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Deleuze, The Dark Precursor

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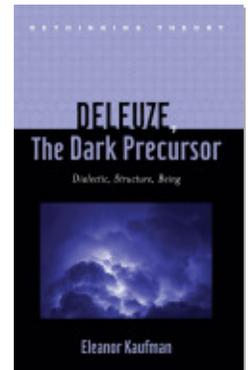
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Lévi-Strauss and the Joy of Abstraction

DELEUZE INSISTS AT DIFFERENT points that the most radical possibility for thought (if not politics) is to become more, not less, abstract. It is this potential for becoming more abstract that I locate as the hinge point between what might be narrated as Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and Deleuze's poststructuralism: in short, Lévi-Strauss never fully crosses into the promised land of abstraction, remaining too insistent on the return to the concrete, whereas Deleuze insists on the need to bring the concrete back to the abstract. This is not to claim that the so-called poststructuralist moment ever really left the fundamental orientations of structuralism (and the mark of this nonabandonment is the continual tension in both domains between the drive to the two- or four-part schema and the concomitant appeal to the univocity of the one single term that encompasses everything). Moreover, traversing both French structuralism and French poststructuralism as it extends from Sartre to Deleuze and on to Badiou, is a preoccupation, often not acknowledged as such, with the inhuman, making this a central term of what I would claim to be a continuous twentieth-century French philosophical project. Insofar as the inhuman numbered structure would seem to reside at the heart of Lévi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology, we might also ask to what degree the "anthropo-" in anthropology is a misnomer. On the one hand, Lévi-Strauss embraces the inhuman structure in all its abstraction, yet on the other he calls for a return to the concrete. By contrast, Deleuze formulates a movement from the abstract to the concrete and back to the abstract, which has an even stronger affinity with Marx's model of capital.

It is first useful to survey a range of critical commentary, some coming from Lévi-Strauss himself, that asserts that his is not a humanist, subject-

oriented project. As Christopher Johnson writes in *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years*:

Parallel to the desacralization of the object of anthropology is what one might term the dehumanization of the subject. If anthropology's point of departure is the lived experience of fieldwork, the concrete interaction of the ethnologist with the other culture and his or her testimony of that experience, then in Lévi-Strauss the destination of such experience is the abstraction of structural analysis. . . . The effective suspension of human agency one finds in structuralism is of course already present in the discipline Lévi-Strauss sees as its main inspiration, linguistics.¹

Johnson's analysis underscores the antihumanist dimension of Lévi-Strauss's oeuvre and, more specifically, the movement from the concrete to the abstract. Whereas the "point of departure" of anthropology centers on questions of "lived experience" and "the concrete interaction of the ethnologist with the other culture," the movement that Lévi-Strauss inaugurates bypasses these dimensions to land at the "destination" of "the abstraction of structural analysis." Even if this antihumanist tendency is already present in linguistics, in the anthropological domain it must follow the trajectory from the concrete to the abstract.

The dominant refrain of critical writing about Lévi-Strauss emphasizes the idea that he comes to rest at the abstract, at the structure itself, and cannot get beyond this. This is often articulated as the shortcoming inherent in Lévi-Strauss's omnipresent structures. In *Elementary Structures Reconsidered*, Francis Korn asserts, "With respect to the concept of 'structure' as used in *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, there is no consistent meaning to the term throughout the book. 'Structure' is assimilated by Lévi-Strauss to 'regulating principle,' or to the Gestalt concept of 'whole,' or alternatively to the division of societies into actual institutions such as moieties, sections, and subsections."² Not only does everything come to rest at the level of the structure, according to Korn, but structure becomes so general that it encompasses a whole range of categories. Jonathan Culler writes in *Structuralist Poetics*, in reference to Lévi-Strauss's four-part structural mapping of the Oedipus myth, that "it does not really advance our understanding of the logic of myth: the only logic revealed is that of the homologous structure postulated in advance and an elementary

