

## Semiotics and Literary Taste: The Case of Algirdas Julius Greimas

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**Abstract:** Semiotician Algirdas Julius Greimas is known to have analysed a variety of literary texts: poetry and prose, Lithuanian and world literature. His literary criticism was also characterised by a great variety of descriptive texts, reminiscent of their evaluations, which have left a clear mark on Lithuanian literary criticism. A wide variety of literary examples are mentioned in his conversations, letters and other texts. This paper considers the issues of Greimas's literary taste by defining the outline of his implied anthology of personal works and highlighting its most important moments, patterns, and the principles of its selection. The aim is to consider the relationship between semiotics and literary taste based on these data. Greimas's essay "On Imperfection", in which fundamental questions of aesthetic survival were raised, was chosen as the starting point for such reflections.

**Keywords:** Algirdas Julius Greimas; semiotics; Lithuanian literary criticism; literary taste; artistic value

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Semiotician Algirdas Julius Greimas has worked across literary genres, examining both poetry and prose, as well as Lithuanian and world literature. The same can be said of his works of literary criticism. They stand out for their notable evaluations, which have left a distinct imprint on Lithuanian literary criticism. Greimas's comments on a wide range of literary examples can also be found in his conversations on literature, the semiotician's letters, and other texts.

In an attempt to define the outline of Greimas's assumed personal anthology, or his personal library, to highlight its most important aspects and patterns, the principles of its selection, and to consider the relationship between his semiotics and literary taste, it is worth raising the complex question of his literary taste.

Which works, in this assumed personal library of Greimas, would stand out right away, and which titles would we find in the first row on his bookshelf? What literary works might have been most important to him?

What is an assumed library anyway? In 2020, the French literary scholar William Marx, in his presentation at the Collège de France of a series of seminars entitled “Constructing and Deconstructing the Library”, suggested that a work of literature can hardly exist on its own, and that it is always read against the backdrop of other readings, in a constant comparison, and that therefore all reading is more or less an obvious comparison. According to him, comparison is only possible because each reader has a very individual library into which they mentally place their newly read book. Marx argues that “our mental libraries serve as our point of reference for reading and understanding books” and that “when we read a book, in a way, we are taking it off our mental shelf”, which is why “each of us reads a literary work in our own way, differently from the others” (Marx, 2020).

As the starting point for considering Greimas’s literary taste, I have chosen his essay “On Imperfection” (Fr. *De l'imperfection*, Greimas, 1987), which was written at the very late stage of the author’s academic life, and which raises fundamental questions on aesthetic experience. The essay appeared in French as a separate publication in 1987 (in Lithuanian it was published in 1991, in the collection of Greimas’s Lithuanian essays, *Iš arti ir iš toli* [From Near and Far], compiled and translated by Saulius Žukas). In Lithuania, as a separate book it came out even later, in 2004 (Greimas, 2004). The book contains an analysis based on the aspect of aesthetic experience (aesthesis) of Michel Tournier, Italo Calvino, Rainer Maria Rilke, Tanizaki and Julio Cortazar. However, “On Imperfection” can also be read as a semiotic analysis in the form of an essay.

Greimas’s essay book *On Imperfection* even contains poetry; for example, the compositional framing of the book (the beginning and end of the essay), which is in italics, is what could be considered prose poetry. Greimas’s *On Imperfection* was a great surprise to many semioticians precisely because of its essay form and pronounced poetic quality. Until then, Greimas was best known for his strict academic texts. However, to someone familiar with Greimas’s Lithuanian essays, the style of this book might have seemed much more credible. Greimas wrote his most important academic texts in French, which may be why for a long time his French students were not aware of his poetic essays in Lithuanian.

It was only in 2017, the year of Greimas's widely celebrated centenary, that a collection of his Lithuanian texts translated into French was published in Limoges (Greimas, 2017a).

