

The Cerebral Savage

On the Work of Claude Lévi-Strauss — By CLIFFORD GEERTZ

Today I sometimes wonder if I was not attracted to anthropology, however unwittingly, by a structural affinity between the civilisations which are its subject matter and my own thought processes. My intelligence is neolithic.

TRISTES TROPIQUES

WHAT, after all, is one to make of savages? Even now, after three centuries of debate on the matter—whether they are noble, bestial, or even as you and I; whether they reason as we do, are sunk in a demented mysticism, or possessors of higher forms of truth we have in our avarice lost; whether their customs, from cannibalism to matriliney, are mere alternatives, no better and no worse, to our own, or crude precursors of our own now out-moded, or simply passing strange, impenetrable exotica amusing to collect; whether they are bound and we are free, or we are bound and they are free—after all this we still don't know. For the anthropologist, whose profession it is to study other cultures, the puzzle is always with him. His personal relationship to his object of study is, perhaps more than any other scientist, inevitably problematic. Know what he thinks a savage is and you have the key to his work. You know what he thinks he himself is and, knowing what he thinks he himself is, you know in general what sort of thing he is going to say about whatever tribe he happens to be studying. All ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest is confession.

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In the case of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Professor of Social Anthropology in the *Collège de France* and the centre right now of a degree of general attention which men who spend their lives studying far-off peoples do not usually get, sorting out the spiritual elements from the descriptive is particularly difficult. On the other hand, no anthropologist has been more insistent on the fact that the practice of his profession has consisted of a personal quest, driven by a personal vision and directed toward a personal salvation.

I owe myself to mankind just as much as to knowledge. History, politics, the social and economic universe, the physical world, even the sky, all surround me in concentric circles and I can only escape from those circles in thought if I concede to each of them some part of my being. Like the pebble which marks the surface of the wave with circles as it passes through it, I must throw myself into the water if I am to plumb the depths.

On the other hand, no anthropologist has made greater claims for ethnology as a positive science:

... The ultimate goal of the human sciences is not to constitute man but to dissolve him. The critical importance of ethnology is that it represents the first step in a process which includes others. Ethnographic analysis tries to arrive at invariants beyond the empirical diversity of societies. ... This initial enterprise opens the way for others... which are incumbent on the natural sciences: the reintegration of culture into nature and generally of life into the whole of its physico-chemical conditions... One can understand, therefore, why I find in ethnology the principle of all research.

In Lévi-Strauss' work the two faces of anthropology—as a way of going at the world and as a method for uncovering lawful relations among empirical facts—are turned in toward one another so as to force a direct confrontation between them rather than (as is more common

among ethnologists) out away from one another so as to avoid such a confrontation and the inward stresses which go with it. This accounts both for the power of his work and for its general appeal. It rings with boldness and a kind of reckless candour. But it also accounts for the more intra-professional suspicion that what is presented as High Science may really be an ingenious and somewhat roundabout attempt to defend a metaphysical position, advance an ideological argument, and serve a moral cause.

There is, perhaps, nothing so terribly wrong about this, but, as with Marx, it is well to keep it in mind, lest an attitude toward life be taken for a simple description of it. Every man has a right to create his own savage for his own purposes. Perhaps every man does. But to demonstrate that such a constructed savage corresponds to Australian Aborigines, African Tribesmen, or Brazilian Indians is another matter altogether.

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS of Lévi-Strauss' encounter with his object of study, what trafficking with savages has meant to him personally, are particularly easy to discover, for he has recorded them with figured eloquence in a work which, though it is very far from being a great anthropology book, or even an especially good one, is surely one of the finest books ever written by an anthropologist: *Tristes Tropiques*.¹ Its design is in the form of the standard legend of the Heroic Quest—the precipitate departure from ancestral shores grown familiar, stultifying, and in some uncertain way menacing (a philosophy post at a provincial *lycée* in Le Brun's France); the journey into another, darker world, a magical realm full of surprises, tests and revelations (the Brazilian jungles of the Cuduveo, Bororo, Nambikwara, and Tupi-Kawahib); and the return, resigned and exhausted, to ordinary existence (“farewell to savages, then, farewell to journeying”) with a deepened knowledge of reality and the obligation to communicate what one has learned to those who, less adventurous, have stayed behind. The book is a combination autobiography, traveller's tale, philosophical treatise, ethnographic report, colonial history, and prophetic myth.

