REVIEWS

CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS ON

R. GEDDES LARGE,

HAROLD BAYLEY, ANNA BIRGITTA ROOTH AND

A. M. HOCART

LOUIS RENOU ON

SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN

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THE ART OF DECIPHERING SYMBOLS

(in Four Lessons, to be Followed or not to be Followed)

Soogwilis, a Collection of Kwakiutl Indian Designs and Legends

BY R. GEDDES LARGE

Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1951. Pp. 87 and 33 coloured plates by Charlie George.

The Lost Language of Symbolism

BY HAROLD BAYLEY

n.e., London: William and Norgate, 1952. 2 vols. Pp. ix–375 and pp. viii–3,888, 1,418 illustrations.

The Cinderella Cycle

BY ANNA BIRGITTA ROOTH

Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1951. Pp. 269 and xvi inserted recapitulated pictures.

The Life-Giving Myth

BY A. M. HOCART

Edited, with introduction by Lord Raglan. London: Methuen and Co., 1952. Pp. 252.

These four volumes, reviewed together solely because of their respective publication dates and their vaguely related subject matter, represent, for the reader interested in myths and symbols, just so many exercises in style that are not equally commendable. In each we find a different lesson which, for the sake of simplification, we will designate respectively as a lesson in innocence, a lesson in impudence, a lesson in science, and a lesson in imagination. This is perhaps the proper order to follow, although we feel a slight uncertainty in regard to the relative position of the first two.

Let us begin, nonetheless, with a lesson in innocence. Doctor R. Geddes Large is a physician, the son of a missionary, born and raised in British Columbia where he still practises. Among his father's papers he discovered native designs which the author, still living, was quite willing to explain verbally in terms of the myth that he had intended to illustrate. The text and the three-colour designs comprise the substance of *Soogwilis*. We should not

expect from such a work any effort to be scientific. It is difficult to say whether this is a myth or a series of disconnected stories, united artificially for a particular purpose; inversely, the chapter headings seem arbitrary. Neither is it known whether the text was assembled in the English or in the Kwakiutl language; there is no philological or critical apparatus; finally, the explanatory notes are preposterous. But the author makes no scientific claim for his work, and we would be wrong to reproach him for not going beyond the limits he set himself. His work is that of an honest man who feels sympathy for native thought and endeavours and who, quite simply, would like to preserve that part of them which happened to come into his hands. We might seek to defend him, if there were any need to, by pointing to the theoretical problems his work raises: although these texts were collected unscientifically (or at least presumably so) they do form an intelligible and perceptive account as myth, even for the reader utterly ignorant of the civilisations of the North-west Pacific coast. This should be sufficient to indicate, if it were necessary (but all of classical mythography is there to prove it), that myths cannot be assessed in terms of linguistic documents: they are *stories*, and their essential reality resides in a succession of events that can fit into any linguistic framework without losing their ability to communicate. This is not the place to discuss so immense a problem; let us merely emphasise in passing that even the least satisfactory mythography can still make a useful contribution to an exposition of the radical difference that exists between a myth, on the one hand, and a poem or a novel on the other. Without becoming absolutely false, the maxim *traduttore traditore* reaches the extreme limit of its validity in relation to myths.

Soogwilis poses another curious problem that has to do with illustration. In the very rapid evolution of art in the Pacific North-west—so closely related in many respects to that of modern occidental art: suddenness of changes, unpredictability of stages, close dependence on economic conditions—Charlie George's designs certainly reveal decadence: vulgar composition, brutal colouring, eclecticism. Nevertheless, they do show some originality (of the kind that one finds in the collection of unpublished graphic documents of the illustrious and lamented Franz Boas). In either case we are witnessing one of the first opportunities for natives to make use of a piece of paper for their designs. All the art of the North-west coast is based upon the free recomposition of themes, in terms of the object to be decorated. Human or animal reproductions are skilfully distorted in order to achieve a kind of compromise between the form of the subject and that of the plastic support: box, weapon, receptacle or bracelet. By offering a sheet of paper to the artist, that is, a surface instead of a tridimensional body, a new problem is added to the traditional ones; he might have solved it either by adopting perspective and illusion to preserve his relative fidelity to the subject, or, on the contrary, by greater freedom in regard to the latter. This is what he decided to do: the artist arbitrarily redesigns the animal that he had chosen to reproduce, his main

concern, apparently, being to cover the surface. We therefore have here a rather exceptional case, where the introduction of an occidental medium does not disrupt the native tendency (at least in this regard), but inclines him more markedly in the direction that was already his.

