

# Text or Context

Reflections on Literary and Cultural Criticism

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JENS MARTIN GURR

**“Without contraries is no progression” –  
Emplotted Figures of Thought in Negotiating  
Oppositions, *Funktionsgeschichte* and Literature  
as ‘Cultural Diagnosis’**

“One comes back to these damned binaries all  
the time.”  
(Robert Kroetsch, in Neumann and Wilson 26)

**1. Introduction**

In *The Poetics of Prose*, Todorov argues that there are two extremes to avoid in the study of literature (cf. 218): One can either theorize too much and lose sight of the texts one is allegedly studying, or one can uncritically engage with a text without any theoretical reflection and can easily lose sight of the big picture. In the context of this volume, the related challenge lies in reconciling the literary scholar’s need to do justice to the intricacies of individual texts with the cultural studies scholar’s focus on the larger cultural frame of reference. I hope to meet both challenges in my discussion by tying my theoretical considerations to the discussion of selected examples and vice versa.

But let me for a moment remain with the idea of having to negotiate between extremes. Because it is exactly this, different ways of dealing with binary oppositions, that I am concerned with in this essay. More specifically, I am looking at how the few basic ways of dealing with such opposites, how the basic figures of thought, are emplotted to form a narrative. My basic contention is that, since these binary opposites are ways in which both human thinking generally and literature in particular attempt to make sense of the world, we can use the specific ways in which texts emplot these figures of thought as a tool in ‘cultural diagnosis’—at least, we can ascribe specific functions to them in a given cultural context. More precisely, we can ascribe certain functions to (clusters of) texts which, in specific contexts, predominantly make use of one or the other form of negotiating a key cultural dichotomy. In my arguments—and in trying to do justice both to text-centred literary studies and to more broadly conceived

cultural studies—I draw on a number of fields: the history of ideas, cognitive linguistics and cognitive anthropology, narratology and the theory of metaphor as developed in the interplay between literary studies and the theory of historiography, as well as approaches to text-context relations and *Funktionsgeschichte*.

I will first comment briefly on binary thinking and narrative; secondly, I will develop a limited and necessarily sketchy inventory of ways of dealing with these opposites, which I can here only briefly unfold. My first illustration will be Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*. I will then outline my theoretical approach to dealing with these figures of thought as they underlie narrative texts. Finally, I will suggest applications of this approach, first by briefly returning to *The Hungry Tide*, then more generally by looking at the history of gender concepts in literature along these lines, more specifically, by discussing how the opposition of 'male/female' has been encoded in Anglophone literary texts since about the early 20th century.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Binary Thinking and Narrative

It has long been established that thinking in binary opposites is a deeply rooted anthropological constant in virtually all cultures. As Hallpike, Lévi-Strauss and others have shown, it seems that this is partly 'natural' in the sense that many phenomena in nature appear to be dualistic: day/night, land/sea, or the human body, which is symmetrical and thus dual. As anthropologists and cognitive scientists have argued, binary thinking may actually be the result of an adaptation of the human mind to the two-sidedness of many phenomena in nature, particularly of the symmetrical structure of the human brain and the body.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, it is fairly clear that the decimal system is not least a result of our ten fingers and the arithmetic strategies they allow for.

But binary thinking is so deeply rooted that we tend to capture all sorts of phenomena in terms of such opposites, even where they do not quite so obviously lend themselves to being seen that way. Thus, binary oppositions such as sameness and difference, nature/culture, subject/object, individual/society, good/evil, in a sense, are everywhere; and if they are not there, we construct

<sup>1</sup> This, to be sure, is not meant to be an approach to gender studies; what will be of interest to me are the figures of thought and their employment; the gender dichotomy merely serves as an example.

<sup>2</sup> For various classic views on the subject, cf. for instance Hallpike: "[T]he prevalence of dualistic classification is not principally a manifestation of a binary property of the human mind, imposing itself on a neutral range of phenomena, but rather an accommodation to a dualistic reality" (1979, 224); Lévi-Strauss argued: "Perhaps it must be acknowledged that duality, alternation, opposition and symmetry, whether presented in definite forms or in imprecise forms, are not so much matters to be explained, as basic and immediate data of mental and social reality which should be the starting point of any attempt at explanation" (1970, 136); cf. also Lloyd (1966, 80), who states that "many phenomena in nature exhibit a certain duality"; cf. also Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 14, 25 et passim), Lakoff and Johnson (1999) and Johnson (1987).

them. In this vein, Titzmann and others have shown that any multiplicity can, without contradiction, be translated into a system of binary oppositions (cf. Titzmann 1977, 147 et passim). And then of course, in every epoch there are innumerable literary texts which make clear just how fundamental oppositions and dichotomies are for human thinking.<sup>3</sup> Take William Blake, for instance, from whom I borrow part of my title: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (1988, 34). More recently, linguists such as Lawrence R. Horn, Steven Jones, Alan D. Cruse (cf. particularly Jones 2007) and others have shown how the semantic relation of antonymy, the linguistic representation of such oppositions, is firmly implanted as a cognitive schema and plays a central role in children's language acquisition, for instance.