logic of class membership.”³ Such an analysis indeed seems aptly applied to Lévi-Strauss’s celebrated analysis of the Oedipus myth, where he condenses transhistorical versions of the Oedipus myth into four series: (1) those that overemphasize kinship relations (Oedipus marrying Jocasta); (2) those that deemphasize kinship relations (Oedipus killing his father); (3) those that deemphasize the autochthonous (monsters being killed); and (4) those that emphasize the autochthonous (the relation to the lame or hunched over, the clubfoot, the state of being closer to the earth). In this fashion, 1 and 2 are in a parallel relation of opposition to 4 and 3.⁴ Yet at the end of the day, what does this stunning chiasmic mapping tell us about the content of the myth under consideration? Is the content not strangely emptied out by the sheer brilliance of the form? What is striking in the criticisms outlined above is the anxiety — and I locate this anxiety in what follows as intrinsic to the structuralist project — that the sequence not end at the abstract but have some kind of “real life” concreteness or applicability.

It is thus significant that in Deleuze we find a less pejorative analysis of Lévi-Strauss’s emphasis on form over content, something entirely in keeping with the drive to be more rather than less abstract. Deleuze writes of Lévi-Strauss in “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?” that “the true subject is the structure itself.”⁵ He notes that Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the Oedipus myth boils down to a mapping of differential relations and singular points and, moreover, to the identification of more than one series of differential and singular elements, as in the categories of the Oedipus myth. More often than not, it is exactly four series at issue, as in Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of “Four Winnebago Myths” or in numerous kinship systems that break down into four interrelated parts.⁶ Rather than critiquing the structure for not returning to the concrete, Deleuze’s 1972 essay dwells on the complexity opened up by the mapping of differential points into a singular structure — in short, the relation of the four to the one — and the type of thought this enables or forecloses.

Such an approach has affinities to the move that Lévi-Strauss makes in his introduction to the works of Marcel Mauss, where he asserts that what is at issue in Mauss’s famous analysis of gift economy as a structure ultimately bound up in reciprocity is not so much the tripartite schema of giving, receiving, and reciprocating that Mauss outlines but rather the singularity of exchange itself. Lévi-Strauss writes, “Why did Mauss halt at the edge of those immense possibilities, like Moses conducting his people

all the way to a promised land whose splendor he would never behold?”⁷ By understanding that it is exchange itself — the structure itself — and not the already condensed three-part schema (the one rather than the three), Lévi-Strauss sets himself up as the greater visionary to Mauss’s Moses.

If Mauss’s tripartite dynamic is ultimately about exchange itself, what might it mean in Lévi-Strauss’s work for the subject to be the structure, generally the four-part structure, itself? There is ample evidence for claiming that Lévi-Strauss’s oeuvre is ultimately about the singularity of the four-part structure, nowhere more so than in the essays that compose the two volumes of Lévi-Strauss’s *Structural Anthropology*, which reflect a startlingly original mapping of myths or kinship structures so that what might seem to be endless repetition or inassimilable complexity is in fact a set of four divergent series, often in some form of chiasmic relation to one another. To be sure, Lévi-Strauss can be critiqued for his selective process of reading (only including the parts of the Oedipus myth that support the four-part structure) and for his relegation of the question of the content. And it is in this space of critique or lack of critique, of problematizing or celebrating the landing on “the structure itself,” that I would venture to distinguish in broad strokes what might be taken as the structuralist project from the poststructuralist one. Though in many regards difficult to differentiate (some of the canonical works of both structuralism and poststructuralism appeared at exactly the same moment in the mid- to late 1960s, by some of the same authors, such as Barthes, Foucault, and Lacan, who are classified simultaneously in both camps), structuralism and poststructuralism might be distinguished by a difference of tone or, more precisely, by a different relation to the anxiety bound up with excessive attention to form. Though both are preoccupied with structure or form at the expense of human content — there is a strong continuity in the analysis of the inhuman — the structuralist desiring mechanism is one that still privileges a grounding in content, whereas the poststructuralist one is more at ease, if not joyful, in the abandonment of such claims.

