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Review of Bertel Nathhorst, *Formal or Structural Studies of Traditional Tales: The Usefulness of Some Methodological Proposals Advanced by Vladimir Propp, Alan Dundes, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach*

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Review of Bertel Nathhorst, *Formal or Structural Studies of Traditional Tales: The Usefulness of Some Methodological Proposals Advanced by Vladimir Propp, Alan Dundes, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach*

**Abstract**

While formalism and structuralism became key concepts in linguistics, literary criticism, and the social sciences during the first half of the twentieth century, they appeared in folklore research only in the late fifties and early sixties, as a direct result of the publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss' "The Structural Study of Myth" (*Journal of American Folklore*, 68 [1955], 428-444) and the 1958 translation of Propp's *Morfologija skazki* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1928). Since then, structural studies in folklore have multiplied by the dozens, encompassing such genres as proverbs, riddles, ballads, and chants. Alan Dundes and Edmund Leach were among the first to elaborate upon the research of their predecessors, applying, respectively, the theories of Propp and Lévi-Strauss to new bodies of literature, and developing new analytical methods.

**Disciplines**

Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Folk Narrative

*Formal or Structural Studies of Traditional Tales: The Usefulness of Some Methodological Proposals Advanced by Vladimir Propp, Alan Dundes, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach.* By Bertel Nathhorst. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969. Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion, 9. Pp. 80, bibliography, index. Sw. Kr.40.)

While formalism and structuralism became key concepts in linguistics, literary criticism, and the social sciences during the first half of the twentieth century, they appeared in folklore research only in the late fifties and early sixties, as a direct result of the publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss' "The Structural Study of Myth" (*JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE*, 68 [1955], 428-444) and the 1958 translation of Propp's *Morfologija skazki* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1928). Since then, structural studies in folklore have multiplied by the dozens, encompassing such genres as proverbs, riddles, ballads, and chants. Alan Dundes and Edmund Leach were among the first to elaborate upon the research of their predecessors, applying, respectively, the theories of Propp and Lévi-Strauss to new bodies of literature, and developing new analytical methods.

Hence, the publication of Nathhorst's dissertation is timely and his intent to clear up "the muddles in the models" of structural analysis is definitely welcomed. In spite of the fact that he focuses on the works of Propp, Dundes, Lévi-Strauss, and Leach to the exclusion of other scholars, his critique might well have pointed to achievements, exposed logical errors, and suggested future developments. Unfortunately, Nathhorst's discussion has only added muddles to the models, not elucidated them. His failure to achieve his goals is due primarily to three reasons: a misunderstanding of the method of theory formation to which structuralism in folklore is subject; a lack of any theoretical-historical perspective in regard to folklore scholarship; and a strategy of flaw-hunting that yields a biased, negative presentation of formal analysis of the traditional tale.

Nathhorst's intent is commendable. Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Dundes all envisioned structural analysis as the method that would transform folklore and myth studies from uncritical speculations to science. It is, therefore, legitimate to inquire, as Nathhorst proposes, whether it has fulfilled the expectations of its exponents; that is, whether structuralism has indeed provided a scientific system for tale analysis. In doing so, however, Nathhorst begins with an erroneous view of scientific theories. He conceives of the hypothetic-deductive technique as the sole method of advancing scientific theories and thus demonstrates a misunderstanding of the theoretical nature of structural studies in folklore. As Ernst Nagel points out in *The Structure of Science* (New York, 1961) there are, in fact, two methods of formulating scientific theories: "abstractive" and "hypothetical." Theories formed by the "abstractive" method "formulate relations between properties common to classes of objects or phenomena 'perceived by the senses' and do not postulate anything 'hypothetical' or conjectural" (p. 125). On the other hand,

"theories formed by the second or 'hypothetical' method assert relations between hypothetical entities that are 'not apparent to the senses'; and their empirical validity can be judged only indirectly, in terms of their consequences with the results of observation and experiment" (p. 125). Furthermore, while the fundamental terms of hypothetical theory need not be associated by correspondent rules with experimental notions, the postulationally defined terms in an abstractive theory do seem to be coordinated by such rules with some experimental idea.

Structural theories of traditional tales are formed by abstraction; they are concerned with the relations between narrative properties, and their terms are expressed in either concepts or logical symbols. These correspond to classes of actions, persons, and objects within the narrative reality. Hence, the test of the hypothetical-deductive capabilities to which Nathhorst puts these theories is simply irrelevant in terms of these works. In the actual course of his discussion, Nathhorst neglects his original intent and ends up scrutinizing precisely the correspondence between the theoretical terms and their narrative correlates. Yet, while in practice, Nathhorst's sound intuition takes him away from logical irrelevancies and guides him to a detailed examination of research methods, in his concluding pronouncements he remains faithful to his original goal. Consequently, he misinterprets his own and other critics' comments and conceives of methodological deficiencies as if they were logical inconsistencies and thus condemns the ideas of Propp, Dundes, Lévi-Strauss, and Leach to dismissal from scientific debate (p. 71).

