

## *Squaring the Circle: A Semiotics of Narrative Grammar*

Hans Löfgren

Until recently, there have been two major ways of regarding the status of theory and method within the humanities: the view that research in this field has no solid scientific basis, lacking the objectivity and experimental repeatability of natural science; or the view that, since disciplines within the humanities are normally guided by methods adequate to their objects of analysis, just as the natural sciences are, they are no less scientific. According to the second alternative, we can define the word "science" differently: rather than taking one type of research as paradigmatic for all, we can emphasize the equivalence of the method/object relation in all disciplines. Thus it is possible to argue that the humanities are distinguished by reflection on the conditions of knowledge production, on the contingency of meaning. During the last few decades, however, or actually longer if we go back to the work of Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*), we have become more accustomed to the notion that even natural science is subject to its socio-historical context. It may therefore be appropriate to ask whether, conversely, this closing of the distance between scientific methods is mutual. Is it possible that what is arbitrary for natural science can actually correspond to the scientific basis of the humanities?

To ask this question is already to imply an affirmative response. I will proceed from the assumption that literary research, though culminating in the interpretation of particular utterances, can nevertheless be placed on a general scientific basis, a theory of the conditions of production and reception of literary texts. One such theory, conceived in elementary semiotic, narrative, and grammatical terms, will be proposed here: a semiotics of narrative grammar. While semiotics is a product of modern society, and grammar dates from the medieval epoch, narrative has existed since the dawn of human culture. Let us therefore first consider the current status of narrative.

It is well known that oral cultures in general depend on storytelling for the transmission of cultural traditions and values, even the expression of a worldview. In the West, it is also widely known that epic narratives like *The*

*Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are repositories of knowledge important for sustaining a culture. Closer to our time, narrative explanations and histories as well as theories of evolution and development came strikingly to the fore. More recently, however, narrative has been called into question as dependent on a humanist conception of the subject (Lyotard). Especially, the critique of the “master narrative” as ethnocentric or totalitarian has been widely accepted, as has the deconstructionist critique of narratological binaries such as story and discourse, diachrony and synchrony. Nevertheless, this critique runs parallel with an opposite tendency: historiography, ethics, medicine, and cognitive science have recently made use, not only of narration but also of narrative theory as such (White, Nussbaum, Herman). Narrative is recognized, for example, as an essential cognitive function, or as offering an alternative to propositional ethics. The project presented in this article forms a part of this tendency to recuperate and extend narrative in scientific research, while taking the new critique seriously: The reference in the title to squaring the circle is meant to suggest a scientific dilemma, problematizing the combination of diachronic and synchronic time in structural narratology yet proposing a new resolution.

Squaring the circle names a classical mathematical problem which is impossible to solve given the specified algebraic means. In order to find the dimensions of a square with the same area as a given circle, other means, consistent with the terms of the problem, are necessary (based on the recognition of  $\pi$  as a transcendental number). In this way squaring the circle may stand as a metaphor for the solution of problems of self-reference and spatio-temporal coherence that challenge scientific theory, and in particular a narrative theory like the one attempted in this essay, which addresses temporality in the broadest terms possible. To solve a problem of language couched in elementary semiotic and grammatical terms, a certain departure from semiotic logic is required. The problem can be formulated in two questions, as follows:

Can the diachronic and synchronic conceptions of time associated with narratology find a general scientific application? And how can the synchronic bias of structuralism be avoided in this extended application? In attempting to construct a general narrative grammar I will return to major elements of a structuralist tradition, while subjecting these to a new critique; by introducing change into a synchronic elementary structure of signification, I will – in accordance with the squaring of the circle metaphor – attempt to solve a problem by altering the conditions of its solution, cutting through its Gordian knot. I will challenge the hierarchical form of the structuralist binary, projecting a model of maximum variation and with no

simple repetition of any procedure. In particular, the aim will be to reach a point where the inevitable – if only provisional – privileging of certain terms will be countered.

