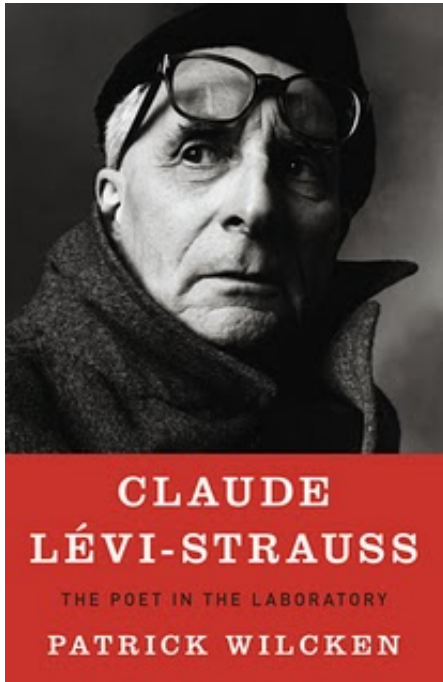


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From Honey to Ashes: The Intellectual Journeys of Levi-Strauss

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By Leo Coleman



Review of [Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory](#), by Patrick Wilcken.

The Penguin Press, 2010. 416 pages. \$29.95 (hardcover).

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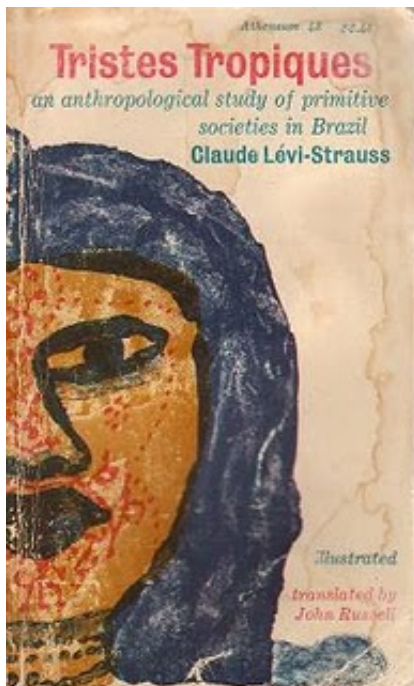
At a wedding I recently attended, one of the toasts included reference to a set of life-resolutions the bride had made with her high-school friends: To travel abroad, to learn another language, and to always have a copy of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* nearby. For these young women an anthropological classic had provoked curiosity, had instilled the value of difference, and had provided a measure of distance, illumination, and solace in their individual journeys through the transitions of adolescence. The relevance of Mead's programmatic lessons about coming of age are perhaps, in this context, self-evident, but it still pleased me to hear an anthropologist's work spoken of in this way—as a companion to engagement and experience, rather than theory to be analyzed, criticized, and dispensed with.

Patrick Wilcken's new biography of Claude Lévi-Strauss is a similarly pleasant surprise. This is the first English-language biography of Lévi-Strauss, and it is an elegant, lucid account of an intellectual's life and work—a body of work that aimed to delineate the workings of the human mind, in its encounters with the distinct elements of its world and with the products of other minds. Wilcken has read widely, and benefits from his own interviews with Lévi-Strauss—some of the last he must have granted. But Lévi-Strauss, as Wilcken often notes with some regret, was not given to personal revelations or even much intimate speculation when he was alive, and he avoided discussing his life in interviews. Thus, this book is by its own self-definition an “assessment—an intellectual biography of Lévi-Strauss's long life of the mind” (13), rather than a biography in a more traditional sense. Wilcken focuses on the ideas and the books, the conditions in which they were made, and the academic contexts they spoke to and from—a strategy well suited to the life, and which reflects Lévi-Strauss's place in the intellectual history of the twentieth century. Indeed, Wilcken situates Lévi-Strauss in his times deftly and efficiently, and untangles strands of influence ranging from (contentiously) early modernist avants-gardes, to (famously) structural linguistics. He traces Lévi-Strauss's journey from youthful participation in left-wing politics to his election to the aristocratic and conservative apex institutions of French intellectual life. Overall, this book delivers a bracing tour through an intellectual movement—structuralism—and a period in recent (academic) history when a set of ideas travelled across disciplines and across linguistic and national borders, spurred by the promise that by contemplating the distant, the “non-civilisé,” one might find release from the weight of historicity and the exactions of civilization.

