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Our Master, Our Brother: Lévi-Strauss's Debt to Rousseau

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The fiery romantics saw Rousseau as their patron. The stolid Kant, as Cassirer has noted, knew him for his own (1945:13). Lévi-Strauss claims him intellectually through Kant, but it is as solitary dreamers that he sees their souls in common. Rousseau is the only philosopher whom Lévi-Strauss eulogizes, the one he calls “the founder of the sciences of man” (1976:33). Contradictory, far-ranging, passionate in his beliefs but abstract in his insights, Rousseau was a complex, conflicted thinker, rejected by his contemporaries and often misunderstood by his successors. Lévi-Strauss lives more consciously in chosen exile, an anthropologist self-condemned to walk the boundaries between his different worlds. In Rousseau’s work he sees a theoretical foundation upon which to build an epistemology and with this framework declares an anthropologist the only thinker qualified to understand the cultural blinders that humans wear. But it is the passion, the solitude, the lonely mysticism in Rousseau that Lévi-Strauss most deeply cherishes and which provide his moral thrust.

Lévi-Strauss seems at first to argue that his debt to Rousseau is analytic, that it arises from Rousseau’s philosophical characterization of human nature and society. He asserts, for instance, that in the *Second Discourse* Rousseau articulated the core concern in at least Lévi-Strauss’s vision of 20th-century anthropology.

[The *Second Discourse*] is without doubt the first anthropological treatise in French literature. In almost modern terms, Rousseau poses the central problem of anthropology, viz, the passage from nature to culture. [1963:99]

It is remarkable in early 20th-century France that an intellectual should choose Rousseau rather than Marx as muse. Doubtless Lévi-Strauss does so in part to rebel, but also in part because the style and tenor of his thought share much with Rousseau’s. Yet he shares more, and less, than he overtly seems to admit. This essay will present first the Rousseauian argument about nature and culture to which Lévi-Strauss paid such heed, and then Lévi-Strauss’s similarly structured claims. Then it will turn to Lévi-Strauss’s failure to use the Rousseauian framework in a Rousseauian way, and discuss the way he does use it—to argue for a unique anthropological epistemology. Lévi-Strauss’s most powerful affinity with Rousseau is however spiritual and emotional, and the last section of the essay elaborates this theme.

Rousseau's Argument

The *Second Discourse*, arguably the most intellectually powerful of Rousseau's works, seeks to explain the origins and foundations of human inequality. Its power stems from the brilliance of its analytic method, which distinguishes the human being within society from the one raised without. Natural man in the *Second Discourse* is a hypothetical construct. Elsewhere Rousseau seems ambivalent about the reality of his natural man, writing as if there were, somewhere, a visitable tribe of noble savages. The *Second Discourse* however is fairly clear in its goals: to describe the nature of this hypothetical natural man in order to comprehend the variety, and hence malleability, of extant society. As the preface states, the goal is

To separate what is original from what is artificial in the present state of man, and to know correctly a state which no longer exists, which probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have precise notions in order to judge our present state correctly. [1964:92–93]

Yeats's metaphor would be the search to tell the dancer from the dance. Rousseau's first simile compares the difficulty of comprehending what human life outside society would be to the difficulty of visualizing the original form of a distorted, weathered statue.

Like the figure of Glaucus, which time, sea and storm had so disfigured that it looked less like a god than a wild beast, the human soul . . . has, so to speak, changed its appearance to the point of being nearly unrecognizable. [1964:91]

The point of the *Second Discourse* is to describe what such an "original" human soul would look like; why it would choose to enter society—although this is really a secondary concern, since the humans Rousseau knew were social animals; and the way it changes in society. Again, the empirical validity of this historical account is irrelevant; Rousseau presents it only to argue for a certain view of a very real social inequality.¹ "The researches which can be undertaken concerning this subject must not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings better suited to clarify the nature of things than to show their true origin" (1964:103). And although parts of the historical account are somewhat fuzzy, that account should be spelled out to clarify its appeal for Lévi-Strauss.

Still in the preface, Rousseau essentially defines the natural human by asserting that human beings have two qualities which do not depend on reason (which he will define as a social product). These two principles or qualities he calls self-preservation and compassion. The former had been a commonplace of political thought at least since Hobbes. The latter Rousseau declared "a natural repugnance to see any sensitive being perish or suffer, particularly our fellow men" (1964:95). This second principle is quite important. Human beings in the presocial state of nature are not self-aware; they do not think about themselves as

objects among objects, but rather as a whole with the world. A human in the state of nature is a child—wordless, timeless, without self-knowledge or history. She has no wants beyond food, shelter, and sex, and she satisfies them without ties or bonds as the animals of the forest satisfy their needs. Other humans she sees as herself. Their cries are her cries, their wounds are her wounds, but she is not bound to them, nor does she remember who they are when they have wandered from her sight.