For what, after all, have I learnt from the masters I have listened to, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have investigated and that very Science in which the West takes a pride?

¹ *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris, 1955) translated minus several chapters into English by John Russell (N.Y., 1964). In the London edition (1961) the title is rendered as *A World on the Wane*.

Simply a fragmentary lesson or two which, if laid end to end would reconstitute the meditations of [Buddha] at the foot of his tree.

The sea journey was uneventful, a prelude. Reflecting upon it twenty years later he compares his position to that of the classical navigators. They were sailing toward an unknown world, one hardly touched by mankind, a Garden of Eden “spared the agitations of ‘history’ for some ten or twenty millennia.” He was sailing toward a spoiled world, one which these navigators (and the colonists who followed them) had destroyed in their greed, their cultural arrogance, and their rage for progress. Nothing was left of the terrestrial Garden but remnants. Its very nature had been transformed and had become “historical where it once was eternal, and social where it once was metaphysical.” Once the traveller found civilisations radically different from his own awaiting him at the end of his journey. Now he finds impoverished imitations of his own, set off here and there by the relics of a discarded past. It is not surprising that he finds Rio disappointing. The proportions are all wrong. Sugar Loaf Mountain is too small, the bay is placed the wrong way round, the tropical moon seems overblown with only shanties and bungalows to set it off. He arrived as a delayed Columbus to make a flattening discovery: “the tropics are not so much exotic as out of date.”

ASHORE, THE DESCENT into the depths begins. The plot thickens, grows phantasmagorical and arrives at a denouement wholly unforeseen. There are no Indians in the outskirts of São Paulo as he had been promised in Paris by, of all people, the head of the *École Normale*. Where in 1918 two-thirds of the state was marked on the map as “unexplored territory, inhabited only by Indians,” not a single native Indian was left in 1935 when, in search of “a human society reduced to its basic expression,” he took up his post as Professor of Sociology in the new university there. The nearest were several hundred miles away on a reservation; but they were not very satisfying. Neither true Indians nor true savages, “they were a perfect example of that social predicament which is becoming ever more widespread in the second half of the 20th century: they were ‘former savages,’ that is to say [ones] on whom civilisation had been abruptly forced; and, as soon as they were no longer ‘a danger to society,’ civilisation took no further interest in them. . . .” None the less, the encounter was instructive, as all initiations are, for they disabused him of “the ingenuous and poetical notion of what is in store for us that is common to all novices in anthropology” and so prepared him to confront with more

objectivity the less "contaminated" Indians with whom he was to have to do later.

There were four groups of these, each a little further into the jungle, a little more untouched, a little more promising of final illumination. (1) The Caduveo in the middle Paraguay intrigued him for their body tattoos in whose elaborate designs he thought he could see a formal representation of their aboriginal social organisation, by then largely decayed. (2) The Bororo, deeper into the forest, were rather more intact. Their numbers had been radically reduced by disease and exploitation, but they still lived in the old village pattern and struggled to maintain both their clan system and their religion. (3) Deeper yet, the childlike Nambikwara were so simple that he could find in their political organisation—a matter of small, constantly reforming nomadic bands led by temporary chiefs—support for Rousseau's theory of the social contract. (4) And finally, near the Bolivian border, in "Crusoe country," gnosis appeared at last at hand in the form of the Tupi-Kawahib, who were not only uncontaminated, but, the savant's dream, *unstudied*:

Nothing is more exciting for an anthropologist than the prospect of being the first white man to penetrate a native community. . . . In my journey I was to re-live the experience of the travellers of old; at the same time I should be faced with that moment, so crucial to modern thought, at which a community, which had thought itself complete, perfected, and self-sufficient, is made to realise that it is nothing of the kind. . . . The counter-revelation in short: the fact that it is not alone in the world, that it is but part of a vast human ensemble, and that to know itself it must first look at the unrecognisable image of itself in that mirror of which one long-forgotten splinter was about to give out, for myself alone, its first and last reflection.

WITH SUCH GREAT EXPECTATIONS it came then as a distinct disappointment that rather than providing a purified vision of primitivity these ultimate savages proved intellectually inaccessible, beyond his grasp. He, quite literally, could not communicate with them.