In carrying out this project, here presented in preliminary hypothetical terms and with an emphasis on the construction of a formal model, I might appear to be reassuming – rather than challenging – not only a totalizing narrative but also a structuralist concept of universality. I would argue, however, that I am rather disclosing the persistence of these concepts in post-structuralist discourse, though to be sure universalization must now rigorously confine itself to elementary and indispensable categories present in all cultures, such as contradiction and difference, and a totalizing narrative must acknowledge conflicting discourses as well as the articulation of narrative variety. The total narrative must be of a negative kind, constructed indirectly through the mutual critique of opposing reductive claims in the existing theories that are drawn on; also, form and substance must be recognized as principles that found opposite but equal hierarchies. Totality is thus achieved by putting mechanisms of exclusion out of play. Of course, no theory could be universal in the sense of popular acceptance, but unargued disagreement – opinion – is something that scientific, methodical argumentation, must attempt to explain and challenge rather than accommodate to.

Squaring the circle as a nominally impossible problem is also a figure for a literally mathematical problem and an argument that has been highly influential on literary interpretation following its textual application by Derrida: Gödel's undecidability theorem . Concisely stated, the theorem holds that a number system is “unentscheidbar,” either complete and inconsistent or consistent and incomplete. It must either contain itself and thus be contradictory, or it must exclude itself and thus be consistent but incomplete. Gödel himself anticipated the extension of his theorem to other fields, referring to an epistemological dilemma, and others have elaborated the theorem within linguistics. Applied to narrative theory, undecidability means that the inclusion of the producer of the narrative must be contradictory, an attempt at self-inclusion that remains a logical impossibility. I will argue, however, that methodical reflection on the conditions of narrative can resolve this contradiction. If we can adequately theorize the conditions that language presupposes – something outside of language which is yet inside language in the sense of constituting its necessary presupposition, then the undecidability theorem will not apply. If extra-linguistic reality can be theorized as structured like a language, then a narrative presents itself which contains the linguistic narrative and its author.

More precisely, there is in this case no boundary, no question of containment: the narrative model turns back on itself. Language then appears as both metaphorical and constitutive, its speakers the creatures of the larger narratives they devise – cosmological, evolutionary, historical – although strictly speaking these are not narratives but rather the conditions of narrative.

Nevertheless, it might be more accurate to say that the procedure to be followed in this prospectus is a type of positive deconstruction, the construction of a model in which no terms are privileged. This is a process within which moments of instability and deconstruction continually occur, until a point of equilibrium is reached, a dynamic state of constant change in which constructive and destructive tendencies balance each other. Such an equilibrium is not directly available within cultural and historical time, which is why the project of a positive deconstruction must also consider physical and biological time – cosmology and evolution. But if literary theory seems to go astray when it aims to taking such a broad perspective, it must be said that the ultimate aim for doing so in the present context is to sharpen the distinctive qualities of culture and literature. My goal is to construct a model of literary narrative that can be inserted into a historical model understood in terms of its boundaries with physical and biological time, an insertion made possible by the use of the same type of categories in each instance. Placing the literary narrative within these successive contexts is intended to open up the cultural significance of the literary text; the shape of history as presupposing the unique cognitive and linguistic competence of *Homo sapiens*; and the shape of time as based in the alteration of physical matter.

---

To sum up this introductory section, the method of introducing change into an elementary structuralist model has the ultimate aim of constructing a model in equilibrium, with no privileged terms. This state of equality is associated with physical cosmology and material change, the evolution of life forms and consequent capacity to cognitively grasp the passage of time; and history which, because of its tendency toward abstract relations, provides conditions increasingly conducive to meta-linguistic reflection. Such a model is possessed of three correlated and equal pairs of terms: diachronic and synchronic perspectives on time; microcosm and macrocosm, or individual and societal perspectives on culture; and the consequent modeling of space and time as finite, yet without boundaries, in which the constraints that dictate undecidability no longer apply, stabilizing language, whose ostensibly invariant structure is then only the effect of constant change.