The natural human is also strong. There are comparatively few illnesses—Rousseau seems to have believed that Enlightenment doctors did their patients more harm than good—and few natural predators, for the body is powerful and agile. Food is plentiful and desires few. Natural humans are happy because they are naturally good, though unaware of the concept of good—Rousseau’s fantasy of the primeval human differs profoundly from Hobbes’s—and because they are sheltered, as of yet, from the demands that reason and passion will place upon them. They seek to preserve themselves, they identify with all around them, and they are content.

Why should the human bother to become social? Rousseau is hazy on this point but he introduces another principle or quality that distinguishes human from animal. This is the faculty of self-perfection, which is essentially the drive to improve one’s life. Animals remain much the same at the end of a thousand years as at the beginning of it, whereas humans change enormously because they are willing always to change in the direction of what they perceive to be improvement (1964:114–115).

Rousseau brings his happy, equable savages into society essentially by accident, and enables them to remain there because they become physically better off. The Edenic grove contains occasional danger and continual environmental challenge. To catch fish, humans learn to make fishhooks; from volcanoes or lightning, they gather fire to keep them warm. Eventually this continual creation of tools and protective techniques encourages rudimentary reasoning, the awareness of a connection between two actions. With this new skill of reason humans begin to recognize that in some conditions—for example, hunting large animals—humans share a common interest in banding together for their mutual good. The more that common interest is recognized, the more self-aware humans grow, the more their reasoning processes improve. Soon they rapidly begin to specialize and allocate responsibilities. And their firm bodies turn to flab.

The real problem is that when humans become aware of themselves they develop the capacity to possess, to use the environment to assert their selfhood.

The first person who, having fenced off a plot of land, took it into his head to say, *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. [1964:141; emphasis in original]

Through possessions, people differentiate themselves; through possessing each other, they develop jealousy and the passions (1964:148–149). People begin to understand themselves only in relation to objects and to the people around them. From this follows corruption.

Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value. . . . From these first preferences were born on the one hand vanity and contempt, on the other shame and envy; and the fermentation caused by these new leavens eventually produced compounds fatal to happiness and innocence. [1964:149]

From social self-awareness stems the destruction of the state of nature.

Rousseau is making a claim far more profound than that envy and vanity are bad feelings which corrupt. He is claiming that the socialized human being has fundamentally altered his very way of thought, that he thinks through objects and through others rather than in himself.

The savage lives within himself; the social man, always outside of himself, knows only how to live in the opinion of others; and it is, so to speak, from their judgement alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence. [1964:179]

Humans no longer identify with each other; they see themselves as distinctive but defined through their relationships with others. The impulses of humans in the state of nature remain, but they are much muted.

His fellow man can be murdered with impunity right under his window; he only has to put his hands over his ears and argue with himself a bit to prevent nature, which revolts within him, from identifying him with the man who is being assassinated. [1964:132]

In a state of nature, any human being would identify with the dying man; he has no capacity even to conceive of himself as distinct from his fellows. Humans in society see themselves as distinct from the people around them; their whole mode of thinking is to elaborate and manipulate that difference. They can deny the compassionate identification with another in pain.

Reason in the *Second Discourse* is for the most part a linguistic phenomenon, and for much of the essay Rousseau describes language—albeit in a loose, metaphorical sense—as the primary mechanism that alters the very thought of socialized humans, and enables them to conceive of themselves as different from each other.² Rousseau gives an elaborate account of the emergence of languages, from cries and grunts laden with affective meaning, to individual objects named each with their own names, to generalizing, abstract words that refer to classes of objects and relations between things. Language becomes riddled with words that have meaning only in a social context—“power,” “prestige,” “reputation”—and these are the words that define the individual. In society, humans name themselves, and by naming themselves differentiate them from their fellows. They come to understand themselves as having value only through the gradations of unequal difference that set them uniquely apart.

Lévi-Strauss

Most anthropologists are familiar with the main thrust of Lévi-Straussian analysis; however, it is worth depicting briefly here to indicate the nature of the

debt Lévi-Strauss describes. Lévi-Strauss places more direct weight upon language than does Rousseau, but attributes his understanding to the earlier thinker. He too constructs a state-of-nature human—although his human is somewhat less hypothetical—and also for him, the challenge is to explain how this presocial human is socialized, and the way in which that alters her. As for Rousseau, the presocial human is transformed in society through a process that alters the very form and mode of her thought, and for Lévi-Strauss the best way to describe this process is to identify it through language.³ To him “the process of language reproduces, in its way and on its plane, the process of humanity” (1976:38). He claims to have learned this lesson from Rousseau (1976:38).

Scholars commonly describe Rousseau’s state-of-nature human as a child.⁴ Lévi-Strauss’s is explicitly a child, but a child prior to at least self-conscious thought and to the beliefs, attitudes, and styles that we call cultural. Unlike Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss has a fairly specific genetic epistemology. The child is not entirely mentally formless and thoughtless; and all thought operates through the process of using categories and thus making distinctions. However, the child does not think with clear-cut categories and, in particular, with definite ideas about herself in relation to other people. These clear categorizations emerge only through the process of being a human-in-society.