I had wanted to pursue "the Primitive" to its furthest point. Surely my wish has been gratified by these delightful people whom no white man had seen before me, and none would ever see again? My journey had been enthralling and, at the end of it, I had come upon "my" savages. But alas—they were all too savage. . . . There they were, all ready to teach me their customs and beliefs and I knew nothing of their language. They were as close to me as an image seen in a looking-glass. I could touch, but not understand them. I had at one and the same time my reward and my punishment, for did not my mistake, and that of my profession, lie in the belief

that men are not always men? That some are more deserving of our interest and our attention because there is something astonishing to us in their manners. . . . No sooner are such people known, or guessed at, than their strangeness drops away, and one might as well have stayed in one's own village. Or if, as in the present case, their strangeness remained intact, then it was no good to me, for I could not even begin to analyse it. Between these two extremes, what are the equivocal cases which afford us [anthropologists] the excuses by which we live? Who is, in the end, the one most defrauded by the disquiet we arouse in the reader? Our remarks must be pushed a certain distance if we are to make them intelligible, and yet they must be cut off half-way, since the people whom they astonish are very like those for whom the customs in question are a matter of course. Is it the reader who is deceived by his belief in us? Or ourselves, who have not the right to be satisfied before we have completely dissolved that residuum which gave our vanity its pretext?

At the end of the Quest there waited thus not a revelation but a riddle. The anthropologist seems condemned either to journey among men whom he can understand precisely because his own culture has already contaminated them, covered them with "the filth, *our* filth," that we have thrown in the face of humanity," or among those who, not so contaminated, are for that reason largely unintelligible to him. Either he is a wanderer among true savages (of whom there are precious few left in any case) whose very otherness isolates his life from theirs or he is a nostalgic tourist "hastening in search of a vanished reality . . . an archaeologist of space, trying in vain to repiece together the idea of the exotic with the help of a particle here and a fragment of debris there." Confronted with looking-glass men he can touch but not grasp, and with half-ruined men "pulverised by the development of Western civilisation," Lévi-Strauss compares himself to the Indian in the legend who had been to the world's end and there asked questions of peoples and things and was disappointed in what he heard. "I am the victim of a double infirmity: what I see is an affliction to me; what I do not see a reproach."

MUST THE ANTHROPOLOGIST therefore despair? Are we never to know savages at all? No, because there is another avenue of approach to their world than personal involvement in it—namely, the construction out of the particles and fragments of *débris* it is still possible to collect (or which have already been collected) of a theoretical model of society which, though it corresponds to none which can be observed in reality will none the less help us towards an understanding of the basic foundations of human

existence. And this is possible because despite the surface strangeness of primitive men and their societies they are, at a deeper level, a psychological level, not alien at all. The mind of man is, at bottom, everywhere the same: so that what could not be accomplished by a drawing near, by an attempt to enter bodily into the world of particular savage tribes, can be accomplished instead by a standing back, by the development of a general, closed, abstract, formalistic science of thought, a universal grammar of the intellect. It is not by storming the citadels of savage life directly, seeking to penetrate their mental life phenomenologically (a sheer impossibility) that a valid anthropology can be written. It is by intellectually reconstituting the shape of that life out of its filth-covered "archaeological" remains, reconstructing the conceptual systems that, from deep beneath its surface, animated it and gave it form.

What a journey to the heart of darkness could not produce, an immersion in structural linguistics, communication theory, cybernetics and mathematical logic can. Out of the disappointed romanticism of *Tristes Tropiques* arose the exultant sciencism of Lévi-Strauss' other major work, *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962).²

LA PENSÉE SAUVAGE actually departs from an idea first set forth in *Tristes Tropiques* with respect to the Caduveo and their sociological tattoos: namely, that the totality of a people's customs always forms an ordered whole, a system. The number of these systems is limited. Human societies, like individual human beings, never create out of whole cloth but merely choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas anteriorly available to them. Stock themes are endlessly arranged and rearranged into different patterns: variant expressions of an underlying ideational structure which it should be possible, given enough ingenuity, to reconstitute. The job of the ethnologist is to, describe the surface patterns as best he can, to reconstitute the deeper structures out of which they are built, and to classify those structures, once reconstituted, into

² An English translation (also not integral) has recently appeared as *The Savage Mind* (London, 1966). However, the translation (mercifully unattributed) is, unlike Russell's sensitive rendering of *Tristes Tropiques*, execrable and I have for the most part made my own English versions rather than quote from it. Lévi-Strauss' collection of essays, *Anthropologie Structurale*, in which many of the themes of his more recent work first appeared, has been translated as *Structural Anthropology* (N.Y., 1963); his *Le Totémisme Aujourd'hui* (1962), a sort of dry run for *La Pensée Sauvage*, as *Totemism* (Boston, 1963).

an analytical scheme—rather like Mendelyev's periodic table of the elements. After that "all that would remain for us to do would be to recognise those [structures] which [particular] societies had in fact adopted." Anthropology is only apparently the study of customs, beliefs, or institutions. Fundamentally it is the study of thought.