In regard to myths and symbols, Mr. Geddes Large's innocence therefore is richly informative. Can we say as much for impudence? Actually, we may speculate endlessly on the reasons that prompted the editor of *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, originally published in 1912, to produce a new *facsimile* edition; one wonders even more at the enthusiastic reception given it by the English-speaking public, since there have been three successive editions since 1951.

Doubtless the author's rambling remarks are charming in themselves; and the beginning of this enormous work (almost 800 pages) attracts the reader by its poetic flavour, which encourages him for a moment to look forward to the sort of treat offered in a book like *The Golden Scarab*, where erudition led to adventurous exploits upon unforeseen paths. Judge for yourself: Mr. H. B.'s principal thesis is that the technique of water-marks that appears in the paper industry in western Europe at the end of the thirteenth century is the secret conservatory of an emblem of gnostic and mystical inspiration, by means of which the Cathari and the Albigensians could have preserved, throughout their persecutions, the secret information of which they were the guardians. This ingenious theory is appealing; we are all set to participate in a grand treasure hunt with the help of ancient magic scrolls. But this takes us a short, or rather a long way round. Actually, on the basis of some fifteen hundred summary sketches of water-marks that are neither dated nor documented as to their origin, Mr. H. B. indulges, for the space of eight hundred pages, in the most frightening free association that literature, insofar as it is classified as mentally sane, has probably ever known. Each motif is interpreted, at times in a plausible and at others in an arbitrary fashion, and serves as the point of departure for a prolonged reverie in which the initial thesis seems completely lost from sight and the author's whim alone prevails. Unfortunately, Mr. H. B. has linguistic whims, and each letter of the water-marks that he chances upon provides material for extravagant manipulations of great virtuosity that permit him, by relating Indo-European, Sino-Tibetian, Amer-Indian and other languages, to attain an original symbolism of phonemes. We know that Mr. H. B. is neither the only one nor the first to have succumbed to this fascination for which linguistics—but not this one—may some day succeed in providing a valid basis.

If such a work is not completely disregarded, but remains, in spite of everything, worthy of attention, it is because it constitutes—in itself and by virtue of the large audience that it has found—a first-rate psycho-sociological document. Who will write a monograph on the innumerable readers of *The Lost Language of Symbolism*? And who will analyse the intellectual mechanisms by which Mr. H. B. produces symbols with such inexhaustible generosity? In

both cases, doubtless, a valid contribution to the theory of thought would result. In quite another sense than that of innocence on which we have already commented, impudence can also teach us something.

We almost do an injustice to *Cinderella Cycle* by Miss Rooth by placing its analysis alongside a study of the preceding work. For, although erudition plays a big part in both cases, we move from chaos to moderation, from fantasy to exactness. We know that Cinderella is the only popular tale that has been the object, in the past, of a monograph that was then considered exhaustive: *Cinderella* by Miss M. R. Cox (Publications of the Folk-Lore Society, vol. xxxi, 1892) is based on about three hundred and fifty variants. It called for a great deal of courage and daring on the part of Miss Rooth to re-examine a subject already so thoroughly explored, to introduce a new methodological spirit in her study and to bring to it new material. She has certainly succeeded, at least in this last respect, since she has collated three hundred and fifty variants besides those already examined by Miss Cox.

Miss Rooth's great originality in regard to fundamentals reveals itself in the fact that she considers the tale of Cinderella in its most limited form (for France, this means the already quite complex *Cendrillon—Peau d'Âne* group) as a western European aspect of a more archaic and larger totality. The traditional Cinderella (the only one studied by Miss Cox) thus becomes a type B, born of primitive type AB from which also a type A had been isolated. The latter would be characterised by the theme of the helpful animal, killed by the stepmother and from whose bones a miraculous gift accrues. There are no traces, in this type A, of the elements characteristic of type B, that is, the tests, the ball, the seduction of the prince, and gratitude in the form of a privileged object. But Miss Rooth demonstrates in a very convincing way that a type AB, doubtless originating in the Orient, integrated the two series. Finally, she isolates a new type C, in which the heroine is replaced by the hero and which might also be archaic.