Each type of social organization represents a choice, which the group imposes and perpetuates. In comparison with adult thought, which has chosen and rejected as the group has required, the child’s thought is a sort of substratum, the crystallizations of which have not yet occurred. [1969:93]

It is as if Lévi-Strauss conceives of a fine net of interconnected categories and distinctions that filters the action of an amorphous individual mind, and thus with a collective net controls the patterns in which an individual’s thought could move.

The main thrust of Lévi-Straussian epistemology is to assert that thought takes place in categories and that categories and distinctions distort the “true” nature of the object of thought. He does not particularly care about the content of the categories themselves: what bothers him is that the process of thinking demands making distinctions, and distinctions distort. We see an object with a flat surface and four legs; we call it a table. The use of the word “table” to identify the object limits its use and distorts its essence: the object becomes defined as not a chair, not a stool, not a stepladder. In all but one case, he says—when thought takes itself as an object—objects do not exist in themselves for language-using humans, but only in relation to other objects. Ricoeur calls Lévi-Straussian philosophy Kantism without a transcendental subject, a description which Lévi-Strauss applauds (Lévi-Strauss 1975:11). It is an apt phrase, for like Kant Lévi-Strauss asserts that the world is seen through prestructuring spectacles. Nothing is seen as it is, but only as it is conceptually constructed in relation to other objects against which its name contrasts it. And thought depends upon language and thus upon the particular categories that a particular culture singles out. This perspective certainly shadows Rousseau’s conception of the socially created self-awareness that arises from the individual’s awareness of his difference from other in-

dividuals. However, Lévi-Strauss uses his argument to move toward a goal quite different from Rousseau's.

Rousseau's Use of His Argument

Rousseau's analysis of the transformation of the natural human enabled him to make the political argument for which he is most widely known, and about which he probably cared most deeply.⁵ If society radically transforms human nature, then the nature of the social animal depends utterly upon the nature of the society into which she is born. "I had come to see that everything was radically connected with politics, and that, however one proceeded, no people would be other than the nature of its government made it" (Rousseau n.d.:417). The social interaction that produces language creates also the network of rights and responsibilities which create political expectations; because it creates property it creates the inequality which is the topic of the *Second Discourse*, and the oppression, degradation, and poverty that Rousseau decrys as the consequence of his own social world. In 18th-century French society "we have only a deceitful and frivolous exterior, honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness" (1964:180).

Despite his despair at his own society Rousseau is a political optimist. The *Social Contract* aims to determine "any legitimate and sane form of government, taking men as they are and laws as they might be" (1968:49). Law creates morals, customs, and belief—social products, although we think them so natural—and these create the participants in the social whole (1968:99–100). The legitimate and effective society is that in which laws are chosen justly. Rousseau argues that if lawgivers and lawfollowers together create and accept laws that promote the common good of all, then their society is morally just. "The social part, far from destroying natural equality, substitutes, on the contrary, a moral and lawful equality for whatever physical inequality that nature may have imposed upon mankind" (1968:68).

Under these conditions humans are actually better off in society than in a state of nature. Rousseau introduces one example of this better state in the *Second Discourse*, when self-conscious notions of morality—absent in a state of nature—have been introduced into the social world, and humans follow their laws willingly out of wisdom. That social world exists before the lust for property and superiority have induced the corruption of society and created profound inequality (1964:150–151). Society as Rousseau knew it corrupts; but socialization has the potential to create humans who achieve far greater moral heights than in the state of nature. And for Rousseau, true freedom arises in a legitimately governed society, where no individual suffers unduly for the benefit of others, but where each life gains through the acceptance of constraints. Emile must be educated outside 18th-century French society, but the purpose of doing so is not to turn him into a noble savage but into a civilian.⁶

Lévi-Strauss's Use of the Argument

Lévi-Strauss writes at times as if he were seeking a Rousseauian political solution to the ills that plague humanity. For instance:

By bringing out the characteristics common to the majority of human societies [anthropological comparison] helps us to postulate a type of which no society is a faithful realization, but which indicates the direction that the investigation ought to follow. [1974:445]

He continues the discussion to argue that anthropology ought to provide us with a vantage point from which we can properly analyze and perhaps reform our social construct. This is Rousseau's goal, and Lévi-Strauss quotes it twice within his own "confessions": the search for a state which "no longer exists, which perhaps has never existed, but of which it is nevertheless essential to have a sound conception" in order to judge ourselves (1974:357, 447). But while Rousseau actively constructed a political ideal and an educational program, Lévi-Strauss retreats. He writes, admittedly, in a different political world than that of prerevolutionary France. He is strikingly apolitical nonetheless.

To achieve his stated political aims, Lévi-Strauss should produce an elaborate model of social relations that we could use pragmatically to rebuild our lives. When he found the Nambikwara he was supposedly searching for a representative of Rousseau's state of nature. He found and recognized his simple society. But, he claimed, it had no constitutive political structure.