## **1. Previous Research**

An earlier stage of this project was published under the title "Projecting a Model of Semiotic Change" (*boundary 2* 24:2). The present plans are to more rigorously construct a formal model in the adaptation of an elementary structure of signification – the "semiotic square" – and the employment of grammatical terms, expanding the model as space-time narrative while focusing on literary narrative syntax. The "model of semiotic change" has a triadic composition ultimately derived from an early work by Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, which formulated a program for combining linguistics and critical theories involving society and the individual subject: ethnology and psychoanalysis. Foucault did not pursue this program, however; rather, he reversed his position on one part of the triadic project – psychoanalysis. It devolved on others to explore the potential of this strategic interdisciplinarity. In Britain, there was a significant attempt to take up the project, although in the place of Foucault's "ethnology" there was now Marxism, a significant departure from the initial conception. Linguistics was part of the triad in the form post-structuralist theory, essentially as included in the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan. Notable achievements in this area are works by critics such as Catherine Belsey (*Critical Practice*), John Ellis and Rosemary Coward (*Language and Materialism*) and the film journal *Screen*. In the United States, the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson rejected the notion of signifying practice as a necessary supplement to Marxism, but relied heavily on psychoanalysis in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*. Jameson accepted psychoanalysis as a materialist theory while subordinating it to the historicizing method of Marxism. He also used Greimas' semiotics – the semiotic square – but critically, as a tool for registering ideology through its formal closure. Influenced by these critics and the latter in particular, my work differs from theirs in regarding psychoanalysis neither as the missing subject of Marxism nor as capable of being entirely historicized. I regard these two theories as complementary forms of theoretical reductionism as well as compelling instances of materialist thought reflecting on its own conditions of possibility. It will also become evident in this essay that I regard a modified form of the semiotic square as having a positive application.

Not surprisingly, the previous research on which I draw also includes narrative theory, well exemplified by the work of such narratologists as Gerald Prince, Susan Onega and José Angel Garcia Landa. Prince defines

the basic elements of narrative in grammatical terms, while Onega and Garcia Landa apply sentence grammar to the activity of four subjects – real writer, textual writer, narrator, and character – and their respective direct and indirect objects. At the same time, my project is closer to the work on narrative by the deconstructionist critic J. Hillis Miller, who problematizes beginnings and endings, as I will do in seeking to model a no-boundary effect.

The work of A. J. Greimas includes not only structural semantics but also narrative theory. I have drawn on both, though simplifying narrative syntax to include only the distinction between subject and object, not the other "actantial" functions – sender/receiver and hero/opponent. It has been the elementary structure of signification, the basic unit of Greimas' structural semantics, which has had the greatest importance for my project, although I claim that a synchronic structure can only exist at the most general level of a linguistic model, not as an elementary unit.

## **2. Project Description**

My hypothesis is therefore that narrative theory, making use of semiotic as well as grammatical concepts, can resolve the dilemma of undecidability and that the formal model which constitutes a finite figure without a boundary forms an intrinsic argument about space-time, simulating the nature of time, as well as finding support in numerous applications. I hope to present sufficient evidence to support the potential validity of this claim. Two kinds of evidence will be presented: the first lies in the just-mentioned formal adequacy of the model as such, its capacity to combine the diachronic and synchronic as well as the double hierarchy of physical, biological, and cultural time, essentially modeling the recursive and looping nature of time that is an alternative to the impossibility of both infinity and the bounded, as if space were a vessel or container. The second kind of evidence presented will consist of the application of the model, in the concluding section of this article, to a literary text. The example will focus on the central trope of "landlessness" in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, illustrating the prediction of the semiotics of narrative grammar that in the modern epoch societal and individual perspectives – micro- and macrocosm – are complementary. Landlessness is an over-determined figure inscribed in a psychosexual narrative as well as in history and political economy, a figure crossed by all four major plot modes – comedy, romance, tragedy and satire – ultimately to be assigned a dominant meaning as ironic romance. It is an ironic restoration in symbolic terms of a lost social position as well as of identity and self-esteem.

## *2.1 The formal model*

What is a semiotic grammar then, and one that is also narrative? A simple answer would be that all grammar depends on linguistic signs and that standard grammar is well equipped to generate a concise narrative: a sequence of a few clauses can describe a series of causally related events. But what I intend is rather the use of explicit semiotic categories to represent an elementary narrative grammar and the extension of this grammar to a narrational level, a level of production that includes the implied author as well as narrator.

The special type of grammar proposed for the project derives from the semiotic square as used by A. J. Greimas, an elementary structure of signification. This figure displays the conjunction and disjunction of four terms, or, two terms and their negations. Greimas refers to the particular relations that make up this figure as contradictory, implied, and contrary. I adapt this structure as modified by the poststructuralist critique of its static closure. It is an exemplary model with respect to its application of the major insight in modern linguistics that language is a system of differences without positive terms. But the semiotic square is inherently unstable, since meaning is shown to be relative.