Now, to come to narrative, the structuralists—mainly Greimas, Lotman and Todorov (cf. Greimas 1970, Lotman 1977 and Todorov 1977)—have long shown that narrative proceeds from precisely these binary oppositions. They have also revealed the grammar of narrative, the operations by means of which the deep structure of a binary opposition is translated into the surface structure of a text. Narrative, it is clear, is based on the acting out, on the "*mise en branle*" (Greimas 1970, 164), of underlying dichotomies. In that sense, narrative is always already *as narrative* a way of dealing with binary oppositions.<sup>4</sup> But I am not so much concerned here with the way in which narrative texts can mediate between extremes and can harmonize such binaries which discursively, in a philosophical text, could not be reconciled.<sup>5</sup>

What I aim to look at specifically is the way in which narrative can be seen to use a very limited repertoire of figures of thought, of firmly established cognitive patterns and schemata available to deal with these binaries. What interests me as a literary scholar is the way in which these figures of thought are emplotted; what interests me as scholar of cultural studies is the function which specific figures of thought—or the frequent occurrence of a certain figure in specific cultural contexts—fulfil in the system of a culture.

By means of some few examples I would here like to show how the negotiation of oppositions in narrative texts often not only occurs at a deep-structural level but on the surface level of a text. One of the most well-known passages

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of how one such dichotomy—the anthropologically central one of mind vs. body and related dichotomies such as those of the 'higher' and the 'lower' faculties—with remarkable consistency unfolds from classical antiquity to Modernist literature, cf. Gurr (2003).

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion and an application cf. Reckwitz (1989, 25–45); cf. also (Reckwitz 2005). For an insightful collection exploring the potential of fiction in the negotiation of extremes generally, cf. Glomb and Horlacher (2004). This quality of narrative might also be conceptualized in terms of Žižek's notion that "narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by way of arranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism" (Žižek 1999, 197, italics original).

<sup>5</sup> For a comparison of the negotiation of identical contradictions in discursive and in literary texts, cf. Gurr (2007).

from the novels of Charles Dickens is the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* of 1859, a historical novel on the time of the French Revolution. This novel begins as follows:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way [...]. (Dickens 2000, 5)

These oppositions are then played out in the course of the text. In some texts, the two sides of an opposition are allocated to different characters; take the classic structure of a good protagonist and an evil antagonist in fairytales as an obvious example. But frequently, these “paradigmatic oppositions are syntagmatically unfolded in acts of embodiment or personification” (Stierle 1975, 21, my translation<sup>6</sup>), played out in the temporal sequence of the narrative. That narrative may partly dissolve paradigmatic oppositions by thus temporalizing them, by projecting them into a narrative sequence, is illustrated in exemplary fashion in Jeffrey Eugenides’ 2002 novel *Middlesex*, of which I again quote the opening lines:

I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August 1974. (Eugenides 2002, 3)

The opposition male/female, which characterizes the entire text, is here made explicit at the surface level from the very beginning. I will briefly return to this example later.

### 3. Figures of Thought in Dealing with Dichotomies

Just how fundamental this binary thinking is becomes evident in those theorists who seek to get away from, to deconstruct such binary oppositions or to reveal them as cultural constructs. Let me cite Hélène Cixous here, who in 1975 wrote: “Thought has always worked by opposition. [...] Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) opposites” (1994, 38). What she indicates here by distinguishing between “dual, irreconcilable” and “mitigable, dialectical” opposites is that there are different patterns of thinking in conceptualizing such oppositions, which basically fall into two fundamental categories.

Now, there is a fairly limited number of basic thought patterns which have evolved to deal with these dichotomies.<sup>7</sup> Here, I am not concerned with a history of ideas of such figures and space does not allow me fully to unfold and

<sup>6</sup> The original reads as follows: “paradigmatische Oppositionen syntagmatisch zu entfalten, sie ‘auszuspielen’ in Akten der Verkörperung” (21).

