
V.Y. PROPP AND C. LÉVI-STRAUSS ON THE MYTH AND FOLKTALE

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Abstract

The article contains a textual and historical-philosophical analysis of V.Y. Propp and C. Lévi-Strauss's debates regarding V.Y. Propp's book entitled 'The morphology of the folktale'. This dispute showed the incompatibility of seemingly related morphological and structural analyses of folklore materials and attracted much attention of ethnographers, semiologists and literary historians. According to the hypothesis put forward in this article, the fundamental difference between the two approaches is not their methods, which is usually suggested, but their understanding of the research subject and its boundaries. C. Lévi-Strauss criticized V.Y. Propp's research model because it does not and cannot include the myth that is primary to the folktale. In his turn, V.Y. Propp reproached structuralism for not 'seeing' folktales. While analysing the debates of these scholars, the authors of the article have proved that the relationship of myths and folktales exceeds the scope of ethnography and can be considered as a philosophical problem.

Keywords: formalism, real, imaginary, necessity, opportunity

1. Introduction

In 1958, the English translation of V.Y. Propp's book entitled 'The morphology of the folktale' happened to be one of the most significant events in the history of the European humanities of the 20th century that influenced the formation of the general and literary semiology of A. Greimas, T. Todorov, R. Barthes and even film poetics [1]. The principles of V.Y. Propp's morphological analysis were applied in pedagogical narratology [2] and subsequently in Computer science [3-5]. V.Y. Propp wrote that he did not expect the translation of his book that had been published in Russia in 1928 without much attention would later arouse the interest of different scientists. V.Y. Propp also did not think that the most implacable criticism of his book would be expressed from the standpoint of structuralism rapidly gaining scientific authority and recognition of

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humanitarian methodology. Its founder and principal theorist Claude Lévi-Strauss harshly responded to the translation of V.Y. Propp's 'Morphology' with his article 'Structure and form' [6]. Recognizing that V.Y. Propp's ideas anticipated some of his own theories, C. Lévi-Strauss denied the scientific value of V.Y. Propp's morphological analysis and explained the very emergence of this method by V.Y. Propp's insufficient knowledge of mythology and ethnography.

V.Y. Propp responded to this 'ferocious attack' by the standards of academic debates (according to one researcher [7]), eight years later with his article 'Structural and historical study of the folktale' complemented the Italian translation of 'Morphology ...' [8] along with C. Lévi-Strauss's critical article. C. Lévi-Strauss and V.Y. Propp's debates always attracted much attention of researchers who were concerned with the corresponding scientific problems, folklore studies and ethnography. However, this polemic might also have a philosophical interest since it addresses not only the scientific status of humanitarian knowledge but also such an 'eternal topic' as the relationship of freedom and necessity.

2. C. Lévi-Strauss and V.Y. Propp's debates

In fact, the main and only rebuke delivered by C. Lévi-Strauss to V.Y. Propp's 'formalism' is that V.Y. Propp divided oral literature into essential (form) and minor (content) [6]. According to C. Lévi-Strauss, structuralism does not make such a mistake and includes both form and content into analysis. Refusing content, formalism simply loses its object and no longer sees any differences in fairy tales [6, p. 180].

C. Lévi-Strauss's conclusion is absolutely fair: reducing the variety of fictional characters in the folktale to only seven actors defined by specific 'action circles', V.Y. Propp gave attention to 'what' characters do ignoring the question of 'who' and 'how' [9].

Is it just to conclude that this kind of 'formalization' destroys the research object, i.e. the folktale? Some researchers agreed with C. Lévi-Strauss's thesis that V.Y. Propp did not pay enough attention to cultural and historical aspects of the Russian fairy tale [7, 10] and studied only the general without regard to the particular [11]. Other authors criticized V.Y. Propp's work even more and argued that the form of fairy tales was not 'extracted' from their content but was regarded as an *a priori* [12].

There were also authors who did not characterize V.Y. Propp's approach as 'formalist' (V.Y. Propp described his method as 'historical'). Some of them expressed the opinion that his approach was similar to R. Ingarden's phenomenological literary criticism [13]. Others noticed that V.Y. Propp's approach to the folktale is wider than the one presented in 'Morphology ...' and included the 'Historical roots of the folktale' (1946, the French translation – 1983, the English translation (abridged) – 1984), which makes V.Y. Propp's research program wider than C. Lévi-Strauss's one [14]. C. Lévi-Strauss

mentioned ‘Historical roots ...’ in his article but apparently considered this book as V.Y. Propp’s commitment to the Soviet ideology, which did not accept ‘formalism’ (a viewpoint typical of Western science [15]). When responding to C. Lévi-Strauss, V.Y. Propp stated that “‘Morphology...’ and ‘Historical roots...’ represent, to so speak, two parts, or two volumes, of a single work” [16].

