## A MEETING WITH LÉVI-STRAUSS

Claude Lévi-Strauss is one of the most influential thinkers of our time. One of his many achievements has been to place anthropology at the heart of the evolution of contemporary French thought. He set about systematically putting into place, from the ground up, entire new systems for explaining humanity to itself. In effect, he reinvented modern anthropology.
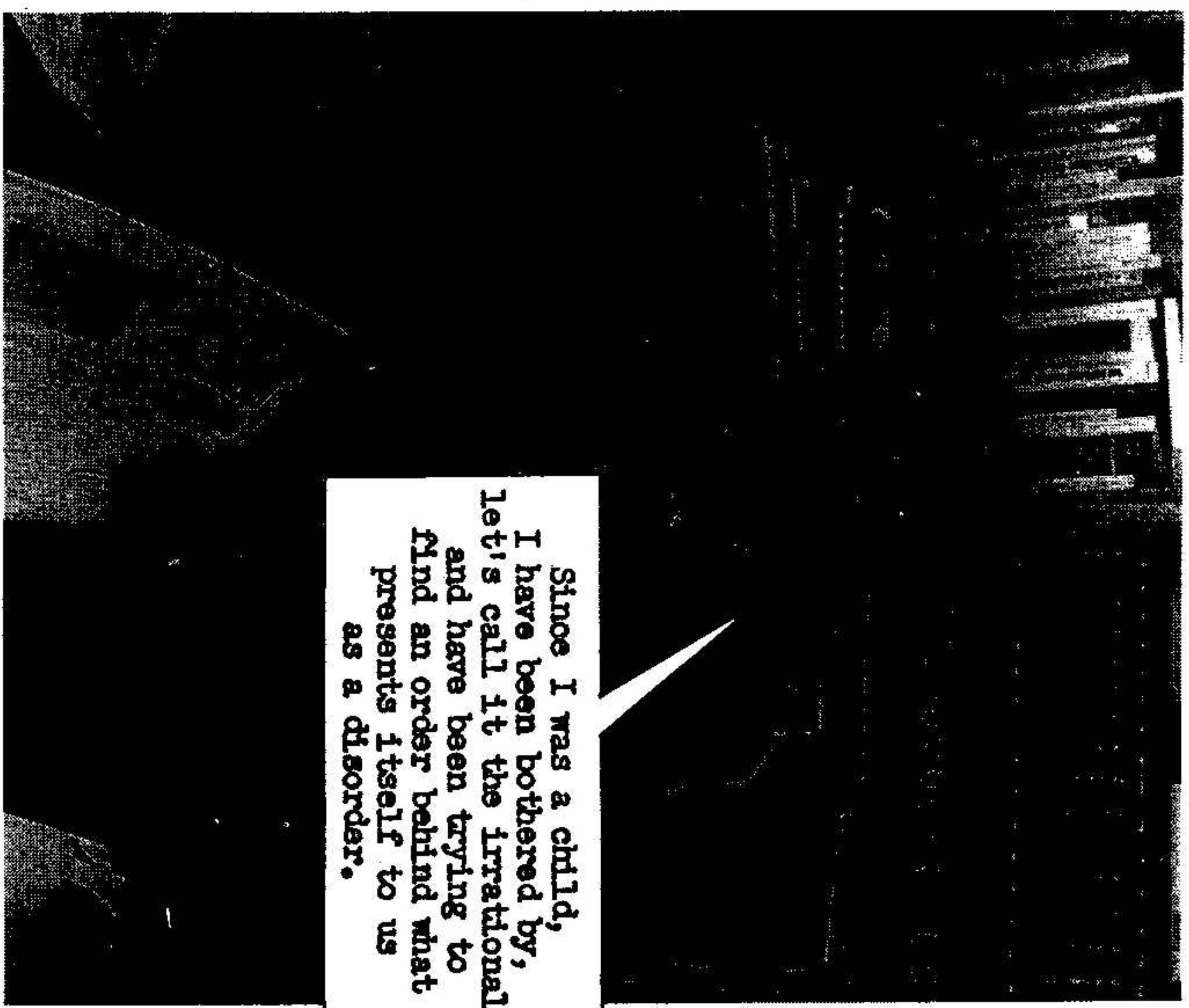
Since I was a child,
I have been bothered by,
let's call it the irrational,
and have been trying to
find an order behind what
presents itself to us
as a disorder.

During the 1950s and 60s, Lévi-Strauss's name became associated with a movement known as **structuralism** which was to influence the entire spectrum of disciplines that makes up the human sciences.

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On a snowy afternoon, 19 November 1996, the author of this book interviewed Claude Lévi-Strauss at the Collège de France in Paris.

YOU HAVE REVEALED THE EXISTENCE OF A TIMELESS PENSÉE SAUVAGE, A "WILD" MODE OF THOUGHT, AT WORK AT THE HEART OF HUMAN SOCIETY.

I have tried to show that there is not a great difference between the ways of thinking of those cultures we call "primitive" and our own.

When, in our own societies, we notice customs or beliefs that appear strange or that contradict common sense, we explain them as the vestiges or the relics of archaic modes of thought. On the contrary, it seems to me that these modes of thought are still present and alive among us. We often give them free rein of expression, so that they have come to coexist with other, domesticated, forms of thinking, such as those that come under the heading of science.

Lévi-Strauss has elaborated new theories in nearly all the key domains of anthropology. In doing so, he has also put into place a general theory of culture which emphasizes the importance of hidden structures, analogous to a kind of syntax, operating behind the scenes.

The origins of Lévi-Strauss's thought lie ultimately in the rainswept forests of the South American continent, home to the Caduveo, the Bororo and the Nambikwara. It was there that this encounter with "primitive" man first took place.

Claude Lévi-Strauss was born in Brussels in 1908. He was brought up in Paris's 16th *arrondissement* (where he still lives today) in a street named after the artist **Nicolas Poussin** (1594–1665), whom he came to admire and write about. His father was a portrait painter and his great-grandfather on his father's side, Isaac Strauss (born in Strasbourg in 1808), was a violinist, composer and conductor who worked with Berlioz and Offenbach.
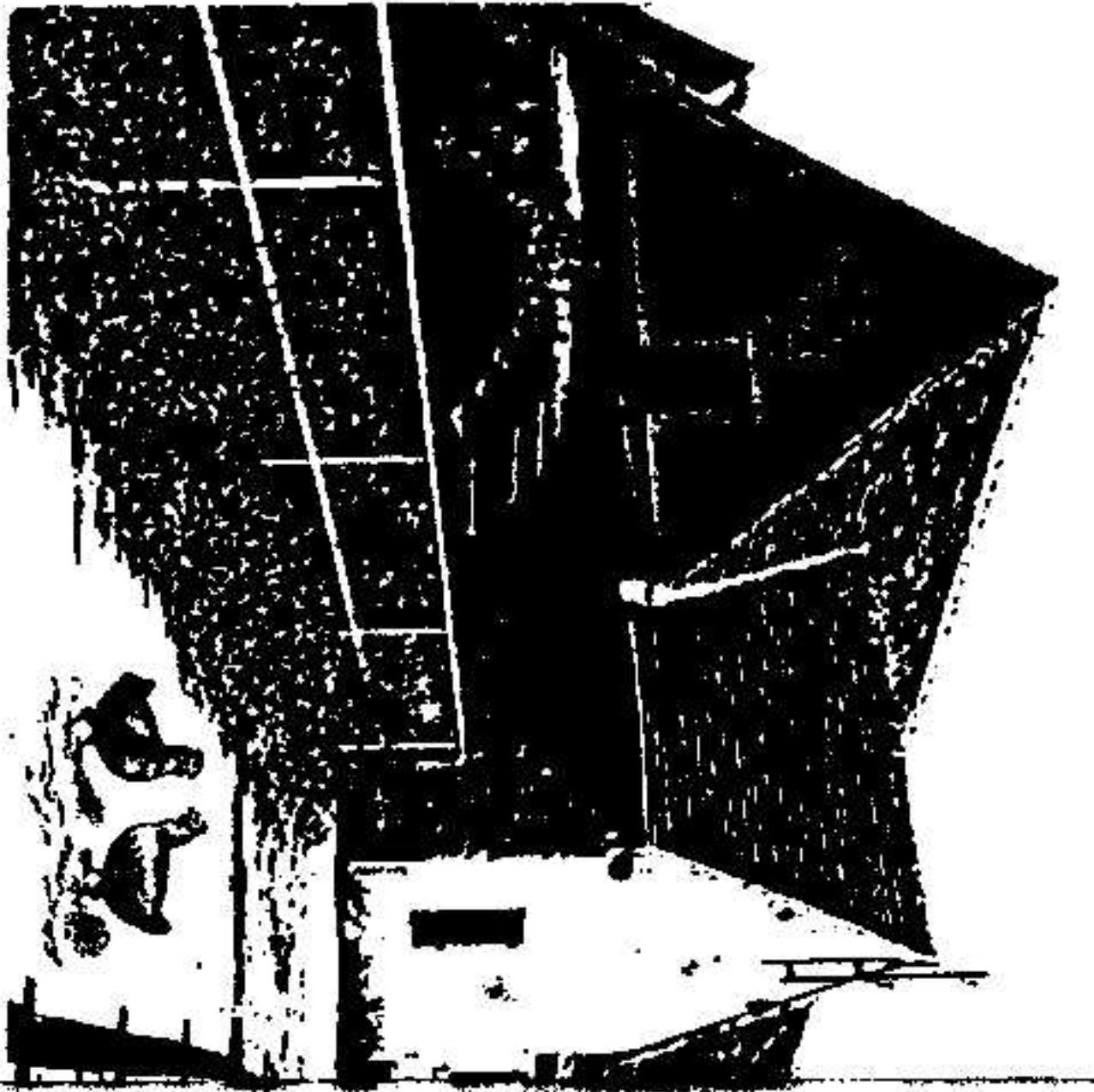
In 1914, when the Great War broke out and his father was conscripted, Lévi-Strauss went to live with his mother and her sisters in the house of his maternal grandfather, the chief rabbi of Versailles.