Such a logic is illustrated by one of Lévi-Strauss’s forays into structuralist poetics, in an essay published in 1960 that analyzes and critiques the then-recent (1958) English-language publication of Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*. In this essay, aptly titled in English translation “Structure and Form: Reflections on a Work by Vladimir Propp,” Lévi-Strauss seeks to distinguish Propp’s formalist approach to the folktale from

his own structuralist approach, the latter developed more in the domain of myth analysis. According to Propp, all the folktales under consideration can be broken down into thirty-one functions, the functions represented by terms such as absence, prohibition, violation, villainy, struggle, victory, and so forth. Notably, these functions are not specific characters or character types but rather single-term attributes that transcend the realm of the personal. Propp analyzes all Russian folktales as combinations of these essential thirty-one functional components, and the types of combinations bring out new nuances of structure—for example, it turns out that the functions implicate one another, that no two functions are mutually exclusive but rather can be grouped in pairs (“prohibition-violation”; “struggle-victory”; “persecution-deliverance,” etc.), in sequences (“villainy-dispatch,” “decision for counteraction-departure from home,” etc.), or according to the sphere of action of the villain (“villainy-struggle-pursuit”; “transference of the hero-liquidation of lack-rescue-solution of a difficult task-transfiguration of the hero,” etc.).⁸ While such a “formalist” reading of the folktale would seem to have much in common with Lévi-Strauss’s “structuralist” analysis of myth, Lévi-Strauss is steadfast in his accusation that formalism privileges the abstract over the concrete—or specifically, in the terms of Propp’s analysis, the single-term functional unit over the richness and variation of the detail.

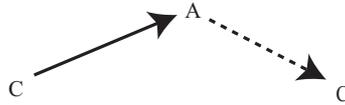
This critique is grounded in the tensions of form and content, or abstract and concrete, but in no way with the fact that the human individuation of characteristics is entirely subsumed by their function in the story. As Lévi-Strauss summarizes: “In order to define the functions, considered as the basic components of the tale, the *dramatis personae* will first be eliminated, their roles being only to ‘support’ the functions. A function will be expressed simply by the name of an action: ‘interdiction,’ ‘flight,’ and so forth.”⁹ Lévi-Strauss then proceeds to critique Propp’s formalist project for eliminating the content and context of the folktale (or *conte*) at issue, but he never explicitly critiques the elimination of the *dramatis personae*, the characters, the human actors, as such.

Lévi-Strauss reads in Propp’s hierarchy of form over content the essence of the difference between formalism and structuralism: “For [formalism], the two domains must be absolutely separate, since form alone is intelligible, and content is only a residual deprived of any significant value. For structuralism, this opposition does not exist. There is not something ab-

stract on one side and something concrete on the other. Form and content are of the same nature, susceptible to the same analysis.”¹⁰ At this juncture Lévi-Strauss would seem to be criticizing the separation between form and content in the formalist project, whereas for structuralism the two are of a piece and not separable. To a certain extent, such a depiction of structuralism as a merging of form and content coincides with the observations, noted above, by those critics who would locate a superior formalism or structure at the heart of Lévi-Strauss’s project. Thus structuralism, even in its seemingly equal attention to form and content, might be said itself to be a formalism taken to the next degree. Yet on the other hand, if one takes one of the distinguishing marks of structuralism as the ability to separate terms, to see binary pairs or chiasmic mappings of four-part structures where there might appear to be only one term (for instance, the Oedipus myth), then the very breaking down of oppositions that Lévi-Strauss proposes as a way to distinguish structuralism from formalism seems hardly aligned with the eye to division and separation that is a hallmark of structuralism no less than of formalism.¹¹

It is on these very terms of inadequate attention to distinction and division that Lévi-Strauss further distinguishes structuralism from formalism. He writes: “*Formalism destroys its object.* With Propp, it results in the discovery that there exists in reality but one tale. . . . Before formalism, we were certainly unaware of what these tales had in common. Since formalism, we have been deprived of any means of understanding how they differ. One has passed from concrete to abstract, but can no longer come down from the abstract to the concrete.”¹² Such a charge of excess abstraction, and beyond that of falling into the very pitfalls he seeks to critique (such as Propp’s univocity), is certainly one of the dominant refrains of the critical literature on Lévi-Strauss, from Paul Ricoeur’s charge that history provided the “destructive disorder” in Lévi-Strauss’s system to Jacques Derrida’s famous arguments in *Of Grammatology* and “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” that among other things Lévi-Strauss elevates the very traces of writing (which he is otherwise at pains to attack) into a sort of mystical glue.¹³ If Lévi-Strauss would want somehow to return to the concrete, to speak to history, to the importance in anthropology of the oral human tradition, he ends up doing just the opposite, by creating his own inhuman, abstract, often four-part, and all-consuming metastructure.¹⁴

