Book review: Die andere Seite des Mondes. 
Schriften über Japan

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“Flamboyant”, “incomparable”, “idiosyncratic”, “expressive”, “astonishing”, “sophisticated”, “striking”, “innovative”, “subtle”, “terrific”, “exciting”, “resourceful”, “clear” – this is the list of exuberant adjectives used by Lévi-Strauss on the condensed space of only six pages to familiarize the reader with his unrestrained appreciation of prehistoric Japanese Jōmon pottery and medieval court literature culture (pp. 30–36). In parts, this collection of short essays on Japan, published from 1979 to 2009, in fact reads like the notes of an extended hallucinogenic or epiphanous trip. Eventually, these rich and colorful descriptions and meditations by a completely overwhelmed Claude Lévi-Strauss have now been skillfully translated by Eva Moldenhauer into German as well (an English translation was published with Harvard UP in 2013, from which I allow myself to quote in this review). The essays collected in this volume are the result of five trips to Japan, which Lévi-Strauss undertook together with his wife, writer Monique Lévi-Strauss, between 1977 and 1988. Therefore, at first sight one might consider these writings as a reverberation of a heightened (sometimes exoticizing) interest of French intellectuals in Japan in the latter half of the 1960s, beginning with Sartre’s trip to Japan and culminating in Barthes visits in the following years. However, it is worth nothing that Lévi-Strauss’ first contact with Japan in fact took place much earlier and extends far back into his childhood, being in itself a reverberation of a much earlier aesthetic appreciation of Japanese–Japonisme. As early as at the age of five, he received a woodblock print by Hiroshige as a present from his father, who was an impressionist painter, himself being deeply impressed with Japanese art.

Thus, although one might criticize Lévi-Strauss for not always meeting his own high standards in his observations of Japan, namely that he considers it necessary “to escape the magnetic attraction” of the Japanese culture in order to “make a valid judgment” about its “place in the world” (or of any other culture) (p. 15), he nevertheless addresses some very important questions, reaching far beyond a trivial travel itinerary or simple descriptions of Japanese culture. In this review, I would like to focus on the two most important of these issues, namely (a) the question of Japan’s place in the world, specifically the place of Japanese mythology in a global context, and (b) the methodologically interesting question regarding the possibility of comparing cultures in general, especially when one is dealing with very remote cultures and civilizations.

Lévi-Strauss begins his elaborations on Japanese mythology, once again, by positioning Japan in a somewhat unique position: “The fundamental problem of Japanese culture”, he writes, lies in the fact that this country, “placed at the far end of a vast continent, occupying a marginal position there, and having experienced long periods of isolation”, at the same time offers “in its most ancient texts a perfectly elaborated synthesis of elements found elsewhere in dispersed order” (p. 23). In particular, he compares and mutually contextualizes certain motifs and themes in the two “most ancient” Japanese texts, Kojiki and Nihon Shoki (both dating from the 8th century), with Native American and Indonesian mythology. When doing so, he is particularly interested in the motif of mediation or the mediating tertium between life and death, or the mortal and the immortal world, namely a very peculiar and central element of almost any mythology. In Japanese mythology as well, he argues, one can find various instances of ontologically ambivalent mediation between the two separated realms of the living and spirits/gods. Typically, these are moments of transition or transgression be-
tween these two actually separated spheres, such as in the
“motif of the lost object”, in which the contact with the oth-
erworld leads to a sudden ageing of the protagonist (namely
a temporal mediation of life and death through a compres-
sion of time), or the spatial mediation of the earth and the
sea in other episodes, often requiring the help of an onto-
logically ambivalent human/non-human existence as a per-
sonified “mediator”. Lévi-Strauss takes the famous story of
“The White Hare of Inaba” as a prominent example, which
is included in the Kojiki. “The White Hare of Inaba” is a
short animal story that exists in numerous versions not only
in Japan but also in Southeast Asia and in the myths of North
and South America, as Lévi-Strauss explains (p. 70). In all
three local versions, the crossing of a body of water, which is
“an intermediate element between the sky and land” (p. 72),
is a crucial theme in all stories. Moreover, he argues, in each
story the conduct of the respective protagonist towards the
mediator between sea and land (a snake, a crocodile, or a sea
monster, depending on the local version) is a mediating one
as well, namely that of an “intermediate between moderation
and immoderation”, because in all versions of the story the
protagonist manages to persuade the mediator between the
two worlds merely by means of “haggling, dupery, (or) false
promises” (p. 73). According to Lévi-Strauss, the “interme-
diate solution” through an ambivalent mediator between the
living and the dead is a “logical necessity” (p. 127) for many
mythologies.