<sup>7</sup> For a different categorization in another context, cf. Elbow, who comes up with five categories.

historicize this inventory from, say, ancient Greece to the present day, but let me sketch a typology, an inventory of figures of thought in dealing with opposites. One would first of all distinguish between those figures of thought which analytically leave the opposition unmediated and unresolved and those which attempt a synthesis or harmonization.

One such non-mediating figure of thought is to assume an ‘either/or,’ black or white distinction between the opposites with no shades of grey in between. Until well into the 20th century, this was the dominant way of thinking about gender—there was male, there was female, and this categorization was ruthlessly enforced. Usually, at least in Western thinking, one of the two poles is privileged over the other—Derrida, for instance, speaks of “*hierarchies violentes*” (1972, 56). Another figure of thought—also without shades of grey but on the side of the synthesizing or mediating figures, is to assume a ‘both/and’ position: ‘Both-and’ figures are, for instance, central to Christianity. The incarnated Christ is fully human *and* fully God. But central notions of Romantic literary theory also belong here; think of Keat’s idea of “Negative Capability” (Keats 1958, 194), the ability to accept both parts of a contradiction as equally acceptable and even to view this tension as productive. The notion of complementarity in modern physics, of light as both wave and particle, can also be conceptualized in this vein.

A further key figure of thought in dealing with dichotomies is to assume a continuum between the two, in other words to assume shades of grey in between. The classic example here is Aristotle’s definition of courage in book III, chapter 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1934, 1115a), for instance. There is a continuum between the two poles of being a coward and being reckless; and somewhere in between, not necessarily in the middle but closer to the extreme of recklessness, lies the ideal of being brave. This assumption of a continuum, to be sure, is also a figure of thought in dealing with opposites; it does not manage to avoid binaries entirely.

Then there is the figure I would like to call ‘monistic inclusion,’ a figure of thought which collapses opposite aspects into one, arguing that one pole actually contains the other. Sacvan Bercovitch (1986) has argued that this is the pattern underlying the American ideology of ‘liberal pluralism.’ What Bercovitch terms “the American Ideology” presents itself as so tolerant that it actively encourages dissent and opposition. But dissent is neutralized because it is immediately redefined as being part of the system. Any critique is thus always neutralized as a mere critique of symptoms, never of the system. This, Sacvan Bercovitch, David Savran and others have argued, is a mechanism at the heart of American culture and literature of the last 200 years. According to this figure of thought, any criticism of American society which remains on the *basis* of an American ideal—from classic American writers via Martin Luther King to Michael Moore—reinforces the hegemonic system which it presumably attacks. The familiar mechanism of the commodification of subversion, i.e. the absorption of the counter-culture into the mainstream frequently discussed in cultural studies, can

also be conceptualized in this way. Thus, one pole is here defined so broadly as to include the other and to defuse it as an opposite.

A figure of thought that is especially present in mystical thinking both in Western and in Eastern traditions is that known as *coincidentia oppositorum*, the notion that the extremes meet and become identical. This occurs in various forms in mystical thinking—with Plotinus in the third or with Cusanus in the 15th century—in each case with the assumption that the world is necessarily ‘made up of contraries,’ that all oppositions are reconciled in God. But the fusion of opposites as a figure of thought also occurs with Schelling, C.G. Jung, and in Jewish mystical thinking (for the parallels cf. Drob 2000, 2001, 2009).

A further key figure of thought is what is known as ‘*Aufhebung*’ in the sense of Hegel’s dialectic; the usual English translation ‘sublation’ is hardly helpful. Here, the extremes are ‘*aufgehoben*,’ sublated, by being reconciled on a higher level. ‘*Aufheben*’ is here obviously used in the triple sense of ‘negate,’ ‘preserve’ and ‘raise to a higher level’ (for analogies with Eastern thought cf. Axtell 1991).

I do not have the time to go into detail here, but I believe that even the fundamental poststructuralist operation of deconstructing such binary pairs as untenable constructs can ultimately also be seen as a figure of thought, namely to take the binary opposition in question and to show that each term of the opposition (e.g. *signifiant/signifié*, freedom/necessity, nature/culture etc.) is completely and logically dependent upon its opposite, i.e. dependent on the very ideas and concepts that the term was meant to oppose or exclude. This thinking is fundamentally opposed to any harmonizing pattern; the emphasis here is on maintaining difference, rather than—as Derrida criticized with Hegel—seeking to obliterate it.