My hypothesis can be restated within this context as follows: by extending the relation between semantic terms to variation in types of terms, then variation in intrinsic and extrinsic relations of the system thus produced, and finally variations in material basis, it is possible to generate a model with three temporal dimensions in which the problematic of self-reference and instability can be resolved. First, the semiotic square is broken down into three relations and moments: the contradiction, splitting, and difference of terms. These relations are then reproduced as grammatical structures (semantics, syntax, and semiotic mode); as the relation of grammatical systems (micro-, intermediate, and macro-grammar), or variation in the relation between micro- and macrocosm; and finally as the relation between space-times, constructed by shifting the dominant term from macrocosm to microcosm, a displacement that occurs as one material substance becomes the basis of another: physical, biological, and cultural. Physical reality is spatially unbounded, though with temporal limits; but cultural time, because it always integrates the past within present, achieves a synthesis of diachrony and synchrony. It is a phenomenon which we can experience most concretely as the momentary synchronization of plot as we reach the end of a narrative.

To elaborate with only the most significant detail, the intermediate grammatical system consists of semantic variation in the relation positive/negative; the semiotic mode, of variation in the relation signifier/signified; and mediating between these, syntactic variation in the subject/object relation. As for the micro- and macro-grammars, they are constructed by differentiating the type of semiotic mode, where the second term increasingly becomes an external category as we move from micro-grammar's self-relation to the macro-grammatical referent that has the sign as its contrary. With respect to language as such, micro-grammar corresponds to phonology and macro-grammar corresponds to pragmatics or the speaking subject – in this case the production of narrative from the standpoint of an implied author. The reason that these systems can be called grammars is that they involve mediation by a subject between a relation intrinsic to the system and another, extrinsic relation. For example, the mediation between two elements of sound and their phonological encoding as phonemes is analogous to the mediation of syntax between the intrinsic relation of semantics – two signifiers – and the extrinsic relation of signifier and signified.

All of these variations should be understood as constructed bi-directionally, in a double hierarchy which ultimately places two totalizations in relation to each other. The notion here is that on the one hand, language can be derived from extra-linguistic reality as doubling and self-reference, while on the other hand language is constitutive of reality. Or, if we assume that reality is constituted, in elementary terms, by three kinds of relations (contradiction, displacement, and difference) and that each set of such relations can enter into a similar series of three relations, and further, that this process is repeated two more times; then reality will so to speak fold on itself, with the production of language as a result. It should be recalled, however, that the double generation of all these moments of the model involves the coupling of prospective and retrospective, and not any teleological conception.

Let us review the kinds of temporality characteristic of each stage in this double hierarchy. The first series of three relations is a simple diachronic sequence, a linear succession of three moments. The second series involves levels of grammar and is more complex: on the one hand, there is a sequence of three moments for each level, but on the other, change at one level can be constrained by another level at an earlier moment of change. This means, for example, that three syntactic periods, though they appear successively to differentiate subject and object, can remain inscribed within the contradictory unity of signifier and signified. The third type of temporality is

synchronic, though in a restricted sense: there is a permanent structure differentiating micro- and macrocosm, yet the macrocosm is the dominant term. Hypothetically, one can say that the basic form of time that physicists associate with the expanding universe corresponds to the sudden primacy of extrinsic relations which will persist until the energy that drives this process will have been exhausted, at which time there will be a reversal, a return to microcosmic primacy that will eventually shrink the universe to the point which would then be subject to another expansion. This symmetrical diachrony that occurs within a permanent synchronic frame is the first moment of the final temporal series. Together, the other two moments of biology and culture bring about the stabilization of this temporal displacement, even if only in cognitive and, from the standpoint of physical change, metaphorical terms. Biological time – whether we focus on evolution or cognition and memory – is reiterative, always beginning over again in a new position. Cultural time synchronizes, always reconstructing elapsed time from the standpoint of an ending. Culture restores the equal status of the microcosm, the individual, while its repetition of linear time in the succession of modes of production postpones this equality to the limits of historical development.

The two totalizations implicit in this procedure constitute two kinds of synecdoche: the whole for the part and the part for the whole. The reason is that successive space-times, as in the repetition just mentioned, reproduce the conditions of the underlying space-time. Culture rests on physical and biological grounds, but not directly: it reproduces these as economy and politics, such that culture achieves relative autonomy as a space-time dependent on physical and biological realities, yet irreducible to them. Consequently, the process of model construction at the primary level, the installation of grammatical terms, results in a redundancy, a contradiction which must be resolved at another comprehensive level of the model. Whereas the fundamental level developed by elaborating change within the semiotic square installs the elementary terms, this second level effects the operations, carries out the syntactic functions. The combined form of these functions is a system of four narrative strings which redistribute the accumulation of an excess in one part of the system and a deficit in another part (more precisely, there are two narrative strings and a third which is split in two). The special significance of this resolution is twofold: first, it encloses linear change within a model that is finite yet without a boundary; second, it creates a narrative system which corresponds to the four *mythoi* or narrative plot modes as theorized by Northrop Frye.

