

THE SEMINAR OF  
**JACQUES LACAN**

Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller

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**BOOK II**

The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the  
Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955

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# III

## The symbolic universe

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Dialogues concerning Lévi-Strauss  
Life and the Machine  
God, Nature and the Symbol  
The Natural Imaginary  
Freudian Dualism

Yesterday evening's meeting marked a definite step forward in comparison with the first session, since we maintained the dialogue better and for longer.<sup>1</sup> I have some evidence as to the comings and goings which this elicits in each person's subjectivity – *Will I make an intervention? – Won't I make an intervention? – I didn't make an intervention* – etc.

Surely you must have realised, if only by the way I conduct them, that these sessions are not analogous to so-called scientific meetings. It is in this sense that I ask you to take careful note of the following, that in these open sessions, you aren't by any means on display, despite the fact that we have outside guests, sympathisers and others. You mustn't try to say elegant things, aimed at putting you in the limelight and increasing the esteem in which you are already held. You are here to be receptive to things you haven't as yet seen, and which are in principle unexpected. So, why not make the most of this opportunity by raising questions at the deepest level you can, even if that comes out in a way which is a bit hesitant, vague, even baroque.

In other words, the only criticism I have to make of you, if I may, is that you all want to appear too clever. Everybody knows you are. So why do you want to appear as such? And, in any case, what is so important, either about being or appearing to be so?

That said, those who weren't able to vent their spleen, or the opposite, yesterday, are asked to do so now, since the whole point of those meetings is what comes out of them.

### 1

Already Anzieu is volunteering. I would be grateful if he says what he has to say.

<sup>1</sup> On 30 November 1954, Claude Lévi-Strauss gave a lecture to the Société Française de Psychanalyse, entitled 'Kinship versus the family'.

Anzieu's question is not reproduced here.

Durandin seemed to say that the violence of the prohibition of incest was something measurable, being translated into clearcut social acts. That isn't true. In order to discover the Oedipus complex, it was first necessary to examine neurotics, so as then to move to a much wider circle of individuals. That is why I said that the Oedipus complex, with the intensity of fantasy that we have discovered it to possess, the importance and the presence that it has on the imaginary level for the subject we are dealing with, must be conceived of as a recent, terminal and not original, phenomenon, in comparison with what Lévi-Strauss is telling us about.

But how can you attach such importance, my dear Anzieu, to the fact that Lévi-Strauss includes words like *compensation* in his vocabulary, when speaking, for example, of Tibetan or Nepalese tribes in which little girls are killed, which has as its consequence that there are more men than women? The term compensation in this case has only a statistical value, without any relation to the analytic term.

We are obliged to concede to Lévi-Strauss that numerical elements have a role in the constitution of a collectivity. M. de Buffon made some very apt remarks on this subject. What is troublesome is that when it comes to the monkey ladder, as you put your feet on one rung, you forget the steps below – or you let them rot. In consequence one always has only a strictly limited field to which the whole of the conception applies. But it would be wrong not to take in Buffon's extremely apt remarks on the role played by statistical elements in a group, in a society.

There's a lot in these remarks, since they deprive all kinds of pseudo-finalist questions of their relevance. There are questions which one doesn't need to ask oneself, because they are dispelled all by themselves as a consequence of the spatial distribution of numbers. Those sorts of problems still exist, and are studied at those demographical levels to which Lévi-Strauss made a vague reference.

Buffon asked himself why bees make such pretty hexagons.<sup>2</sup> He noticed that no other polyhedron fills a surface in so practical and pretty a manner. It is a kind of pressure on the occupation of space which requires that they be hexagons, and one doesn't have to create sophisticated problems of the type – do bees know geometry?

You can see the meaning which the word compensation might have in that case – if there are less women, there will necessarily be more men.

But your mistake goes even deeper when you speak of finality, when you believe that Lévi-Strauss confers a soul on the society when he speaks of the traffic from one family to another. There would be a lot to say about the usage

<sup>2</sup> Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, Paris, 1753, IV 99.

even of the term finality, of its relations with causality, and intellectual rigour requires one to accord it some attention, if only to note that finality is always implied, in a variously embryonic form, in every causal notion – except when one expressly opposes causal thought to the finalist conception. For causal thought, finality doesn't exist, but the fact that one must emphasize that is sufficient proof that the notion is difficult to deal with.

What is original in Lévi-Strauss's notion of the elementary structure?