#### 4. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*.

As a first illustration to be discussed in some detail, I would like to use Amitav Ghosh’s 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*, a text which instantly became a set text for ecocritical approaches but which is also highly illuminating in my context.<sup>8</sup> This text very consistently emplots a ‘both/and’ figure. The novel in a very narrow sense is based on the dichotomy of land and water, ebb and flood. It is entirely set in the Sundarbans, the vast delta at the estuary of the rivers Ganges and Brahmaputra in the coastal region between India and Bangladesh:

[I]nterposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal lies an immense archipelago of islands. [...] The rivers’ channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. [...] The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily [...]

<sup>8</sup> This reading to some extent draws on my more detailed discussion of the text in another light in Gurr (2010).

And to the inhabitants of these islands this land is known as *bhatir desh*—the tide country. (Ghosh 2004, 6–7)

This landscape, so fundamentally both land and water, is in many ways really the key protagonist. The text very consistently plays with the idea that narrative quite literally springs from the tension between land and water. The following passage makes it quite clear that the dike, the dividing line between land and water, is literally the origin of narrative.

“[T]he *bādh* [dike] is not just the guarantor of human life on our island; it is also our abacus and archive, our library of stories. [...] Let’s see if you can pick out the spots where the embankment has been repaired. For each such repair I’ll give you a story.”<sup>9</sup> (Ghosh 2004, 202)

The text thus literalizes the notion that narrative originates from the tension between binary opposites. In many ways, even the protagonists are subordinated to the structuring principle of ebb and flood, land and water. The central protagonist, Piya, a marine biologist there to conduct research on dolphins in these waters, finds herself caught between two men, Kanai, a worldly translator from the city, and an illiterate local fisherman named Fokir. In a key passage which illustrates this constellation, Fokir chants a local legend, of which Piya has just read Kanai’s English translation:

[S]uddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense. [...] Although the sound of the voice was Fokir’s, the meaning was Kanai’s, and in the depths of her heart she knew she would always be torn between the one and the other. (Ghosh 2004, 360)

Thus, even in the protagonists, the novel echoes the dichotomy of land and water—and it is hardly incidental that Piya is not doing research on fish or on land animals, but specifically on dolphins, mammals living in water but breathing air, a species also embodying the being caught between both.

In a very literal sense, the dualism of land and water is precisely what motivates the entire narrative, even in the disastrous storm which occurs as the climax of the novel. This storm very directly grows out of the unique climate developing in this area which is so fundamentally both land and water. This opposition is also mirrored in the two men and again in the structure of the narrative: The book has two parts entitled “Ebb” and “Flood”; and the two strands of the action are treated in chapters alternating between the sub-plots.

<sup>9</sup> For the connection between language and perception, cf. also 6: “To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way”; and 159: “The two of them, Fokir and [Piya], they could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other: and wasn’t it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins’ echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being.” Cf. also 258: “[W]ords are just air, Kanai-babu,” Moira said. “When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard.” Cf. also 335, where this saying is quoted again by Kanai. Cf. also 82, 247, 282.

## 5. Making Sense through Narrative: A Cognitive Approach to Figures of Thought and their Emplotment

What mainly interests me here is the way in which the figures of thought I have discussed above are emplotted, are turned into text, how they come to shape a narrative. Though I do not wish to add to the wealth of material on text-context relations directly (for a compelling approach, cf. Baßler 2005), before commenting on how literature, and specifically narrative texts, might be used as a tool in 'cultural diagnosis'—or before we can think about potential functions in the sense of *Funktionsgeschichte*—a few considerations on the relationship of literature and context are in order.

I here want to use the notion of 'emplotment,' the turning into narrative of concepts, events, oppositions. This is what Paul Ricœur calls "mise en intrigue" (Ricœur 1983, *passim*). According to Ricœur, it is the telling of stories that allows the expression of human experience, of history and of human identity.<sup>10</sup> Narrative, in other words, is an anthropological necessity; we need narrative as a form of making sense of the world: "I see in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience" (Ricœur 1984, I, xi).<sup>11</sup> Literature thus becomes a prime form of appropriation and refiguration of the world and ultimately a form of sense-making. And in contrast to a number of recent critics, I maintain that this has always been and remains, even with radically 'postmodern' texts, one of the prime functions of literature (cf. Butler/Gurr 2008). This notion of literature as necessarily a culturally embedded form centrally concerned with human experience might be formulated in terms of what Iser calls "the return of lived reality in the text" (Iser 1993, 21, my translation).<sup>12</sup> However fictitious a text is, it cannot help being in some sense mimetic. This connection between text and 'reality' can also be conceptualised in terms of what Stierle calls "connecting worlds in literature" which extend the real world into the realm of the imaginary (Stierle 1983, 176, my translation).<sup>13</sup>

In trying to understand the way in which experience is turned into narrative, I use Hayden White's notion of 'emplotment' (for the following, cf. mainly White 1973, 1–42). As one of the most important theorists of narrative, mainly in historiography, but also of fiction, virtually all of White's work can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the way in which narrative is used to structure and order the representation of experience. And in producing such narrative,

<sup>10</sup> For this, cf. also Mandelbrote: "[M]emory and the telling of stories about oneself, allow the expression not only of the human experience of time, and of history, but also of human identity. We are who we are because of the stories which we remember and repeat about ourselves" (Mandelbrote 1996, 339).

