

A Slash-and-Burn Intellect

THE VIEW FROM AFAR

By Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Translated by Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss.

311 pp. New York: Basic Books. \$24.95.

By Richard A. Shweder

RUN the risk of being accused of sentimentality by beginning this review with a personal recollection. Years ago, a professor of mine gave me a copy of a book by Claude Lévi-Strauss called "Tristes Tropiques" and said to me, "If you ever feel like leaving anthropology, read this." I read the book immediately.

Something akin to that scene took place 20 years ago at universities throughout the United States. "Tristes Tropiques," translated in certain editions as "A World on the Wane," has been described by one authoritative and thorough critic, Clifford Geertz, as "one of the finest books ever written by an anthropologist." It didn't take long for word to get out. A generation of young anthropologists in the 1960's, some already starting to lose faith over divisive political conflicts, Vietnam and civil rights, became inoculated against personal disenchantment by a French Jewish academic, a master at rational synthesis, who was himself once a refugee from a Europe that Germany had dared to try to unify through terror instead of reason. In "Tristes Tropiques," Lévi-Strauss, the Old World intellectual from a civilization with no innocence left to lose, transformed an expedition to the virgin interiors of the Amazon into a vision quest, and turned anthropology into a spiritual mission to defend mankind against itself.

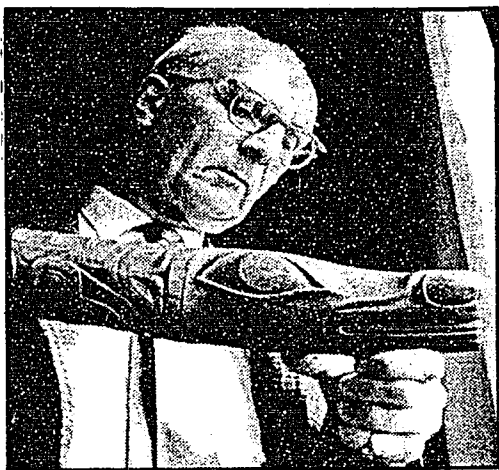
"A World on the Wane"—an intellectual autobiography and the most readable of Lévi-Strauss's many books—did much to establish him as a high priest of cultural affairs and something of a prophet of dark ages yet to come. His more academic works, especially "The Savage Mind," four volumes on mythology, and two collections of essays under the banner "Structural Anthropology," revealed another, more controversial, persona—Lévi-Strauss the erudite trickster, both wonderful and ridiculous, plunging into the depths of the collective unconscious, dazzling some readers by tracing connections between things that have never been connected before, dismaying other readers by reckoning a remote kinship between things that might be considered merely fictive.

• • •

"The View From Afar" is a third collection of essays by Lévi-Strauss, and, as he notes in the preface, it might have been entitled "Structural Anthropology, Vol. 3," except that he didn't want to seem to be treading water. Whatever the label, it is vintage Lévi-Strauss. It may well be the last collection of essays from the itinerant intellectual who in 1941 settled in among the French Surrealists in Greenwich Village, taught at the New School for Social Research and became the cultural adviser to the French Embassy. He later returned to Paris to become a professor of social anthropology in the Collège de France, critic of existentialism and, as Parisian intellectual fashion would have it, a rival to Sartre. Now, in "The View From Afar," he speaks of the end of his days of teaching and the conclusion of his academic career of 50 years.

Lévi-Strauss once described his own rather cultivated, but sometimes savage, mind as the intellectual equivalent of slash-and-burn agriculture. In "The View from Afar" hardly a field remains untouched—sociobiology, linguistics, botany, genetics, psychiatry, esthetics, ecology, politics, neuro-

Richard A. Shweder, an anthropologist and an associate professor of human development at the University of Chicago, has co-edited "Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion."



PIERRE VAUTHY/BLACK STAR
Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1968.

science, education, morality, psychology. And little can remain unscathed as the high-priest-cum-trickster from Paris hops from world mythology to the genetics of altruism, takes a leap from the concept of liberty to a botanical analysis of the meaning of "autumn crocuses" in a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire (a "small mythico-literary puzzle" he calls it); and then it's on to the origins of schizophrenia, the role of unconscious mental activity in language production, and a quick but satisfying devastation of Impressionism and Cubism.