Throughout he emphasizes the fact that nothing is understood about the facts now collected for some considerable time concerning kinship and the family, if one tries to deduce them from any natural or naturalising dynamic. Incest as such doesn't elicit any natural feeling of horror. I don't say that we can base our work on this fact, all I'm saying is that this is what Lévi-Strauss says. There is no biological reason, and in particular no genetic one, to account for exogamy, and he demonstrates that with an extremely precise discussion of the scientific data. In a society – and we can imagine societies other than human societies – the permanent and constant practice of endogamy would not only not have any disadvantages, but would after a certain time have the result of eliminating the alleged hereditary defects. There is no possible means, starting from the natural plane, of deducing the formation of this elementary structure called the preferential order.

And what does he base this on? On the fact that, in the human order, we are dealing with the complete emergence of a new function, encompassing the whole order in its entirety. The symbolic function is not new as a function, it has its beginnings elsewhere than in the human order, but they are only beginnings. The human order is characterised by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence.

In other words, the whole thing holds together. In order to conceive what happens in the domain proper to the human order, we must start with the idea that this order constitutes a totality. In the symbolic order the totality is called a universe. The symbolic order from the first takes on its universal character.

It isn't constituted bit by bit. As soon as the symbol arrives, there is a universe of symbols. The question one might ask – how many symbols, numerically, does it take to constitute the symbolic universe – remains open. But however small the number of symbols which you might conceive of as constituting the emergence of the symbolic function as such in human life, they imply the totality of everything which is human. Everything is ordered in accordance with the symbols which have emerged, in accordance with the symbols once they have appeared.

Everything which is human has to be ordained within a universe constituted by the symbolic function. It's not for nothing that Lévi-Strauss calls his structures *elementary* – he doesn't say *primitive*. *Elementary* is the opposite of *complex*. And, oddly enough, he hasn't written *The Complex Structures of Kinship*

yet. We are the representers of complex structures, and they are characterised by being much more amorphous.

DR BARQUES: *Lévi-Strauss has spoken of complex structures.*

Of course. He alludes to them, he indicates the points of insertion, but he hasn't discussed them.

In elementary structures, the rules of alliance are part of an extraordinarily rich, luxuriant network of preferences and prohibitions, of indications, of commands, of facilitations, and cover a much larger field than the complex forms. The closer we get, not to the origin, but to the element, the more the structuration, the amplitude, the intricacy of the specifically symbolic structure of nomenclature imposes itself. The nomenclature of kinship and alliance is more comprehensive in the elementary forms than in the so-called complex forms, that is to say those forms elaborated in cultural cycles of far greater extension.

This is one of Lévi-Strauss's fundamental points, one which shows the fertility of his thinking in this book. On this basis, we can formulate the hypothesis that this symbolic order, since it always presents itself as a whole, as forming a universe all by itself – and even constituting the universe as such, as distinct from the world – must also be structured as a whole, that is to say, it forms a dialectic structure which holds together, which is complete.

Some systems of kinship are more viable than others. Some lead to impasses which are properly speaking arithmetical and which presuppose that from time to time crises occur within the society, bringing with them ruptures and new beginnings.

On the basis of these arithmetical studies – understanding arithmetical not only as the manipulation of collections of objects, but also as including the significance of these combinatory operations, which exceeds any sort of given which might be deduced experimentally from the living relation of the subject to the world – Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that there is a correct classification of what the elementary structures of kinship make available to us. This presupposes that the symbolic agencies function in the society from the start, from the moment it takes on a human appearance. But this is nothing more nor less than what is presupposed by the unconscious such as we discover and manipulate it in analysis.

This is exactly where there was some uncertainty yesterday evening in Lévi-Strauss's answer to my question. For, in truth, in a manoeuvre often found in people who produce new ideas, a kind of hesitation to sustain all of their sharp edge, he almost returns back to the psychological level. The question which I put to him in no way implied a collective unconscious, as he called it. What solution could seriously be expected from the word 'collective' in this instance, when the collective and the individual are strictly the same thing? No, it isn't a

matter of positing a communal soul somewhere, in which all these calculations would take place, it isn't a question of any psychological entification, it is a question of the symbolic function. The symbolic function has absolutely nothing to do with a para-animal formation, a totality which would make of the whole of humanity a kind of large animal – for in the end, that's what the collective unconscious is.