It is not my claim that Lévi-Strauss somehow succeeded where other critics would say he failed; rather, I wish to dwell on the image of failing to come down from the abstract to the concrete. For such a failure, whether it is attributed to Mauss or Propp or Lévi-Strauss himself, implies a projected trajectory of terms that is itself of great interest. It places the abstract at a sort of summit from which it is difficult to redescend into the realm of the concrete. Thus we have a model on the order of



The abstract rests at the summit, much like Moses at the peak of Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy 34), but without being able to descend into the promised land of the concrete. Rather than rest on the drive to the abstract, it is perhaps more meaningful instead to consider the logic that would seek to recuperate the abstract into the concrete, into the real lived experience or use value that would return a balance or proper elevation or reciprocity to the system. This is notable in its affinity with the system that Marx outlines in *Capital* where the commodity is exchanged for money and that money is used to purchase a new commodity that will be of use, effectively producing a C-M-C structure between the commodities and the money (where commodities are concrete and money is abstract). Marx, of course, goes on to formulate the structure proper to capital as that of M-C-M, where money serves as the motor force, one that does not rest with a balanced exchange but builds on the perpetual energy of the surplus it engenders.¹⁵ When one adds to this mixture the important writings on use value and the desire structure it generates, one that is in every way equivalent to the imbalanced economy of exchange (by theorists of “libidinal economy” such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, Klossowski, and Deleuze and Guattari), as well as a Derridean model of gift economy that is based on the unconditional and the nonreciprocal and pitted against Mauss’s gift theory that would see an ultimate structure of reciprocity at the heart of all gift exchange, then one finds that if anything could be said to distinguish it definitively from structuralism, the “poststructuralist turn” is centrally bound up with nonreciprocity, pure gift, desire that cannot be returned to simple use or need—in short, an M-C-M structure that draws its energy from a critique of the return to the level of use, the concrete, and the reciprocal.¹⁶

If there is a difference to be had between structuralism and what follows it, it might consist in the movement from the desire to return to the concrete (C-A-C) to the full embracing of the entropic movement of capital, one that starts with and returns to the abstract (A-C-A).

Indeed, it is with such a movement that I would like to conclude, by drawing on two examples of this A-C-A dynamic, proffered at the moment of structuralism's heyday by Deleuze himself. In this fashion, I hope to underscore, alongside the dialectical and ontological dimension of Deleuze's oeuvre, one that is bound up with the idea of structure, if not structuralism. If it may be argued that Deleuze, like Barthes, Foucault, and Lacan, had a structuralist phase, it would generally be located at the moment of his "How Do We Recognize Structuralism?," which is also the moment of his 1969 *The Logic of Sense*. In the latter book, Deleuze focuses on the series and the serial and defines them in terms that are highly resonant with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, particularly insofar as they participate in a logic of division that is above all one of duality. The chapters in *The Logic of Sense* are in fact called "series," and the one from which I quote is the wonderfully alliterative "Sixth Series on Serialization": "[T]he serial form is necessarily realized in the simultaneity of at least two series. Every unique series, whose homogenous terms are distinguished only according to type or degree, necessarily subsumes under it two heterogeneous series, each one of which is constituted by terms of the same type or degree, although these terms differ in nature from those of the other series."¹⁷ For Deleuze, the series in question are by necessity unequal, though they may in fact share some of the same terms. What is essential, however, is that there is always more than one series, and although these series may have some relation to one another, it is not one of mediation (which takes us back to Deleuze's affinity with Sartre and Badiou, and even more with Klossowski, who all share a drive to a non-mediated dualism).