He studied law, then sat the *agrégation* in philosophy, which he taught in a secondary school (a subject still taught in French secondary schools today) until 1935.

The atmosphere in which I grew up was an artistic one. In my childhood, the 16th *arrondissement* was a more bohemian place than it is now. I recollect a farm at the end of our street.

Among those preparing for the *agrégation* at the same time as Lévi-Strauss were **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** (1908–61) and **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–86). French philosophy at the time was marked by its neo-Kantianism, and many traces of the thought of the great Enlightenment philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804) can be found in Lévi-Strauss's work.

I began reading Marx for the first time at the age of 17.

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

In 1935, disillusioned with philosophy, Lévi-Strauss accepted an offer to become a lecturer in sociology at the University of São Paulo in Brazil.

At the end of that academic year, I carried out, together with my wife, my first ethnographic expedition in the Matto Grosso region of Brazil.

This was his first encounter with the Bororo and the Caduveo whose unique mode of artistic expression – a complex form of body painting – he later analyzed in great detail.

"I thought I was re-living the adventures of the first explorers of the 16th century. I was once again discovering, but with my own eyes, the New World. Everything seemed fantastic to me: the landscapes, the animals, the plants." [CL-S]
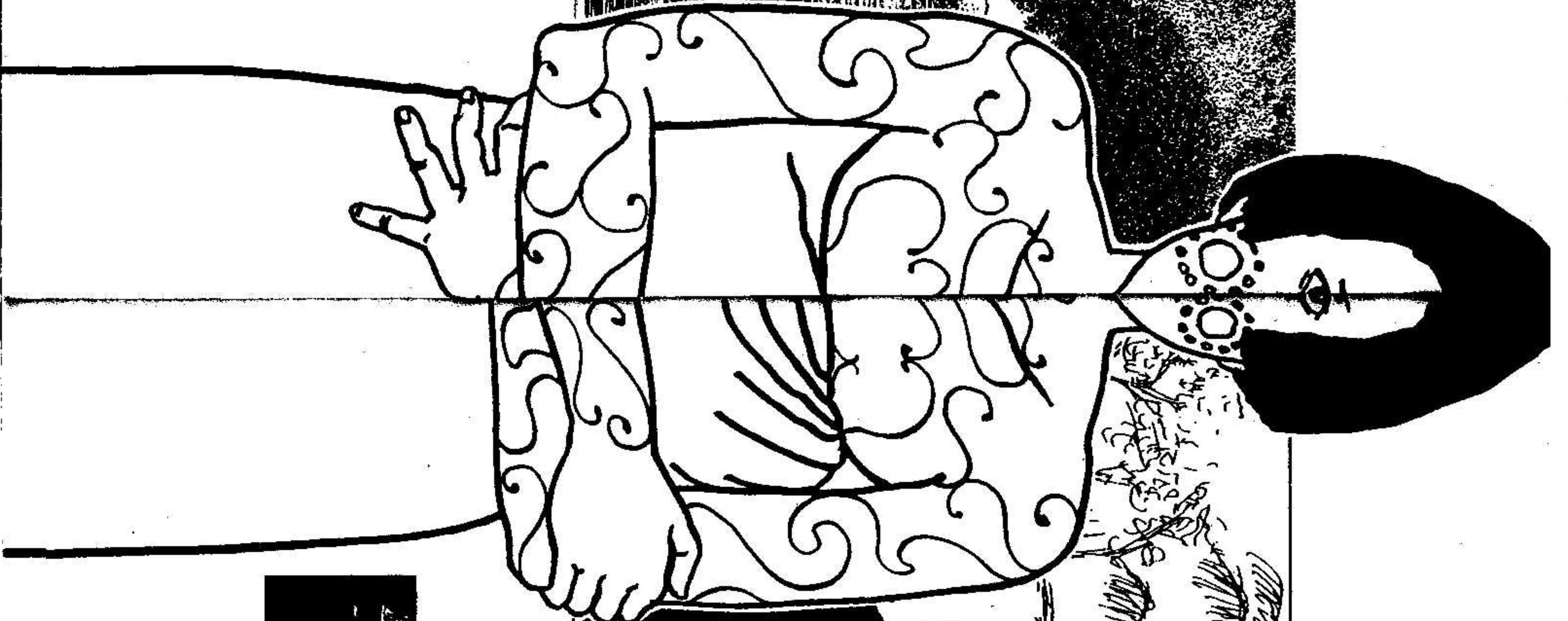
It was during a later expedition in 1938 that Lévi-Strauss carried out field research among the Nambikwara, a semi-nomadic group with whom he lived for several months.

They were so destitute that a family's entire possessions could be contained in a single basket carried on a woman's back. They went about naked and slept on the bare ground.

Lévi-Strauss had discovered the "noble savages" celebrated by **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712–78) and other 18th century Enlightenment philosophers.

After these two trips, however, Lévi-Strauss was soon to discover that he was more suited for the work of the cabinet anthropologist (ethnology) than for field work (ethnography).

But I was soon to return to America, this time for a different reason— the Second World War and the Nazi threat!

It was in the New York public library in 1943 that Lévi-Strauss, then a Jewish refugee who had fled the German invasion of France, began work on what became his doctoral thesis and first book: *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. This work revolutionized the anthropological study of kinship systems and established his reputation among professional anthropologists.
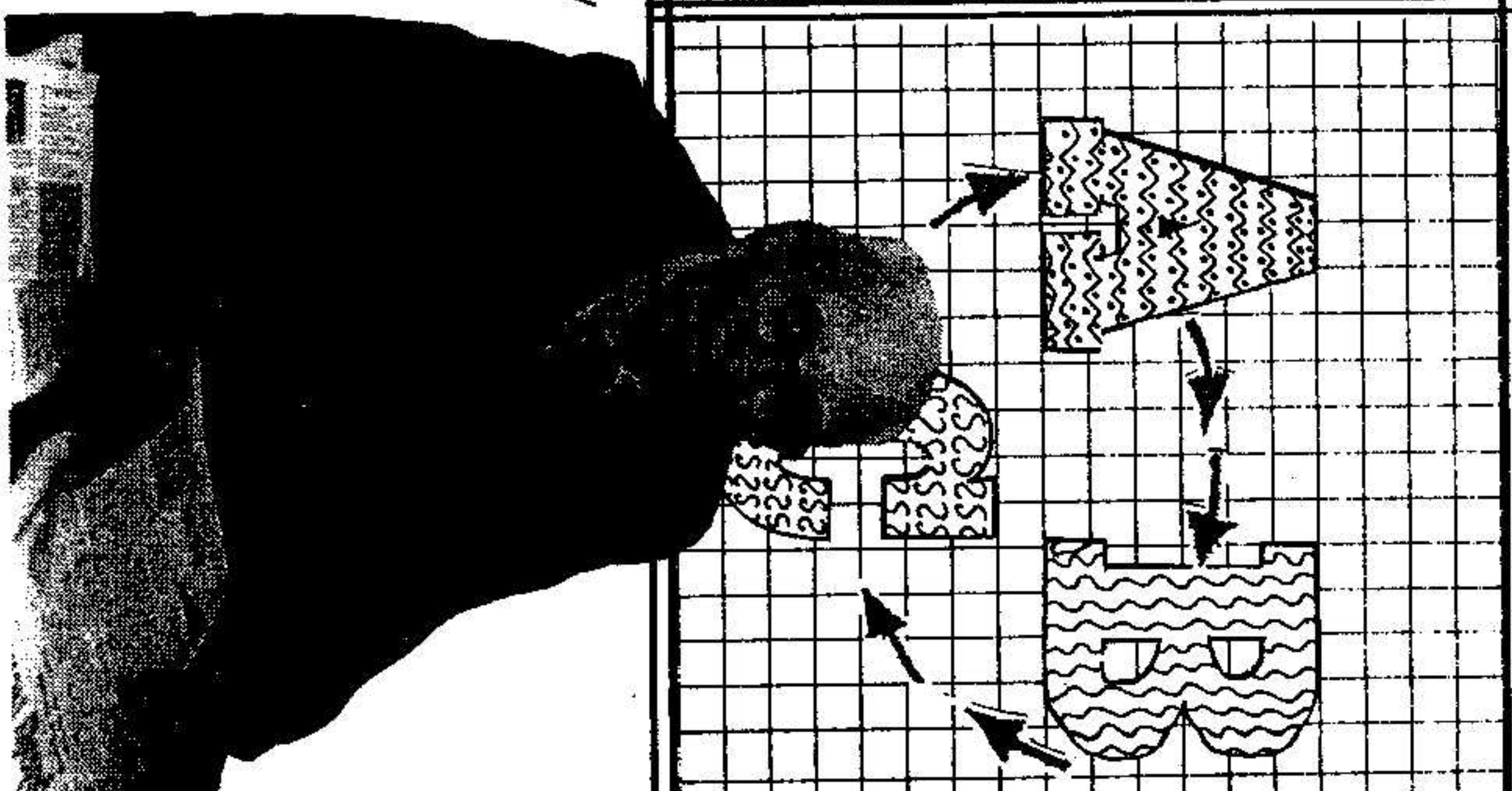
It was also at this time that Lévi-Strauss began to discover primitive art – not in ethnographic museums, but in the windows of New York antique dealers.

Primitive art was then considered by most anthropologists to have primarily a documentary value, but for me it represented more than that.