If the symbolic function functions, we are inside it. And I would even say – we are so far into it that we can't get out of it. A large part of the problems which confront us when we try to scientificate, that is to say to bring order to a certain number of phenomena, first in line being those of life, in the end it is always the paths of the symbolic function which lead us, much more than any sort of direct apprehension.

Thus, when it comes down to it, we always try to explain the living organism in terms of mechanism. The first question which we analysts must answer, and which can perhaps help us get away from the controversy which exists between vitalism and mechanism, is the following – why are we led to think of life in terms of mechanism? In what way actually are we, as men, parents of the machine?

M. HYPOLITE: *In so far as we are mathematicians, in so far as we have a passion for mathematics.*

That's right. The philosophical criticisms made of strictly mechanistic research assume the machine to be deprived of freedom. It would be very easy to prove to you that the machine is much freer than the animal. The animal is a jammed machine. It's a machine with certain parameters that are no longer capable of variation. And why? Because the external environment determines the animal, and turns it into a fixed type. It is in as much as, compared to the animal, we are machines, that is to say something decomposed, that we possess greater freedom, in the sense in which freedom means the multiplicity of possible choices. This is a way of looking at it which is never highlighted.

M. HYPOLITE: *Hasn't the word machine fundamentally and sociologically changed its meaning, from its origins up to cybernetics?*

I agree with you. I am in the process, for the first time, of trying to inculcate in my listeners the idea that the machine is not what a vain people think it is. The meaning of the machine is in the process of complete transformation, for us all, whether or not you have opened a book on cybernetics. You're behind the times, it's always like that.

People in the eighteenth century, the ones who introduced the idea of mechanism – an idea which it is in good taste to pour scorn on today, a notion of small machines quite removed from life, a superseded notion, so you believe – people like La Mettrie, whom I can't encourage you enough to read, those

people who lived that, who wrote *L'Homme-Machine*, you can't imagine the extent to which they were still all caught up in the categories of an earlier age, which truly dominated their thinking. One must read the thirty-five volumes of the *Encyclopédie des Arts et des Techniques* from end to end, which sets the tone for the period, to become aware of the extent to which scholastic notions dominated what they were trying, not without an effort, to introduce. These attempts at reduction based on the machine, at the functionalisation of the phenomena which occur on the human level, were very far ahead of the complications which held good in their mental functioning when they took up any common or garden theme.

Look up the word *amour*, the word *amour-propre* in the *Encyclopédie* – you'll see how far removed their human feelings were from what they were trying to construct in the way of knowledge of man.

It is only much later, in our thinking or that of our fathers, that mechanism took on its full, purified, naked meaning, a meaning exclusive of all other interpretative systems. That is an observation which allows us to grasp what it means to be a precursor. What it isn't, which would be completely impossible, is the anticipation of the categories which emerge later and which haven't yet been created – human beings are always immersed in the same cultural network as their contemporaries, and the ideas they have can only be theirs as well. Being a precursor means seeing what it is one's contemporaries are constituting in the way of ideas, of consciousness, of action, of techniques, of political forms, seeing them as they will be seen a century later. Yes, that can happen.

There is a mutation taking place in the function of the machine, which is leaving all those who are still bent on criticising the old mechanism miles behind. To be a little ahead means realising that this has as its consequences the complete reversal of all the classical objections raised to the use of purely mechanistic categories. I think I'll have the opportunity to demonstrate this to you this year.

## 2

Has anyone still got a question to ask?

O. MANNONI: *What interested me was the manner in which Lévi-Strauss addressed the problem of nature and culture. He said that for some time now, the opposition between nature and culture has no longer been visible. The work that was being done continued to look for nature somewhere on the side of affectivity, of impulsions, of the natural foundation of being. Now, what brought Lévi-Strauss to set himself the question of nature and culture was that it seemed to him that a certain form of incest, for instance, was both universal and contingent. And this type of*

*contradiction brought him to a kind of conventionalism which has baffled a good number of listeners. I made the following observation – it is troubling to find this problem of the contingent and the universal elsewhere than in the institutional world. Right-handedness is a universal form, and yet it is contingent – we could be left-handed. And no one has ever been able to prove that it was social or biological. There is something profoundly obscure for us here, which is of the same kind as that in Lévi-Strauss. To go further, and show that the obscurity is really very serious, one can note that in molluscs of the helical variety, which are clearly not institutional, there is also a universal coiling round which is contingent, since they could be coiled the other way, and some individuals in fact are coiled the other way. It seems therefore that the question raised by Lévi-Strauss is much larger than the classical opposition of the natural and the institutional. It isn't surprising, therefore, if he also tries to feel which is his natural and which his institutional side, as every one did yesterday. That seems extremely important to me – we are confronted by something which dissolves both the old idea of nature and that of the institution.*