Of course, Lévi-Strauss's books did not come from nothing, and his sojourns in Brazil, fieldwork there, and experiences of exile from wartime Europe form Wilcken's narrative for the first half of the book. The basic outlines of the narrative are familiar from Lévi-Strauss's celebrated memoir, *Tristes Tropiques*. While any literary biographer must meet the challenge of his subject's own prose, the difficulty is perhaps compounded here by the polarities of Lévi-Strauss's intellectual legacy, and the fact that this supremely logical analyst was himself a writer of great personality, if not purpleness. *Tristes Tropiques* is in some ways a coming-of-age story, and a voyage of discovery; it establishes a plot for “Lévi-Strauss” the intellectual which cannot be avoided in any attempt to tell the life of Lévi-Strauss the man.

Wisely, Wilcken does not try to avoid the overwhelming imprint of *Tristes Tropiques*, and he follows quite faithfully key events, rearranging the moments of reflection and memory into a more straightforward biographical account. Wilcken has also tracked down films of Lévi-Strauss in the field, memoirs by his companions on his travels, and identified the

traces of Lévi-Strauss's then-wife Dina's hand in the notes and documents out of which he compiled key parts of *Tristes Tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss's own notes on the Caduveo, whose face-paintings formed a centerpiece of both *Tristes Tropiques* and structuralism, were lost in World War II, and he employed Dina's notes in his reconstructions of their encounters with the Caduveo—see pp. 206-207). Wilcken thus makes his readers privy to “tantalizing glimpses backstage” of *Tristes Tropiques* (p. 66), and his descriptions of films, photos, and sketches that record the Lévi-Strausses' travels in Brazil are an especially valuable part of this biography.



Wilcken has a strong sense of the dramatic ironies Lévi-Strauss himself built into the account of his travels in *Tristes Tropiques*, and he skillfully picks up on and plays with the resonances and symbolic correspondences woven into that book. Wilcken both begins and ends his account “on the line”—along the decayed and partly-abandoned telegraph line that both provided Lévi-Strauss's expedition with a pathway into the Western reaches of Brazil, and served Lévi-Strauss as a nice, understated image of the speeded-up processes of decline, decay, and impoverishment that he associated with Western modernity. As Lévi-Strauss himself described the line: “The poles were allowed to collapse and the wires to rust; the last survivors manning the posts lacked the courage to leave and indeed could not afford to do so” because of relations of permanent indebtedness to traders down the line; “they were slowly dying out because of sickness, famine, and loneliness” (*Tristes Tropiques*, Penguin ed., p. 272). The Indians he had come to “discover” for himself, for their part, were caught up in this decline, grappling with it, changing with it—not, in his view, for the better. It was Lévi-Strauss's mission—along with his scientific colleagues on an over-encumbered and quite old-fashioned expedition—to discern what remained of their way of

life, social organization, and material culture under the tide of an already receding modernity. It is a testament to Wilcken's literary gifts, his fine ear, and his well-trained ethnographic sensibility that he can match Lévi-Strauss at his most elegiac, describing the present condition of the terrain Lévi-Strauss travelled across: "These dusty scrublands in the far west of Brazil are now at the agro-industrial frontier—a bleak landscape of cane fields and soya plantations. . . . Backlit by vivid blue skies, little balls of dust roll along feeder roads through the plantations. . . . The remains of [the] telegraph line snake through the secondary forests of the indigenous reservations, hundreds of porcelain adaptors lying scattered in the undergrowth" (p. 341).

In the second half of Wilcken's book, as Lévi-Strauss himself declared "an end to voyaging" and put his experiences to different ends—reading and comparing the myths of the American continents in the vast project that became the *Mythologiques*—the focus shifts to Paris, to the development of a structuralist system, the associated academic disputes, and the conditions of a professional career. The career seems to separate into two phases: first, Lévi-Strauss was an voyager and anthropologist, wedded to a tradition of "being there," of experiential, first-person research with living members of other societies and cultures (whether Brazil or New York); then, as the grand Parisian intellectual he became known for a philosophical rejection of humanism—a shift from the explanatory priority of the individual, group, or tradition in preference to a deep structure widely distributed across vast culture-areas, if not indeed universal and innate.

Wilcken tracks Levi-Strauss's analytic and universal explanatory ambitions from the very start, but it would perhaps be more structuralist—if less in keeping with the canons of biography—to treat the developments of Levi-Strauss's later career as a shift of emphasis or a new modulation, rather than as a progressive withdrawal from experience, engagement, and the world. If his life appears, here, like a "retreat" from the field to the library, from the activity of fieldwork to the aridity of theory, such contrasts at the very least do not do credit to his abiding concern with precision and exactness in capturing the rich, sensory detail.