ANDRÉ BRETON

On the boat that took him to New York, Lévi-Strauss had encountered **André Breton** (1896–1966), the leader of the French Surrealist movement.

In New York, Breton introduced Lévi-Strauss to the German Surrealist artist **Max Ernst** (1891–1976), with whom he was to have a lasting friendship, and the art critic **George Duthuit** (1891–1973). The four men shared the same keen interest in primitive art, in particular Indian art.

MAX ERNST

GEORGE DUTHUIT

WE SET OUT TO FIND NEW OBJECTS TO COLLECT.

WE POOLED OUR RESOURCES WHEN ONE OR OTHER OF US WAS UNABLE TO AFFORD A NEW ITEM.

Many paths crossed at that time in New York. Other encounters with the Surrealists were at the origin of the American artistic movement that became known in the late 1940s as Abstract Expressionism.

I INTRODUCED LÉVI-STRAUSS TO THE AREA OF STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS.

In New York I had an important encounter with ROMAN JAKOBSON (1896-1982), the Prague School linguist.

Within this linguistic discipline, Lévi-Strauss discovered the principles, methods and ideas that were to enable him to crystallize his own conceptions and develop what he was to call **structural anthropology.**

"New York — and this was the secret of its charm and fascination — was a town where everything seemed possible. Its social and cultural fabric, like the spreading town itself, was riddled with holes. One needed only to choose one, slip into it, and, like Alice on the other side of the looking glass, find oneself in a world so full of enchantments that it seemed unreal." [CL-S]

THE INCEST TABOO

Throughout his writings on kinship there is a central enigma that Lévi-Strauss constantly returns to – that of the **incest taboo**. More precisely, he asks himself: why is it present, in one form or another, in all known human societies?

I rejected previous explanations of the taboo.

GENETIC ARGUMENTS THAT INVOKE THE RISK OF DEGENERACY.

PSYCHO-CULTURAL ARGUMENTS THAT INVOKE AN INSTINCTIVE HORROR, A DEFENCE AGAINST AN UNCONSCIOUS WISH.

OR, ON THE CONTRARY, AN INCAPACITY TO FEEL SEXUAL AROUSAL DUE TO THE PROXIMITY OF KIN.
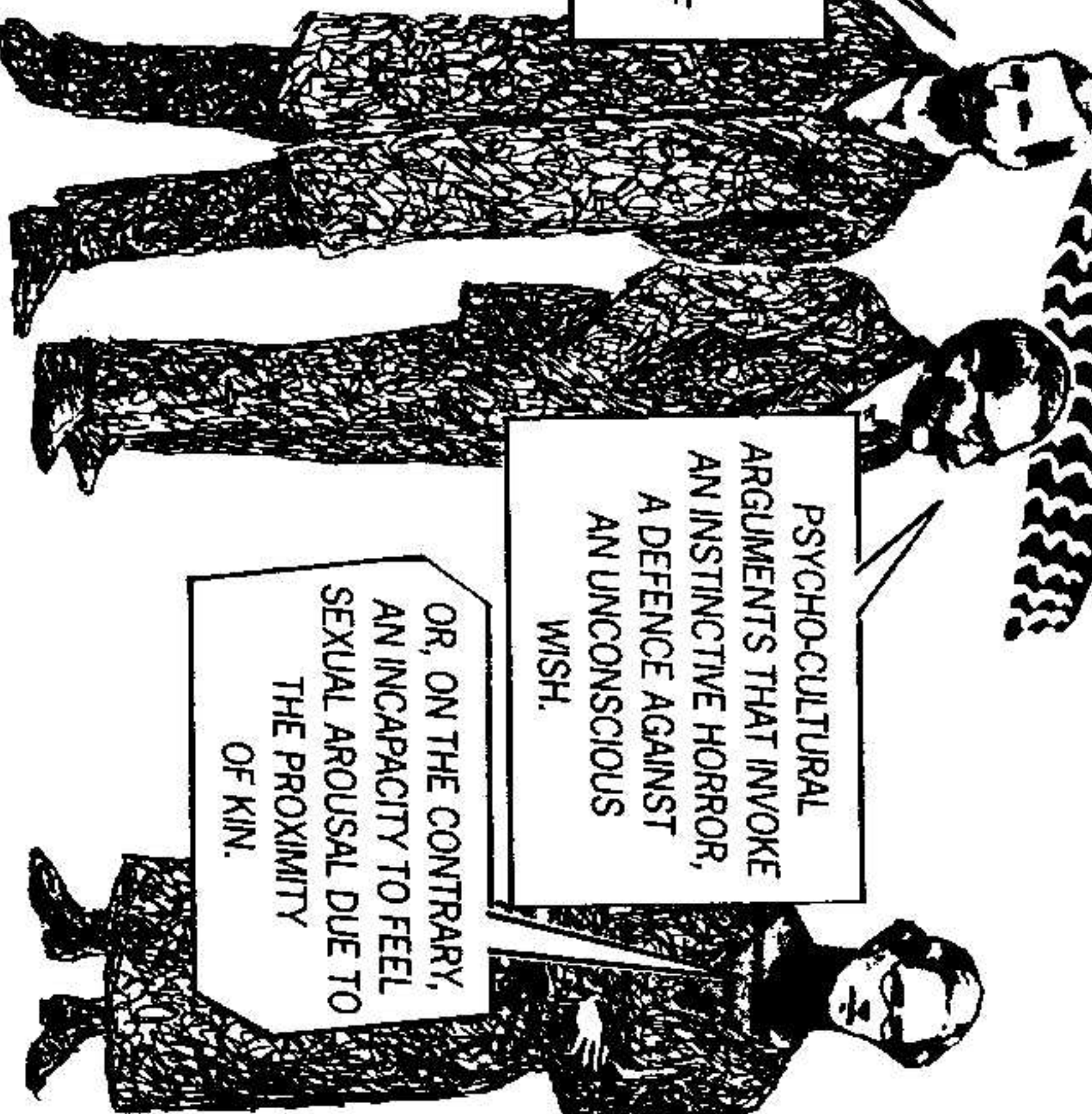
Genealogical arguments, which see in the taboo the remnants of archaic institutions that have now disappeared, are also criticized. Durkheim and Freud provide two examples.

DURKHEIM

I RELATE THE INCEST TABOO TO RELIGIOUS PROHIBITIONS CONCERNING MENSTRUAL BLOOD, THEMSELVES SYMBOLICALLY LINKED TO THE BLOOD OF THE CLAN AND HENCE THE TOTEM.

The theory of **Sigmund Freud** (1856–1939) in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) is relegated to the rank of "myth-making".
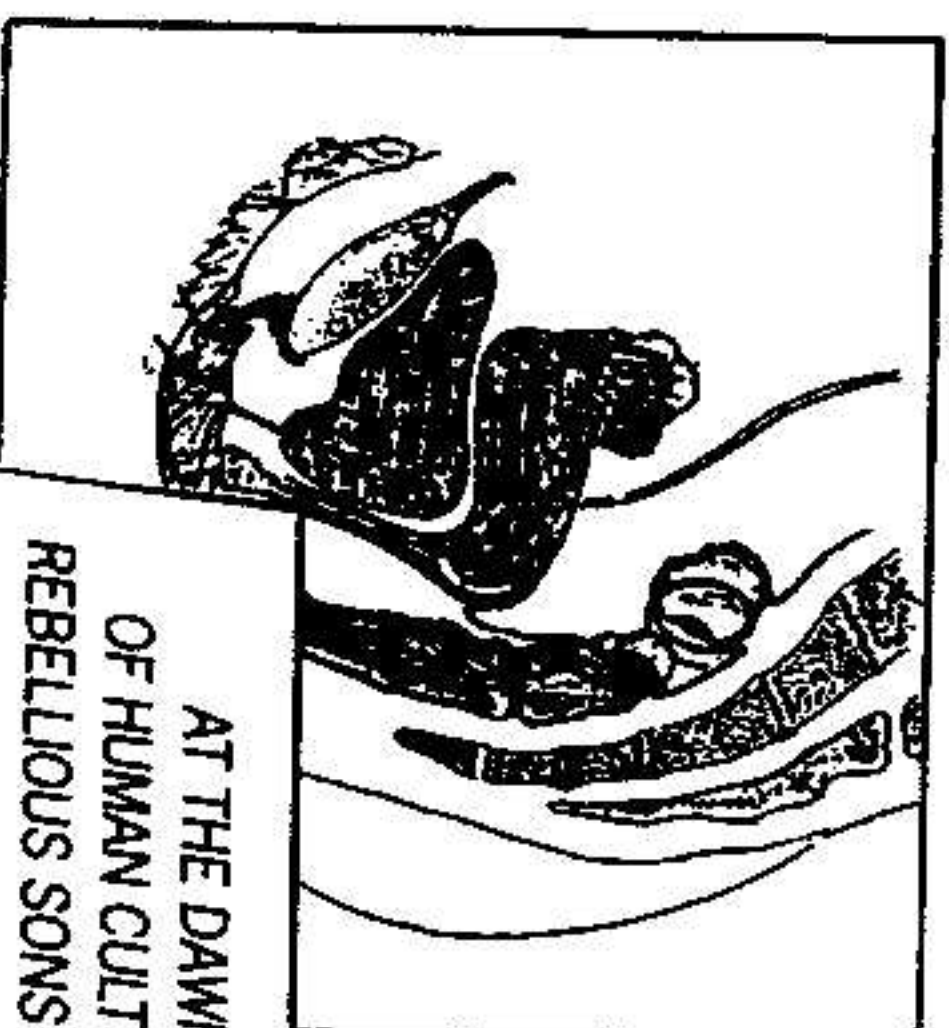
AT THE DAWN OF HUMAN CULTURE, REBELLIOUS SONS KILLED AND ATE THEIR FATHER, AND THEN, FEELING REMORSE FOR THEIR DEED, SET UP THE FIRST PROHIBITIONS, FORBIDDING THEMSELVES THOSE VERY WOMEN THEY HAD DESIRED.