M. HYPPOLITE: *That would be a universal contingency.*

O. MANNONI: *I don't know.*

I think you are bringing in things which perhaps were not implied by the notion of contingency that Lévi-Strauss invoked. I think that for him contingency was opposed to the idea of the necessary – in fact, he said as much. The question he posed, which we might well in the end think naive, concerns the distinction between the universal and the necessary. Which also ends up raising the question of what we could call the necessity of mathematics. It is quite clear that it warrants a special definition, and that is why I talked just now about the universe. With respect to the introduction of the symbolic system, I think that the answer to the question raised by Lévi-Strauss yesterday, is that the Oedipus complex is both universal and contingent, because it is uniquely and purely symbolic.

M. HYPPOLITE: *I don't think so.*

The contingency now suggested by Mannoni belongs to a completely different order. The value of the distinction between nature and culture which Lévi-Strauss introduces in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* is that it allows us to distinguish the universal from the generic. There's absolutely no need for the symbolic universal to be spread over the entire surface of the world for it to be universal. Besides, as far as I know, there's nothing which entails the world unity of human beings. There's nothing which is concretely realised as universal. And yet, as soon as any symbolic system is formed, straightaway it is, *de jure*, a universal as such. The fact that men have, with some exceptions, two arms, two legs and a pair of eyes – which in any case they have in common with

animals – the fact that they are, as someone once put it, featherless bipeds, plucked chickens, all of that is generic, categorically not universal.<sup>3</sup> You bring in your helix coiled one way or the other. The question you are asking pertains to the natural type.

O. MANNONI: *That is what I am putting into question. Up until now, men have opposed to nature a pseudo-nature, the human institutions – one encounters the family in the same way one encounters the oak or the birch. And then they decided that these pseudo-natures were a result of human liberty or of the contingent choices of man. And in consequence they were led to attach the greatest importance to a new category, culture, opposed to nature. Studying these questions, Lévi-Strauss ends up no longer knowing which is nature, which is culture, precisely because one encounters problems of choosing, not only in the universe of nomenclatures, but in the universe of forms. From the symbolism of the nomenclature to the symbolism of the whole, form, nature speaks. It speaks by coiling to the right or to the left, by being right- or left-handed. It is her own way of making contingent choices such as families or arabesques. At this point, it is true, I find myself at a watershed and I no longer know which way to go. I wanted to share my difficulty. I don't have a solution, just a difficulty.*

M. HYPOLITE: *It seems to me that earlier on you quite rightly opposed the universal to the generic, by saying that universality was tied to symbolism itself, to the modality of the symbolic universe created by man. But then it is a pure form. Your term universality at bottom means that a human universe necessarily affects the form of universality, it attracts a totality which is universalised.*

That is the function of the symbol.

M. HYPOLITE: *Does that answer the question? It only shows us the formal character which a human universe acquires.*

There are two senses of the word *formal*. When one speaks of mathematical formalisation, we are dealing with a set of conventions from which you can generate a whole series of consequences, of theorems which follow on from one another, and establish certain structural relations, a law, in the strict sense of law, within a set. In the gestaltist sense of the word, in contrast, *form*, the *good form*,<sup>4</sup> is a totality, but it is actualised and isolated.

M. HYPOLITE: *Is this second sense yours, or the first?*

Unquestionably the first.

M. HYPOLITE: *Nonetheless, you did speak of totality, so this symbolic universe is purely conventional. It affects the form in that sense in which one speaks of universal*

*form, without, for all that, it being generic or even general. I wonder if you aren't giving a formal solution to the problem raised by Mannoni.*

Mannoni's question has two sides.

First there is the problem he raises, which is stated in the form *signatura rerum* – do things themselves possess, naturally, a specifically asymmetrical character? There is something real, a given. This given is structured in a specific manner. In particular natural asymmetries exist. Within the present line of development of our understanding, are we going to get to the bottom of their mysterious meaning? One whole human tradition, known as the philosophy of nature, busied itself with this kind of reading. We know what that yields. It never gets very far. It leads to completely ineffable things, which moreover soon peter out – except if one wants to carry on regardless, ending up with what is commonly called a delirium. This is certainly not the case with Mannoni, whose mind is too sharp, too dialectical, not to raise such a question save in the form of a problem.

