

one does not accept any meaning that is not straightforwardly grammatical, then indeed one must reject my interpretation of “possess” in line 13 of Wordsworth’s “To the Torrent at Devil’s Bridge.” But if grammatical expression is considered as only *one* rule by which to determine meaning in poetry, then the situation changes. My subject was not Wordsworth’s grammar or his poetic ingenuity in that area but his remarkable attitude toward the “force” of language. The grammatical point about “possess” is subordinated in my essay to Wordsworth’s concern with naming, cursing, and blessing, whose locutionary force may extend (that was my suggestion) to such grammatical particulars.

Hall, I suspect, has a more prudential (he calls it “plain speech”) understanding of language than I have. He combs my essay to show that it is iffy in a way that hides assertiveness, that it plays with terms, and that it is unquantitative. Though he considers these as flaws of argumentation, they seem to me presumptive matters of style. He is less of a logician than an *arbiter elegantiarum*. But I don’t want to dispute a particular point: it is the entire attitude of the man that is perplexing. What if the game of criticism has changed, or the rules of the game are being questioned? Even if that were not so, do we want critics to be certified by a Normal School?

As to style, it is conceivable that a flexible or playful mode of writing—apparently admitted only *outside* of criticism—comes closer to the rules of the language game than Hall’s sober, scientific, and uppity standards. Besides, he knows he is not all that objective. “Damn braces,” he says, quoting from Blake’s *Proverbs of Hell*. He might have remembered further hellish axioms. For instance: “One Law for the Lion and the Ox is Oppression.” Or the other half of what he quotes: “Bless relaxes.” Then “Let Hall house of Hall relax, and bless the Torrent with the Interpreter.”

He himself violates a rule of the game, as I understand it, by an imperfect quotation from *Beyond Formalism* that makes it appear as if I were a vulgar demystifier or depth analyst. The preface to my book discusses a difference in the concept of literary form. I do not simply justify the Continental style of criticism but point out, rather, that “it often neglects literary form and dissolves art into a reflex of consciousness, technology, or social process.” I go on to suggest, however, that “In Anglo-America, respect for literary form is *a priori*, but not necessarily deeper. A more radical difference between the two approaches [Continental and Anglo-American] centers on the presumed objectivity of the work of art: for us the reader in his selfhood is the problem, and

he needs historical, philological, or similar correctives . . . but for the Continental critic it is the objective form of art that seems problematic, and he seeks to liberate it, to release a hidden or repressed content.” Hall leaves out the concluding sentence, with which I will conclude again, in the hope, now as then, of finding a better understanding in this country for an alternative, though by no means alien, mode of thinking about art. “Not our subjectivity is to be feared but our overreaction to it, those pseudo-objective criteria which imprison both the work and ourselves.”

GEOFFREY HARTMAN  
Yale University

### *La Vie de Saint Alexis*

To the Editor:

To Evelyn Birge Vitz’s excellent demonstration of the inadequacy of Greimasian narratological analysis, in “*La Vie de Saint Alexis: Narrative Analysis and the Quest for the Sacred Subject*” (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 396–408), I should like to add some considerations on the origin of Greimas’ doctrines and to suggest a broader-based, more generally valid approach.

Like many other types of linguistic, stylistic, and philosophical theory, Greimas’ concepts of Subject, Object, Beneficiary, and the rest are too narrowly based on Indo-European grammatical structure. The major clause or “sentence” in modern French, English, and other Indo-European languages has one element traditionally termed the “subject,” one the “direct object,” and one the “indirect object” (all three of them either simple or compound), and various complements indicating helpers, obstacles, and the like. This type of linguistic structure is the obvious source not only of Greimas’ analysis but also of medieval philosophers’ distinctions between the *signans* (nominative, hence “actor” or subject, “that which signifies”) and the *signatum* (accusative, hence “goal” or direct object, “that which is signified”) and of Ferdinand de Saussure’s corresponding formulation of the linguistic sign as involving a *signifiant* and a *signifié*.

These structural features are far from universal. Even Latin sentence structure did not involve the obligatory presence of a subject (cf. such impersonal verbs as *pluit* ‘it rains,’ which, in their literal meaning, cannot have a subject). Greimasian analysis in terms of a single Subject and Object is applicable only to tightly knit works such as Racinean tragedies (cf. the old parallel between the five acts of *Bérénice* and the five-word Tacitean sentence *Titus Berenicen invitam invitam dimisit*).