Wilcken says that by the mid-point of his career Lévi-Strauss was "fascinated by ethnographic minutiae, but only as the raw material for second-order analysis" (257). But Lévi-Strauss aimed to show how—in his own words—"the tiniest details, however gratuitous, bizarre, and even absurd as they may have seemed at the beginning, acquire both meaning and function" when we compare and reach across cultures (in Wilcken, p. 323). Demonstrating this required a sensitivity to detail, to significant differences, which is preserved across his works. It is the analysis which grants the minutiae its significance. Wilcken reads anthropological

structuralism through an inappropriate zero-sum logic, in which something must be sacrificed if the activity of fieldwork and of direct engagement with the conditions of other people's lives is not an end in itself, but a means to wider analyses.

Thus, Wilcken insists on the "abstraction" and modernism of Lévi-Strauss's later thought to the exclusion of any possibility that it preserves the specificity of difference in any way, or provides any avenue to experience—if not to an experience that can be captured by the realist tradition of ethnography. He stresses one side of the binaries that structuralism (and modernism) always played across, focusing on "esprit," logic, systematicity, and anti-humanism, at the expense of "sens," feeling, contradiction, and human experience (though, for a structuralist, as for Hamlet, it is the thinking that makes the experience what it is). We are left with the strange and somewhat disappointing conclusion that Lévi-Strauss's theories have been superseded by cognitive science (302). Yet as an exercise in associating ideas across differences, Lévi-Straussian structuralism may be more contemporary than Wilcken allows.

Lévi-Strauss himself, of course, always distanced himself from the therapeutic uses of his own texts. He told *Le Monde* that "structuralism, sanely practiced, doesn't carry a message . . . it doesn't want to found a therapy or a philosophy" (in Wilcken 295). But the method he devised for interpreting cross-culturally and distilling meaningful messages from the proliferating details and oddities of our own and others' cultural productions led him to develop a strong theory of mind-in-the-world, and read as such his work still has an tonic relevance—in its very techniques of estrangement and forcible, if at times forced, comparison. Lévi-Strauss may be especially relevant to anthropologists interested in thinking about mind, subjectivity, intellect, and cognition from a wider evidentiary base than that provided by teams of undergraduate research subjects. Such disciplinary considerations fall beneath the horizon of Wilcken's remit, but he doesn't provide much sense to his general audience, either, that reading Lévi-Strauss, even at his "most arcane, theoretical discourse at its most French" (261), could be a specifically aesthetic and sensible experience, not just an exercise in logic and deciphering puzzles. In arguing his case—identifying Lévi-Strauss's later work with an increasing formalism, sterility, and impersonality—Wilcken is echoing a range of critics, mostly British, including Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham and Mary Douglas (Wilcken interviewed Needham, too, and provides an affecting view of Needham's role as translator and disavowed student of Lévi-Strauss's ideas).

My disagreement with Wilcken's assessment of structuralism is arcane, and perhaps even "French"—a quibble with an otherwise vivid account of a vast body of work. Indeed, Wilcken's biographical account of the

varieties of experience and the polarities of sens/esprit across which Lévi-Strauss's thinking stretched itself, reflects the challenge that Lévi-Strauss (still) presents to anthropologists, and to our habits of thinking about mind and world, history and nature. As Wilcken himself insists, and as this biography fully demonstrates, there is a great majesty in Lévi-Strauss's compendia of fragments and narratives, and (more so) in his manner of reading across difference.

Wilcken is also writing as an anthropologist, and as an engaged and concerned ethical thinker in his own right. For Wilcken, the image of the telegraph line is not just an ambiguous symbol or a convenient Conradian folly but is a real presence, materializing a history which generated more misery than it ever promised to leave behind in a march of progress. For both Wilcken and Lévi-Strauss, then, the telegraph line conveys both the promise of modernity and its threat; the dreams of the metropole and the political ambitions of the distant capital at (then) Rio, and the human cupidity that turns them into the savage reality of disease and dispossession (see Wilcken p. 81). The indigenes, Lévi-Strauss reported in *Tristes Tropiques*, took "the characteristic hum of the telegraph wire for the buzzing of a hive of wild bees at work." Wilcken's biography helps us remember the core structuralist principle that however "second-order," our symbols and our logic have no priority over those of others: if the telegraph line is a double symbolic and material reality, it must be so, if differently, for everyone who thinks it. This ethical thought is one that can serve any anthropologist well, and it is good to think it in the company of Lévi-Strauss, through the mind of Patrick Wilcken.

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