The English and French translations of V.Y. Propp’s ‘Historical roots of the folktale’ showed long-standing debates between the author and C. Lévi-Strauss from a different perspective, not as the collision of structuralism and formalism. V.Y. Propp’s approach considered in the unity of its morphological and historical aspects turned out to be more productive than C. Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, and many authors seeking to develop structuralism into the theory of narrative genres started to consider V.Y. Propp as the founder of their research program [17]. Then C. Lévi-Strauss became criticized. For example, he regularly mixed the concept of myths, tales and legends, used suitable materials without distinguishing their genres [18]. However, one should not think that criticizing C. Lévi-Strauss researchers unconditionally accepted V.Y. Propp’s position: most of them reached a compromise and regarded both approaches as incomparable but complementary. The essence of this compromise can be summed up with a quote from E. Bálsamo’s article: “Within the field of structuralism, two main methods of analysis exist; syntagmatic and paradigmatic, with ... two heroes, Propp and Lévi-Strauss, adhering to these two methods respectively” [11]. At the same time, both methods (syntagmatic moving ‘along’ the narrative and paradigmatic comparing different narratives) inevitably see one another as an ‘abstraction’ and ‘oblivion of content’. Countering C. Lévi-Strauss’s criticism, V.Y. Propp did not argue that the folktale he reconstructed to embrace all characters and functions never existed. He did not call it some ‘abstraction’ or ‘archetype’ rather than a ‘compositional skeleton’ of all real-life fairy tales [16, p. 74], a catalogue of all possible plots that form actions. As V.Y. Propp noticed actions were the content of all folktales because this genre did not use descriptive pauses and lyrical digressions due to its dynamics [19]. If one excludes an action and subsequently time from the folktale (fairy tales do not use abstract time, the time of folktales is always connected with actions), the folktale becomes an empty abstraction. C. Lévi-Strauss was known for doing this simplification and V.Y. Propp criticized such an approach. V.Y. Propp said, “Lévi-Strauss carries out his logical operations in total disregard of the material (he is not in the least interested in the wondertale, nor does he attempt to learn more about it) and removes the functions from their temporal sequence” [16, p. 76].

While criticizing V.Y. Propp, C. Lévi-Strauss wrote that all the actors and even objects mentioned in the folktale had their own semantic meaning. For instance, there are no ‘simple birds’ in the folktale. There is an eagle, owl, duck or raven forming multi-level oppositions: an eagle is a day bird opposite to a night owl; an eagle and owl are predators that are opposed to a crow feeding on dead animals; finally, all these birds are opposed to the waterfowl. However, not all these birds can be found in a single tale: rooting some opposition in an

ethnographic context requires several, or more precisely, as many tales as possible. At the same time, the action of a certain folktale is eliminated from such an analysis, and a collection of fairy tales is transformed into “an atemporal matrix structure whose form is indeed constant” [6, p. 184]. Of course, V.Y. Propp found this approach unacceptable since the significant attribute highlighted by C. Lévi-Strauss’s “is not an action, much less an action of a character in a narrative” [16, p. 74].

3. Actions vs. attributes

Therefore, an action-oriented approach is opposed to an attribute-oriented approach. This opposition points to their methodological and object-centred differences, with the first approach directed at the folktale and the second concerned with the myth. Does this reveal some fundamental differences between the myth and folktale? Both V.Y. Propp and C. Lévi-Strauss denied any of these distinctions (otherwise their debate would have been meaningless), and considered the myth and folktale in close connection, although they saw this connection differently. However, the relationship between the myth and folktale is not a special problem for both scientists: C. Lévi-Strauss used myths and fairy tales in his analysis, and V.Y. Propp stated that a distinctive difference between the myth and folktale “... is not a very important problem for the present discussion” [16, p. 78]. In his ‘Morphology...’, V.Y. Propp claimed that “the fairy tale in its morphological bases represents a myth” [9, p. 90] and the “full” or multi-character fairy tales deserve the “name of mythical tales” [9, p. 100]. C. Lévi-Strauss expressed an approval of these statements in his article (“Propp is right: there is no serious reason to isolate tales from myth” [6, p. 176]). V.Y. Propp’s comments provided C. Lévi-Strauss with a good reason to ask the following question: if the fairy tale is derived from the myth and is based on its structure, then why not to study only myths without fairy tales? That is the approach used by C. Lévi-Strauss but his position on this issue is slightly uncertain: he mentioned complementary relationships (“It is a complementary relationship”) [6, p. 178], which caused V.Y. Propp’s critical remark: fairy tales replaced myths, they do not exist simultaneously [16, p. 79 and the following pages].