In *La Pensée Sauvage* this governing notion—that the universe of conceptual tools available to the savage is closed and he must make do with it to build whatever cultural forms he builds—reappears in the guise of what Lévi-Strauss calls "the science of the concrete." Savages build models of reality—of the natural world, of the self, of society. But they do so not as modern scientists do by integrating abstract propositions into a framework of formal theory, sacrificing the vividness of perceived particulars for the explanatory power of generalised conceptual systems, but by ordering perceived particulars into immediately intelligible wholes. The science of the concrete arranges directly-sensed realities—the unmistakable differences between kangaroos and ostriches, the seasonal advance and retreat of flood waters, the progress of the sun or the phases of the moon. These become structural models representing the underlying order of reality as it were analogically. "Savage thought extends its grasp by means of *imagines mundi*. It fashions mental constructions which render the world intelligible to the degree that they contrive to resemble it."

This uncanonical science ("which we prefer to call 'primary' rather than 'primitive'") puts a philosophy of finitude into practice. The elements of the conceptual world are given, prefabricated as it were, and thinking consists in fiddling with the elements. Savage logic works like a kaleidoscope whose chips can fall into a variety of patterns while remaining unchanged in quantity, form, or colour. The number of patterns producible in this way may be large if the chips are numerous and varied enough, but it is not infinite. The patterns consist in the disposition of the chips *vis-à-vis* one another (*i.e.*, they are a function of the relationships among the chips rather than their individual properties considered separately). And their range of possible transformations is strictly determined by the construction of the kaleidoscope, the inner law which governs its operation. And so it is too with savage thought. Both anecdotal and geometric, it builds coherent structures out of "the odds and ends left over from psychological or historical process."

THESE ODDS AND ENDS, the chips of the kaleidoscope, are images drawn from myth, ritual,

magic, and empirical lore. (How, precisely, they have come into being in the first place is one of the points on which Lévi-Strauss is not too explicit, referring to them vaguely as the "residue of events . . . fossil remains of the history of an individual or a society.") Such images are inevitably embodied in larger structures—in myths, ceremonies, folk taxonomies, etc.—for, as in a kaleidoscope, one always sees the chips distributed in *some* pattern, however ill-formed or irregular. But, as in a kaleidoscope, they are detachable from these structures and arrangeable into different ones of a similar sort. Quoting Franz Boas that "it would seem that mythological worlds have been built up, only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments," Lévi-Strauss generalises this permutational view of thinking to savage thought in general. It is all a matter of shuffling discrete (and concrete) images—totem animals, sacred colours, wind directions, sun deities or whatever—so as to produce symbolic structures capable of formulating and communicating objective (which is not to say accurate) analyses of the social and physical worlds.

CONSIDER TOTEMISM. Long regarded as an autonomous, unitary institution, a kind of primitive nature worship to be explained in terms of mechanical theories of one sort or another—evolutionist, functionalist, psycho-analytic, utilitarian—it is for Lévi-Strauss only a special case of this overall tendency to build conceptual schemes out of particular images.

In totemism, a logical parallel is (quite subconsciously) postulated between two series, one natural and one cultural. The order of differences between the terms on one side of the parallel is isomorphic with the order of differences between the terms on the other side. In the simplest case, the apparent physical differences between animal species—bear, eagle, turtle, etc.—are put into correspondence with the sociological differences between social groups—clans *A, B, C*, and so on. It is not the specific characteristics of bear, eagle, and turtle as such which are critical—fox, rabbit, and crow would have served as well—but the sensible contrast between any pair of them. It is upon this that the savage seizes to represent intellectually to himself and to others the structure of his clan system. When he says that the members of his clan are descended from bear but those of his neighbour's from eagle he is not giving forth with a bit of illiterate biology. He is saying, in a concrete metaphorical way, that the relationship between his clan and his neighbours is analogous to the perceived relationship between species.