<sup>11</sup> Original: "Je vois dans les intrigues que nous inventons le moyen privilégié par lequel nous re-configurons notre expérience temporelle confuse, informe et, à la limite, muette" (Ricœur 1983, I, 13).

<sup>12</sup> Original: "die Wiederkehr lebensweltlicher Realität im Text."

<sup>13</sup> Original: "literarische Anschlusswelten [...] die unsere Welt in je spezifischer Weise ins Imaginäre fortführen, doch so, dass die Übergänglichkeit selbst erkennbar ist."

White argues, there are only four basic plots available: comedy, tragedy, romance and satire. And the choice of a plot structure also implies the choice of a figure of speech and thought—he analogizes them with the established tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony—and carries an implicit ideology, a way of seeing the world. Drawing on Frye, Pepper and Mannheim, White thus comes up with an extremely complex and sometimes quite schematic combination of these basic plots, of key figures of speech, and of ideological implications. It is clear that there cannot be a mechanistic mapping of form to function, but White's notion of a correspondence of certain figures of thought with certain patterns of emplotment and certain ideological preconceptions is, if not taken too schematically, very compelling. Where White has demonstrated that there are very few basic patterns available to emplot a story, I build on that to maintain that different options in emplotting the negotiation of those binary opposites at the heart of all narrative are also very limited indeed and that they can be correlated with certain cultural patterns of thought and can therefore be studied with a view to their cultural functions.

There are basically only the figures of thought I outlined in part 3. Thus, in negotiating any key opposition in a culture—with Luhmann, one could speak of "*Leitdifferenzen*" (cf. Luhmann 1984, 19, 57)—there is only this limited arsenal of strategies available. And *which* of these figures is emplotted in a given situation is frequently indicative of a specific view of the world. As an example, take class differences in the 19th-century novel. This opposition can be emplotted as an unbridgeable gap, or forms of social mobility can be staged which suggest that the boundaries between classes are not impenetrable. What is central to this understanding of the functions of literature is the view of Kenneth Burke, Dieter Wellershoff, Wolfgang Iser or more recently that of an impressive volume edited by Stefan Glomb and Stefan Horlacher. This is the view of literature as a form of symbolic action, as a social experiment free from the constraints of everyday life—literature as 'depragmatised behaviour in rehearsal' ['entpragmatisiertes Probehandeln'], which makes it possible symbolically to try out in fiction solutions for key problems of a society.<sup>14</sup>

What becomes crucial to me here is the research carried out in cognitive linguistics in the last 25 years by George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Mark Turner, Gilles Fauconnier, Zoltan Kövecses and others.<sup>15</sup> This research has revealed the close connection between figures of speech, figures of thought, human experience and the way in which cognitive patterns shape our understanding of the world. Metaphors and other figures of speech, according to this research *are* figures of thought:

<sup>14</sup> One classic formulation is Wellershoff's, who spoke of literature as a "space of simulation for alternative rehearsal behaviour in rehearsal at reduced risk" (Wellershoff 1973, 57, my translation): "Simulationsraum für ein alternatives Probehandeln mit herabgesetztem Risiko." Cf. also Glomb and Horlacher (2004), *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> For the classic studies cf. Fauconnier (1997), Fauconnier and Turner (2002), Johnson (1987), Kövecses (2005), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff and Johnson (1999), Lakoff and Turner (1989), Turner (1991); cf. also Geeraerts and Cuyckens (2010).



Metaphors [...] are conceptual in nature. They are among our principle vehicles for understanding. And they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality. [...] New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. [...] Much cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 159, 145)

We construct reality through conceptual metaphors. This research has become far more rigorously and empirically cognitive in recent years (for an excellent recent overview, cf. Geeraerts and Cuyckens 2010, especially part I, 3–418. And according to an increasingly prevalent view, these figures of speech and thought are often based on human experience and virtually become ‘embodied’ in the sense that they become hard-wired patterns in the brain.