C. Lévi-Strauss did not clarify what he meant by a ‘complementary’ relationship between the myth and fairy tale. Sometimes he interpreted the myth-folktale relationship as the relationship of two poles, then completely dissolved the fairy tale in the myth: “in a tale a ‘king’ is not only a king and a ‘shepherdess’ not only a shepherdess; these words and what they signify become recognizable means of constructing a system formed by the oppositions male/female (with regard to nature) and high/low (with regard to culture)” [6, p. 187]. This example shows that structuralism uses the cultural-historical context in a very peculiar way interpreting the specifics of fairy tales through extremely abstract categories. C. Lévi-Strauss’s texts provide the answer to the question about the nature of complementary relationships between the fairy tale and

myth: they represent two ways to read the same narrative – ‘horizontal’ (‘successive’) and ‘vertical’ (‘comparative’).

4. The folktale - a memory or fiction?

V.Y. Propp’s approach to the myth-folktale relationship is also characterized by certain vagueness and even contradiction. On the one hand, V.Y. Propp strived to clarify the connection between the folktale and myth by assuming that the hero’s journey to the Kingdom of Far Far Away, which forms the basic narrative of fairy tales, “i.e., wandering, reflects notions about the wandering of souls in the other world” [9, p. 107]. On the other hand, V.Y. Propp’s elaborate analysis of the roots of fairy tales did not reveal the mythological substrate that could be the prototype of its whole plot rather than individual elements [20].

V.Y. Propp’s approach to the myth-folktale relationship comprises a certain contradiction. While deriving the fairy tale from the myth whose form and content are influenced by “religious Orthodoxy and collective pressure” [6, p. 176] (V.Y. Propp did not debate this C. Lévi-Strauss’s thesis), V.Y. Propp considered the fairy tale as a free combination of characters and action made by the narrator without violating its logical coherence. He wrote, “This freedom is a peculiarity of the folktale alone” [9, p. 102] (C. Lévi-Strauss reproachfully quoted these words as a methodological prerequisite for refusing to analyse the content of fairy tales [6, p. 177]. To answer C. Lévi-Strauss’s criticism, V.Y. Propp developed his own thesis on the freedom of fairy tales. He said, “One of the properties of the wondertale is that it is based on poetic fiction and is a distortion of reality. In most languages the word tale is a synonym for lie or falsehood. ‘The tale is over; I can’t lie any more’ – thus do Russian narrators conclude their stories. Myth, on the other hand, is a sacral narrative; not only is it believed to be true, it also expresses the faith of the people.” [16, p. 79]

In his scientific work ‘Folklore and reality’, V.Y. Propp further testified to the invention of the fairy tale arguing that its ‘realism’ manifested itself only at the level of individual characters (men, women, boyars, soldiers, priests, etc.). “As soon as we ask ourselves what these realistic men, women, soldiers and other characters do in some fairy tale, i.e. analyse its narrative, we will immediately dive into the world of the impossible and fictional.” [19, p. 85] V.Y. Propp concluded that “fairy tales deliberately turn the reality inside out, which makes them interesting to people” [19, p. 87]. Although V.Y. Propp criticized the realistic interpretation of the fairy tale common to the Soviet folklore, his arguments had the same force in opposing its mythological interpretation. Indeed, the fairy tale adopts some social realities alongside elements of mythological systems and religious doctrines in such a way that they become organic elements of the fairy tale and lose their realistic or mythological significance.

Perhaps V.Y. Propp was inconsistent in proving his thesis about the genre independence of the folktale with regard to its supposed mythological substrate but his approach was far from structuralism trying to interpret all cultural works in terms of their necessity and tended towards W. Benjamin's aesthetics opposing the freedom in the fairy tale and the necessity in the myth. W. Benjamin wrote, "The wisest thing – so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day – is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits. (This is how the fairy tale polarizes Mut, courage, dividing it dialectically into Untermut, that is, cunning, and Ubermut, high spirits). The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man. A mature man feels this complicity only occasionally, that is, when he is happy; but the child first meets it in fairy tales, and it makes him happy." [21] According to W. Benjamin, the fairy tale opposes the myth (identified with the forces of nature) not like another ideology (or another myth) but does it cunningly and courageously like the hero of some fairy tale opposes a more powerful character (in terms of physical or magical skills). The only indulgence that V.Y. Propp showed to the 'social realism' of fairy tales was the struggle of the weak against the strong: "The fairy tale knows only one kind of social struggle and social satire: a landlord or a pope are always fooled and deceived by their cunning farm labourers" [19, p. 100].