This rich material is the object of a triple scrutiny: from the point of view of types, from the point of view of motifs and of motif-complexes, and finally from that of tradition-areas. And it is here, perhaps, that one might formulate some reservations.

First of all, Miss Rooth's method claims to be a structural one. As a reaction to her teacher, von Sydow (to whom the work is dedicated), she insists upon the necessity of studying fairy tales as organic totalities formed by constituent units, themselves structured. ('The tale must be studied as . . . an organic unit consisting of smaller elements, themselves organic,' p. 26.) Therefore she articulates the tales in 'acts', motif-complexes and 'motifs', the latter being entirely elementary in character (p. 32). All this is very good and is inspired by the methodology of Troubetzkoy and Jakobson (structural linguistics). With the difference, however, that in the latter case, the logical analysis admits of an experimental verification, which is not attempted here. On what basis is one to separate acts,

complexes, and motifs? The criteria that Miss Rooth adopts are all the more vague and impressionistic since she readily understands that the analogy between the study of tales and that of language must be placed on the very highest plane: 'A comparison may be drawn between the motif-complex and the structure of a sentence—the subject, predicate, etc.' (p. 32). And so we find ourselves right away on the level of grammar, that is to say, on a level where structural linguistics is still feeling its way, seeking its own criteria and hardly in a position to instruct others by its example. Only one thing is certain: comparative grammar knows very well that it cannot make use of the categories ('subject, predicate, etc.') that Miss Rooth would like to borrow from it. Despite Miss Rooth's good intentions her method is therefore vitiated from the start, and for two reasons: she either did not wish or did not know how to draw from this initial research the methodological data indispensable to the elaboration of a structural grammar; and above all, she did not dare to go to the end of her hypothesis, which was to isolate, on the level of the tale, an element (from the methodological point of view) comparable to the only linguistic one that strictly deserves the name: the phoneme.

We must seek the reasons for this timidity in the author's deep interests. Despite her initial gambol down the path of structuralism, she is above all an historian, mindful of geographical distributions and of centres of diffusion. But, although the major portion of her work is dedicated to research of this nature, the value and influence of which we do not question, she does not go far enough even in this direction. From time to time, of course, she intersperses her discussion with anthropology; thus, we read with interest her observations on Oriental costumes and feasts (pp. 75–78) and on traditional ideas associated with the shoe (pp. 103–9). But how can one validly determine the origine of the theme of the helpful animal without comparing its tradition-area to that of the double burial (first the cadaver, then, after the corruption and the corrosion of the soft parts, the skeleton) of which it seems to be the memory—or the justification?

Finally, there is a much more serious objection and one which, over and above Miss Rooth, questions the value of all folklore study as it is now being conducted. Miss Rooth's research takes her from Portugal to China; she adduces, at times, African examples. But, except for European importations, she resolutely ignores the New World. Yet the tale of Cinderella exists in America, though doubtless in an imported form. But below these recent and easily identifiable versions others exist, incontestably indigenous, formally related to type B, but wherein, just as in Miss Rooth's type C, the protagonist is a man—Cinderella—a male endowed with a symmetrically corresponding name: Fire-Boy, Poker-Boy, Corncob-Boy, or even quite literally, Ash-Boy. This inversion of the sexes obtains in other domains: the name and attributes have a phallic connotation, just as the feminine names of Cinderella (Miss Rooth demonstrates this in convincing fashion, cf. pp. 110 *et seq.*) refer openly

to sex; the American hero is characterised by his short shock of hair, just as Cinderella is by her long hair; he is an orphan and lonely while she is endowed with a second family. And both of them make a fine marriage, they are 'masters of the animals' and 'masters of the morning dew'. How can Miss Rooth permit herself to ignore this type BC, whose isolation in the western hemisphere (as well as its diffusion from one end of the continent to the other) vouches for its archaic character?