## 2.2 Literary Plot Modes

To be more precise, this narrative system corresponds to a structural adaptation of Frye's model. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye describes four archetypal plots in terms of the circular relation of seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter correspond to comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire, each with its characteristic plot and representative characters. The purpose of adapting these four modes to a structural model is twofold. First, the modes can then be placed in dynamic relation to each other, opening up readings in which several modes can be seen as impinging on a single text. Textual analysis is then not primarily classificatory, but involves reading a plot mode in terms of a writing strategy rather than a given type. It should also be possible to read texts in terms of specific deviations from standard modes, such as failed closure or the deliberately open ending, and elements which tend to convert one mode into another. Second, reducing the plot modes to syntactic deep structures enables a reading of their relation to a moment of cultural change which is theorized by means of the same syntactic categories. The structural (read "post-structural" in terms of the critique of a synchronic bias, as stated above) or semiotic narrative syntax consists of four narrative strings arranged in two correlative pairs: the conjunction of a positive object and the disjunction of a negative object, the disjunction and conjunction of ambivalent objects. The first pair opposes desire and aggression and involves the negation of opposing drives; the second pair opposes ambivalent objects and involves displacement as a method resolving an ambivalent drive orientation. In other words, one narrative type involves the acquisition of an object of desire; its contradictory involves the rejection of an object of aggression; and the other contradictory pair, with objects of both aggression and desire, must involve the release of one aspect of ambivalence – through grief and laughter, respectively.

Textual analysis according to the literary model developed so far requires the specification of a surface structure which selectively reproduces the deep structure which installs the grammatical terms and the intermediate structure centered on four kinds of syntactic operation, or plot modes. It is a question of the position taken in regard to the dominant paradigm and moment of change which the fundamental level posits, of emphasizing a certain plot mode or type of resolution, as well as privileging certain categories, figuratively re-encoding a basic semantic register, and representing syntactic functions as characters. In general terms, it is a question of the production of narrative discourse on the basis of the selective reproduction of paradigmatic cultural change and the options of narrative grammar. And these general terms apply to the microcosm of the individual subject as well as the

macrocosm of the societal subject. The central issue in this regard is the relative state of embedding of the individual in the societal. One central feature of history, or social evolution, is the undoing of this embedding and the articulation of individuality.

### *2.3 Culture*

This cultural form of narrative grammar can be summarized by referring to changes in its semiotic mode, its three epochs of semiotic differentiation in the relation of signifier and signified. This is to say that social evolution moves from the naïve association of word and thing to the abstract association between an acoustic or visual image and a mental concept. The condition of this change is material: the change from hunting and gathering to agricultural and finally to capitalist society. Just as the relation between intrinsic value and extrinsic value becomes more differentiated, so does the relation of signifier and signified. In this conception of three epochs or modes of production, I have adapted Marxist theory, and in the same spirit I have developed a typology of deviations from the dominant epochal mode. Change always depends on integration of the past; alternatively the past is repeated through regression, reappropriation, or reinvention.

Similarly, I have adapted psychoanalysis for the individual instantiation of the model of change, although structural psychoanalysis lies closer to my method than does existing structural Marxism. In particular, the notion of three periods of psychosexual development in the work of Jacques Lacan has been influential. I read the sequence of symbiotic, imaginary and symbolic phases – the latter two generally recognized as corresponding to Freud's pre-Oedipal and Oedipal stages – as the sequence of differentiation of the subject-object relation from contradictory unity to splitting and differentiation. Moreover, this structural translation of Marxism and psychoanalysis makes possible a reading of the initial embedding of individuality in collective relations and its subsequent independent articulation. This last point will be elaborated in the exemplification of the model which follows here.

## **3. Method and Example: *Moby-Dick***

In introducing a textual example and application of the theory, let me hasten to point out that I do not believe in the application of theory as the exclusive method of interpreting texts. Even if the theory in question were fully adequate, the text would always contain something unpredictable. My comments on Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* in what follows are only offered as a means to another end, namely the illustration of theory.