A related field of research at the intersection of cognitive linguistics and cognitive anthropology is concerned with cognitive or cultural models. These are established concepts of perception and cognition which also shape thought and behaviour. Holland and Quinn in a classic account define cultural models as follows:

[Culture is understood as] shared knowledge—not a people’s customs and artefacts and oral traditions, but what they must know in order to act as they do, make the things they make, and interpret their experience in the distinctive way they do. [...] *Cultural models* are presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared [...] by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behaviour in it. (Holland and Quinn 1987, 4; cf. also Kronenfeld 2008)

It is one of the central insights of this branch of research that these forms of conceptualizing the world are made up of a very limited number of small and comparatively simple building blocks. The “prototypical scenarios” encoded in these simplified models of reality and the applicability of these models to a wide range of situations can help to account for how we acquire knowledge about the world, how we are able appropriately to act in it, and how we can share this knowledge by means of communication (cf. Holland and Quinn 1987, 35).

As might be expected—and as Zoltan Kövecses has shown in his excellent 2005 study *Metaphor in Culture*—a number of these metaphorical ways of conceptualising the world are specific to certain cultures, while others are universal and appear in all cultures. This may be indicative of just *how* fundamental these models are. Although, strictly speaking, Kövecses is only concerned with metaphorical concepts, these are frequently elaborate and far-reaching enough to qualify as cultural models in the sense I have just outlined.

What also belongs here is the concept of ‘scripts’ known from research in cognitive science and artificial intelligence. Schank and Abelson defined scripts as unconscious and collectively shared building blocks of understanding and behaviour (Schank and Abelson 1977), as in the notorious example of the restaurant script. Going to a restaurant involves a fairly fixed sequence of actions: sitting down, choosing from the menu, ordering, eating, paying the bill,

leaving. So far, so banal. But although I have no intention of entering the maze of philosophical and ethical debates associated with this type of research, it is becoming increasingly clear that this scripting appears to go much further and that, in a lot of situations, rather than making conscious choices, we run such automated scripts. Cultural understanding, the organization of perception and actions appears to function by means of a limited inventory of small, more or less clearly defined schemes and scripts.

What all this ultimately means is that patterns of conceptualising the world, including the figures of thought in dealing with dichotomies I have been discussing, are deeply rooted and inescapably shape thinking—and writing, for that matter. In a sense, culturally embedded beings that we are, we cannot help sharing the limited number of figures of thought available to us in negotiating dichotomies. In that sense, in writing, too, “we are not master in our own house,” to use Freud’s phrase (1969, 294, my translation).<sup>16</sup> In dealing with the dichotomies at the heart of every text, we can only emplot a very limited inventory of figures of thought—and in doing so, we inevitably suggest a certain view of this dichotomy.

Finally, what is also helpful here are the views of Jürgen Link, Winfried Fluck or Hubert Zapf on functions of literature in the system of culture in the sense of ‘*Funktionsgeschichte*’ (for an overview cf. Gymnich/Nünning 2005; for one influential account cf. Fluck 1997). Thus, following Zapf’s suggestive terminology, literature can have the function of a critical cultural diagnosis (“critical meta-discourse”), but it is also an “imaginative counter-discourse,” which potentially develops alternatives. Finally, as a “reintegrating inter-discourse” (Zapf 2001, cf. also Zapf 2002), it re-integrates into the cultural whole what is otherwise repressed or marginalized.

In synthesizing these approaches, I suggest that—by leveraging both the close textual awareness of ‘literary studies’ and the contextual awareness of ‘cultural studies’—the specific form in which a text encodes a central opposition, that the figure of thought it emplots in negotiating this opposition, can be used to ascribe certain functions to a text in a given cultural situation. If I thus propose to discuss literary texts and their functions in the system of culture, it is clear that there can be no mechanist scheme in the sense of a one-to-one mapping of one figure of thought and one ideological view. But White’s notion of a correspondence or “elective affinity” between certain figures of thought, “modes of emplotment, and ideological implication” (White 1973, 29 *et passim*), if not used too schematically, can be very illuminating.<sup>17</sup> This is where Ricœur, White, cognitive linguistics and ‘*Funktionsgeschichte*’ can fruitfully be brought together in an attempt to use the emplotment of specific figures of thought in dealing with “*Leitdifferenzen*” as a tool in ‘cultural diagnosis’ or at least in order

<sup>16</sup> He uses the phrase “wir sind nicht Herr im eigenen Haus” in the 1922 Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent—balanced if unorthodox—discussion of White and an attempt (based not least on White, Ricœur and cognitive approaches) at exploring the interplay between metaphor, narrative, and emotion, cf. Snævarr (2010).

to ascribe certain functions to a text in a given cultural context. 'Cultural diagnosis' here means more than a mere critical stock-taking, but also implies the fictitious exploration of alternatives in the sense of 'de-pragmatized behaviour in rehearsal' or of "an imaginative counter-discourse" (*sensu* Zapf).