The second thing is knowing if this wasn't the point Lévi-Strauss was getting at when he told us yesterday evening that, after all, he found himself, at the edge of nature, prey to vertigo, asking himself whether the roots of the symbolic tree weren't to be rediscovered in her. Private conversations I've had with Lévi-Strauss allow me to enlighten you on this point.

Lévi-Strauss is in the midst of backtracking as regards the very sharp bipartition which he makes between nature and symbol, whose creative value he nonetheless well appreciates, because it is a method which allows him to distinguish between registers, and by the same token between orders of facts. He wavers, for a reason which may seem surprising to you, but which he has made quite explicit – he is afraid that the autonomy of the symbolic register will give rise to a masked transcendentalism once again, for which, as regards his affinites, his personal sensibility, he feels only fear and aversion. In other words, he is afraid that after we have shown God out of one door, we will bring him back in by the other. He doesn't want the symbol, even in the extraordinarily purified form in which he offers us it, to be only a re-apparition, under a mask, of God.

That is what lies at the base of the wavering which he showed signs of when he put into question the methodical separation of the symbolic from the natural plane.

M. HYPOLITE: *It isn't any the less true that to call on the symbolic universe does not even resolve the question of the choices man has made.*

Certainly not.

M. HYPOLITE: *There is no doubt that what we used to call institutions, implying a certain number of contingent choices, enter into the symbolic universe. But, having said this, it doesn't give us the explanation for these choices.*

<sup>3</sup> See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* II 5, 92a 1–5.

<sup>4</sup> The corresponding German term within Gestalt psychology is usually rendered into English as 'good shape'. Occasionally in this Seminar, this is the translation given, but more often 'la bonne forme' is translated as 'good form'.

It isn't a question of explanation.

M. HYPPOLITE: But we are nonetheless confronted with a problem.

It is precisely the problem of origins.

M. HYPPOLITE: I don't deny that the mark of a systematic universality has been imprinted by the symbolic relation. But this guise itself requires explanation and leads us to the problem which Mannoni raised. I would like to address a criticism to you. How does the use of the word symbolic help us? What does it give us? That's the question. I don't doubt that it is useful. In what way does it contribute? And what does it contribute?

I use it to give an account of the analytic experience. You were able to see that last year, when I showed you that it is impossible to bring the diverse aspects of the transference together correctly, if one doesn't start with a definition of speech, of the creative function, of full speech. In the analytic experience, we encounter it under different aspects – psychological, personal, interpersonal – it occurs in an imperfect, refracted, diversified way. Without a radical stand on the function of speech, transference is purely and simply inconceivable. Inconceivable in the true sense of the word – there is no concept of transference, nothing but a multiplicity of facts tied together by a vague and inconsistent bond.

### 3

Next time I will introduce the question of the ego in the following form:

*Relations between the function of the ego and the pleasure principle.*

I think I can show that in order to gain an idea of the function which Freud designates by the word 'ego', as indeed to read the whole of the Freudian metapsychology, it is necessary to use this distinction of planes and relations expressed in the terms, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real.

What's the point? The point is to retain the meaning of a particularly pure symbolic experience, that of analysis. I will give you an example of it, by giving you a foretaste of what I will tell you regarding the ego.

In its most essential aspect, the ego is an imaginary function. That is a discovery yielded by experience, and not a category which I might almost qualify as *a priori*, like that of the symbolic. On account of this point, I would almost say on account of this point alone, we find in human experience a door opened out on to an element of typicality. Of course, to us this element appears on the surface of nature, but in a form which is always misleading. That is what I wanted to insist on when I spoke of the failure of the various philosophies of nature. It is also very misleading with respect to the imaginary function of the ego. But this is a deception to which we are committed up to the hilt. In as much

as we are the ego, not only do we experience it, but it is just as much a guide to our experience as the different registers that have been called guides in life, that is, sensations.

The fundamental, central structure of our experience really belongs to the imaginary order. And we can even grasp the extent to which this function is already different in man from what it is in nature as a whole.

We rediscover the imaginary function in nature in a thousand different forms – all the Gestaltist captations linked up to the parade, so essential to sustaining sexual attraction within the species.