Flirting with various intellectual movements and always on the intellectual move, he lets drop Delphic riddles, mysterious at first blush, yet pregnant with deeper significances: why were Egyptian priests prohibited from eating or even looking at fava beans? With well-timed political and cultural jabs he provokes and disarms the reader: "Superstition [is] the surest antidote to despotism"; and "It is not at all invidious to place one way of life or thought above all others." Throughout he teases and entertains: think of the Chuck-gee of eastern Siberia who "do not view as unsuitable a marriage between a girl about twenty years old and a baby boy of two or three years. The young woman, already often a mother if she has lovers, raises her child and her little husband together."

THEN, all of a sudden, he pauses to reminisce and it is all augury, much of it dark. Thinking back on his times with André Breton, Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy in New York in the 1940's, he comments: "One changed countries every few blocks." To his foreigner's eyes, the city was a stage on which mass culture threatened the relics of archaic civilization—play-acting was a way of keeping one's sanity. "In New York, as we used to say to one another, women do not 'dress': they disguise themselves. We found all this very funny. But today you have only to visit any chic boutique in Paris to realize that here, too, New York has founded a school." Ominously his thoughts drift to "a society becoming each day ever more oppressive and inhuman," where the possibilities of yesterday "seem almost mythical today when we no longer dare to dream of doors: at best, we may wonder about niches to cower in."

Thinking back on the battle against racism, he defines mutual tolerance as "relative equality and sufficient physical distance from one another." And he contemplates with skepticism "the future of a world whose cultures, all passionately fond of one another, would aspire only to celebrate one another in such confusion that each would lose any attraction it could have for the others and its own reasons for existing." Thinking back on humanism in the West he argues that individual liberty is not a

natural right, castigates Western humanism for "isolating man from the rest of creation" and holds out as genuinely humane exactly those preliterate societies we regard as most superstitious. Thinking back on the history of our planet, he likens humanity to flour worms that "with the toxins they secrete, poison one another at a distance long before their density exceeds the available food supply in their sack."

It's all breathtaking and alarming, some of it wonderful, some of it ridiculous. Not everyone will appreciate the essays in the collection, a few of which are tedious in their microscopic attention to the details of botany, kinship and folklore. But those who care to try must first consider why the book is called "The View From Afar," and why Lévi-Strauss, the trickster of structuralism, has been seen close up by some very smart people as a seer into deeper truths, and by other very smart people as a shaman whose magic is suspect.

FOR 25 years he has been the object of adoration and scorn in the English-speaking world. Criticisms of his work are well developed, widely known and even rehearsed in academic circles. There's that tendency to convert anything "hot," passionate, sexual, anxiety-ridden, "of the body," into its opposite — the "cool" mentation of the aptly labeled "cerebral savage." It is almost as if desire were an idea for him, ambivalence a difficulty in classification, anxiety a contradictory argument and lust a premise in search of a conclusion.

Nowhere is this more evident than in a 1972 lecture to alumnae of Barnard College in New York. There is Lévi-Strauss informing those women that Franz Boas — the founding father of American anthropology, whose intellectual progeny include Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead — loved to lecture to classes of debutantes at Barnard. Lévi-Strauss reminisces: 30 years earlier, his own first lecture in "the traditional American academic system" took place at Barnard, and he still remembers his panic — none of the students were taking notes; "instead of writing, they were knitting."

Now, before this sophisticated audience of highly educated women, he launches into a structural analysis of various versions of an American Indian story about an ogress who kidnaps little boys and girls. The ogress, it seems, likes to eat clams, all except the siphons — "those soft little trunks by means of which mollusks take in and expel water, and which are conspicuous in some species of clams." A supernatural helper tells the child how to escape from the ogress. Collect the discarded siphons, place them on the tips of your fingers and wave them at the ogress, "who will become so frightened that she will fall backward into an abyss and be killed." This is done and the wealth of the ogress goes to the child's father, who shares it with others.