FREUD

THE RULE OF INCEST

So where does Lévi-Strauss depart from these previous theories?

Within the context of the theory of kinship that he develops around the principle of exchange, Lévi-Strauss relates the incest taboo to rules of exogamy that require marriage outside of a particular group or category of individuals. In short, the primary function of the incest taboo is to oblige individuals to marry out.
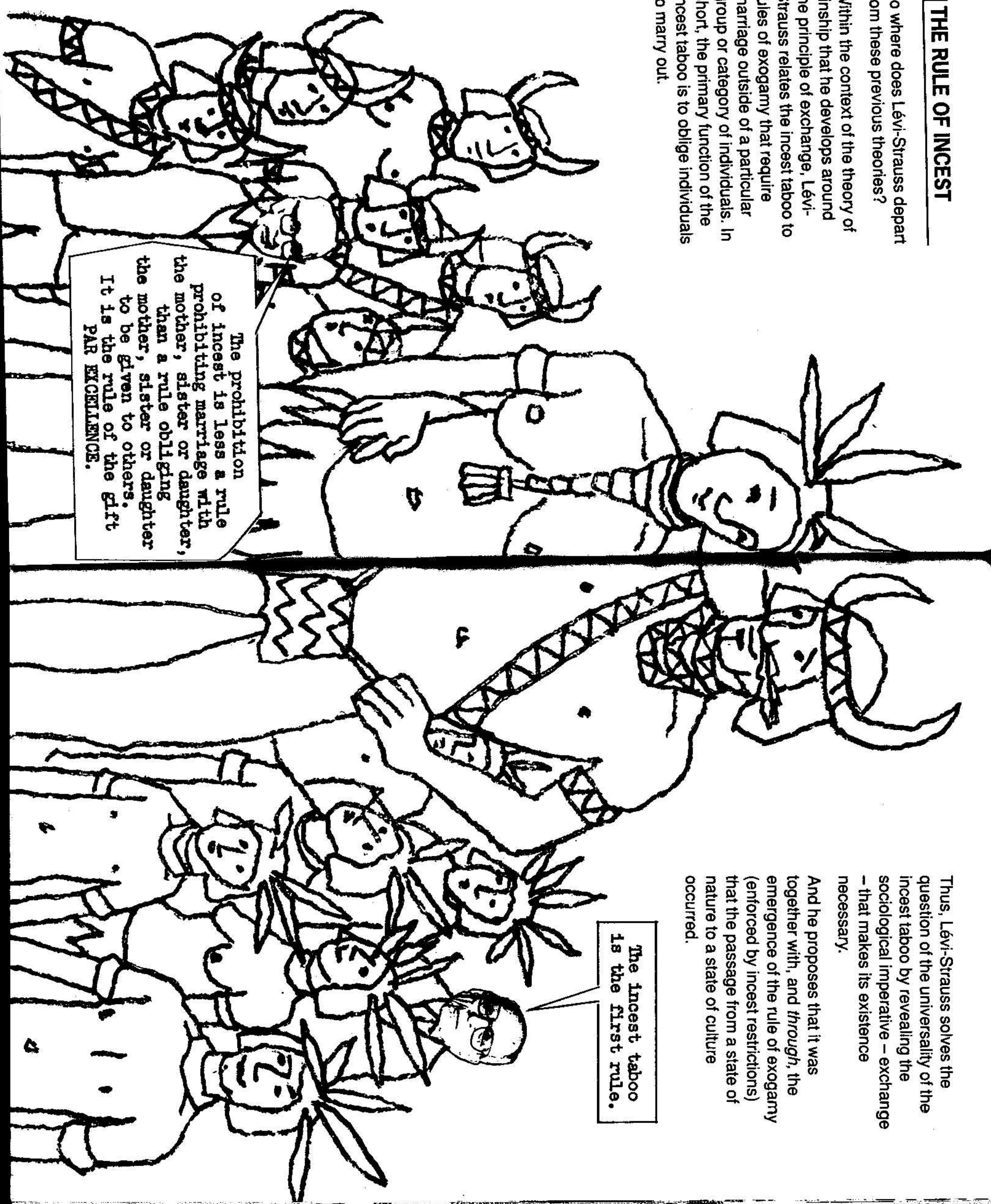
The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others. It is the rule of the gift PAR EXCELLENCE.

Thus, Lévi-Strauss solves the question of the universality of the incest taboo by revealing the sociological imperative – exchange – that makes its existence necessary.

And he proposes that it was together with, and *through*, the emergence of the rule of exogamy (enforced by incest restrictions) that the passage from a state of nature to a state of culture occurred.

The incest taboo is the first rule.

The introduction of an incest rule marks the replacement of arbitrary primate mating-patterns with regulated exchange. The incest taboo forces the kin group to make alliances with strangers, thereby creating a community based on ties that are other than those dictated by nature.
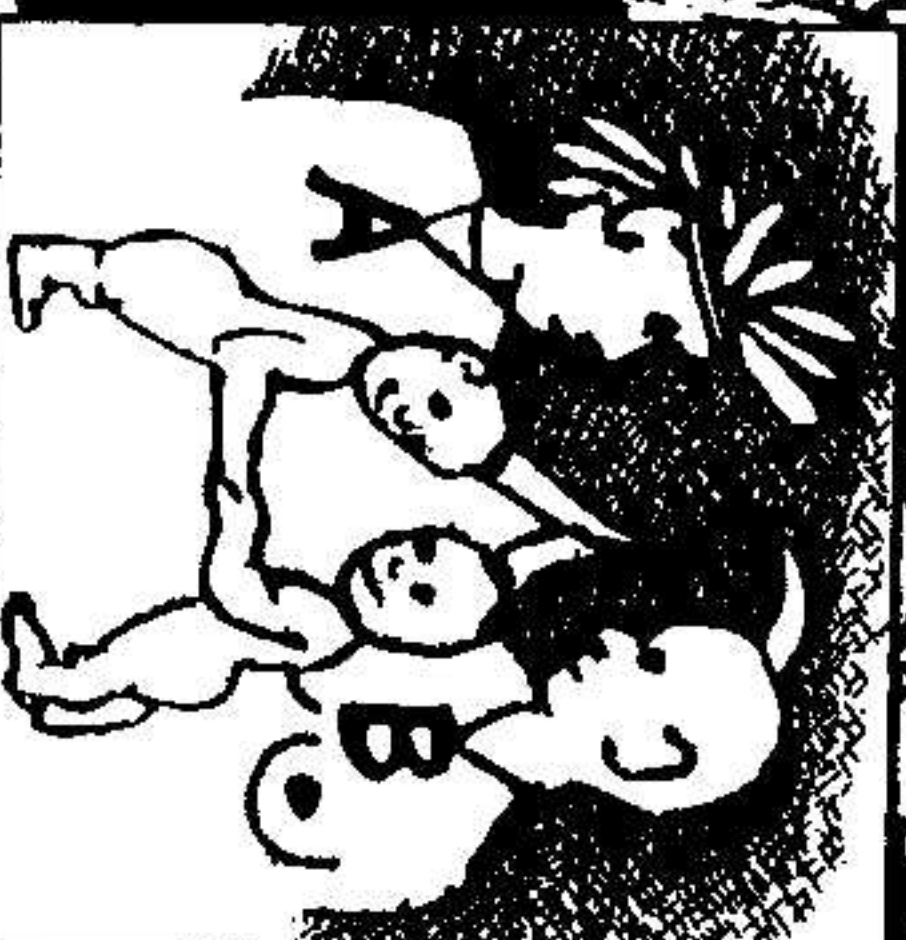
"Before the emergence of the incest taboo, culture does not exist; with its emergence, nature ceases to exist, for man, as the only kingdom. The prohibition of incest is the process by which nature goes beyond itself, it lights the spark which gives birth to a new and more complex type of structure, which superimposes itself upon the more elementary structures of mental life while integrating them, just as these structures superimpose themselves upon and integrate the yet more elementary structures of animal life. It brings about, and in itself constitutes, the advent of a new order." [CL-S]

Culture is a fire atop nature, set alight by the "spark" of the incest taboo.

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WHAT IS MYTH?

Myths are a "magnifying glass of the way in which man has always thought".

The study of myths is to Lévi-Strauss what the study of dreams was to Freud: the "royal road" to the unconscious. But the Lévi-Straussian unconscious is empty of any contents; a place where laws of structural patterning are applied to elements (images, memories, emotions, drives) that always come from elsewhere.

> In my quest for universal paradigms, myths offer a privileged terrain of investigation.

In his early work, the elementary structures that Lévi-Strauss extracted from the vast mass of kinship systems were meant to reflect the functioning of the mind that had engendered them. However, the possibility always remained that these structures arose out of a different set of determinants. They reflected, for example, certain material constraints of social life that had become objectified in the institutions of kinship exchange.

Not so with myth, says Lévi-Strauss.

> Mythical thought has no immediate practical function. It is not engaged with any form of reality different from itself.

In myth, the mind imitates itself as object, thus reflecting, in as clear a mirror as one may hope to find, the mind's own modes of operating. Lévi-Strauss takes primitive myths to be a manifestation of the free functioning of the mind, observed relatively undisturbed by other extraneous factors. They present an image of the mind in a state of nature.