Now, in man the function of the ego possesses distinct characteristics. That's the great discovery of analysis – at the level of the generic relation, bound up with the life of the species, man already functions differently. In man, there's already a crack, a profound perturbation of the regulation of life. That's the importance of the notion introduced by Freud of the death instinct. Not that the death instinct is such an enlightening notion in itself. What has to be comprehended is that he was forced to introduce it so as to remind us of a salient fact of his experience, just when it was beginning to get lost.

As I observed a little while ago, when an apperception of the structure is ahead of its time, there is always a moment of weakness when one is inclined to abandon it.

That is what happened in the circle around Freud when the meaning of the discovery of the unconscious was pushed into the background. They reverted to a confused, unitary, naturalistic conception of man, of the ego, and by the same token of the instincts. It was precisely in order to regain the sense of his experience that Freud wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. I will show you what necessity led him to write those last paragraphs, of whose fate at the hands of the majority of the analytic community you are well aware. It is said they are incomprehensible. And even when one does show willingness to follow Freud, muzzling the *death instinct*, one doesn't understand it any more than the Dominicans, so prettily riddled by Pascal in *Les Provinciales*, had a clue about sufficient grace. I ask all of you to read this extraordinary text of Freud's, unbelievably ambiguous, almost confused, to read it several times, otherwise you won't understand the literal critique I am going to make of it.

The final paragraphs have quite literally remained a closed book, refusing to speak. As yet they have never been elucidated. They can only be understood if one understands what Freud's experience amounted to. He wanted to save some kind of dualism at all costs, just when this dualism was crumbling in his hands, and when the ego, the libido, etc., all of that was tending to produce a kind of vast whole, returning us to a philosophy of nature.

This dualism is none other than what I am getting at when I emphasize the autonomy of the symbolic. Freud never formulated that. To get you to

understand it, a critique and exegesis of his text will be necessary. I can't now take for granted precisely what has to be proven this year. But I believe that I can show you that the category of symbolic action is well-founded.

M. HYPOLITE: *I wasn't denying that. The symbolic function is for you, if I understand it correctly, a transcendental function, in the sense that, quite simultaneously, we can neither remain in it, nor can we get out of it. What purpose does it serve? We cannot do without it, and yet we cannot inhabit it either.*

Of course. It is presence in absence and absence in presence.

M. HYPOLITE: *I wanted to understand what there was to be understood.*

If you want to stick by what you are giving me now, on the phenomenological plane, I have no objection. Only I believe it is insufficient.

M. HYPOLITE: *Doubtless. I believe so too.*

And, to be candid, being purely phenomenological doesn't get us very far.

M. HYPOLITE: *I agree.*

That can only obscure the path we have to follow, by setting in advance the tone which it will retain from then on. Does the use I make of the symbolic register just lead one into locating your transcendence somewhere, a transcendence which, after all, surely must exist? Is that what it is about? I don't think so. The allusions I have made to a completely different use of the notion of machine might well indicate that.

M. HYPOLITE: *My questions were only questions. I was asking you what enabled you to avoid answering Mannoni's question by saying that there was nothing to reply to, or at least that one would get side-tracked in answering it.*

I said that I don't think that that is the meaning one has in mind in saying that Claude Lévi-Strauss is going back to nature.

M. HYPOLITE: *... refuses to go back to her.*

I also said that we have, of course, to take the formal side of nature into account, in the sense in which I qualified it as possessing pseudo-significant symmetry, because that is what man embraces in order to produce his fundamental symbols. The important thing is what gives the forms of nature symbolic value and function, what makes them function in relation to one another. It is man who introduces the notion of asymmetry. Asymmetry in nature is neither symmetrical, nor asymmetrical – it is what it is.

Next time I wanted to tell you about the following – *the Ego as function and as symbol*. That is where the ambiguity is played out. The ego, the imaginary function, intervenes in psychic life only as symbol. One makes use of the ego in

the same way as the Bororo does the parrot. The Bororo says *I am a parrot*, we say *I am me [moi]*. None of that has the slightest importance. The important thing is the function it has.

O. MANNONI: *After Lévi-Strauss one has the impression that we can no longer use the notions of culture and nature. He destroys them. The same is true for the ideal of adaptation we talk about all the time. Being adapted simply means being alive.*

There's something to that. It pertains to the same order as what I was implying just now by saying that at a given point in time Freud wanted to defend some sort of dualism at all costs. As a result of the rapid evolution of the theory and technique of analysis, Freud found himself faced with a drop in tension analogous to that which you discern in the mind of Lévi-Strauss. But, in his case, it may not be his last word.

1 December 1954