I had been looking for a society reduced to its simplest expression. That of the Nambikwara was so truly simple that all I could find in it was human beings. [1974:358]

And with this he abandons his search.

The explanation for abandoning the search is unconvincing. The nomadic nature of the Nambikwara made their division into groups nomadically essential. But, says Lévi-Strauss, the choice to lead a group is individual and inborn. It is a personal decision, not an imposition by the group.

In the initial community there are men who are recognized as leaders: it is they who form the nucleus around which the groups assemble. . . . Political power does not appear to result from the needs of the community; it is the group rather which owes its form, size and even origin to the potential chief who was there before it came into being. [1974:347]

The crucial impulse for centralized power comes from individuals, not from the collective order that they create.⁷ The only constitutive elements of government are the governed individuals. And Lévi-Strauss is not compelled to explore the social construction of the personality or the group dynamics that create a personal drive for power. He does not provide an abstract skeleton on the order of his model of the constitutive properties of thought. But the problem seems one of inclination, rather than inherent difficulty. Ultimately, governmental institutions are interesting to Lévi-Strauss only as they reflect the social whole, the "totality" of organizationally connected social action that forms the anthropological subject (1967:362). He is not interested in government itself, or even in the psychological material of the individuals who create it. Lévi-Strauss does, however, use the

argument about the transformation of nature into culture in order to describe an anthropological epistemology. Lévi-Strauss remarks that Rousseau radically violated Western philosophy. Cartesian philosophy sought certainty and declared that at the limits of skepticism one cannot doubt the doubting: from the self—“I think”—one establishes that the external world (which includes the self) exists. Rousseau—according to Lévi-Strauss—discovered from cognitive self-consciousness not so much that there was an external world, but that society alters our perception of it.

Descartes believes that he proceeds directly from a man’s interiority to the exteriorization of the

world, without seeing that societies, civilization—in other words, worlds of men—place themselves between the two extremes. [1976:36]

One never sees the external world directly; one has no real certainty of its nature. The one thing about which we *can* be certain is that self-awareness depends upon a social whole.

To Lévi-Strauss Rousseau “conceived, willed and announced this very ethnography which did not yet exist” (1976:34). Certainly the *Second Discourse* contains anthropology-like exhortations:

The whole world is covered with nations of which we know only the names, yet we dabble in judging the human race! Let us suppose a Montesquieu, a Buffon, a Diderot, a d’Alembert, a Condillac, or men of that stamp travelling in order to inform their compatriots by observing and describing . . . we ourselves would see a new world come from their pens, and we would thus come to learn our own. [1964:212–213]

Yet Lévi-Strauss has something more specific in mind than the mere reportage of difference.

The implications of Rousseau’s anti-Cartesian philosophy (according to Lévi-Strauss) is that the truly knowable and objective fact about the world is that thought takes place in categories. What truly excites Lévi-Strauss is the use of the anthropological process to discover and to specify these categories.

The methodological rules which [the anthropologist] will have to evoke in order to translate these systems in terms of his own system, and vice versa, will reveal a pattern of basic and universal laws; this is a supreme form of mental gymnastics, in which the exercise of thought, carried to its objective limits . . . exercises every muscle and every joint of the skeleton, thus revealing a general pattern of anatomical structure. [1975:11]

We think in categories, and the very fact that we are ethnocentric, that we are caught within them, reveals their reality. Lévi-Strauss writes and practices as if we are able to grasp the alien thought of another culture; this belief is essential to the anthropologist’s trade. But in the last instance, it does not matter whether the thoughts of the Bororo take place in his mind or his thought or in theirs, because

the only fact that is truly knowable, and the only truth that really matters, is that both are couched in categories.

Anthropologists—from this perspective—best recognize this shared constitutive structure precisely because they cannot fully comprehend their fellows. If Westerners see the world through rosy lenses and the Bororo see theirs through blue, the world is tinted purple to the anthropologist. His own mixed perception is his most important data. In Lévi-Straussian anthropology knowledge takes itself as its own object; it is, again, “Kantism,” because it seeks to understand the limitations of our thought. No anthropologist can be sure of the content of his thought; his split between noumena and phenomena, external reality and reality perceived, is as real in his own world as in his perception of his native’s experience. He can no more understand the native appreciation of a myth than he can view his desktop without his spatial perceptions. But in his frustration with the content of the myth he can at least appreciate its familiar form, that the myth itself has an internal structure. The anthropologist’s self-reflexive subjectivity—his treatment of thought as a “thing among things”—allows him to see that thought itself has structure. To Lévi-Strauss anthropology has a deeper epistemological reality than the natural sciences, because while the sciences build models of an unknowable reality anthropologists build models of themselves. An atom is postulated reality; a category, regardless of its content, is a fact. The message is determinedly argued throughout his corpus, but perhaps most powerfully stated in the “Overture” to *The Raw and the Cooked*, his philosophical account of his methods and aims. And again, he attributes this philosophical methodology to Rousseau (see Lévi-Strauss 1976:33–43).