This binary relation between series is in many respects parallel to the terms and modalities of Saussurean linguistics or Lévi-Strauss's elementary structures of kinship, especially when Deleuze insists on the dualist relation of signifier and signified in the same oppositional terms as Ferdinand de Saussure or Lévi-Strauss: "When we extend the serial method—in order to consider two series of events, two series of things, two series of propositions, or two series of expressions—homogeneity is only appar-

ent: it is always the case that one series has the role of signifier, and the other the role of the signified, even if these roles are interchanged as we change points of view.”¹⁸ Such a formulation is entirely of a piece not only with Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology but also with his claim, contra Russian formalism, that structuralism does not ultimately separate form from content, nor does it collapse them into one term, but leaves them as two terms in chiasmic relation. Yet on the same page of *The Logic of Sense*, we see the gesture to a line of descent that would seem to be the descent that formalism, and Lévi-Strauss in its wake, are unable to fully achieve, like Moses stuck upon the mountain unable to descend.

In the lengthy passage that follows, Deleuze would seem to chart a descent from the abstract theory of the series to the concrete literary instantiation of the serial, yet what ensues is an exemplary excess that more nearly produces an endless chain of signifiers than a coming to rest on a coherent literary signified:

Jacques Lacan has brought to light the existence of two series in one of Edgar Allan Poe’s stories [”The Purloined Letter”]. First series: the king who does not see the compromising letter received by his wife; the queen who is relieved to have hidden it so cleverly by leaving it out in the open; the minister who sees everything and takes possession of the letter. Second series: the police who find nothing at the minister’s hotel; the minister who thought of leaving the letter in the open in order better to hide it; Dupin who sees everything and takes back possession of the letter. It is obvious that differences between series may be more or less great — very great with certain authors, or very small with those others who introduce only infinitesimal, and yet equally efficacious, variations. . . . It is easy to cite various authors, who have known how to create serial techniques of an *exemplary formalism*. Joyce, for example, secured the relation between the signifying series “Bloom” and the signified series “Ulysses,” thanks to multiple forms which included an archeology of narrative modes, a *system* of correspondence between numbers, a prodigious employment of esoteric words, a method of question and answer and the establishment of currents of thought or multiple trains of thought (Carroll’s double thinking?). Raymond Roussel based the communication of series on a phonematic relation (“*les bandes du vieux pillard*,” “*les bandes du vieux billard*” = b/p),

and filled up the difference with a marvelous story in which the signifying series *p* links up with the signified series *b*: the enigmatic nature of the story is emphasized in this general procedure, to the extent that the signified series may remain hidden. Robbe-Grillet established his series of descriptions of states of affairs and *rigorous designations* with *small differences*. He did it by having them revolve around themes which, although fixed, are nevertheless suited to almost imperceptible modification and displacement in each series. Pierre Klossowski relies on the *proper name* “Roberte,” certainly not in order to designate a character and manifest its identity, but on the contrary, in order to express a “primary intensity,” *to distribute difference and to obtain the doubling up of two series*: the first, signifying, which refers to “the husband being unable to imagine his wife otherwise than as surprising herself as she would allow herself to be surprised”; the second, signified, which refers to the wife “rushing into initiatives which ought to convince her of her freedom, when these initiatives confirm only the vision of her spouse.” Witold Gombrowicz established a signifying series of hanged animals (what do they signify?), and a signified series of feminine mouths (what is signifying them?); *each series develops a system of signs*, sometimes by excess, sometimes by default, and communicates with another by means of strange interfering objects and by means of the esoteric words pronounced to Léon.¹⁹

Not only does this long passage mirror in its swift progression the very form of the series that creates, through division, a line of descent, or line of flight (which is also the very form of Deleuzian dialectic), but this also could serve as a model of sorts for a method of literary comparison. Here Deleuze breaks many implicit or explicit rules about the way to do literary analysis. The examples are thrown out, not situated in their context, undeveloped, ranging in seemingly haphazard fashion over myriad national literatures and authors (and the same accusation has been made of Deleuze’s mode of filmic analysis in his cinema books). Yet the examples are linked by the singular thematic of the series and its systematic differentials (see my emphases in the passage above) in such a strong fashion that this allows for the breakneck line of comparison that might seem to run roughshod, with a peculiar type of literary diletantism, over the richness of the texts it evokes. What is gained, however, is not only the precision of the

insight but the exhilaration of its staging as a serial line of descent. (How might this serve as a model for the study of comparative literature?)

