

# Books & the Arts.

## Library Man

by THOMAS MEANEY

When Claude Lévi-Strauss died a little over a year ago at age 100, he left behind a curious and contested legacy. For the French, he was the intellectual equivalent of royalty. In 2008, editions of his works were published in the gilt-lettered *Pléiade* collection, an act of canonization rare for a living French author; in his last appearances on television, he was less a commentator than an object of veneration; shortly before the end, President Nicolas Sarkozy paid him court to wish him happy birthday. “All French anthropologists are the children of Lévi-Strauss,” proclaimed *Le Monde* in its obituary—which was an understatement, as there is scarcely a field in the humanities and social sciences Lévi-Strauss left unaltered. His ideas about myth dramatically collapsed the distinction between European high culture and so-called primitive society, and weaned a generation of French thinkers off Marxist orthodoxy and Sartrean existentialism. Though he did not like to claim intellectual patrimony, the careers of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault are impossible to imagine without him.

But for readers outside France, including many Anglo-American critics, the nature of his achievement is harder to define. No one doubts Lévi-Strauss was the author of important works and the purveyor of powerful insights, but the suspicion remains that behind his fantastically rigorous analyses of Amerindian culture there operated a deeply impressionistic and idiosyncratic mind at odds with any general theory. Some accused him of reducing the meaning of human existence to an arbitrary stock of contrasting flavors: the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the rotten, the wet and the dry. Others took his structuralist program to be a scientific alibi that concealed his fundamentally artistic enterprise. This was a man, after all, who once, while in the middle of the Amazon, wrote a tragedy about Augustus, and whose magnum opus, the four-volume *Mythologiques* (1964–71), was composed in a

series of musical movements that promised a key to all mythologies. For such critics, the very scale of Lévi-Strauss’s ambition belongs to a particularly heady moment in French thought.

Patrick Wilcken’s new biography, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory*, is an ambitious attempt to navigate between these two extreme perspectives. An Australian historian of Brazil with a background in anthropology, Wilcken is well positioned to deliver a coolheaded account of Lévi-Strauss’s life and career. He interviewed Lévi-Strauss twice for this book, and while his subject remained almost comically aloof during their sessions—“My emotional states weren’t that important to me,” he once remarked—Wilcken is alive enough to his dissembling ironies to read him profitably against the grain. If Lévi-Strauss was able to make scientific discoveries about aboriginal cultures, it was not despite his artistic predilections, Wilcken convincingly argues, but because of them. Countless anthropologists combed through the remains of the last aboriginal societies in the course of the twentieth century, many of them with more experience in the field than Lévi-Strauss. But they lacked his trained sensibility: the sharp eye for cultural patterns, the novelistic feel for the shape of a story, the patience for synthesizing masses of abstruse data into meaningful wholes. This is what Wilcken means when he calls him “the poet in the laboratory,” even if, as Lévi-Strauss liked to joke, his lab was inconveniently located 6,000 miles outside Paris.

Claude Lévi-Strauss was groomed to be an *artiste*. He grew up in a secular Jewish household on the edge of Paris’s sixteenth *arrondissement*, surrounded by his father’s exotic curios and half-finished projects. Raymond Lévi-Strauss was a portraitist with a weakness for pastels. His livelihood was endangered by the rise of photography, and when his commissions dried up in the 1920s, his son helped him use scraps around the house to make a series of haphazard, artful knickknacks to pay the bills (a homegrown example of what the anthropologist would later call “bricolage”). Despite

**Claude Lévi-Strauss**

*The Poet in the Laboratory.*

By Patrick Wilcken.

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his limited means, Raymond gave Claude a rich grounding in the arts. He schooled him in the grand masters at the Louvre, immersed him in the operas of Wagner and encouraged his sketching of set designs for the theater.

But the young Lévi-Strauss was also tempted by the world beyond his father’s ken. He admired the novels of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and André Breton and made the rounds at the studios and galleries of avant-garde painters. In an early article published in Georges Bataille’s journal *Documents*, he made a case for Picasso as the greatest painter of the age but criticized Cubism for pretending to be a break from Impressionism when it was simply another manifestation of bourgeois art tailor-made for a band of insiders. By age 21, Lévi-Strauss was already playing the detective, deciphering the clues of culture.