Classification is the essence of society. Lévi-Strauss in fact searches for wider similarities in the content of the distinctions humans make within their worlds; *Mythologiques* is one product of this quest, an attempt to display the subtle similarities within a huge mythological corpus. But despite the attempt, in the end the tension between being caught within our categories and striving to see the world in terms of others is relieved, for him, with the belief that the only important claim is that the categories, as structuring form, exist. How can we comprehend another’s culture, when we are caught within the conceptual categories of our own? How may we reconcile values and objectivity? The Lévi-Straussian answer is that we cannot, and that the anthropologist should not try. Her job is that of the philosopher: to understand how we think, rather than what we should.

Elective Affinities

And yet Lévi-Strauss is not wholly a rationalist. The moral thrust of Lévi-Strauss’s anthropology and the political solution to the tension between values and objectivity is toward an almost mystical reunion of the individual and the world around her. And ultimately, Lévi-Strauss’s sympathy for Rousseau is spiritual, not analytic. In 1962 he delivered a speech honoring Rousseau in which he spelled out his analytic debt to Rousseau; this was the period during which *The Raw and the Cooked* (1975) was gestating.⁸ At a Geneva conference Lévi-Strauss’s tribute

to Rousseau was unusually poetic and emotionally charged. The script crescendos to its climax:

And if we give these [works] a special place among the great productions of human genius, it is because their author not only discovered, with identification, the real principle of the human sciences and the only possible basis for ethics. It is because he also restored for us its ardour, burning for the last two centuries and forever in this crucible, a crucible uniting beings whom the interests of politicians and philosophers are everywhere else bent on rendering incompatible: me and the other, my societies and other societies, nature and culture, the sensitive and the rational, humanity and life. [1976:43]

The paragraph reveals that identification—the compassion of Rousseau’s natural man—is morally and epistemologically central to Lévi-Strauss. Identification forms the “real principle” of the human sciences and through it, as anthropologists, we reveal the classifying bonds that chain us. But morally, the point is to dissolve them, by identifying with others to lose our selfhood. By so doing we escape the otherwise dangerous and life-destroying course of contemporary society and return to the primitive union with a presocial world.

“I is another” to Lévi-Strauss in two quite different senses. On the one hand, our language, thought, and our very concept of selfhood are formed by the categories imposed by society. To understand man one must disregard individuality to discover what one shares with men. This is the epistemology that in his tribute he credits to Rousseau.

To gain acceptance of oneself in others (the goal assigned to human knowledge by the ethnologist) one must first deny the self in oneself. To Rousseau we owe the discovery of this principle, the only one on which to base the sciences of man. [1976:36]

On the other hand, more profoundly, “I is another” describes an injunction to lose the conceptual shackles that bind us, and to regain through compassion that primitive identification with one’s fellow human being. This is what the paragraph of his tribute also credits to Rousseau; and from its placement and its eloquence, it seems more deeply felt.

Lévi-Strauss’s work is replete with elaborate epistemological argument, the description of the classificatory foundation of universal human thought. But his most personal work, *Tristes Tropiques* (1974), his “confessions,” presents this other, almost mystic, side of his tribute to Rousseau. In *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss asserts that knowledge destroys the subject of its study. To be known is to be categorized, and every category distorts its content. Meaning is created by demarcating an undifferentiated environment, by naming, defining, classifying. To know the object is to transform it for oneself.

Every effort to understand destroys the object studied in favor of another object of a different nature; this second object requires from us a new effort which destroys it in favor of a third, and so on and so forth until we reach the one lasting presence, the point at which the distinction between meaning and the absence of meaning disappears: the same point from which we began. [1974:469]

Thought separates person from object because its categories—essential to it—continually intervene to split them; we can speak of the “mutual exclusiveness of being and knowledge” (1974:470). Only in the moment before thought, before consciousness arises, does the category and hence the meaning disappear.

From this perspective the self is yet another false creation that splits the individual from his being. The concept of a self arises in the need to demarcate ourselves from others: we cannot control the mother, she has her own volition. The consciousness of a selfhood denies an identification with others. “The self is not only hateful: there is no place for it between *us* and *nothing*” (1974:473; emphasis in original). It is a cruel paradox, for to recognize the problem, to articulate one’s selfhood, is to thicken the cloud of knowing that knowledge builds around us all.

Thus, thought separates humans from each other; human history and knowledge separate us from our past. With the accumulation of history, people find it easier to deny their origins, for those origins become as alien to them as the exotic societies with which they are contemporary. To regain their being people must strip away these rusty layers of their armor.