On this reading Deleuze achieves something that by Lévi-Strauss's evaluation Propp and the Russian formalists fail to do: to descend from the abstract to the concrete. Yet viewed from a different lens, this evocation of the specific literary examples of seriality transitions into its own form of abstraction in the seemingly endless energy of the propagation of the chain of examples at the expense of arrival at a concrete destination. What we witness is the high structuralism of the model devolving into the manic and interminable chain of concrete instantiations that in the very energy of their metonymic deferral take on a still higher level of abstraction. Is such a phenomenon to be signaled as the central gesture of structuralism or the mark of the "post" that would somehow lie beyond? (Given the opening example of Poe's letter, is this what it means to enter the postal dimension?)

In a still earlier work, Deleuze presents a more sober example that conforms more exactly to the A-C-A model of descent into the abstract as opposed to the concrete. In *Proust and Signs* Deleuze provides, as it were, a serial mapping of human affect. At the outset, he discusses the dynamics of jealousy, how jealousy allows for an intensive reading of signs that accesses love's truths far more pointedly than would a less motivated relation of friendship — in effect, jealousy allows for the best possible fine-tuning of the skills of close reading (or in words that are not exactly Deleuze's, for a heightened attunement to the structure itself).²⁰ Yet Deleuze also focuses on how love's very intensity waxes and wanes in serial fashion. He takes as his example the Proustian narrator's falling in and out of love with Albertine. When the narrator first encounters Albertine, she is indistinguishable from a group of young girls; she is one element in a series. However, as the narrator falls in love with her, she becomes a singular entity, entirely apart from her young peers. So far this seems altogether straightforward and recognizable, but what Deleuze isolates in Proust is the descent from love's singularity back into serial formation. In other words, as the narrator falls out of love with Albertine, she begins to resemble once again the group of young girls from which she emerged. Significantly, Deleuze registers no hierarchy between the two states. If anything, the descent proves more enlightening, because it allows for the

perception of the law of the series.²¹ Love's singularization is not superior to the receding away from it; indeed Deleuze emphasizes the joy of seriality and its repetitions as illustrated by Proust. That is, Deleuze distinguishes the joy of the form of repetition from the pain of the content. The fact that one's patterns of loving often repeat themselves — hence Deleuze's assertion that "there are so many Albertines," for the relation with Albertine keeps being repeated with other people²² — introduces a second-order seriality to the first-order seriality of simply falling out of love. Deleuze emphasizes that although the love repetitions are quite painful, there is nonetheless a joy and a pleasure in the often fleeting recognition of the pattern itself and of the love object's being merely a part of a larger serial structure. The hyperbolic curve of the series, the series of amorous repetitions, is the series as it approaches its own law, which is often semi-unconscious.

Deleuze's study of Proust thus stages in more than one fashion the triumph of form and abstraction, presented in what follows as the perception of the law of the series above and beyond the amorous series itself:

What we repeat is each time a particular suffering; but the repetition itself is always joyous, the phenomenon of repetition forms a general joy. Or rather, the phenomena are always unhappy, and particular; but the idea extracted from them is general, and joyous. For love's repetition is not to be separated from a law of progression by which we accede to a consciousness which transmutes our sufferings into joy. We realize that our sufferings do not depend on their object. . . . There is something tragic about what is repeated, but something comic in the repetition itself, and more profoundly, a joy of repetition understood, or of the comprehension of its law.²³

This logic of difference and repetition, or of the Nietzschean eternal return, is the promised land that Lévi-Strauss feared to enter. It is the affirmation of joy in landing upon the structure itself, something that Lévi-Strauss's readers all signaled as the hallmark if not the downfall of his work but that Lévi-Strauss approached with extensive reticence if not denial. It is Deleuze who will recognize the desire for the structure and give this desire an affirmative valence, something entirely comparable to Lacan's injunction to not give way on one's desire, or Žižek's imperative to

“enjoy your symptom.” And it is this joy of abstraction, this desire to remain under its sway rather than reside in the world of the concrete with its ever-repeating content, that may be the true hallmark of the move beyond structuralism, but at a moment and from a vantage point that was confoundingly always within it.