Interpretation as such must depend not only on theory but also on commentary or paraphrase of what is ultimately a unique instance of language. Indeed, a theory is at times valuable as the ground against which the particularity of the text manifests itself as sheer divergence.

We can read the meaning of texts because we assign them a frame of reference or because we find in them some type of meta-language: explicit explanations of meaning, as in direct characterization; allusions and the use of familiar conventions; or anticipations of what we call theory. *Moby-Dick* is a work that excels particularly in the latter category, and it does so chiefly by exposing how a primal semantic level at the site of disruption which marks the beginning of a story is re-encoded at less transparent, symbolic levels where the narrative work of restoration can claim its effects. The semanteme or metaphor which constitutes the pivotal point of such associated semantic levels in *Moby-Dick* is "landlessness." To embrace the apparently limitless ocean world, as Ishmael has done in going on a whaling voyage as a simple sailor, is to leave the static and restrictive land world behind in search of adventure as well as contemplative freedom. At least this is the basic premise of the narrative regarded in terms of its literal physical events. Landlessness, however, has negative as well as positive connotations, and it is inscribed in other semantic fields than that of heroic action.

As Ishmael himself explains, when one comes from an illustrious family it touches one's sense of honor to go to sea not as a paying passenger but as one who gets paid, and not very well at that. If we regard this first-person narrator as Melville's fictional persona, with all the ambiguity that this phrase evokes, it is not difficult to make the biographical association to the declining fortunes of the Melville family. In particular, this concerns the distinguished genealogy on his mother's side, the Gansevoorts, who enjoyed high status among the New York landed gentry. Even without this biographical reference, however, the theme of economic decline and loss of privileged class position is apparent. It is a case, as it were, of the text carrying its context within itself. We can date *Moby-Dick* in the sense of placing it within a certain historical conjuncture, not only by noting its date of publication in 1851, at the height of the American Romantic period, but by more concretely placing it at a moment when the 18th-century elite loses its social position in favor of the increasingly powerful middle class and the broadening of democratic representation.

In terms of the semiotic model, this moment marks the onset of the second period of the third epoch; that is to say, the period under the third economic mode, capitalism, when its two major classes are increasingly

coming into conflict. The model predicts that the equivalent change at the level of language and cultural representation will be the replacement of realist representation and empiricism with the themes of self-relation and reflection, with the divided self and its project of restoring a unified existence. Further, the embedding of individuality in a second period relation will produce a social Imaginary, the reproduction as social structure of something like a pre-Oedipal relation, though without implications for individual psychology. It is a question of a social structure that splits an earlier, relative unity of subject/object relations. And this is indeed the phenomenon that we can observe generally in the literature and culture of the Romantic period. It is the cultural dominant of Romanticism; not the paradigm that everyone adheres to but the reference point for virtually all cultural practice.

When we go on to inquire what kind of plot mode and plot resolution characterize *Moby-Dick*, we find, not only a critical reaction to this dominant paradigm, but also a double determination in terms of material and libidinal economies. The critical reaction expresses itself as a questioning of the romantic reflection of self in nature. The withdrawal into the contemplation of nature in this novel is represented skeptically as narcissistic; the image that we see in all bodies of water, drawing us irresistibly, is like the image of Narcissus who kissed his own reflection in the pool and drowned. Ishmael states in agreement with Ecclesiastes that "all is vanity", and cautions us in Platonic terms to avoid the artificial fire, keeping to the truth of the sun. His story follows a path from narcissistic enchantment to disenchantment, from allegiance to Ahab's quest for revenge to detachment and sobering insight. The outcome of Ahab's quest is tragic: he has his moment of *anagnorisis* before he is pulled down into the depths by Moby Dick, while the resolution of Ishmael's voyage is in the mode of romance. The mother who had punished him severely in childhood with enforced isolation returns symbolically at the end to rescue him after the wreck of the *Pequod*.

The two characters are the split manifestations of a single subject at the intermediate level of narrative syntax, and that is perhaps why the plot modes that govern their fates are not without traces of irony. The symbolic mother that rescues Ishmael is the "devious-cruising Rachel" who, in her search for missing members of her crew, "only found another orphan." As for Ahab, though his death may be seen as the tragic outcome of an attempt to eradicate evil, nevertheless, his vengeful ambition has a satirical aspect since the question of what intention might be embodied in the white whale is never resolved. We might conclude that the ideal of landlessness initially stated in the novel and figuring in both of these characters' ends does not

entirely hold up. Or, noting that the split protagonist produces a splitting of plot modes, we might conclude that Melville exposes the virtual act of narrative resolution as illusory. Even so, however, the semiotic model of narrative grammar sets up an interpretation of the text as responding to a historical paradigm that is both material and, to use a term from Raymond Williams, a "structure of feeling."