Lévi-Strauss’s early academic experiences were less exhilarating than his extracurricular escapades. In his memoir *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), he bitterly recalled the “claustrophobic, Turkish bath-like atmosphere” of the French university system and its scholastic pretensions. After choosing to study philosophy—“the result less of a genuine vocation than of a dislike for the other subjects”—he prepared for the “inhuman ordeal” of the Aggregation, the competitive examination that allows students in France to become university lecturers. “I was confident that, at ten minutes’ notice, I could knock together an hour’s lecture with a sound dialectical framework, on the respective superiority of buses and trams,” he remembered. Wilcken’s retelling of the period offers glimpses of the coming attractions of postwar French thought: we see Lévi-Strauss brush shoulders with Simone Weil, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir (“Very young, with a fresh, bright complexion, like a little peasant girl,” he remembered). Like many of his generation, Lévi-Strauss was intimately involved in politics: he served as the secretary general for the Socialist student union, worked for

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a Socialist deputy and became president of a left-wing advocacy group dedicated to mobilizing students worldwide. But with these solid leftist credentials came remarkably conventional views. The young Lévi-Strauss emerges in Wilcken's portrait as an advocate of the sort of mild paternalistic colonialism he would later abhor, and a champion of a vague kind of gradual social change he called "Constructive Revolution." If Lévi-Strauss was a radical in anything, it was in his course of study. He eventually decided to abandon his pursuit of a doctorate in philosophy—the traditional rite of passage for France's intellectual elite—and cast about for an escape route.

The relatively uncharted waters of anthropology made it an appealing refuge for the intellectually adept but rudderless Lévi-Strauss. In later years, he made it seem like

## If the young Lévi-Strauss was radical in anything, it was in his course of study: anthropology.

he was hard-wired for the match:

I sometimes wonder if anthropology did not attract me, without my realizing this, because of a structural affinity between the civilizations it studies and my particular way of thinking. I have no aptitude for prudently cultivating a given field and gathering in the harvest year after year: I have a neolithic kind of intelligence. Like native bush fires, it sometimes sets unexplored areas alight; it may fertilize them and snatch a few crops from them, and then it moves on, leaving scorched earth in its wake.

For Lévi-Strauss, anthropology was a vocation akin to music or mathematics: you had to discover the aptitude for it within yourself. It was perhaps an advantage that he barely had any formal training in the field. He was too young to have signed on to the first major French ethnographic expedition across North Africa, undertaken by Marcel Griaule and Michael Leiris, and he neglected to attend the seminars of Marcel Mauss, who did pioneering work on reciprocity and gift exchange, at the Collège de France. Instead, he imbibed a mixed brew of the latest field reports by American anthropologists along with the Surrealist accounts of French writers who had made contact with indigenous peoples. Inspired by the travel books of the

contemporary novelist Paul Nizan and the sixteenth-century missionary-explorer Jean de Léry, Lévi-Strauss dreamed of the possibility of not only philosophizing about Rousseau's noble savage but of actually going out to find him. In 1934, when an opportunity came his way to teach at the University of São Paulo in Brazil, he jumped at the chance.

It is astonishing how much of Lévi-Strauss's reputation still hinges on a nine-month voyage through the Mato Grosso of western Brazil that was, in many respects, a failure. The objective was to travel along an abandoned telegraph line and conduct a rigorous survey of the little-known Nambikwara tribe, but a series of setbacks meant Lévi-Strauss could spend only a few days among them. His account of his sole sustained fieldwork experience—which makes up the bulk of *Tristes Tropiques*—presents a challenge to any biographer who wants to cover the same territory with matching vividness. But it's in Brazil that Wilcken is at his best, providing the miss-

ing parts of Lévi-Strauss's narrative, including his on-the-spot field notes, and filling in the supporting cast barely mentioned in the book. We watch as Lévi-Strauss, low on money and bartering supplies, placates a planted spy from the Brazilian government in the convoy, and copes with broken recording equipment and unreliable mules. After his young ethnographer wife, Dina, contracts a sight-threatening eye infection, he wastes no time dispatching her back to São Paulo. For a thinker who would be an armchair anthropologist for the rest of his life—"I realized early on that I was a library man," he once told an interviewer—Lévi-Strauss displayed a remarkable toughness in the bush. Wilcken treats us to a digression on the fate of another member of the expedition, a young Columbia graduate student named Buell Quain, who would later commit suicide from the pressures likely related to fieldwork.