As he moves about within his mental and historical framework, man takes with him all the positions he has already occupied, and all those he will occupy . . . [we] grant a meaning to the nearest and . . . deny any to those furthest away; whereas the truth lies in a progressive dilating of meaning, but in a reverse order, up to the point at which it explodes. [1974:471]

The logical structures of all societies are equally complex—the polemical burden carried by *The Savage Mind*. But only modern societies internalize their history, so that it intervenes in experience to block them from themselves. Oppressed by its own civilization Europe suffocates,

like some aging animal whose thickening hide has formed an imperishable crust around its body and, by no longer allowing the skin to breathe, is hastening the aging process. [1974:382]

Modern society stumbles under the weight of its own history and is dying under the mass of its own intellectual sophistication. This is not the account one expects from a philosopher of the universal structure of human thought. But it is argued with passion.

Rejected and despised by society, Rousseau retreated from Paris on long and solitary country walks. Returning from Menilmontant one evening he stepped into the path of a charging dog, and so great was the impact that it was several hours before he regained consciousness. The passage in Rousseau reads:

The first sensation was a moment of delight. I was conscious of nothing else. In this instant I was being born again, and it seemed as if all I perceived was filled with my frail existence. Entirely taken up by the present, I could remember nothing; I had no distinct notion of myself as a person. [1979:43]

Remarkably, tellingly, it is this passage which, in his tribute to Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss calls a “precious moment”: it “gives us access to the very core of his works” (1976:43). A moment of rebirth, before the return of consciousness and its weight of memories, of history—to Lévi-Strauss this is the unattainable goal that would bring true happiness. Rousseau describes such happiness: “whenever I recall this feeling I can find nothing to compare with it in all the pleasures that stir our lives” (1979:39).

Reveries of a Solitary Walker, in which this moment is recorded, is a remarkable text. Exiled from society, Rousseau records the power of isolation and the depth of the self in solitude. He writes of his great love of solitude, of the resources of the self, and of the true knowledge and happiness that—forced on us through adversity—comes only from within (1979:52). In their humanity he loves his fellow humans, but as individuals he finds them difficult: “thrown into the whirlpool of life while still a child, I learned from early experience that I was not made for this world” (1979:48). But in his forced renunciation of the world,

When men later reduced me to a life of solitude, I found that in isolating me to make me miserable, they had done more for my happiness than I had been able to do myself. [1979:52]

The sweetest joys and keenest pleasures come from inner retreats.

This joy is the peace of nature, the solitude deep in the heart of the forest. The quiet beauty of nature, her freedom from the “social passions and their dismal train” allows the lonely man to know a “feeling of existence unmixed with any other emotion” (1979:134); in itself it is “a precious feeling of peace and contentment” (1979:89). In the forest human senses are possessed in “delightful reverie.”

In a state of blissful self-abandonment [a man] loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at one. All individual objects escape him; he sees and feels nothing but the unity of all things. [1979:108]

To lose one’s self in reverie, and to live alone with nature, is to be at peace.

The subjectivity that in Rousseau seems a passionate whirl appears in Lévi-Strauss as a finely tuned scientific instrument. “Without a doubt unique in making the most intimate subjectivity into a means of objective demonstration” (1968:26), anthropology finds subjectivity its finest instrument in an unknown land. Only by attaining distance from his society can the anthropologist interpret it. He thrusts himself into a group so joltingly different from his own that his once-possessed identity is stripped away. Yet although from his new vantage point he can see his previous society, he has lost it as his home.

This is of course an epistemological lesson, an account of the power of the anthropologist’s task. And yet in his most personal work Lévi-Strauss turns this epistemological subjectivity into a spiritual response to modernistic despair. He lauds the peculiar freedom of the anthropologist astride two different worlds, but his own resolution of the tension, and his response to what he perceives to be soul-

destroying knowledge, is to retreat in solitude, and to lose the self by merging its categories and collapsing its distinctions. That escape is:

The only privilege of which [man] can make himself worthy: that of arresting the process, of controlling the impulse which forces him to block up the cracks in the wall one by one and complete his work at the same time as he shuts himself up in prison. [1974:473]

The prison walls are created by the categories that divide the world from us. Only by “unhitching,” by removing oneself for a while from the escalating process, can one restore some of one’s lost humanity.

Tristes Tropiques is an intensely solitary book, an internal, abstract meditation on the 19th-century drama of the travel-stained explorer. It reads like philosophical reflections on a film in which the author is deeply absorbed but from which he stands apart. Whether the heightened sense of isolation results from or causes his professional choice is unimportant. Lévi-Strauss would claim both; the anthropologist “eventually comes to feel at home nowhere” (1974:47). Solitary subjectivity is the center of his trade, and it is, perhaps, the subject of this book: the experience of the sunset, of the glass of rum, of forest solitude. There are other people in the book, but they are curiously decorative tokens in the landscape of the self. They do little to dispell the sense of loneliness, or to thwart the sense of absorption in individual experience.⁹

Lévi-Strauss closes *Tristes Tropiques* with the plea to seek Rousseauian moments of the solitary contemplation of nature, where we can lose for a time our selves and our selves’ history in the moment of the enduring present:

In the contemplation of a mineral more beautiful than all our creations; in the scent that can be smelt at the heart of a lily and is more imbued with learning than all our books; or in the brief glance, heavy with patience, serenity and mutual understanding, one can sometimes exchange with a cat. [1974:474]

Merge, do not differentiate yourself. Be in the world rather than be knowledgeable of it. It seems odd advice to come from a self-proclaimed scientist. Yet he presents it as a major teaching; and he presents it with greater eloquence and power than he does his epistemology.

Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau share more than this one affinity, powerful as it is. Each is a musician and an amateur botanist, and to each these activities appeal because they simultaneously characterize the humanmade play of categories, and yet also subvert them. Lévi-Strauss, a failed composer—“if I wasn’t able to compose with sounds, perhaps I would be able to do it with meanings” (1978:54)—presents music as an emotional “totality.” And yet, like myth, it unfolds along a story line. In fact it is because both are simultaneously sequential and encompassingly immediate that they have this power. Both myth and music are “instruments for the obliteration of time” (1975:16) and yet depend upon time, and upon its defined distinctions to articulate its passing. The center of the elaborate analogy between myth and music—the analogy creates the structure for Lévi-Strauss’s

largest work—lies in this dualistic unity. “It can now be seen how music resembles myth, since the latter too overcomes the contradiction between historical, enacted time and a permanent constant” (1975:16).

Rousseau was, in fact, a composer. His “*Le Devin du Village*,” a light comic opera, won him the offer of a royal pension, and he published a weighty and sophisticated *Dictionary of Music* (1975). He wrote of music at times as he wrote of nature:

I soon became so infatuated with the opera that, tired of chattering . . . I often stole away from the company in order to find another seat, where . . . I abandoned myself to the pleasure of enjoying it. [n.d.:322]

And upon awakening to music in progress:

What an awakening! what rapture! what ecstasy, when I opened, at the same time, my eyes and ears! My first idea was to believe myself in Paradise. [n.d.:323]

In his essay on the origin of languages he compares music to language, and argues that music must break with nature in order to move us. Music is created through a system artificially created in society; yet its power is to remove one from society and deliver one into passionate solitude.

For Rousseau botany, too, is made possible by artificially created human constructs; and yet it, too, plunges one into a kind of mystic solitude. “Do not suffer yourself to be terrified by the word, *system*” (1807:72). The essence of botany lies in classification: “I look at [plants], observe them carefully, compare them, and eventually learn to classify them” (1979:115). And yet botany also leads the botanist to the peace of solitude. “Deep in the forest shades it seems to me that I can live free” (1979:116). It is not only that nature enables solitudes, but that, somehow, it makes that solitude rich. “The deeper the solitude that surrounds me, the greater the need I feel at such times for something to fill this vacuum . . . the earth makes up for this with the many objects which it produces spontaneously” (1979:117). It is in nature and through nature that Rousseau had his intense spiritual experiences.

Lévi-Strauss clearly shares this love for solitary nature, and like Rousseau he cherishes the “concentrated world” of the mountains (1974:383). But geology, even more than botany, forms the natural model for his thought. Lévi-Strauss loves geology because it embeds our human categories in the concrete.

When the miracle occurs, as it sometimes does; when, on one side and the other of the hidden crack, there are suddenly to be found cheek by jowl two green plants of different species . . . and when at the same time two ammonites with unevenly intricate involutions can be glimpsed in the rock . . . suddenly space and time become one . . . I feel myself to be steeped in a more dense intelligibility, within which centuries and distance answer each other and speak at last with one and the same voice. [1974:49]

A “quest” that seems “the very image of knowledge” (1974:48), geology reveals the master meaning beneath the chaos of the landscape, in the collapse of the time sequence which gives rise to minute, detailed distinctions. And yet, like myth and like music, the ultimate science of time rests on time’s irrelevance, on the vision—“cheek by jowl”—of the ancient and the modern. For Lévi-Strauss as for Rousseau the natural world displays and yet denies the classificatory categories men create.

In the introduction to his Canadian radio broadcasts—the 1977 Massey lectures—Lévi-Strauss remarks that “unfortunately I forget what I have written as soon as it is finished.” And, sympathetically, he adds, “there is probably going to be some trouble about that” (1978:3). He declares himself to have no historical concept of himself, no sense of a continuous state of being. “I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no ‘I,’ no ‘me’ ” (1978:3–4). A “self” depends upon memory, upon its awareness and possession of a history. He claims to have none. And yet, his own “confessions” concern a self that is, somehow, also the world about him.

Rousseau makes a similar remark:

As soon as I commit its [memory’s] contents to paper it forsakes me, and when I have once written a thing down, I completely forget it. This peculiarity follows me even into music. Before I learnt it, I knew a number of songs by heart. As soon as I was able to sing from notes I was unable to retain a single one in my memory, and I doubt whether I should now be able to repeat, from beginning to end, a single one of those which were my greatest favorites. [n.d.:361]

For Rousseau this is primarily an insight into mnemonics. His mind is a highly abstract one, but he retains to a far greater extent than Lévi-Strauss his sense of history. His confessions, though biased, describe his life’s unfolding; those of Lévi-Strauss are presented as disjointed glimpses, described to justify the musings that dominate the book. Rousseau has a strong sense of at least an individual personality, however eventually maimed and mad. Lévi-Strauss, true to his asserted vocation, at least claims to lack a coherent, historical, individuality.