Considered term by term, totemic beliefs are simply arbitrary. "History" has cast them up and "history" may ultimately destroy them, alter their role, or replace them with others. But seen as an ordered set they become coherent, for they are able then to represent symbolically another sort of set similarly ordered: allied, exogamous, patrilineal clans. And the point is general. The relationship between a symbolic structure and its referent, the basis of its *meaning*, is fundamentally "logical," a coincidence of form—not affective, not historical, not functional. Savage thought is frozen reason and anthropology is, like music and mathematics, "one of the few true vocations."

Or like linguistics. For in language too the constituent units—phonemes, morphemes, words—are, from a semantic point of view, arbitrary. Why the French call a certain kind of animal "*chien*" and the English call it "*dog*," or why English forms its plurals by adding "*-s*" and Malay forms its by doubling roots are not the sorts of questions linguists—structural linguists, at any rate—any longer consider it profitable to ask except in historical terms. It is only when ordered, by the rules of grammar and syntax, into utterances—strings of speech embodying propositions—that significance emerges and communication is possible. And in language too this guiding order, this *ur*-system of forms in terms of which discrete units are shuffled in such a way as to turn sound into speech, is subconscious. It is a deep structure which a linguist reconstitutes from its surface manifestations. One can become conscious of one's grammatical categories by reading linguistic treatises just as one can become conscious of one's cultural categories by reading ethnological ones. But, as acts, both speaking and behaving are spontaneous performances fed from underground springs. Finally, and most important, linguistic study (and, along with it, information theory and class logic) also defines its basic units, its constituent elements, not in terms of their common properties but their differences; *i.e.*, by contrasting them in pairs. Binary opposition—that dialectical chasm between plus and minus which computer technology has rendered the *lingua franca* of modern science—forms the basis of savage thought as it does of language. And indeed it is this which makes them essentially variant forms of the same thing: communications systems.

WITH THIS DOOR OPEN all things are possible. Not just the logic of totemic classifications but of any classificatory scheme at all—plant taxonomies, personal names, sacred geographies, cosmologies, hair styles among the Omaha Indians, or design motifs on Australian bull-

roarers—can, *en principe*, be exposed. For they always trace down to an underlying opposition of paired terms—high and low, right and left, peace and war, etc.—expressed in concrete images, palpable concepts, “beyond which it is, for intrinsic reasons, both useless and impossible to go.” Further, once certain of these schemas, or structures are determined, they can then be related to one another—*i.e.*, reduced to a more general, and “deeper” structure embracing them both. They are shown to be mutually derivable from each other by logical operations—inversion, transposition, substitution: all sorts of systematic permutations—just as one transforms an English sentence into the dots and dashes of Morse code or turns a mathematical expression into its complement by changing all the signs. One can even move between different levels of social reality—the exchange of women in marriage, the exchange of gifts in trade, the exchange of symbols in ritual—by demonstrating that the logical structures of these various institutions are, when considered as communication schemes, isomorphic.

Some of these essays in “socio-logic” are, like the analysis of totemism, persuasive and enlightening as far as they go. (In as much as any metaphysical content or affective aura these beliefs may have is vigorously excluded from attention, this is not really so very far.) Others, like the attempt to show that totemism and caste are capable (“by means of a very simple transformation”) of being reduced to variant expressions of the same general underlying structure are at least intriguing if not precisely convincing. And others, like the attempts to show that the different ways in which horses, dogs, birds and cattle are named form a coherent three-dimensional system of complementary images cross-cut by relations of inverted symmetry, are triumphs of self-parody. They are exercises in “depth interpretation” far-fetched enough to make even a psycho-analyst blush. It is all terribly ingenious. If a model of society which is “eternal and universal” can be built up out of the débris of dead and dying societies—a model which reflects not time, nor place, nor circumstance but (this from *Totemism*) “a direct expression of the structure of the mind (and behind the mind, probably of the brain)” —then this may well be the way to build it.

FOR WHAT Lévi-Strauss has made for himself is an infernal culture machine. It annuls history, reduces sentiment to a shadow of the intellect, and replaces the particular minds of particular savages in particular jungles with the Savage Mind immanent in us all. It has made it possible for him to circumvent the

impasse to which his Brazilian expedition led—physical closeness and intellectual distance—by what perhaps he always really wanted—intellectual closeness and physical distance. “I stood out against the new tendencies in metaphysical thinking which were then [*i.e.*, in 1934] beginning to take shape,” he wrote in *Tristes Tropiques*, explaining his dissatisfaction with academic philosophy and his turn towards anthropology.