5. The burden of the real and the temptation of the imaginary

Despite the fact that V.Y. Propp cited W. Benjamin, he interpreted the struggle between the folktale and the myth on a larger scale since the myth uses the power of natural forces. In this case, the myth is equated with the reality (C. Lévi-Strauss's general interpretation of the myth). What is the fairy tale? It is the fiction that recognizes itself as fiction and only 'pretends to be real'. V.Y. Propp mentioned, "Among the peculiarities of the fairy tale is that it tells a story that never happened and could not happen in such a way that these events seem to be real despite their extraordinary nature. At the same time, neither the narrator nor the listener believes the fairy tale. This discrepancy determines its humor." [19, p. 88] In other words, if the myth safeguards the reality and legitimizes it, the fairy tale is the fiction that realizes itself as non-true. The storyline of the folktale presenting the hero's journey to the Kingdom of Far Far Away and back is just a metaphor of the reader's journey into fiction and back to the reality, i.e. the plot analogy to the beginning of the fairy tale that carries readers inside the world of the folktale and its ending. The subject of the fairy tale is the tale itself, while its 'elements' can comprise almost anything.

The fictional nature of the folktale together with its monotony is strikingly reminiscent of the imaginary as it is interpreted by J.-P. Sartre. He wrote, "The real and the imaginary, by reason of their essences, cannot coexist. It is a case of two entirely irreducible types of objects, feelings and conducts." [22] The imaginary world in its most complete form (as exemplified by the schizophrenic

world) is not the world of absolute freedom but the world filled with determinism and ritualism, i.e. a semantically poor world [22, p. 147-148]. Does it resemble the world of the fairy tale? To some extent, it does but the fairy tale exists not in a social but individual context. The fairy tale assumes some narrative situation and the reader's interest, which causes an almost inexhaustible variety of elements. However, the folktale is inclined to the comfortable world of the already-known and harmonized, which is not typical of the myth and was later avoided by literature.

However, J.-P. Sartre's ideas should not be understood in such a way that one should live only in the real world and avoid illusions of the imaginary world in every possible way. According to J.-P. Sartre, living in the imaginary world means to refuse any action but a person living only in the real world "is squashed in the world, transfixed by the real, and is closest to the thing" [22, p. 187].

What does it mean to be 'squashed in the world' or 'be closest to the thing'? It means living in the world defined by a system of mythological oppositions or a system of scientific laws. The scientific explanation of the world can challenge the mythological and vice versa, but the folktale is 'on the other side' of this dispute and does not participate in it. When V.Y. Propp wrote that the fairy tale replaced religion and paved the way to literature [9, p. 106], the author introduced the positivistic model 'myth – folktale – literature' as the gradual development of secular culture from the religious one. However, the development of secular culture in the European Modern Period did not preserve biblical narratives in the form of 'fairy tales'; they were regarded from the viewpoint of their truthfulness, which they either rejected or stubbornly protected. On the contrary, the folktale never contained such a truth, therefore V.Y. Propp did not manage to discover the mythological basis of fairy tales. Using C. Lévi-Strauss's metaphors, one can say that the folktale is not an opponent of both religion and science but rather their companion. It is another matter that C. Lévi-Strauss described the fairy tale with due regard to the myth and mingled these concepts that they became almost indistinguishable. It comes as no surprise since C. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism identifies the myth and nature and affirms the unconditional domination of the real as the pressure of impersonal necessities. Paul Ricœur described forming structuralism in the following way: "structuralism as philosophy will develop a kind of intellectualism which is fundamentally antireflective, anti-idealist, and antiphenomenological. Moreover, this unconscious mind can be said to be homologous to nature; perhaps it even is nature." [23]

6. Conclusions

While emphasizing the importance of the folktale, V.Y. Propp opposes the need for reality not to some other necessity but to the possibility of creating a new one. This is how structuralism and morphological analysis differ. It is no coincidence that many modern studies in the field of Computer science include

references to V.Y. Propp's book. However, the existing software cannot embrace the variety of elements that V.Y. Propp's model offers. The morphological approach is a generative method, while opposition systems revealed by C. Lévi-Strauss through the comparative analysis of mythological and fairy-tale narratives do not and should not fulfil these functions since it concerns the stable and unchanging basis of human existence and natural order. According to C. Lévi-Strauss, structural analysis reproduces this order and is its vital part.

Could the order have a broader meaning than the one determined by structuralism and include not only the immobility of oppositions but also the development of some plot with its eventfulness, unpredictability and accidentality? It seems that this kind of doubts leads the scholars describing V.Y. Propp and C. Lévi-Strauss's polemics to some middle ground when none of the approaches is given any preference. In the end, we have reached the same conclusion. We tried to show that the problems addressed during the scientists' debates refer not only to folklore. These problems mostly belong to the sphere of Philosophy and are often called 'eternal' issues, therefore their solution requires more than an 'arithmetical average'. A possible solution (always intermediate) is a more accurate formulation of the original opposition lying in the core of any given debate, while the search for such a solution can be compared to the wandering of a folktale character.

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