The alternative terms “Topic” and “Comment,” proposed by Charles F. Hockett (*Course in Modern Linguistics* [New York: Macmillan, 1958], pp. 191, 194, 201–02), are more universally valid and are applicable to linguistic, semantic, and narrative structures. These two terms cover, but go well beyond, the traditional “subject” and “predicate.” Since they are not tied to any specific type of linguistic structure, they are applicable to shorter or longer utterances, ranging from a single clause to an entire literary work.

We need have no hesitation in identifying more than one Topic in any narrative and any number of Comments thereon. What is a Topic in one part of a narrative can become part of the Comment in another; the main concern of narratological analysis is to identify the shifting relations between Topics and Comments in any given work. As we have seen, this is true even for a short poem like the *Alexis*, and it is a fortiori valid for longer stories, especially epics (prose or verse). We need think only of the long and futile debates over who is the “hero” (or even the “protagonist”) of the *Chanson de Roland* (is it Roland? Charlemagne? Ganelon?)—or, to choose a modern example, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (Frodo? Sam? Aragorn?).

These considerations are not merely terminological. They concern the inherent structure of narrative, which should be analyzed with concepts as universally applicable as possible, free from ties with any specific type of linguistic structure.

ROBERT A. HALL, JR.  
Cornell University

To the Editor:

For all its elegance and finesse, Vitz’s article fails to substantiate its claims—some wrongly stated—against certain theoretical models.

(1) It is misleading to set Greimas *over against* Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, as if the two were either comparable or mutually exclusive, on the ground that the latter can get us inside the mentality of the text. Greimas’ scientific posture, of course, forbids any such pretension and can make no allowance for transcendency as such. *De Diligendo Deo* may account for the “deeply religious” nature of the work, but it does not offer a theory of narrative.

(2) Is it true that the hagiographic story entails no viable narrative transformation? The story of Alexis as summarized by Vitz does not read like a narration lacking a transformation, particularly inasmuch as Todorov and others have allowed that the reestablishment of a lost identity—an event it

does include—qualifies as a transformation. And if it is to be argued that there is “transcendence” rather than “transformation,” what is to keep the theoretician from treating the two as functionally equivalent?

(3) In other respects, too, the narrative models could be construed otherwise than as Vitz has done. She has obscured the classification of “subjects” by ignoring the fact that Greimas defines them (as well as the other *actants*) only by *function*. He is not interested, at least in the passages she refers to, in psychological subjects; the “subject” of a story in this construct does not have to be presented “subjectively.” Similarly, the love of Alexis’ family does not prevent their serving functionally as obstacles to his sainthood, if that is the object that the narrative valorizes.

(4) If God is Alexis’ object, and He is already present to him, then there is indeed no quest here. But is this formulation satisfactory? One cannot call Alexis the spiritual contemporary of Roland and still say there is no sense of conquest. If Alexis does not desire sainthood as such, then he may be said, perhaps, to desire the mortification leading implicitly to it. Vitz stresses that he “specializes” in will, that he is a Christian hero: it is “functionally heroic” to sit under the stairs for seventeen years. The *functional* value is finally acknowledged here. Alexis’ desire has an unusual generic definition, but it is not functionally null.

(5) Must God be invested in Greimas’ model as a second subject? He may be that theologically, but not necessarily in the narrative structure. Vitz’s summary suggests that God acts in the story only as an *adjuvant*, which Greimas has recognized can be represented through nonhuman forces: “Un arbre montre le chemin . . .” (Greimas, p. 185). Nothing prevents the *adjuvant*’s being supernatural, or even the determining power, as long as that power aids the hero.

(6) One might postulate a second, larger semantic structure englobing the first (the life proper of Alexis) in which God is the *destinateur*. This would account for the end, where the audience is clearly a *destinataire* (certainly not a “subject” in a Greimasian sense). I see no reason why the idea of a “transcendental subject” cannot be schematized in this manner as *destinateur*.

(7) Greimas’ model is based not on “human desires,” as Vitz asserts, but on the structure of plots; and there is no reason why it could not include hagiography in its purview if it can encompass anything else. Its secular nature alone cannot be held to exclude this, not if we limit ourselves to functions. Greimas writes that “a structure of *actants*