When Lévi-Strauss at last reached the Nambikwara after an 800-mile trek, the encounter shattered his romantic expectations. "I had been looking for a society reduced to its simplest expression," he wrote, and "that of the Nambikwara was so truly simple that all I could find in it was individual human beings." The men of the tribe greeted him laughing; the women tried to steal his soap as he washed in the river. Malnourished, and on the brink of a breakdown, he nevertheless started to gather the material he would

use to shatter a generation-old consensus in anthropology. Whereas functionalist anthropologists following Bronislaw Malinowski believed the social lives of indigenous peoples were determined by basic needs like sex and hunger, Lévi-Strauss found something close to the opposite in the tribes he encountered: even in the most dire conditions, they were driven above all by an intellectual need to understand the world around them. When Amerindians chose animals for their totems, it was not because they were "good to eat," Lévi-Strauss argued, but because they were "good to think." The Nambikwara were every bit as scientifically minded as the ethnographers who studied them (their mental inventory for honey, for instance, included thirteen different varieties). The only major difference, Lévi-Strauss claimed, was the "totalitarian ambition of the savage mind," which operated on the assumption that if you couldn't explain everything, you hadn't explained anything. Lévi-Strauss witnessed this rage for order in everything from their face-painting to the layout of their camps, and most especially in their myths, which they pieced together with borrowed scraps of older ones in the same way a computer programmer might patch together code.

Lévi-Strauss left the Nambikwara with a hoard of impressions about their culture, but he hadn't yet cracked their riddles. The major theoretical breakthrough would come from an unexpected source during his wartime exile in New York City. He spent the war years teaching at the New School, having barely scrambled out of occupied France alive. It was there that his colleague Alexandre Koyré introduced him to Roman Jakobson, a globe-trotting Russian linguist who specialized in the structural analysis of language developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Jakobson thought he had found a dependable drinking partner in Lévi-Strauss; he was disappointed on that front—Lévi-Strauss was a teetotaling early riser—but their friendship blossomed into a rich intellectual exchange.

Lévi-Strauss learned from Jakobson how language could be broken down into simple components called phonemes. As Wilcken explains, the "r" in "rat" and the "m" in "mat" operated like control gates on a circuit board, indicating alternate meanings. It was not the phonemes themselves that held the meaning of words but the relationship among them. This shift from studying single objects—whether it be a syllable, a sentence, a family or a culture—in favor of analyzing the relations among them was the essence of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss applied its logic to the workings of myth, which he took to be

another form of language. Mythology, in his view, is an elaborate attempt to make cognitive sense out of our chaotic impressions of the natural world. We respond to our environment by breaking it down into manageable dualisms, which makes it possible to orient our existence in the world. By “cooking” the “raw” material of nature, we translate it into culture. Lévi-Strauss came to consider indigenous myths, as a form of aesthetic creation, superior to the West’s precarious investment in more dubious expressions of individual artists, since individual-centered meaning was almost guaranteed to pale in comparison to the power of a myth that had been fashioned by an entire community over time. There may have been no Tolstoy of the Nambikwara, but the culture and language they had made and shared was more fecund than *War and Peace*.

Jakobson’s structural method became Lévi-Strauss’s prize intellectual tool and brought anthropology closer to becoming a hard science. Lévi-Strauss could now process the huge amounts of data in his colleagues’ field reports by plugging their findings into his elaborate charts and tables. He wrote *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) in the now-vanished North American reading room of the New York Public Library, where he shared a table with a Native American chief taking notes in a buckskin jacket and full feather headdress. *The Elementary Structures* remains the most forbidding of Lévi-Strauss’s major works, but it revolutionized the way anthropologists understood kinship and caste systems. Instead of focusing on lineage and descent, Lévi-Strauss showed how indigenous families developed on a horizontal plane, with men exchanging their sisters and daughters in order to avoid the incest taboo, which Lévi-Strauss interpreted as humanity’s most basic attempt to rein in the randomness of nature.