#### 6. Suggested Applications: *Funktionsgeschichte* and the 'Diagnosis of Culture'—Texts and Contexts, Literary and Cultural Studies

Let me illustrate a few of these ideas by returning to *The Hungry Tide*. In a remarkable passage, the familiar notion that narrative grows out of the central dichotomy represented in landscape is combined with the notion highly resonant in my context that language and the cultural concepts embedded in language indeed bring about a specific way of perceiving the world. This is of course a classic notion by now; but I have rarely seen it exemplified more elegantly:

[W]ith her binoculars fixed to her eyes, [Piya was] watching the water with a closeness of attention that reminded Kanai of a textual scholar poring over a yet-undeciphered manuscript: it was as though she were puzzling over a codex that had been authored by the earth itself. [...] [H]e too had peered into the unknown as if through an eyeglass—but the vistas he had been looking at lay deep within the interior of other languages. Those horizons had filled him with the desire to learn of the ways in which other realities were conjugated. And he remembered too the obstacles, the frustration, the sense that he would never be able to bend his mouth around those words, produce those sounds, put sentences together in the required way, a way that seemed to call for a recasting of the usual order of things. (Ghosh 2004, 269)

Realities are "conjugated" through language; a different use of language brings about a different view of what is here significantly called "The Order of Things." The cultural models inherent in language and thought restrict and shape the ways in which we can see the world. This novel thus exemplifies a number of my central notions: It shows how narrative in a very narrow sense springs from a central opposition; it illustrates how narrative necessarily emplots one of the few concepts available to deal with binary opposites—here the figure of 'both/and'; it shows how cultural models and concepts shape the perception of the world and, by extension, reality itself.

A number of reviewers of the novel have remarked on its somewhat contorted ending. I would even venture the suggestion that this awkward ending may indeed be explained by means of the underlying figure of 'both/and' the text consistently emplots: At a crucial moment in the text, with the death of one of the characters, the central 'both/and' figure and the central structural principle of alternation between sub-plots no longer pull in the same direction and the text literally falls apart in a very suggestive way.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> That this structural aporia may also be read as a self-conscious showing of the strings and hinges of the narrative in a subtly self-reflexive novel is another matter, which does not, I believe, invalidate my reading.

I turn to my final application to show how such an analysis of figures of thought in the narrative negotiation of oppositions can be functionalized in the sense of a *Funktionsgeschichte*. I can only sketch this here, but I believe it would be illuminating to give a reading of the cultural history of gender ambiguity, of androgynous figures in literature and culture all the way from Ovid's Tiresias in the *Metamorphoses* to Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* in terms of the specific ways in which they emplot different figures of thought in developing different concepts of androgyny.<sup>19</sup>

Take Ovid's Tiresias from the *Metamorphoses* as one of the earliest literary conceptions of potential androgyny in classical antiquity.<sup>20</sup> Tiresias turns from male to female and back again, but this is entirely an 'either/or' conception; he is entirely male or entirely female, never both (Ovid 1997, III, ll. 314–36). By contrast, if we leap into the twentieth century, the Tiresias in Eliot's *Waste Land* is both simultaneously, he is "throbbing between two lives,/Old man with wrinkled female breasts" (Eliot 1974, ll. 218–19), he is both, but he is so only as a literary device; there is no concept of androgyny, there is no enriched experience, on the contrary. This is an entirely different matter with Woolf's *Orlando*, though Orlando is male and female only in sequence, never both at the same time—an ideal example of narrative's tendency to temporalize dichotomies by playing out the poles one after the other. Here, however, and in a curious sense also in the fusion of minds of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren in *Mrs Dalloway*, we come remarkably close to the emplotment of a dialectical *Aufhebung*. Both genders are *aufgehoben*, in the full triple sense; they cease to matter as separate poles; they are nonetheless preserved in some sense by being fused into a new unity at a higher level.<sup>21</sup>