There is one major question left unanswered, however: why does Melville choose such a dark and skeptical resolution, regardless of plot mode? The most persuasive answer in the present context is that the articulation of a general form of individuality, since it expresses certain material conditions of possibility, also expresses the relation of two subject positions inherent in those conditions. This is to say, not only that class position is invoked as one constraint on meaning but also that the structure of feeling has its own two positional alternatives. Drawing on the narrative theory of Greimas, we can refer to two possible outcomes in regard to the narrative of restoration: euphoric repossession of the object or dysphoric failure. In psychoanalytic terms, these would correspond to fantasies associated with early ego formation. Without making any value judgment in favor of one position or the other, one can observe that the dysphoric alternative characterizes Melville's work, while the euphoric applies to such writers as Emerson and Whitman. Both aspects belong to the general form of individuality, but to explain the choice that a certain writer makes we must refer to his or her particular predisposition.

I have argued earlier in this article that theories which hold to the primacy of social relations or of the individual, respectively, are complementary – they mutually presuppose each other. Psychoanalysis can be used to read the text symptomatically, whether focusing on the implied or real author, and it can be used when focusing more on the literary intention of a text and its cultural meaning. As I have suggested, "individuality" as a general social form, the transposition of embedded individual subjectivity onto social structure, forms an intermediate category between collective relations conditioned by mode of production and the particular subject. Thus, the psychoanalytical "imaginary" can characterize social relations in general, divided into euphoric and dysphoric opposites. One aspect and example of this cultural imaginary is the dream-like plot of *Moby-Dick*, the construction meaning in individual terms as loss and restoration. But the negative condition which marks the beginning of narrative can just as well be construed as the loss of pre-capitalist society where value has not yet been instrumentalized and commodified as extensively as in the emerging

middle class culture that created those commercial conditions for the writer that Melville so deplored.

In terms of this literary application, the major significance of the semiotics of narrative grammar I have outlined in this essay lies in its demonstration of how the individual can be, not only a part subordinated to the social whole, but also constitutive. Such a reading is made possible by what I have called the negative totality of the semiotic model, a totality which is built up, not from the standpoint of a typically unacknowledged metalanguage, but through the removal of the mechanisms of exclusion through which the model's constituent theories otherwise establish their autonomy and legitimacy. The complex process in which microcosm and macrocosm flow into each other is constant change, a continual reintegration of time that narrative uniquely effects.

## Selected Bibliography

- Belsey, Catherine. 1980. *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen.
- Coward, Rosemary and John Ellis. 1977. *Language and Materialism. Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*. Boston: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1966. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- Frye, Northrop. 1957. *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Greene, Bryan. 1999. *The Elegant Universe*. New York: Vintage, 2
- . 2004. *The Fabric of the Cosmos*. London: Penguin.
- Greimas, A.-J. 1983. *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. Trans. Danielle McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie. Intro. Ronald Schleifer. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Greimas, A.-J. 1987. *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*. Trans. Paul Perron and Frank Collins. Intro. Fredric Jameson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hawking, Stephen. 1988. *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. London: Bantam.
- . 1988. *The Universe in a Nutshell*. New York: Bantam, 2001.
- Herman, David. 1999. *Narratologies*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

- Jameson, Fredric. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1977. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton.
- Lyotard, Jean François. 1993. *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Intro.
- Fredric Jameson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital*, vol. 1. Intro. Ernest Mandel. Hammondsorth: Penguin.,
- .1970. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. In *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 1998. *Reading Narrative*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2001. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Onega, Susanna & José Ángel García Landa (ed. and introd.). 1996. *Narratology: An Introduction*. Longman: London and New York.
- Prince, Gerald. 1982. *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative*. Berlin: Mouton.
- Ryan, Michael. 1982. *Marxism and Deconstruction: a Critical Articulation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, Hayden. 1973. *Meta-history: the Historical Imagination in 19th-century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press.
- Wilden, Anthony. 1968. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, Johns Hopkins Press: Baltimore.