Phenomenology I found unacceptable, in so far as it postulated a continuity between experience and reality. That one enveloped and explained the other I was quite willing to agree, but I had learnt... that there is no continuity in the passage between the two and that to reach reality we must first repudiate experience, even though we may later reintegrate it into an objective synthesis in which sentimentality plays no part.

As for the trend of thought which was to find fulfilment in existentialism, it seemed to me to be the exact opposite of true thought, by reason of its indulgent attitude toward the illusions of subjectivity. To promote private preoccupations to the rank of philosophical problems is dangerous... excusable as an element in teaching procedure, but perilous in the extreme if it leads the philosopher to turn his back on his mission. That mission (he holds it only until science is strong enough to take over from philosophy) is to understand Being in relation to itself, and not in relation to oneself.

The High Science of *La Pensée Sauvage* and the Heroic Quest of *Tristes Tropiques* are, at base, but “very simple transformations” of one another. They are variant expressions of the same deep underlying structure: the universal rationalism of the French Enlightenment. For all the apostrophes to structural linguistics, information theory, class logic, cybernetics, game theory, and other advanced doctrines, it is not de Saussure, or Shannon, or Boole, or Weiner, or von Neumann who is Lévi-Strauss’ real *guru* (nor, despite the ritual invocation of them for dramatic effect, Marx or Buddha)—but Rousseau!

Rousseau is our master and our brother... For there is only one way in which we can escape the contradiction inherent in the notion of the position of the anthropologist, and that is by reformulating, on our own account, the intellectual procedures which allowed Rousseau to move forward from the ruins left by the *Discours sur l’Origine de l’Inégalité* to the ample design of the *Social Contract*, of which Emile reveals the secret. He it is who showed us how, after we have destroyed every existing order, we can still discover the principles which allow us to erect a new order in their stead.

LIKE ROUSSEAU, Lévi-Strauss’ search is not after all for men, whom he doesn’t much care for,

but for Man, with whom he is enthralled. It is, as much in *La Pensée Sauvage* as in *Tristes Tropiques*, the jewel in the lotus he is after. The “unshakable basis of human society” is not really social at all but psychological—a rational, universal, eternal, and thus (in the great tradition of French moralism) virtuous mind.

Rousseau (“of all the *philosophes* the nearest to being an anthropologist”) demonstrates the method by which the paradox of the anthropological traveller—who comes either too late to find savagery or too early to appreciate it—can at last be solved. We must, as he did, develop the ability to penetrate the savage mind by employing (to provide Lévi-Strauss with what he perhaps least needs, another *expression*) what might be called epistemological empathy. The bridge between our world and that of our subjects (extinct, opaque, or merely tattered) lies not in personal confrontation—which, so far as it occurs, corrupts both them and us. It lies in a kind of experimental mind-reading. And Rousseau, “trying on [himself] modes of thought taken from elsewhere or merely imagined” (in order to demonstrate “that every human mind is a locus of virtual experience where what goes on in the minds of men, however remote they may be, can be investigated”), was the first to undertake it. One understands the thought of savages neither by mere introspection nor by mere observation, but by attempting to think as they think and with their materials. What one needs, aside from obsessively detailed ethnography, is a neolithic intelligence.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCLUSIONS which for Lévi-Strauss follow from this postulate—that savages can only be understood by re-enacting their thought processes with the débris of their cultures—add up, in turn, to a technically reconditioned version of Rousseauian moralism.

Savage (“wild,” “undomesticated”) modes of thought are primary in human mentality. They are what we all have in common. The civilised (“tamed,” “domesticated”) thought patterns of modern science and scholarship are specialised productions of our own society. They are secondary, derived and, though not unuseful, artificial. Although these primary modes of thought (and thus the foundations of human social life) are “undomesticated” like the “wild pansy”—that spectacularly untranslatable pun which gives *La Pensée Sauvage* its title—they are essentially intellectual, rational, logical, not emotional, instinctive, or mystical. The best—but in no sense perfect—time for man was the neolithic (*i.e.*, post-agricultural, pre-urban) age: what Rousseau (who, contrary to the usual

stereotype of him, was not a primitivist) called *société naissante*. For it was then that this mentality flourished, producing, out of its “science of the concrete,” those arts of civilisation—agriculture, animal husbandry, pottery, weaving, food conservation and preparation, etc.—which still provide the foundations of our existence.

