbolic thought possible while acting out its fatal disability. This argument dispenses with conventional concepts of the symbol while opening up the possibility of grasping why humans are condemned to symbolic thought, as unconscious effects of signification.

How does this notion of the 'floating signifier' relate to psychoanalysis? Consider the category of the phallus. Its place in psychoanalytical thought is furiously contested and subject to a battery of empirical and ethical denunciations. Certainly anthropologists have resisted psychoanalytical ethnography which too easily discovers the phallus always everywhere. But perhaps there is something more sideways to be said. Clearly the phallus can function at the name of an interpretive device in the consulting-room. It can appear whenever the power, or the force, or the primacy of the signifier is experienced. Of course it is the beginning of an interpretation, not the conclusion. Viewed from the side of anthropology the phallus might be considered as the indigenous theory of a people who sit behind or lie on couches, and as such may be grouped with *mana*, *wakan*, *orenda*. All are the effects of the fundamental asymmetry of signification.

This, at least in part, seems to me the secretive programme for the human sciences which the text on Mauss contains. It rests upon a fundamental postulate which it shares with psychoanalysis: that humans are effects of unconscious processes but these processes are not hidden, buried selves, but systems of signification which must act in obedience to those laws of the unconscious functioning of language. It enables Levi-Strauss to stake out a definite epistemological space, one which discards empiricism without resorting to a metaphysical system of essences. For what lies behind appearances is not a world of essence but the unconscious. That very fact also provides a novel methodological means to justify the interpretation of objects and others. Subjects and objects, selves and others, do not lie in different realms. Knowledge of oneself and others is a knowledge of objects. But objects are always derived from subjects by the very splitting which ensures that community with them which we call knowledge. It is not so much that we are subjects of communication but subject to communication. Yet it compensates us for its imposition upon us, with the certainty that there is no fundamental division between us and others, since we are others in this and through this. Indeed it is this ineradicable narcissistic wound, rather than any strutting conviction of our humanity, which provides the grounds of anthropological knowledge.

Levi-Strauss pays particular debt in this move to the paper by Jacques Lacan of 1948, translated into English as 'Aggressivity in psychoanalysis', as a psychoanalytical register for some of these arguments. In that paper Lacan

sketches his own myth of the creation of the subject. The subject is born in the moment of its narcissistic identification with its own image, whose tale is that of the looking-glass. It is an image of ourselves, there in the glass, yet it is elsewhere. In short it is the model for all subsequent alienations which provide the energy and form in which the organization of passions that we call the ego, is based. Aggressive competition is the product of this identification, which Lacan calls the desire for the object of the others' desire. Out of this movement develop the ego and its objects, objects which include others. This scheme presents as an ontogenetic melodrama something which Levi-Strauss poses as a muted consequence of the possibility of language. But this indebtedness does imply a harsh destiny. For the ego, the construct of past identifications, the cost of the illusion of identity is aggression and paranoia. The ego turns upon itself and others with a mortal ferocity which Lacan expresses with a dread formula: 'I am nothing of what happens to me. You are nothing of value.'

It is from this stern patristic darkness that Levi-Strauss finds not only the melancholy of *Tristes Tropiques* but the wish to be free of things, the wish which, at the end of that text, he calls *unhitching* which famously, if diffidently, seeks pardon for damage 'in the brief glance, weary with patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness, that through some involuntary understanding, one can sometimes exchange with a cat'.