For anyone who has never come across a primitive myth, the first appeal of the *Mythologiques* will be in the discovery of this unique form of literary creation. The myths – all of them orally transmitted stories, that have no identifiable author and whose origins are lost in time – strike one first of all by their sheer force of invention and unbridled imagination, and this despite their apparent incoherence.

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A SAMPLE MYTH

The Shipaia from Brazil have a myth (M178 in *The Raw and the Cooked*) that tells of the origin of the colour of birds. It runs as follows.

Once upon a time, two brothers and a sister lived together in an abandoned hut. One of the brothers fell in love with his sister. He visited her at night without revealing who he was. The other brother found out that his sister was pregnant and told her to mark her secret visitor with genipa dye.

The culprit, thus unmasked, fled to the sky with his sister.

But once there, they argued and the incestuous brother pushed his sister who fell to the earth like a meteorite, landing with a great crash.

There, she transformed into a tapir, while her brother in the sky became the moon.

The moon's human brother ordered the tribe warriors to assemble and shoot arrows at the moon and kill it. Only the armadillo hit his target.

The moon's blood was of many colours and it streamed to earth, splashing the men and women below.
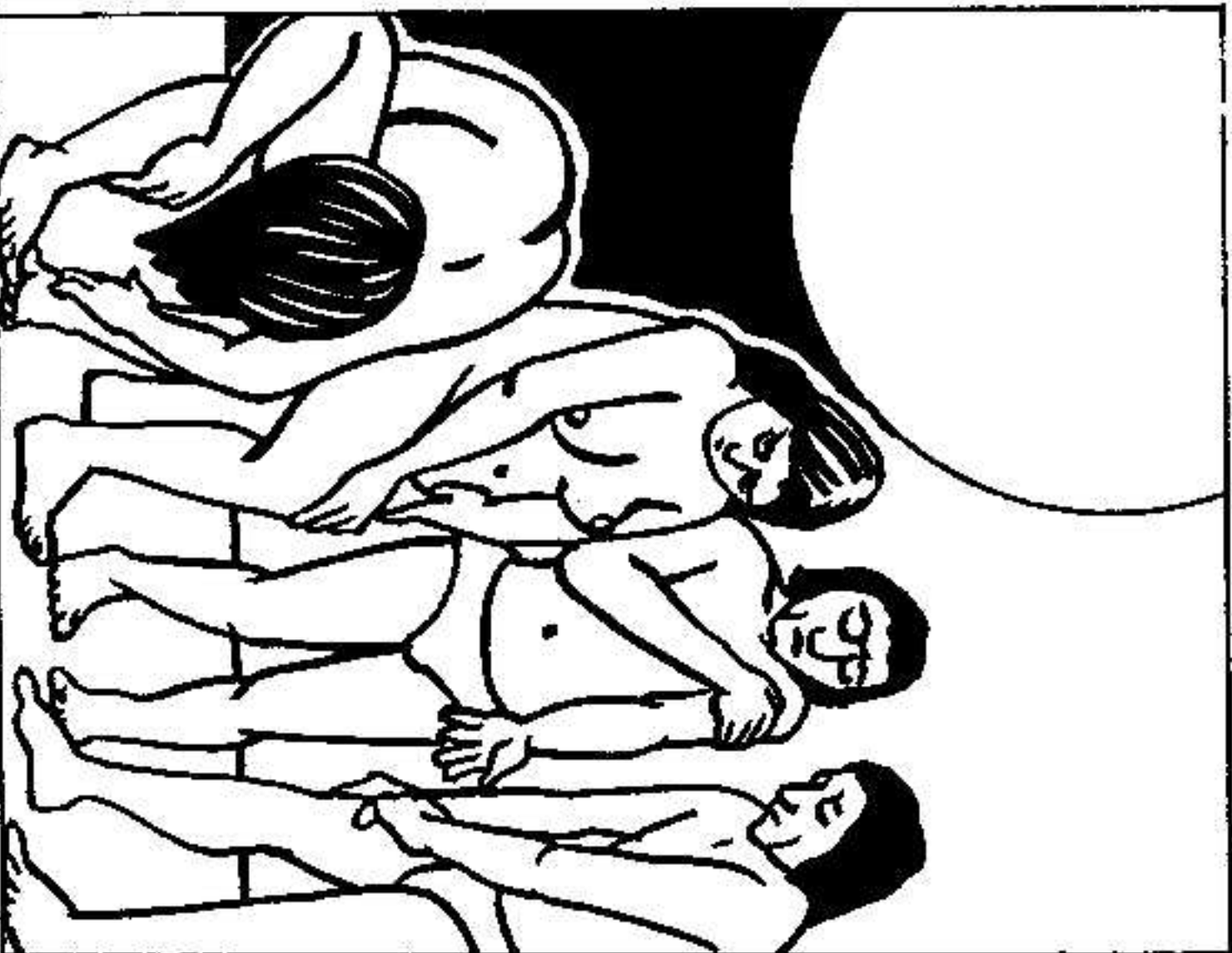
The women wiped themselves with an upward movement, and from that day they are subjected to the influence of the moon. The men wiped themselves with a downward movement.

The birds bathed in the different-coloured pools of blood, and this is how each acquired its unique plumage.

Contrary to traditional approaches to the study of myths (psychological or symbolic), Lévi-Strauss does not believe them to have a determinate content which it is the analyst's job to recover. Myths are not "reservoirs" of encoded meaning.

Myths are **structures** that realize themselves in and through the listener (in this respect, their meaning is always local). "A myth, like a piece of music, is a score whose silent executors are the audience."

Lévi-Strauss's approach to understanding myth is, at heart, that of an artist, someone concerned with the processes of *creation* of mythical stories and with their internal organization. At the centre of his concerns is the question of how myths come into being. How are they produced?

Understanding what a myth is, is intimately related to understanding a process essentially of *transformation*. Lévi-Strauss's basic hypothesis is that myths come into being by a process of transformation of one myth into another.

Myths do not have any meaning in themselves, but only in relation to each other. In this respect they form a system — one that is analogous to the phonological system which underlies language.

Contrary to what mythographers had done in the past, Lévi-Strauss does not set out to identify the "original" or the "correct" version of a given myth — the Oedipus myth, for example. Rather, he defines a myth as the *sum total of its variants*. In the case of the Oedipus myth, this will also include Freud's interpretation of it, which is no more than its latest transformation (here, into the psycho-sexual code).
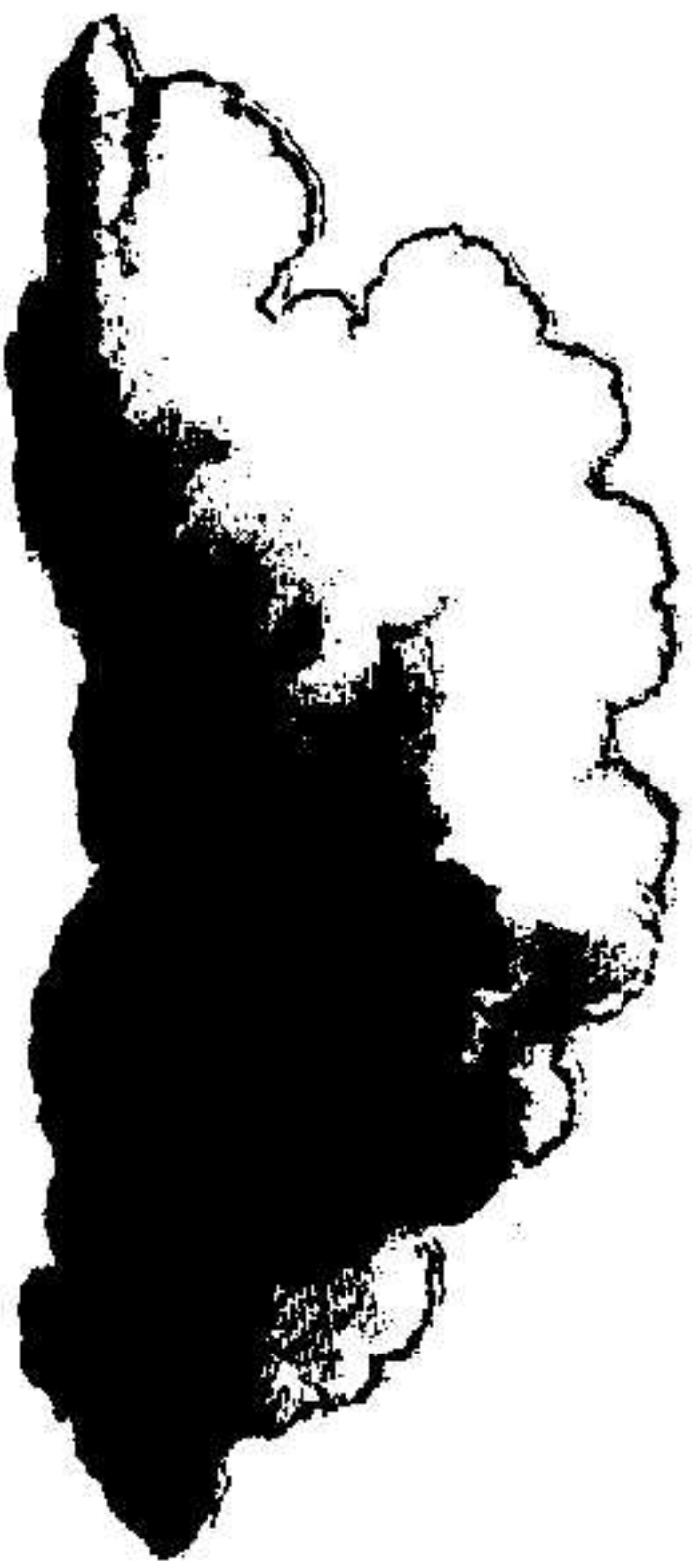
To illustrate Lévi-Strauss's method as it is applied in the *Mythologiques* is difficult because wherever one starts, one is always breaking into a chain (or even several chains) of transformations. Equally, wherever one stops will always fall short of arriving somewhere, as it is in the very nature of myths always to be in the process of becoming other myths, none of which contains the final meaning.