Nathhorst's overconcern with the hypothetical-deductive method of inquiry hinders him from viewing structural studies in their theoretical and historical perspectives. The emergence of formalism and structuralism in the analysis of traditional tales occurred in reaction to the atomistic, diffusion-oriented trend in folklore research and to the historical and functional approaches in anthropology. Fundamental to this new direction was the holistic premise in narrative research, that is, the assumption that traditional tales do not consist of an accidental aggregate of elements but of constituents that are interrelated with each other in a distinct order. Whatever the logical problems with the holistic approach in the social science might be, within both folklore and anthropological scholarship the application of this view to tale analysis was an innovation that opened up new research possibilities. Yet Nathhorst dismisses this basic premise of structuralism with a shrug. "It is difficult to conceive anything at all that cannot from some point of view be described as ordered" (p. 32). This, indeed, may be so, yet in folktale studies it has hardly been the case. Until the emergence of formal and structural studies, myths and tales were often branded as garbled, illogical, and nonsensical. Propp, Dundes, Lévi-Strauss, and Leach, of course, do not merely postulate the existence of structural relations between the elements of the traditional narrative, but also attempt to discover them in, or abstract them from, the plot.

Moreover, not only does Nathhorst lack theoretical perspective in his discussion of structural analysis, but he also neglects important works by the very scholars whose research methods he criticizes. In his analysis of Propp he does not avail himself of any of Propp's many publications in Russian and even disregards the essay "Les transformations des contes fantastiques," in *Théorie de la littérature* (ed. Tzvetan Todorov [Paris, 1965], 234–262), originally published in 1928. His discussion of Lévi-Strauss revolves mainly around the first article on structural analysis of myth, which appeared in 1955. He deliberately omits most of Lévi-Strauss' later work and attempts to justify this lack

by a curiously reasoned protest against the "publish-or-perish" system of the academic world (pp. 72-74).

In the actual discussion of the works of Propp, Dundes, Lévi-Strauss, and Leach, Nathhorst indulges in pedantic criticism in which he purports to expose the "methodological weakness" in the studies of his structural heroes. In so doing he accepts as valid any criticism they have advanced against each other, while dismissing as invalid the very theoretical premises upon which they have founded their critiques. His own ideas are often marred by errors, many of which another reviewer has already discussed in detail (Ulf Drobin, "A Review of Structuralism," *Temenos*, 5 [1969], 203-212) and of which there is no need to repeat here. Stylistically, Nathhorst tends to intersperse his analysis with sweeping negative conclusions that bear no relationship to the graveness of the alleged methodological error he uncovered. For example, on Leach he says: "His analysis of this Old Testament material does, certainly, contain some good details, but several of his assertions are completely absurd and the whole is, therefore, hopelessly arbitrary" (p. 60). Similarly, he states that "the value of this dictum, Propp's chief thesis [is] nil" (p. 24). Needless to say, such statements could easily boomerang.

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*Mexican Tales and Legends from Los Altos*. Introduction, classification, and notes by Stanley L. Robe. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Publications, 1970. Folklore Studies, 20. Pp. xxvi + 560, preface, photographs, bibliography, type and motif indexes, glossary. \$8.50.)

*Folktales of Mexico*. Edited and translated by Américo Paredes. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970. Folktales of the World Series. Pp. lxxxiii + 282, foreword, introduction, glossary, bibliography, type and motif indexes, general index. \$9.75.)

In terms of popular tradition, the United States may best be considered an underdeveloped nation at the periphery of an immensely rich Latin America. A community in Mexico, for example, generally consists of people who have known one another all their lives, not just of people "who share any one common factor"; tradition is a generations-long process and does not include yesterday's fad. Richard Dorson, in his panoramic introduction to *Folktales of Mexico*, shows well that the American's concept of folklore must change radically when he observes a folk culture as a whole. Suddenly one has to deal not with a list of genres but with a structural unity in which popular religion, medicine, song, dance, costume, and narrative are all symbolic or behavioral components of an integrated (though not necessarily consistent) world view.

Thus, the American folklorist, reduced so often to gleaning elephant jokes and redefining his discipline to include them, can hardly fail to be impressed when presented with such treasures as these collections of Paredes and Robe. In both we see, alive and flourishing, the entire range of Aarne-Thompson tales, the Los Altos volume displaying them all in a limited region, the Paredes anthology culling them from all over the nation. The collections are excellent not only in their content but also in their execution. The scholarship of their fabricators is impeccable; the works should serve as models for future collections.