When he was not unraveling the mysteries of kinship systems, Lévi-Strauss led a cheerful bohemian existence in New York. He spent weekends prowling antique shops, surprised to find museum-quality Indian artifacts and pottery available for next to nothing. Anthropologists and Surrealists shared a passion for cultural fragments and provocative juxtapositions. With his friends Max Ernst and André Breton, he sought out the most enchanting pockets of the city’s flourishing cultural ecosystem, stumbling on communities that preserved traditions long ago abandoned in the old country. In his mini-memoir “New York in 1941,” Lévi-Strauss fondly recalled attending Chinese Operas under the first arch of the Brooklyn

Bridge, conducting a mock-ethnography of Fire Island and reading out translations of President Roosevelt’s speeches on Free French radio (the clarity of his diction made him a good fit for the job). He easily could have made a career for himself in his adopted homeland, but after the war he took a post at the École pratique des hautes études, where he rejoined his old tribe as a more formidable member.

**B**ack in Paris in the early 1950s, Lévi-Strauss wrote *Tristes Tropiques*—a memoir of his voyage to Brazil disguised as an anti-travel book—in a moment of despair, when he felt his academic career had stalled and he could risk a wider audience. From its opening line (“I hate traveling and explorers”) to its disenchanting declarations (“the tropics are less exotic, than out of date”), the book dealt in the cultural pessimism that would become his trademark. While Lévi-Strauss rails against the Western myth of the self-authorizing individual, he allows his subjectivity to shimmer throughout *Tristes Tropiques*. The prose bears a heavy Surrealistic stamp: two mountains outside Rio de Janeiro are like “stumps sticking up here and there in a toothless mouth”; the precipices between the skyscrapers of New York are “sombre valleys, dotted with multicoloured cars looking like flowers.” Lévi-Strauss shares with Proust the ability to cycle through the styles of great French writers, whether he is teasing out the colors of a sunset à la Chateaubriand or sharpening an insight to the fine point of a Pascalian *pensée*. Wilcken, a beautiful stylist, is well attuned to these shifts but also alert to the places where Lévi-Strauss feigns nonchalance or veers into preciousness.

The question remains: how did a relatively obscure, taciturn anthropologist, who had written an unsupervised dissertation on a recondite subject and maintained only minimal ties with the French intellectual establishment, manage, within the course of a decade, to dethrone the leading thinker of the age? Jean-Paul Sartre hardly considered Lévi-Strauss a threat. He sent the anthropologist an inscribed copy of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) “in testimony of a faithful friendship,” and cited *The Elementary Structures* approvingly in the course of his argument. But Lévi-Strauss was in no mood to return favors. By then installed at the prestigious Collège de France, he devoted a year-long seminar to a detailed study of Sartre’s *Critique*, and when his *Savage Mind* appeared in 1962 it ended with a twenty-page assault on the fundamental underpinnings of Sartre’s

thinking. “Power was passing from a chain-smoking, pill-popping haunter of Left Bank café society to a sixteenth-arondissement aesthete,” writes Wilcken. But how exactly, and under what conditions, did the exchange take place?

Sartre was an early hero of postwar French intellectuals for a reason. By articulating a philosophy based on acting responsibly in the face of history, he restored the confidence of a damaged intellectual elite and helped it prepare for its confrontation with the nation’s colonial past. The impossible ambition of the *Critique* was to reconcile Sartre’s existentialist ethics with the Marxist dictates of historical necessity. In Sartre’s system, history presents us with a limited range of possibilities and we act within them, which in turn gives rise to a new set of possibilities. For Lévi-Strauss, this blend of historical determinism and personal agency was doubly problematic. First, it put the individual front and center in the historical process, whereas, as Lévi-Strauss believed he had shown, the underlying structures of society left little room for the whimsy of subjectivity. “The self is not only hateful,” he wrote in *Tristes Tropiques*, channeling Pascal, “there is no place for it between *us* and *nothing*.” Second, Sartre was still propagating the old European idea of history as a progressive narrative, whereas Lévi-Strauss held up indigenous cultures as examples of other, possibly more appealing ways of organizing human experience. The myths of tribes such as the Nambikwara and the Bororo were designed to insulate their seemingly unchanging social orders from the disruptions of history. By making history always be “for” something, and privileging the breakneck speed of Western history over the slow, recycling world of indigenous peoples, Sartre was committing “a sort of intellectual cannibalism much more revolting to the anthropologist than real cannibalism.”