The paths of transformation that Lévi-Strauss follows are complicated. It is not simply a question of one myth transforming into another in a unilinear progression. Myths are organized into affiliated groups which form *series* of transformations. But each myth from a series also contains motifs that are transformations of motifs present in myths belonging to other groups or series. The overall picture that emerges is one of multi-dimensional networks of bisecting axes of transformation, an endless criss-crossing of stories.

And as one follows the transformations charted by Lévi-Strauss throughout the *Mythologiques*, one also finds oneself voyaging from the region where one had started off. From a series of myths told by a group of tribes living in central Brazil, Lévi-Strauss traces an uninterrupted chain to the coastal regions of North-Western America, thus linking together the two broad mythological systems of North and South America.

Let us now have a sample of transformation. We begin with Lévi-Strauss's reference myth and point of departure, M1. This is a myth told by the Bororo about the origin of wind and rain-water.

THE POSITION OF THE JAGUAR

The central theme of the Gé series – unrelated, it would seem, to the story told by the Bororo – is that of the alliance between man and jaguar which leads eventually to the acquisition by man of the fire he will use to cook with. Jaguar is the Master of Fire and is described by the myths as having eyes that shine at night like burning embers.
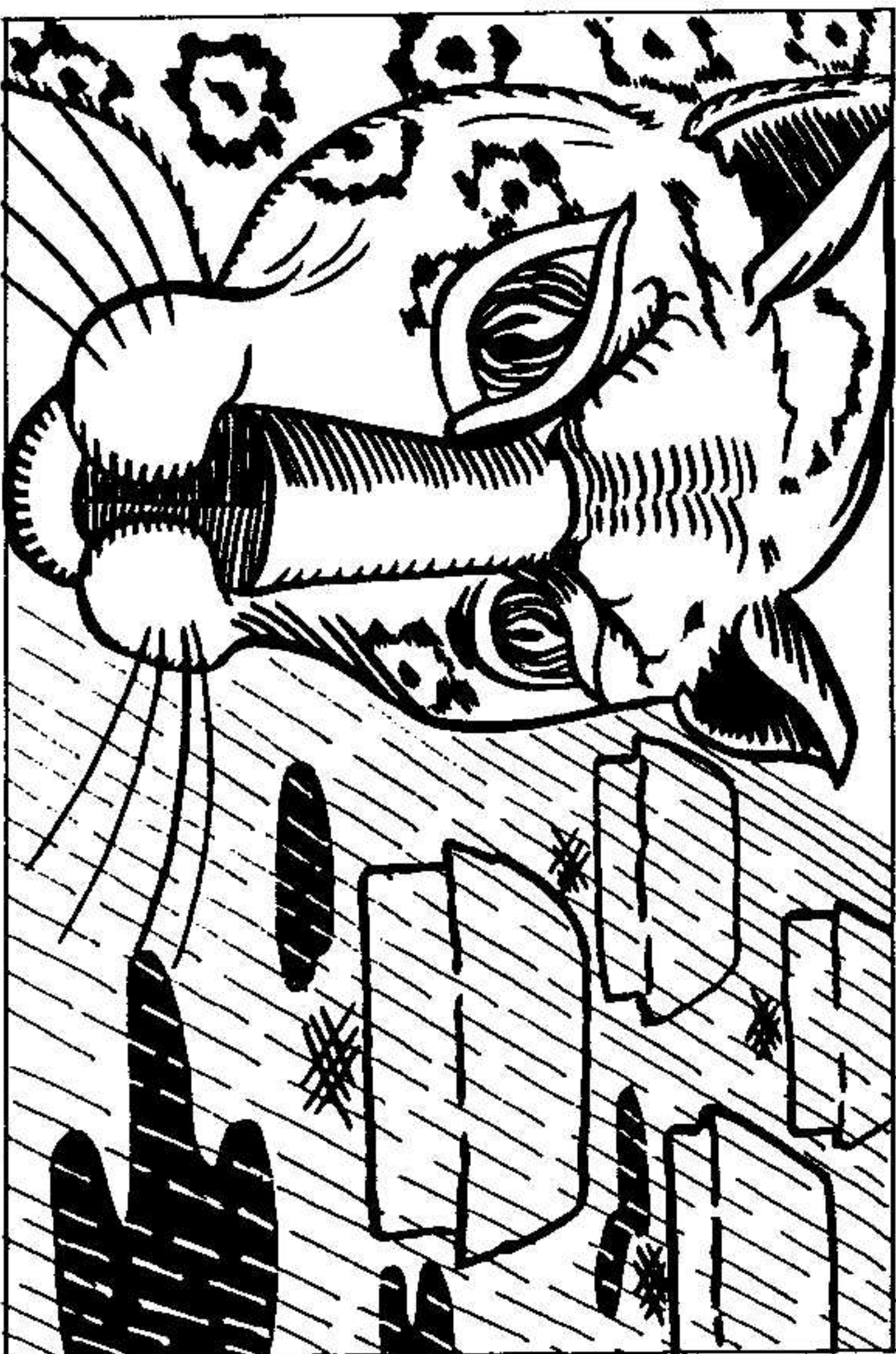
More significantly still, as a result of the storm extinguishing all the village fires except for that of the hero's grandmother, he becomes the sole possessor of fire. Other members of the village must come to him to obtain fire after the storm.

In other words,
he is in the same position
as the jaguar in the Gé myths:
he is the master of fire.

By a process of permutation (a type of inversion), the bird-nester hero has come to take the place of the jaguar.

Rain-water in the Bororo myth is conceived as being the opposite of fire because it extinguishes all the fires in the village. It is a kind of "anti-fire", says Lévi-Strauss.

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Lévi-Strauss shows that all myths are linked to other myths by relationships of transformation (like the Swaihwé and Dzonokwa masks discussed above). But this is not at the level of their manifest content. Lévi-Strauss identifies a deeper structural level of organization in myths which supports the mythical narrative proper. It is at this level of structural organization that myths may be seen to "communicate with one another".

Lévi-Strauss's method throughout the *Mythologiques* is to dismantle, one by one, the mythical narratives, in order to uncover their hidden *armatures* and determine how these may be related to those underlying other myths. Lévi-Strauss uses the term *armature* in the sense which in French derives from musicology. (In English, an armature is a *key signature*.)

These are the signs written at the beginning of each stave which indicate the tonality or key of a composition. The ARMATURE provides the underlying principle of structural unity.

He breaks up the "diachronic" linearity of the story and shows how it is made up of systems of relationships that may be apprehended "synchronically" as structures. We are reminded of Saussure's idea of diachronic (*parole* or usage) and synchronic (*langue* or language).

BINARY OPPOSITIONS

In the first book of the *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss shows how sensible qualities – such as the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the rotten, the high and the low – are, at the level of deep structure, articulated into systems that encode logical propositions.

The Gé tribe trace the origin of fire to a mythical jaguar. Another series of myths, this time from the Guarani-Tupi, trace the origin of fire to a vulture. Both groups of myths characterize the animals in terms of the types of foods they eat, and it is this which is important about them.

THE JAGUAR IS A PREDATOR WHO EATS **RAW** MEAT.

THE VULTURE IS A SCAVENGER WHO CONSUMES **ROTTEN** MEAT.

The jaguar and the vulture are terms in a system. They are "mythemes" (the "phonemes" of myths) which serve to encode a double opposition, that between the raw and the cooked and that between the fresh and the rotten. What is the significance of these binary oppositions?

FROM NATURE TO CULTURE

The great theme which all myths have in common is the passage from nature to culture.

A MYTH IS A STORY THAT TAKES PLACE AT A TIME WHEN HUMANS AND ANIMALS WERE NOT YET DISTINCT BEINGS. AND ALL MYTHS, IN THE END, EXPLAIN HOW THIS FUNDAMENTAL, THIS INAUGURAL SEPARATION OCCURRED.

In the South American corpus of myths (with which the first two volumes of the *Mythologiques* are primarily concerned), Lévi-Strauss reveals that it is through cooking – the transformation of the raw into the cooked – that the passage from nature to culture is symbolized. This explains the importance of stories relating to the acquisition by man of the fire he cooks with. Fire occupies a crucial position in mythical thought as a mediating term between, on the one hand, nature and culture, and on the other, the earth and the sky.

The *Raw and the Cooked* is concerned primarily with the culinary code, but there are many others: astronomical, zoological, social, sexual, etc., and each code has its own generativity. Around the central binary opposition between the raw and the cooked, other elements find their place. One such element is honey.