Philip Roth's 1972 novel *The Breast*—arguably his least compelling work of fiction but nicely suited to my purpose—loosely based on Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* [*Die Verwandlung*], comes to mind as a further variation. As David Kepesh awakes one morning, he finds himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic human breast. This transformation, I would argue, may be read as the emplotment of a monistic concept of human sexual identity, while Angela Carter's *Passion of New Eve* (1977) may very well be read as emplotting a deconstructive movement which anticipates Judith Butler's deconstruction of defined gender identities and their replacement by a far more fluid conception of gender as a performative concept. As a further more recent example, one might consider Iain Bank's 1984 *The Wasp Factory*. This can be read as the emplotment of a neither/nor figure, because the protagonist, born as a girl but raised as a boy,

<sup>19</sup> For the notion that, in order to represent "the paradoxical abstraction of androgyny," literature has to resort to representing a "combination of physical and psychic traits of both sexes or their respective symbols, i.e., the hermaphrodite," cf. Gvozdeva (2007, 141, my translation).

<sup>20</sup> There is, to be sure, the earlier notion of the originally androgynous human figure in Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, cf. Plato (1983, 188 C-193 D).

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of Woolf's conception of androgyny, cf. Matz (2007, 161–88).

is really neither—and since she/he turns out to be a perversely disturbed killer, the novel very drastically emplots the double deprivation of a full identity.

Space does not permit me to go into detail, but a large number of further texts formulating androgynous conceptions such as Will Self's *Cock and Bull* or films such as *Orlando*, *Boys Don't Cry* or *XXY* can in each case be fruitfully discussed as emplotments of an underlying figure of thought in dealing with the dichotomy of male/female.

Finally, let me briefly come back to Jeffrey Eugenides' 2002 novel *Middlesex*. At the beginning of the novel, as I have shown above, the opposition male/female still appeared as a chronologically separated sequence. But by means of non-chronological narration, this opposition in the course of the novel is increasingly blurred, undermined and dissolved. The text thus develops an understanding of androgyny in which, in between the poles of male and female, there is a whole continuum:

To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry [...] I've got a male brain. But I was raised as a girl. If you were going to devise an experiment to measure the relative influences of nature versus nurture, you couldn't come up with anything better than my life. (Eugenides 2002, 19)

In another year or two I'll leave Berlin. I'll be sad to go. This once divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for *Einheit*. Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred [referring to Detroit], I feel hopeful in Berlin. (2002, 106)

[I have] the ability to communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both. (2002, 269)<sup>22</sup>

Even these brief selections make clear how the novel uses the opposition of male/female and its narrative dissolution in order to negotiate a whole sequence of other dichotomies at the same time, here, for instance, the opposition of nature versus nurture or genes versus education in the development of the individual, or ethnic differences. Even the city of Berlin, of course, is a highly symbolic location—maybe a little *too* blatantly symbolic—as a formerly divided city which here comes to symbolize the unification and harmonization of what used to be divided.

To conclude: A vast number of fictions in which gender distinctions are blurred and androgynous concepts are developed have flourished in the 20th century and even more so in the last, say, 30 years. As Stefan Horlacher has shown in an excellent study of masculinity in Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, this can already be shown for the late 19th and the early 20th centuries (cf. Horlacher 2006). This can be seen side by side with developments in gender theory since the early 1990s, with, for instance, Judith Butler's

<sup>22</sup> Cal, Eugenides's protagonist, from the very first page of the novel repeatedly compares himself to Tiresias and even plays the role in a school production of *Antigone*. Cf. also 331 and especially the chapter entitled "Tiresias in Love," 340–60. For another recent engagement with Tiresias, cf. Carol Ann Duffy's "from Mrs Tiresias" (1994).

concepts of gender as being socially constructed and ultimately performative. It might also be read in the light of a frequently diagnosed 'crisis in masculinity' and no longer quite so new discussions about the 'new' 'metrosexual man.' If we read fictions emplotting figures of thought which blur rather than affirm gender in the light of all these developments, we come to realize once again that literature can be seismographically sensitive in picking up such subtle developments, frequently long before they become discursively graspable, before they are studied academically and before they become apparent in culture at large. Literature can here take both the function of a "critical metadiscourse" and that of an "imaginative counter-discourse" (*sensu* Zapf).

In short, I propose that the specific way in which a text emplots one of the few available figures of thought in negotiating key oppositions may profitably be studied from the point of view of *Funktionsgeschichte* or with a view to 'cultural diagnosis.' Quite without wishing to be too apologetic, I do believe that this might be one way of continuing to show that close engagements with individual texts as well as "wide reading" (cf. Hallet 2002, 2010) can be fruitfully combined—and that a text-oriented literary studies approach can simultaneously be fruitful in a cultural studies sense.

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