**F**or French academics and intellectuals coming of age in the 1960s, it was difficult to avoid the impression that Lévi-Strauss, by painstakingly drawing lessons from indigenous peoples from across the world, was working on a much grander scale than Sartre. “Bus-stop queues, strikes, boxing matches—the examples out of which Sartre built his ‘philosophical anthropology’—seemed provincial in comparison to structuralism’s global reach,” writes Wilcken. While Sartre concentrated on working out the problem of individual emancipation within the narrow confines of

the Western philosophical tradition, Lévi-Strauss, by peeling back the divergent expressions of a common human nature all over the world, was able to reveal how much of Western culture was an unhealthy aberration. This self-critical stance in the face of other cultures became a more compelling form of anticolonialism than Sartre's calling for third world revolution from his table at the Café de Flore. Ours was the only civilization, argued Lévi-Strauss, whose attempts to release humanity from the bonds of nature led to gross delusions that have underwritten everything from the destruction of the environment to the Holocaust. To Sartre's "Hell is other people," Lévi-Strauss answered: "Hell is ourselves."

The other reason for Lévi-Strauss's unlikely triumph was that structuralism served as a convenient halfway house for disenchanted Marxists. Those who had lost faith in the iron laws of historical materialism during the war now placed their bets on structuralism as a more credible form of social criticism for resisting the advances of Anglo-American liberalism. Structuralism also exercised a hold on their minds because its core concept of social codes was a closed system invulnerable to empirical testing. Its "imperialism of significance," as René Girard has called it, could explain almost anything, and turned Lévi-Strauss's corpus into the intellectual buffet from which the next generation selected its defining ideas. For Lacan, structuralism revealed the system of symbolic forms that the mind unconsciously mapped onto reality. For Althusser, it helped explain how the capitalist mode of production drew on an intricate code of agreed-upon meanings that bore little relation to the actual reality of workers. For Foucault, who was deeply attracted to the antihumanist element in structuralism despite claiming not to be a structuralist, Lévi-Strauss showed how concepts like "madness" were arbitrary constructions whose salience depended on a complex web of shifting social values. Meanwhile, Barthes used its more formal techniques to unveil the realist conceits of the modern novel and champion the "novels-without-a-subject" of Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Lévi-Strauss had little time for all this. "I don't know and I don't care," he tells Wilcken when asked about his legacy. He never read a "structuralist" novel and confessed to finding Lacan's seminars incomprehensible ("to his fervent admirers, 'understand' means something other than it does to me"). He considered Althusser politically perverse, Foucault an illuminating but dubious historian and

Barthes mildly absurd. (Lévi-Strauss once performed a structuralist analysis of a Balzac story and sent it to Barthes, who responded with enthusiasm and urged Lévi-Strauss to publish it—until, Wilcken tells us, he was informed it was a joke.) It was only with May 1968 that structuralism's star began to fade, relieving Lévi-Strauss of his place at center stage. There was widespread agreement among the student protesters that his thought held no revolutionary potential—"Structures don't take to the streets," read a famous pronouncement—and they began to question whether it even impeded social progress. Some of Lévi-Strauss's more fanciful critics claimed that structuralism was the theoretical expression of the static authoritarian technocracy of de Gaulle's government. "Structuralism is the last barrier the bourgeoisie have erected against Marx," wrote a rehabilitated Sartre, momentarily back in the spotlight, where he would soon proselytize for Mao, his version of a noble savage.