In the end their differences arise from their different self-conceptions; Rousseau conceives his need for mystical solitude as created by his particularly hateful society, while Lévi-Strauss conceives his need as created by the essential human self. Their epistemologies claim kinship because for each, social construction creates the individual and her experience. For each, thought is constituted in categories of which the most fundamental is the self, demarcated from the world. But while Rousseau sees value in the imposition of consensual structure on epistemology and in politics, Lévi-Strauss denies such value, preferring retreat, fueled by the belief that the categories themselves, this encrustation of knowledge, create human misery. Reason and its product, knowledge, are inherently evil for Lévi-Strauss; they destroy humanity. But for Rousseau reason is not value-laden. With it humans build states of freedom and oppression; the highest moral good and the blackest evil are found only in society. While Lévi-Strauss elaborates Rousseau’s

epistemology, his notions of freedom and happiness are in fact far more crude, the creation of a spiritual mysticism. Rousseau describes an Emile who matures outside a particular society to attain the most generally social values; Lévi-Strauss perhaps would never enter, by choice, into the social realm.

His philosophy misunderstood, his tact nonexistent, Rousseau was ousted from his own society. His passionate nature found release in mystical union with nature, his philosophy in effect belied by his personal experience.¹⁰ These two halves of his life are one for Lévi-Strauss. The latter's judgment on knowledge—that it alienates man from himself—demands the mystical reunion of a divided world, and while he seeks intellectual support from Rousseau for his epistemology it is for Rousseau's spiritual sense of union that he is most profoundly in his debt. "Rousseau, our master and brother, to whom we have behaved with such ingratitude but to whom every page of this book could have been dedicated, had the homage been worthy of his great memory" (1974:445).

Both Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss combine the dreamer's mysticism with abstract analytical reasoning. Both are riddled with paradox and contradiction. But whereas Rousseau most deeply felt the split between his theory and his experience, Lévi-Strauss, who does not make that split, feels that contradiction within himself. He seeks the nature of his own being through the medium of society; he believes that anthropologists are maladjusted in their own societies and unaccepted in the ones to which they flee. The doyen of social anthropology, he finds his peace, alone, in the heart of the mountains. As a scientist, he is intuitive, as a social critic, he seeks solitude; as an individual, he yearns to lose himself within a larger whole. In the span of Rousseau's thought and his musings on his own experience Lévi-Strauss can identify his contradictions and find them recombined.

Notes

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¹Rousseau describes two sorts of inequality, one consequent to natural endowment and the differences in age, height, and so forth, and the other engendered by the social order. Rousseau is interested only in the latter. See 1964:101.

²Rousseau's conception of language is not, however, entirely clear; he devotes considerable space to language in the *Second Discourse* but also follows it with an account of human development in which language is more or less unimportant. He invites others to explore "the following difficult problem: Which was most necessary, previously formed society for the institution of languages; or previously invented languages for the establishment of society?" (1964:126). Another essay (see Rousseau 1966) provides a longer and somewhat distinctive account of linguistic function and origins.

³He is influenced by the tremendous interest in language at this time, and particularly by Saussure and, later, Jakobson.

⁴Rousseau specifically denies that his presocial human is a child (1964:129), but then refers to a childlike presocial status (1964:137).

⁵I am treating Rousseau's work as forming more or less a coherent whole. In the past two hundred years interpretations of his work have been numerous and often wildly conflicting, and Rousseau's work has itself sometimes been seen as deeply at odds with itself. In approaching the work as a rough unity I am following the lead of Cassirer, who paved the way for contemporary Rousseau scholarship.

⁶In *Emile* Rousseau remarks that although he hates books—"they only teach us to talk about things we know nothing about"—the one book which for a long time would form Emile's only library would be *Robinson Crusoe* (1974:147).

⁷Lévi-Strauss does claim that contract and consent are the "basic material" of social life, and not its "secondary creations," but it is a passing reference and the discussion is in no way comparable to his epistemological analysis.

⁸The original French edition, *Le cru et le cuit*, was published in 1964.

⁹It is relevant here that Lévi-Strauss escaped the horrors of World War II through a flight into nature; and relevant, too, that he was a member of the pariah group which that war threatened to expunge. By fleeing to Brazil Lévi-Strauss shakes off both the ancient civilization that defines him and the equally ancient one which seeks to root him out.

¹⁰In his *Confessions* Rousseau wrote: "two things, almost incompatible, are united in me in a manner which I am unable to understand. . . . One might say that my heart and my mind do not belong to the same person" (n.d.:116).

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