Undoubtedly it is fashionable today to treat America as an isolated continent (since historical Europe ignored it until 1492, how could others have had the bad manners to be aware of it?); all resemblances between the myths of the Old and New Worlds would thus be sheer coincidences. But even this caution discredits the very basis of Miss Rooth's method. For you have to choose between two things: either the parallelisms and the symmetries between the Eurasian Cinderella and the American Cinderella can be explained on the basis of chance; and then why would the same not hold true for the resemblances noted within the Eurasian area which are certainly not more striking and from which Miss Rooth nevertheless derives all sorts of conclusions as to the centres of origin and the avenues of diffusion? Or else, resemblance means kinship, and the proposed historico-geographical pattern falls apart because of the neglect, on the other side of the Pacific, of a mass of types and variants whose integration would have profoundly modified the configuration of this pattern.

Had Miss Rooth been more of a structuralist and less of an historian to begin with, she would have first attempted to establish a typology. And since at this stage no hypothesis of contact is implied, she would have had no reason to neglect the American facts. But then she would have noticed that types B and C are linked functionally, i.e., that the inversion of the sexes is accompanied by the inversion of other motifs. Consequently, group BC must be treated as an organic whole. The fact that this game of seesaw is strikingly illustrated in examples borrowed from two widely separated areas—western Europe and North America—and that all the forms discovered in the interval seem composite or intermediate, certainly raises a problem. It can be handled in either a structuralist or historical spirit or in both simultaneously. But the world-wide phenomenon cannot be ignored.

Despite her immense erudition and her many ingenious insights, despite even the ephemeral light she sheds, Miss Rooth lacks that special intuition and subjectivity the abuse of which we have criticised above in Mr. Bayley's work, but which remains indispensable for any study of mythical thought, even though it be in homeopathic quantity. It is not enough to affirm superficially and from the tip of one's tongue that myths are everything; it is not even enough to convince oneself of this by accumulating tiny objective facts, for when you build a wall of bricks, they do not solder of their own accord—cement has to be added. Actually, the mythologist lends himself to a very dangerous game if he does not know when to stop: to place his own

intellectual mechanisms at the disposal of the traditional pattern, to let it live and perform that mysterious alchemy that gave it solidity and permanence throughout continents and millenia. Whether he rejects adventure or does not know how to dominate it, two forms of failure lie in wait for the scholar, and they are exemplified by both Miss Rooth and Mr. Bayley. But we hasten to point out that these authors cannot be judged on the same level. Miss Rooth has made innumerable contributions to knowledge; she only went half way, while Mr. Bayley went irretrievably astray from the very outset; he had taken too strong a dose at the beginning.

If we devote a few lines of this too lengthy essay to a little work mainly composed of reprints of rather inaccessible articles written by the late A. M. Hocart, it is because in all of them one perceives that inspiration that is lacking in *Soogwilis* and in *Cinderella Cycle* and of which *The Lost Language of Symbolism* only offers a comical caricature. Mr. Hocart was one of the most amazing figures of contemporary anthropology: this colonial administrator was rich in inspiration and experience but he had little else. His erudition was vast but uneven, and it consisted of poorly related knowledge. His technique and intellectual activity always gave proof of a certain rusticity. Hocart was a kind of 'Sunday painter' of anthropology, the sort whose work—as it sometimes happens—overflows with animation, invention, sometimes even genius. Around a few simple ideas, but very new when he first formulated them—unity of the myth, of ritual, and of social structure; divine origin of royalty, importance of the notion of reciprocity for interpreting primitive institutions—he discovered relationships between very distant and apparently heterogeneous costumes, resolved traditional difficulties, and provided material, generally not too delicate but always rich, for theoretical reflexion.

All these impressions are once again verified in reading *The Life-Giving Myth*. Assuredly interpretations are often over-simplified; and one is frequently exasperated on realising that Hocart displaces problems he claims to solve. It is true that he confuses 'logical necessity' to which he aspires (p. 28) with historical relationships which in themselves admit of no definite explanation. But at a time when easy solutions were rampant in many countries, such as the 'primitive mentality', which had to be renounced by its author himself at the end of his life, it was a great virtue to give credit to native thought, as Hocart systematically tried to do. He was not afraid to become identified with myths while undertaking to dissect them. After reading the three works which we discussed above, we come back to Hocart with pleasure to remind ourselves, apropos of Mr. Geddes Large, that a long familiarity with natives does not allow us to dispense with science; apropos of Mr. Bayley, that even the study of myths requires common sense; and finally, apropos of Miss Rooth, the most serious of all our authors, that a grain of slightly mad recklessness might, in this domain as in others, be the price you have to pay for great and noble findings.