**B**ut Lévi-Strauss's politics remain badly misunderstood. He had an intensely political project that Wilcken, stressing aesthetic concerns, fails to appreciate. While his hopes of becoming a socialist functionary may have died early, Lévi-Strauss admired the "savage mind" largely because he believed it proposed remedies for specifically Western maladies. For example, when considering cannibalism, he argues that the indigenous practice of eating part of one's parent's deceased body, so that they might continue to live symbolically in their progeny, indicates more respect for humans than the scalpel work of the dissection table. In return, Lévi-Strauss writes, Amerindians would be mystified by modern prison practices, which separate lawbreakers from society and attempt to reform them by destroying their social ties. The Plains Indians, argues Lévi-Strauss, had a more effective way of rehabilitating criminals. By temporarily ridding them of their possessions or living quarters, they put them in a tightly bound reciprocal relationship with society. The criminal would then perform a form of community service until the community had incurred a debt to him and so restored him to his place in society. Lévi-

Strauss never seriously considered returning to some primitive golden age, but there is little doubt he scanned native societies for elements that could contribute to the ongoing ethnographic critique of Western culture.

For this Lévi-Strauss has continually come under attack from critics as a cultural relativist of the worst order. The charge was first leveled in the 1950s by the writer Roger Caillois, who condemned him as an inverted ethnocentrist. Lévi-Strauss, he argued, epitomized Western hypocrisy by putting primitive cultures on a pedestal, when the very existence of anthropology as a discipline was proof of Western cultural superiority. This pabulum would become the familiar conservative rebuke of anthropology throughout the

## Dorothy Wordsworth

The daffodils can go fuck themselves.

I'm tired of their crowds, yellow rantings  
about the spastic sun that shines and shines  
and shines. How are they any different

from me? I, too, have a big messy head  
on a fragile stalk. I spin with the wind.  
I flower and don't apologize. There's nothing  
funny about good weather. Oh, spring again,

the critics nod. They know the old joy,  
that wakeful quotidian, the dark plot  
of future growing things, each one  
labeled *Narcissus nobilis* or *Jennifer Chang*.

If I died falling from a helicopter, then  
this would be an important poem. Then  
the ex-boyfriends would swim to shore  
declaiming their knowledge of my bulbous

youth. O, Flower, one said, why aren't you  
meat? But I won't be another bashful shank.  
The tulips have their nervous joie-de-vivre,  
the lilacs their taunt. Fractious petals, stop

interrupting my poem with boring beauty.  
All the boys are in the field gnawing raw  
bones of ambition and calling it ardor. Who  
the hell are they? This is a poem about war.

JENNIFER CHANG

culture wars—right up to the present. Last year the French social critic Pascal Bruckner published a book that singled out Lévi-Strauss as one of Europe's leading "guilt-peddlers." For Bruckner, the West's self-flagellation has made it nearly impossible to criticize non-Western societies. This claim not only mischaracterizes Lévi-Strauss's position but also fails to grasp that he long ago anticipated the objection. In *Tristes Tropiques* he successfully answers the charge:

Other societies are perhaps no better than our own; even if we are inclined to believe they are, we have no method at our disposal for proving it. However, by getting to know them better, we are enabled to detach ourselves from our own society. Not that our own society is peculiarly or absolutely bad. But it is the only one from which we have a duty to free ourselves: we are, by definition, free in relation to the others.

As for the claim that only the West harbors interest in "the others," Lévi-Strauss pointed to, among others, the Flathead Indians of the Rocky Mountains, who were so intrigued by what they heard about white settlers that they sent a series of expeditions to make contact with the Christian missionaries at St. Louis. In the closing pages of *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss argues that not all cultures are equally humane—the Aztecs, modern Europeans and modern Muslims occupy low rungs on his ladder. In a comparison that would become notorious, he equated the intransigent utopianism of Islam with that of postrevolutionary France.

"Just as Islam has kept its gaze fixed on a society which was real seven centuries ago, and for the problems of which it then invented effective solutions," he wrote, "so we [French] are incapable of thinking outside the framework of an epoch which came to an end a century and a half ago." By contrast, certain indigenous societies, he argued, have more salient lessons than others to teach when it comes to integrating mankind into a more intimate relationship with the world—and many of these are by definition societies that have safeguarded themselves from outside influences.

Still, the fusillades Lévi-Strauss aimed at his critics didn't deter him from settling into his own brand of conservatism toward the end of his life. As Wilcken points out, Lévi-Strauss *père's* reverence for established forms reasserted itself with renewed force in his son, whose youthful taste for the avant-garde proved to be spent. In 1980 Lévi-Strauss voted against Marguerite Yourcenar's nomination to a seat in the Académie française because it went against "centuries of tradition." (Yourcenar was the first woman to be elected.) A backslide into traditionalism is not unusual among old men. But less expected was that Lévi-Strauss's scientific work would later be co-opted for explicitly conservative political ends: in the '80s, French deputies quoted from *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* in their arguments in favor of traditional marriage as the cornerstone of the Fifth Republic.