IT WOULD HAVE been better for man had he kept to this “middle ground between the indolence of the primitive state and the questing activity to which we are prompted by our *amour propre*”—instead of abandoning it, by some unhappy chance, for the restless ambitiousness, the pride and egoism, of mechanical civilisation. But he *has* left it. The task of social reform consists in turning us again towards that middle state, not by drawing us back into the neolithic but by presenting us with compelling reminders of its human achievements, its sociological grace, so as to draw us forward into a rational future where its ideals—the balancing of self-regard with general sympathy—will be even more fully realised. And it is a scientifically enriched anthropology (“legitimising the principles of savage thought and restoring them to their rightful place”) which is the appropriate agency of such reform. Progress towards humanness—that gradual unfolding of the higher intellectual faculties Rousseau called *perfectibilité*—was destroyed by cultural parochialism, armed with a half-grown science. Cultural universalism, armed with a mature science, will once more set it in motion.

If [the human] race has so far concentrated on one task, and one alone—that of building a society in which Man can live—then the sources of strength on which our remote ancestors drew are present also in ourselves. All the stakes are still on the board, and we can take them up at any time we please. Whatever was done, and done badly, can be begun all over again: “The golden age [wrote Rousseau] which blind superstition situated behind or ahead of us is *in us*.” Human brotherhood acquires a palpable significance when we find our image of it confirmed in the poorest of tribes, and when that tribe offers us an experience which, when joined with many hundreds of others, has a lesson to teach us.

But perhaps more interesting than this modernised profession of a classical faith in (to use Hooker’s phrase) “the perpetual and general voice of men” is what the fate of such an attempt to set King Reason back upon his throne in the guise of the Cerebral Savage will be in today’s world. However much it is set round with symbolic logic, matrix algebra, or structural linguistics, can we—after all that has happened since 1762—still believe in the sovereignty of the intellect?

After a century-and-a-half of investigations into the depths of human consciousness which have uncovered vested interests, infantile emotions, or a chaos of animal appetites, we now have one which finds there the pure light of natural wisdom that shines in all alike. It will doubtless be greeted, in some quarters, with a degree of welcome, not to say relief. Yet that such an investigation should have been launched from an anthropological base seems distinctly surprising. For anthropologists are forever being tempted—as Lévi-Strauss himself once was—out of libraries and lecture halls, where it is hard to remember that the mind of man is no dry light, into “the field,” where it is impossible to forget it. Even if there are not many “true savages” out there any more there are enough vividly peculiar human individuals around to make any doctrine of man which sees him as the bearer of changeless truths of reason—an “original logic” proceeding from “the structure of the mind”—seem merely quaint, an academic curiosity.

THAT LÉVI-STRAUSS SHOULD have been able to transmute the romantic passion of *Tristes Tropiques* into the hyper-modern intellectualism of *La Pensée Sauvage* is surely a startling achievement. But there remain the questions one cannot help but ask. Is this transmutation science or alchemy? Is the “very simple transformation” which produced a general theory out of a personal disappointment real or a sleight-of-hand? Is it a genuine demolition of the walls which seem to separate mind from mind by showing that the walls are surface structures only, or is it an elaborately disguised evasion necessitated by a failure to breach them when they were directly encountered? Is Lévi-Strauss writing, as he seems to be claiming in the confident pages of *La Pensée Sauvage*, a prolegomena to all future anthropology? Or is he, like some uprooted neolithic intelligence cast away on a reservation, shuffling the débris of old traditions in a vain attempt to revivify a primitive faith whose moral beauty is still apparent but from which both relevance and credibility have long since departed?

The Dirtypot Decider

In my mind there's a Dirtypot Decider.
It comes from science fiction and the 21st century—
If you feed in a plus it comes out a minus;
When a digital computer really pulls its finger out
You get something of the same effect.
I use it on art and unsympathetic people,
It's like crossing oneself when one passes a nun in the street.
It combats black magic; it's a total negation.

It keeps me incommunicate, and silent at meetings,
Makes me a silent drinker and a laugher at nothings.
Prevents me joining in when the fun is other people's,
Gives me adventure stories to read, garbles fashion,
Plays curious tricks with time; so I find myself saying
“Do you remember the Beatles?
But that was thirty years ago!” It's no respecter
Of places either. China already has India,
Holiday resorts march backwards
And the debts are crowding the seafront at Clacton.
Prophetic, really. On art
Its workings are never so certain.
It hasn't yet made up its mind
About *Caro nome*

Gavin Ewart