

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.

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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*

constitutes a *genre*" (Greimas, p. 175). The problem is to identify the ways in which the actantial functions are particular to the life of a saint.

This, in fact, Vitz has largely achieved; but because of the theoretical distortions, she has demonstrated little of substance with regard to the applicability of the Greimasian or other formalist or semantic models.

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*Mrs. Vitz replies:*

I am grateful for Robert A. Hall, Jr.'s kind remarks, and I found his comments from a linguistic perspective on the Greimasian-type model very interesting.

I wonder a little, though, about the usefulness of Hockett's approach for a narrative analysis. Is not the notion of Topic and Comment rather vague, a little like asserting that in language "we say something about something"? And would we all reliably agree on what were the Topics of, for example, the *Chanson de Roland*?

"Topic" and "Comment" are indeed very general terms and would be equally applicable to Isidore's *Etymologies*, medieval *romans*, and articles from the *New York Times*—as well as helpful, perhaps, in teaching students to write well-organized term papers. All to the good. But there is nothing specifically narrative about such an approach to linguistic utterance. In particular, this pair of notions is abstract and impersonal. But narrative, like theater, deals with personae, as well as with words and ideas: it presents characters and action. The Hockettian approach cannot, then, help us understand anything of the energy behind, or rather within, narrative: the dynamism of the narrative text. But the concept of the Subject can: the Subject intends, desires. And that desire is (generally . . .) represented as having causal energy, as moving the events. So even if the Subject-Object relationship is not always present in literature, or even always in narrative (e.g., some chronicles), when it *is* present it is useful indeed.

I will respond to Philip Stewart's objections in the order in which he raised them, but since there are seven distinct topics, each containing several questions, I may not be able to answer them all. I will try.

1. Although Greimas has set desire at the very center of his actantial system (more on this below)—in that hyphen between Subject and Object—he never clearly defines what he means by desire, nor does it apparently occur to him that desire is an enor-

mously rich and varied notion. I have been impressed with the usefulness of the notions of Subject and Object, but I have also been struck by the variability of desire. Therefore I needed to find someone who (unlike Greimas) had given the matter some thought—some thought that would prove enlightening to the text at hand. Now, suppose that in my dilemma I had turned to Freud or Lacan, or to Marx. Would Stewart have objected, *poussé de hauts cris*? Perhaps I underestimate his evenhandedness, but I very much doubt it. Yet none of these fashionable thinkers offers a "theory of narrative," nor for that matter is any of them any more "scientific" than Bernard of Clairvaux. They are all, like him, theoreticians, ideologues, whose ideas we may find useful for "getting inside texts" but whose status as "scientists" is very much open to dispute (despite the dogmatism that they all share). I suspect that it is not really because Bernard is "unscientific" that Stewart objects to him. It may not even be because he is medieval: a grammarian or a philosopher he might have tolerated. I think it is rather because Bernard is a theologian, a Christian theorist, that Stewart objects, and the rest of his objections would bear out this hypothesis.

As for Greimas' being "scientific": nonsense. His scientific posture is, to a considerable degree, just that: posture. Not only does he use terms without defining them, but, more important, like most of today's theoreticians (and like all "social scientists"), he makes all manner of assumptions about art and life that are never explored or even declared. (They may in fact be unconscious.) This means that he has a great deal of trouble with texts that don't "think" like him. The real difference between Greimas and Bernard is that the latter knows and makes perfectly clear his Christian assumptions: the metaphysical and moral position from which he is operating.

2. There is indeed in this text a transformation: the regaining of a lost identity—but Alexis is not around to notice. He is dead when the other characters discover who he really was. The discovery, the restoration of identity, exists only for his family, who had been searching for him for thirty-five years, and for the people of Rome, seeking the saint they need. This is precisely why it is useful to think of them as Subjects: *their* "lack" is finally "liquidated." They find the lost man—the man who had been lost to *them*. But the transformation does not affect Alexis: he always knew who he was.

There is no transformation for or with respect to Alexis himself in the text. Why distinguish between transformation and transcendence (which, I insisted, is the nature of Alexis' dynamic)? Why not