Wilcken concludes his biography on a dismissive note. "Lévi-Strauss ended up

as a one-man school," he writes, "peddling a type of analysis that had become so utterly idiosyncratic that it was impossible to build on." But his frustration with Lévi-Strauss's overall project is understandable. The scientific side of Lévi-Strauss expected his work to be superseded, but in practice he stubbornly resisted updating his thinking or responding to revisions proposed by thinkers like Noam Chomsky and Clifford Geertz. In Wilcken's telling, Lévi-Strauss comes to resemble a medieval scholastic, rummaging through structures of his own imagining as he twirls three-dimensional "myth mobiles" that hang from the ceiling of his office. The best Wilcken can say, in the end, is that "in a world of ever more specialized areas of knowledge, there may never again be a body of work of such exhilarating reach and ambition."

But Lévi-Strauss's legacy is more than a monument of aging intellect for us twenty-first-century pygmies to marvel at. Lévi-Strauss is better remembered as a *moraliste* in the tradition stretching back to Diderot and Montaigne. The French *moralistes* have fulfilled a uniquely corrective function in the West: they are not the custodians of social mores but the refurbishers, eager to scrap faulty moral assumptions. When Lévi-Strauss surveyed indigenous cultures, he did so in the hope of expanding awareness of the repertory of social arrangements beyond the West's increasingly monocultural civilization. From the practices most stigmatized by racism—wedding rites, initiation ceremonies, creation myths—Lévi-Strauss extracted precepts for understanding, if not sympathizing with, the internal logic of the most

## Sonnet of Exemplary Sentences From the Chapter Pertaining to the Nature of Pronouns in Emile Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics* (Paris 1966)

This time I forgive you but I shall not forgive you again.  
 I observe that he forgives you but he will not forgive you again.  
 Although I eat this fish I don't know its name.  
 Spirits watch over the soul of course.  
 I suppose and I presume.  
 I pose and I resume.  
 I suppose I have a horse.  
 How in the world can you afford this house I said and she said  
  
 I had a good divorce.  
 Strangers are warned that here there is a fierce, fast dog.  
 Whores have no business getting lost in the fog.  
 Is it to your ears or your soul that my voice is intolerable?  
 Whether Florinda lays a hand on his knee or his voluble, he pleads a headache  
 and the narrator concludes, *The problem is insoluble.*

foreign cultures. The sheer scientific rigor of his analyses—and the respect for his subjects it implied—was ultimately more effective in combating racial prejudices than the pronouncements of *grand penseurs* like Sartre.

Lévi-Strauss was more forthright than many political thinkers today in spelling out the paradox of his antidiscrimination efforts. The struggle against racism, which enjoined humanity to adopt the norms of global civilization, was also, he believed, responsible for destroying the very cultural differences antidiscrimination was meant to protect. As human societies become more aware of the importance of preserving one another's particularisms, their differences become harder to justify. "When integral communication with the other is achieved completely," wrote

Lévi-Strauss in *The View From Afar* (1983), "it sooner or later spells doom for both his and my creativity." Lévi-Strauss never ceased to mourn the loss of original wellsprings of aesthetic and moral meaning that could be found only in societies that turned a deaf ear to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, he came to see his work and that of anthropology in general as making us more cautious and careful as we inevitably come into closer contact with them. The charms of civilization may be "due essentially to the various residues it carries along with it," but for Lévi-Strauss this does not absolve us of the duty to reform it. For this realistic sense of responsibility and unwillingness to provide false comforts in a time of totalizing prophets, he can still be read with much reward. ■

## Perfect-Bound

by JAMES MARCUS

Elizabeth Hardwick's name is so synonymous with the essay—especially with the errant, genre-busting, quicksilver sort of undertakings that she brought to perfection during her long career—that it's hard to believe she made her initial breakthrough with a short story. Yet it's true. In 1939 she arrived in New York City from Lexington, Kentucky, with the avowed goal of transforming herself into a New York Jewish intellectual. (She went two for three: not bad.) Her initial idea was to get a doctorate from Columbia, where she studied John Donne and the rest of the metaphysical posse. But Hardwick eventually drifted away from academia, and in 1944 she published her first short story, "The People on the Roller Coaster," in *The New Mexico Quarterly Review*.