Honey constitutes an essentially ambivalent element in the system. Although it is ready for human consumption (in a sense "cooked"), it has been transformed not by cultural means but by nature itself.
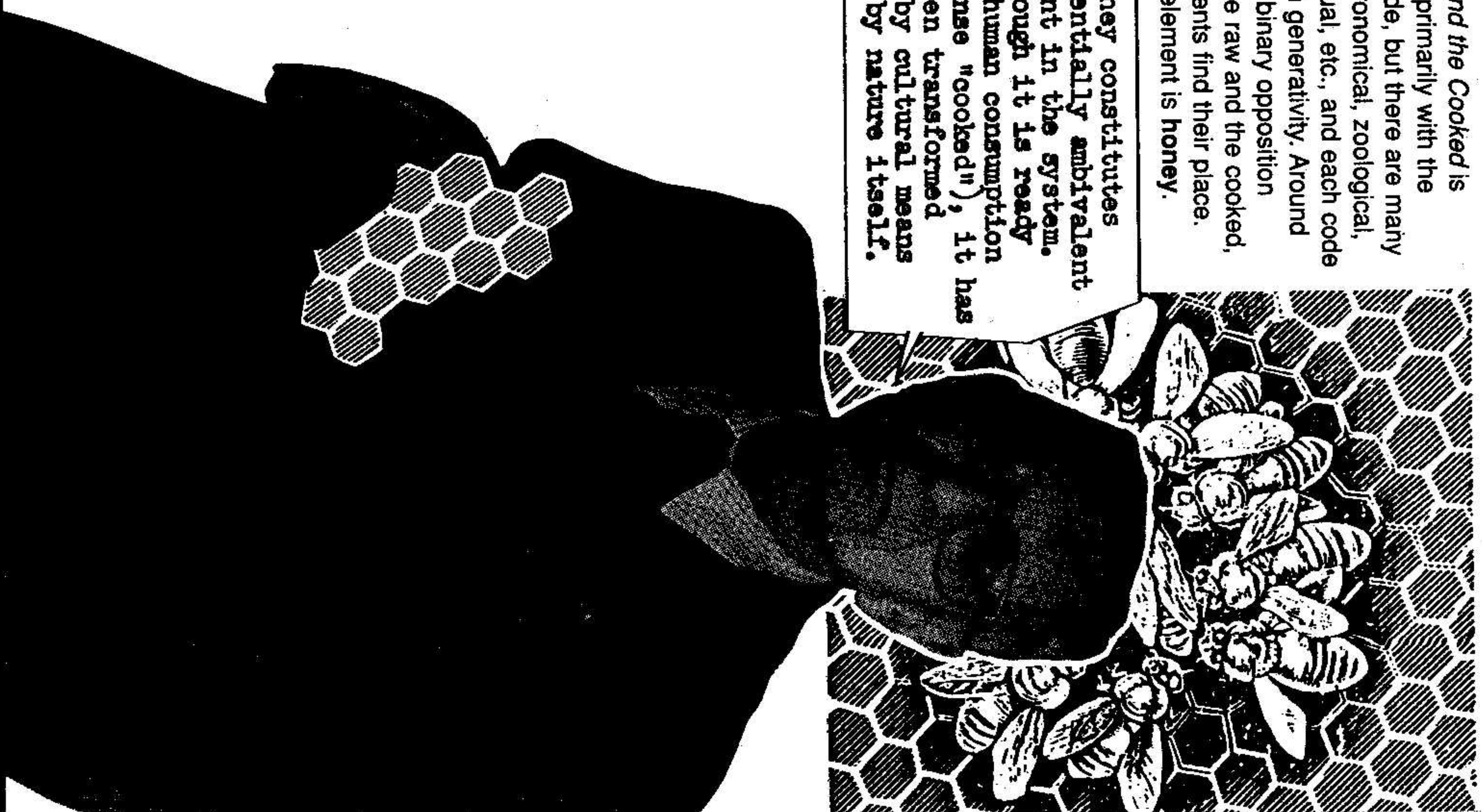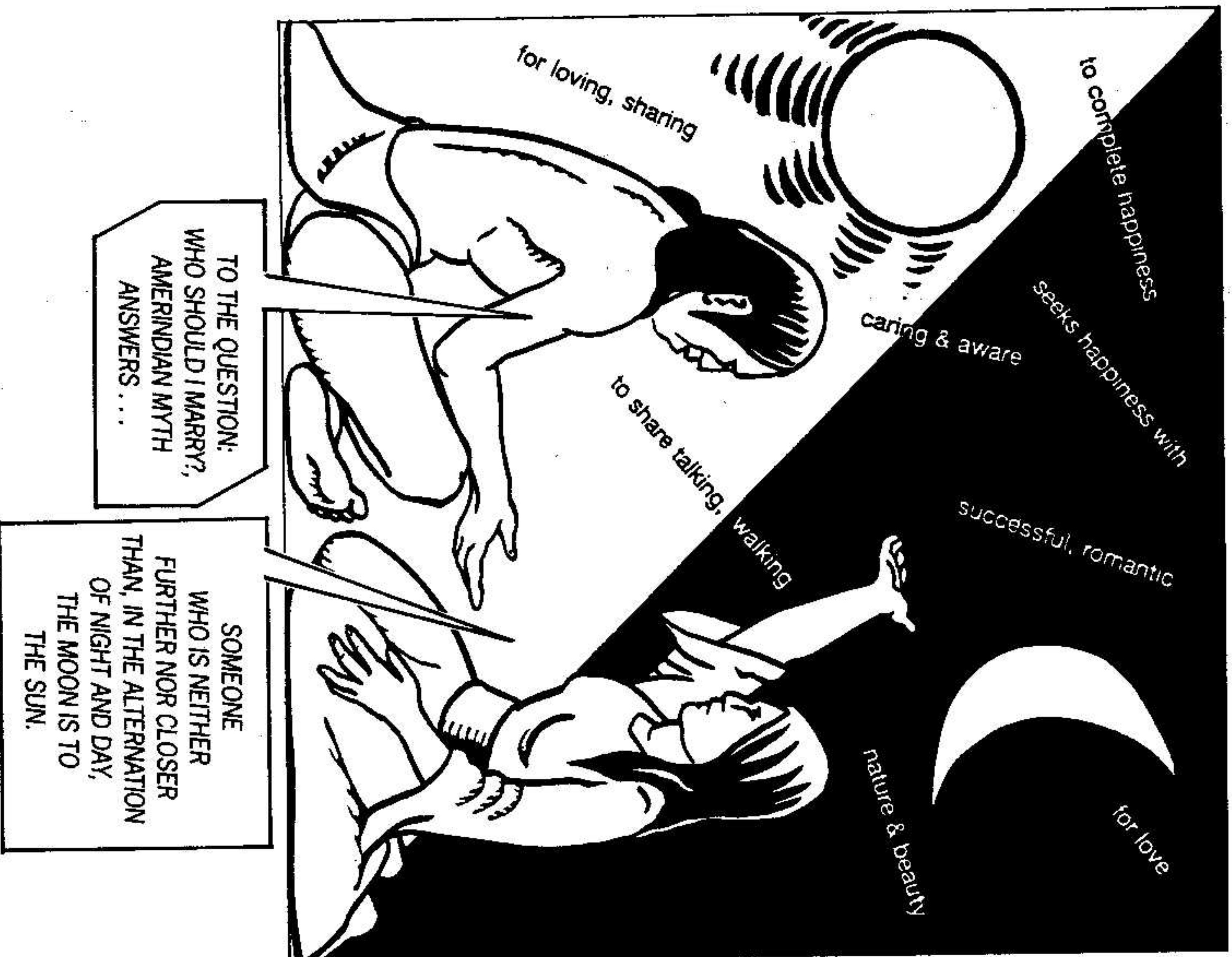
MYTHS AND PARADOXES

In the myths of the North American corpus (in the third and fourth volumes of the *Mythologiques*), the symbols change. What marks the passage from nature to culture is no longer the symbolic mediation of cooking, but the invention of costumes, ornaments and the institution of commercial exchanges. Thus, where South American myths oppose the raw to the cooked, North American myths oppose the naked to the clothed.

> Out of these interpretations, I derive the key function of myths.

In a nutshell, his conception is that myths are tools for processing logical problems. They are invented to mediate fundamental paradoxes or contradictions within a culture that cannot be solved.

These paradoxes are of numerous kinds: metaphysical, moral, social, legal, political, religious, etc. And they provide the impetus which sets mythical thought in motion. Myths do not aim to resolve the paradoxes around which they develop, in the way philosophy does. The "solution" they provide is other. Their principle virtue is to transpose these paradoxes into the terms of other, similar, paradoxes. Thus, myths develop in a kind of spiral, by establishing a series of analogies between formally similar problems.

for loving, sharing

to complete happiness

seeks happiness with

caring & aware

to share talking, walking

successful, romantic

nature & beauty

for love

> TO THE QUESTION: WHO SHOULD I MARRY?, AMERINDIAN MYTH ANSWERS . . .

> SOMEONE WHO IS NEITHER FURTHER NOR CLOSER THAN, IN THE ALTERNATION OF NIGHT AND DAY, THE MOON IS TO THE SUN.

DO MYTHS HAVE MEANING?

For Lévi-Strauss, a myth is not a reservoir of archetypes or universal symbols, as **C.G. Jung** (1875–1961) believed myths to be. The images it assembles are chosen first of all for their "symbolic efficacy", their capacity to express metaphorically (encode) a particular set of problems. What the Argentinian writer **Jorge Luis Borges** (1899–1986) said about that grandfather of mythical beings, the dragon, is true of the Lévi-Straussian view of myths.

We are ignorant of the meaning of the dragon in the same way that we are ignorant of the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the dragon's image that fits man's imagination, and this accounts for the dragon's appearance in different places and periods.
(The Book of Imaginary Beings)

Meaning is not in myths – rather myths, and the images they invent, are structures through which to make sense of the rest of the world.