Particularly interesting and methodologically sophisti-
cated is Lévi-Strauss’ essay entitled “The Shameless Dance
of Ame no Uzume”, in which the motif of mediation is a cen-
tral theme as well. This episode describes the obscene
dance of the goddess Ame no Uzume by which she lures the
Japanese sun goddess Amaterasu out of the cave in which she
had been hiding. However, it is not the dance per se by a god-
ess that is said to be the first mythological medium/shaman,
namely a mediator between the sphere of immortals and mor-
tals, that prompts Amaterasu to leave her retreat but rather
the mediating force of laughter of the other gods about this
unusual behavior. Lévi-Strauss points out that there is also
a very similar variation of this story in ancient Egyptian
mythology, dating from the end of the second millennium
BC. In the Egyptian version it is the sun god as well, Pre-
Harakhti, who retreats insulted into his pavilion and can only
be convinced to leave his seclusion by the god’s laughter
casted by the behavior of his daughter Hathor, who – strik-
ingly similar to the behavior of Ame no Uzume – lifts her
dress and reveals her genitals in this episode.

It is these two elements, namely the fact that in both
narratives the protagonist deity is the sun god/goddess and
that the mediator of action lies in the decisive function of
laughter caused by revelation of genitals, that Lévi-Strauss
rules out chance as a reason for this coincidence or “in-
dependent invention”: “(G)iven the extent to which the myths
of these three regions correspond even in their details, we
must “therefore endeavor (…) to discover a single origin for
them?” (p. 23). Lévi-Strauss argues that with such funda-
mentally similar motifs we are certainly rather dealing with a
transnational “archaic mythological stratum”. However, that
“in no way” should imply “that genealogical relationships
can be established between their manifestations”. Instead,
he suggests that one could learn from the “modern form of
systematics of the animal kingdom, known as cladism” that
has taught us “to distinguish primitive from derived charac-
teristics”. Based on this assumption, it is strictly forbidden
“to conclude, based on the presence of primitive characteris-
tics in common, that two species are closely related”. If one
“transpose(s) this distinction to mythology, we may say that
the primitive characteristics of myths consist of mental oper-
ations that are formal in essence” (pp. 126, 128). His aim is
to reveal what others have called “Urmythos”, namely “pri-
mordial myths” that “must have been common to humanity
as a whole at the origin of time” (pp. 22–23). Based on this
research, Lévi-Strauss hypothesizes that a great number of
myths might actually have their origins in Asia, “from which
they could have traveled in both directions” (p. 96). This
leads me to the other important subject in the book, namely
the problem of comparison in general.

It is a very serious problem of any comparison, accord-
ing to Lévi-Strauss, that “cultures are by nature incommen-
surable”, since all “the criteria we could use to characterize
one of them come either from it, and are therefore lacking
in objectivity, or from a different culture, and are by that
very fact invalid” (p. 15). Accordingly, if comparing cul-
tures from within one culture is out of the question, the only
thing a comparator could do is either to construct an artifi-
cial tertium comparationis or indulge in what according to
Lévi-Strauss is the special task of anthropology, namely “to
propose an overall view – one reduced to a few schematic
outlines, but which those indigenous to the culture would be
incapable of attaining because they are located too close to it”
(p. 18). It is particularly the latter perspective that Lévi-
Strauss has exercised in the abovementioned comparative
remarks on mythology.

Of great importance in this regard is an essay entitled
“Domesticating Strangeness”. In this essay Lévi-Strauss dis-
cusses one of the earliest English encyclopedic accounts
of Japan, namely Basil Hall Chamberlain’s book Things
Japanese (1890), in which he describes the relationship be-
tween Japan and the West as “topsy-turvy”. According to
Chamberlain, “the Japanese do many things in a way that
runs directly counter to European ideas of that is natural and
proper”. Lévi-Strauss argues that attributions of this kind are
always the result of essentialization and containment of the
entities under comparison and thus often arise from the act
of comparing things itself. Instead, he argues that it is neces-
sary to take a closer look at the proposed “demarcation line”
between allegedly contained entities when comparing them.
This becomes very obvious in Chamberlain’s way of com-
paring, because by merely focusing only on Japan and his
country of origin, he misses that the demarcation line in fact
“passes between insular Japan and continental Asia”, and not between Japan and The West (p. 114). It is one of the greatest pitfalls of comparisons, according to Lévi-Strauss, that, in order to be able to compare, one tries “to make all the contrasts fit the same mold”. This is based on the urge to move “beyond mutual unintelligibility” in order to bring “to light transparent relationships of symmetry”, because the “recognition of a symmetry between two cultures unites them, even as it places them in opposition. They appear both similar and different, the symmetrical image of ourselves reflected in a mirror, an image irreducible to us, even though we find ourselves in every detail” (p. 116).

In summary, although Lévi-Strauss at times falls for his own, sometimes unbridled, admiration of Japan, at one point even crediting Japan with a certain cultural superiority over the West (supposedly offering a “model” of “mental hygiene”, better to be adopted by the West, p. 50), this collection of essays by Lévi-Strauss surely remains a valuable and worthwhile outsider’s perspective on Japan. Particularly refreshing to the reader will be the “cladist” perspective on Japanese mythology, or the critical examination of the more general problem of comparison by one of the great French critical thinkers of his times.