The Northwest Coast Indians, whose story that is, think it is about the origins of their cultural practice of ceremonial gift-giving. But Lévi-Strauss, who likes very much to figure out what a story or myth is "really" about, is on a search for hidden meanings. "Why," he asks, "should a powerful ogress be frightened by something as harmless and insignificant as clam siphons?" Why indeed? One almost expects Freud to burst through the walls of the lecture hall. But no, Lévi-Strauss moves on to a related story, a young boy who enjoys his captivity and refuses to return to his parents. When he reluctantly agrees to flee, he puts mountain goat horns on his fingers to frighten his captor. In another version it's the beards of the clam, described as tufts of silky filament, that are used to make sheaths for the fingers.

So what are the symbols in the story — those clam siphons that get nipped off and discarded, the goat horns, the beards — really about? Could it have something to do with ambivalence over sex identity, genital associations, castration, and so on? No — what the story is about, according to Lévi-Strauss, is the contrast between water and land, marine and terrestrial nature, means and ends. Freud's logic does not seem to compute in this French structural calculus.

From the title of the book down to its punctilious analyses of discrepancies in ethnographers' re-

ports about Australian aborigine marriage rules, "The View From Afar" calls attention to a problem of scale. Lévi-Strauss seems more comfortable with life as represented through a microscope or in an aerial photograph — moving in to blow up a detail, stepping back transcendently in search of higher-order patterns. In one direction or the other we quickly recede from the middle-sized world where we live.

At times the experience is exhilarating, as we participate in the high priest's irrepressible quest to overcome all dualisms, contrasts and oppositions. At times it feels like a search after unity gone berserk. Just as the Surrealists sought, to quote André Breton, "a mental vantage point [a view from afar?] from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low, will no longer be perceived as contradictories," so too for Lévi-Strauss everything must be reconciled — "the physical and the moral, nature and man, the mind and the world."

At times it reads like a parody. Acknowledging an analogy between his own research on myths and the art work of Max Ernst, Lévi-Strauss presents a structural analysis of Lautréamont's poetic image, "Chance Encounter of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella on a Dissecting Table." Identified are a series of contrasts and resemblances. "The machine is made for sewing, the other device is against rain; the machine acts upon material and transforms it, the umbrella offers passive resistance to

*"It is almost as if desire
were an idea for Lévi-
Strauss, ambivalence a
difficulty in classification,
anxiety a contradictory
argument."*

it. Both articles have a point: the point of the umbrella ensures its protection . . . the point of the sewing machine is sharp and aggressive."

Now, while it is certainly true that to understand is to compare, and comparison is a play on likeness and difference, Lévi-Strauss's structural search for "deeper" truths seems to some critics like searching for the "real" artichoke by divesting it of its leaves. Lévi-Strauss, of course, thinks he's going right to the "heart" of the matter. Whatever the reader's taste in artichokes, do sample the intellectual tidbits in the collection. Lévi-Strauss is to anthropology as the Surrealists are to painting. One can't be certain whether, fantasylike and fantastic, he is really real or for real, or whether it really matters if he's wearing the cape of magic or the mantle of science.

IT is high praise of Lévi-Strauss, and perhaps a condemnation of certain fashionable trends in cultural analysis, that the high priest almost seems outmoded. With an imperial command of diverse fields, he strives for generalizations about the entire human condition. While others conclude that if there's no absolute truth there's no truth, he defends the idea of objectivity. While others conclude that if the world can't be known literally, innocently and directly there's nothing to be known, that it's all in the eye of the beholder, he goes on searching. While others feel secure, ironically, with the current Continental dogma that there is definitely, absolutely no privileged knowledge, it is Lévi-Strauss who is entitled to, and who inspires, respect. While other high priests of our culture lose their faith yet hang on to their jobs, it is Lévi-Strauss who retires, still enchanted — and incorrigible. If you ever feel like leaving anthropology, or learning it, read him. □