"A myth offers a grid that is definable only by its rules of construction. This grid enables one to decipher the meaning, not of the myth itself, but of all the rest: images of the world, of society, of history, which lie at the fringe of consciousness, along with all the questions we ask about them." [CL-S]

A myth is a "matrix of intelligbility".
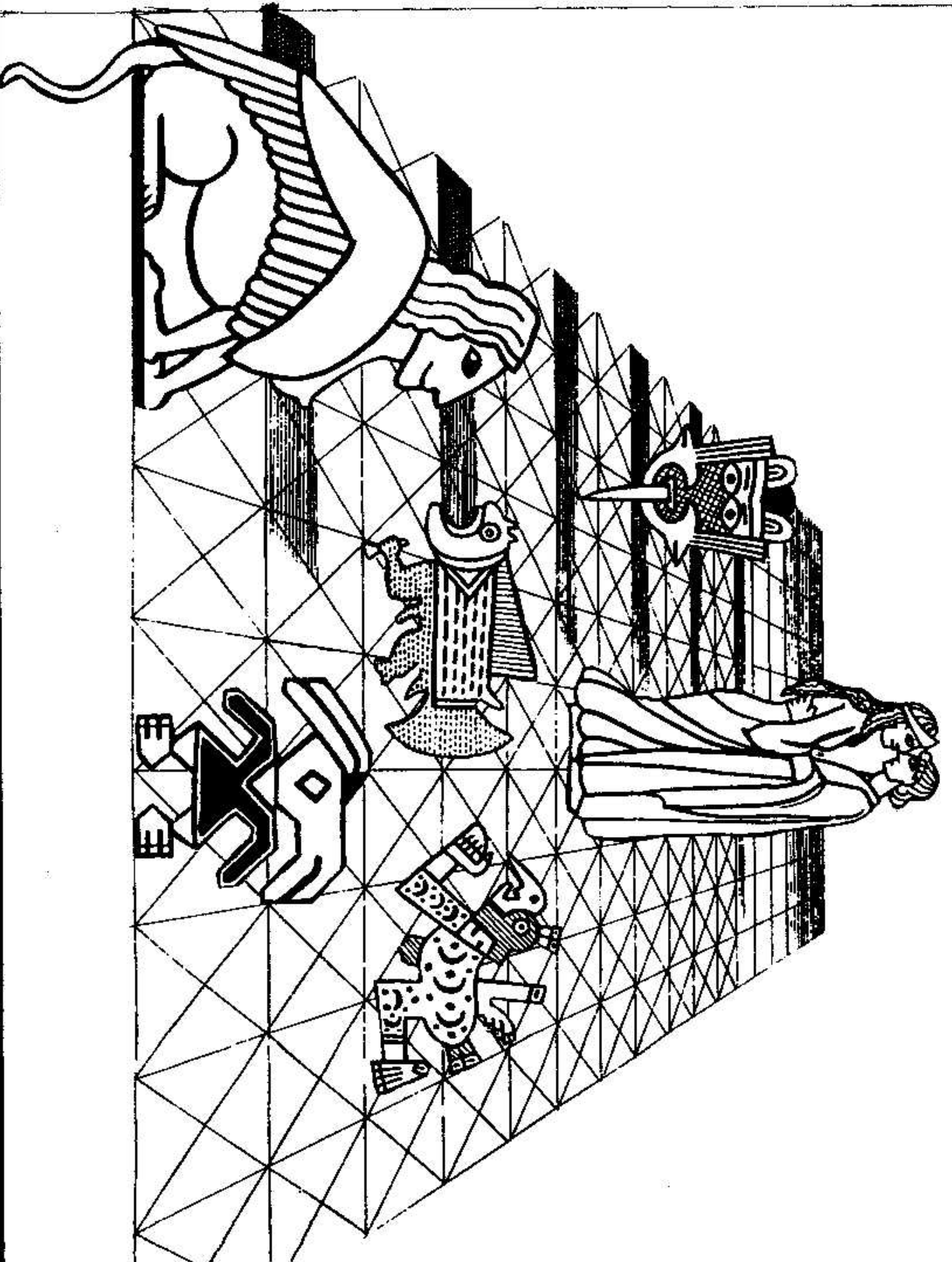
THE OEDIPUS MYTH

Lévi-Strauss also turned his attention to literary texts in Western culture. One example is the Greek myth of Oedipus which emerged from ancient local legends and folklore, best known to us in its dramatized version by **Sophocles** (c. 496–406 B.C.).

Oedipus may originally have been related to an underground or snake god. His name means "swollen-foot" and can be interpreted as an anthropomorphic figuration of a dragon's tail. Lévi-Strauss has compared the inability to "walk straight" (Oedipus = swollen foot) to being born from the earth, a Greek chthonic belief. Central to the myth is a concern with man's origins.

The story, as most commonly told, is this. Oedipus is the son of King Laius (of the Theban dynasty founded by the dragon-slayer Cadmus) and Queen Jocasta.

Laius learns from an oracle that his son will one day murder him and marry Jocasta. Laius commands that the baby be left to die on Mount Cithaeron with his feet pierced (swollen-foot).

But Oedipus is saved by a shepherd and he grows to manhood unaware who his real parents are.

One day, on his journeys, Oedipus comes to a crossroads. He enters into conflict with an arrogant stranger and kills him. This man is none other than his own father, Laius. Oedipus has unknowingly committed the great crime of parricide.
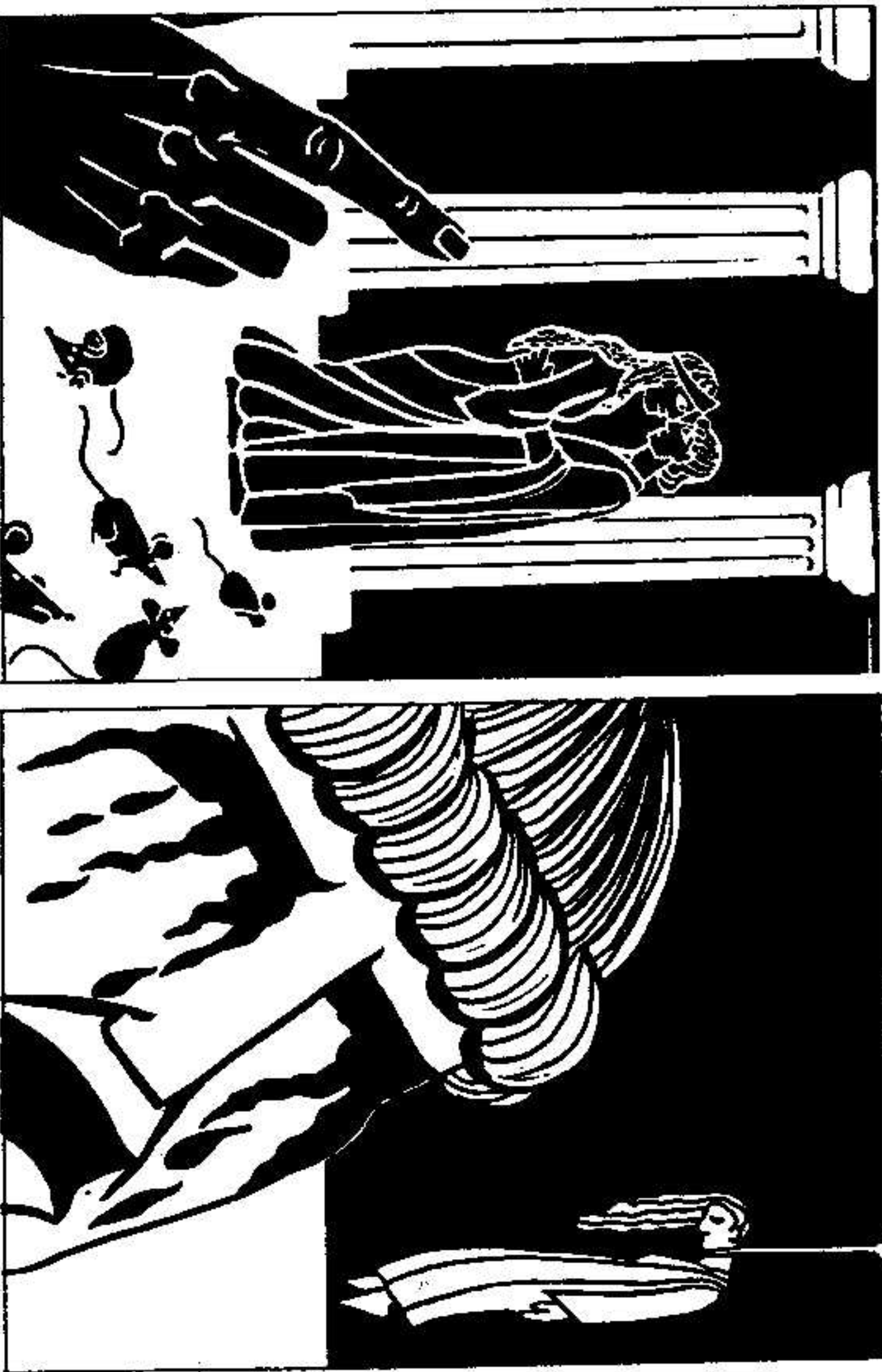

He proceeds to Thebes which is oppressed by a devouring monster, the Sphinx. He solves the Sphinx's riddle and thus forces her to kill herself (like his ancestor Cadmus, Oedipus too is a dragon-slayer).

In reward, Oedipus is offered the throne of Thebes and the hand of Laius's widow, Jocasta, his mother.

Thebes is consequently ravaged by a dreadful plague. For it to end, the Delphic oracle commands that the slayer of Laius be found.

Oedipus takes on the task and discovers he is himself the killer he is looking for. When his identity is revealed, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself with her brooch.

THE INTERPRETATION

Lévi-Strauss focuses on the episode of the Sphinx at the heart of the Oedipus legend. Solving the Sphinx's riddle leads Oedipus to incest with his mother – which is also ironically his reward, to become King of Thebes and marry the Queen.

In Lévi-Strauss's unravelling of this mytho-poetic logic, the riddle (*énigme*) is defined as a question to which there is no answer. Oedipus therefore unites a question and an answer that should have been kept apart. This exemplifies what may be described as an "excess of communication"; just as the incestuous marriage is an "excess of communication" of a different kind that similarly unites two "terms" best kept apart.