These days, a debut in a respectable but somewhat off-the-radar quarterly would be the occasion for a well-deserved pat on the back plus two free copies of the magazine. In Hardwick's youth, it was possible to make more of a splash—or so she told Hilton Als in a 1998 *New Yorker* profile. "If you published a story then," she noted, "even in *The New Mexico Quarterly*, the publishers would call." Soon Hardwick obtained a contract for her first novel, *The Ghostly Lover*, whose appearance in 1945 caught the attention of *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv. He admitted the newcomer to his stable of sharpshooting critics, which included James Agee, Mary

### The New York Stories of Elizabeth Hardwick

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McCarthy and James Baldwin. Soon enough the preternaturally witty, gimlet-eyed essayist, who gave to the form "everything and more than would be required in fiction," nudged aside the writer of short stories.

Yet she kept writing them, in an on-and-off, left-handed manner. The collection that Darryl Pinckney has assembled in *The New York Stories of Elizabeth Hardwick* does not include all the short fiction by Hardwick published before her death in 2007 (it omits "The People on the Roller Coaster" and several other stories). Presumably Pinckney made these cuts in the name of quality control and geographical unity.

Hairsplitting readers will protest that four of the thirteen tales in the collection are not set in New York. No matter—the thematic logic is still irresistible. The city always had a special claim on the author's imagination, long before she arrived there. "As a Southerner," she once confessed, "I had in my earliest youth determined to come to New York, and it has been, with interruptions, my home for most of my adult life." An exile of sorts, she felt exceedingly comfortable in the Valhalla of displaced people that was postwar New York. Yet she also saw the city's jittery impermanence—its

compulsive need to wipe the slate clean and start again—as an obstacle for the fiction writer. "Manhattan," she would later write, "is not altogether felicitous for fiction. It is not a city of memory, not a family city.... Its skyscrapers and bleak, rotting tenements are a gift for photographic consumption, but for the fictional imagination the city's inchoate density is a special challenge."

None of which deterred Hardwick in the first of these stories, "The Temptations of Dr. Hoffmann" (1946). The narrator, like the author, is a Southerner who has established a fragile beachhead in Manhattan, living in one of those furnished rooms whose "left-over, dim, vanquished" occupants Hardwick would later recall in the autobiographical hybrid *Sleepless Nights*. Lonely, and less than captivated by her studies, the narrator becomes friendly with Dr. Hoffmann—a German émigré and theologian whose fresh-faced disciples like to congregate in his apartment. Surrounded by these "ordinary boys who would later be in the Presbyterian pulpits throughout America," the good doctor is in fact quite bored. Perhaps that is why he welcomes the narrator, a self-described "village atheist," into his household.

The stage is set for a clash, or at least a close encounter, between faith and faithlessness. Yet this is a story in which nothing happens. The narrator, having smuggled herself into the Hoffmann ménage like a surveillance camera, records a number of domestic disputes between the theologian and his wife and daughter. She tells us, too, about her encounters with a young man from her Kentucky hometown, now a seminary student and one of Hoffmann's eager ecclesiastical beavers. But again, the only thing we come to understand about the narrator and Dr. Hoffmann is that she can't understand him: "I lacked specific details of his experience and even if I had known him forever I could never have felt certain of my abstraction."

This seems less like the utterance of an unreliable narrator and more like a veiled *cri de coeur* on the author's part. Hardwick, then 30, simply hadn't figured out what to do with fiction.

An obvious model would have been Mary McCarthy, a close friend of the era with whom she shared numerous literary tastes, a fading attachment to the Communist Party and several high-profile love interests. But McCarthy was too successful, having already hit the big time with *The Company She Keeps* (1942). And anyway, Hardwick had little stomach for the sexual shenanigans and anthropological zest that were her friend's stock in trade. Staking out her own, comparatively