Greimas was always attracted to literature. According to him, he wrote “a novel of adventures” at the age of twelve (Greimas, 2017b, 51) and in 1943, he made his debut as a critic in the almanac *Varpai* [Bells] (articles on the Lithuanian poet Kazys Binkis, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Paul Verlaine). Greimas went to France to study literature, but, paradoxically, his friend, the poet Jonas Aistis, discouraged him. Greimas recalled that he “taught me that in life one should study what can be useful and not what one likes: not literature, but linguistics”, and that “literature is not learned in universities, that one either loves or does not love it”. Aistis' words – “don't be a fool, don't study literature” – pushed Greimas “towards linguistics” (Greimas, 1991, 106). This happened in 1936 in Grenoble. However, according to Greimas, “the literary works have been very useful to me—or have they been detrimental?—by giving my sentimental life—and even my moral or aesthetic approach to people and things—with precise forms, by proposing a whole series of figurative models for my behavior [...] In the Lithuanian space—I loved poetry, I even wanted to share my taste with others, trying to single out and introduce the still [then] unacceptable Radauskas, Mackus and Venclova” (Greimas, 1991, 33–34).

Greimas associated Lithuanianness with poeticism, with a particularly developed poetic sense. He stressed that there are many, perhaps even too many poets in Lithuania, that “in recent decades, Lithuanian culture has expressed itself most fully in poetic language”, that poetry, and perhaps even philosophy, is the only form of sacred language in a profane world, and that “as long as the poetic feeling survives in the nation, human values would not yet be decidedly replaced by the commodities of necessity or pleasure” (Greimas, 1991, 135).

On the other hand, Greimas emphasised that as a semiotician he was concerned with scientificity, which he perceived as a coherent and clear conceptual language, where some concepts are related to others, where one explains the other, and where one avoids logically undefined concepts, and where the text being analyzed must be adequate. Such language is different from poetic language. Greimas saw poetic language as a way of “saying the unsayable”, as a language of many meanings and not a language of a single isotopy. It is precisely this kind of language that scientific language should avoid, if one is to develop

humanities that are no less a scientific than the fields of natural sciences. In “An Attempt at an Intellectual Autobiography”, Greimas wrote: “I sometimes have to compare Roland Barthes’s *esprit de finesse*, his refinement, with my *esprit de géometrie*, rough geometrical constructions” (*Metmenys*, 1985). He repeated this comparison in a letter to the artist Aleksandra Kašubienė (Kasuba), dated April 18, 1990 (*Algirdo...*, 2008, 140).

This phrase can also be read as Greimas’s confession about his taste. Greimas confesses in “An Attempt at an Intellectual Autobiography” that he intends to write a piece “On Imperfection”: “It has even become a fashion nowadays that every serious person—especially a man of science—should conclude his career by writing a novel. I hope to resist this temptation. The only genre that would attract me would be essays: I would like to write about imperfection as a screen that hides the beauty of the world, and even about the aesthetic rhythm of everyday life” (Greimas, 1991, 34). This is a real admission, though an ironic one, that this desire to write in a different, not just academic way, exists at all.

French was the academic language Greimas used to address the whole world. He probably devoted the most attention in his French writings to Guy de Maupassant, devoting around half a hundred pages to the analysis of the short stories *Two Friends* alone (Greimas, 1976). Even more memorable is his analysis of Maupassant’s other story, “The Piece of String” (Greimas, 1983, 135–156), wherein Greimas shows, among other things, that the narrator’s stance and metaphorical speech can be felt in the writer’s impersonalized, “objective” narrative. The analysis of the description of the peasants heading to the town of Goderville reveals an indirect comparison between the peasants and that of their cattle, a metonymic relationship between those sitting in the tavern and the empty carts parked in the yard, which raise their thills to the sky, or turn their rear towards it. In such a depiction, Greimas sees the impossibility of communication with a divine determinant and the higher values of the consumer society described by Maupassant. This analysis also lends us a hand in reading Greimas himself, who, in his academic texts written in French, strove for impersonal writing, clarity, and strict definitions.

In his first book *Structural Semantics* (1966), Greimas, in order to introduce semantics, used examples from the novels of Georges Bernanos (especially the *Journal d’un curé de campagne*); he also alluded to the works of Jean Racine, André Malraux, André Gide, Albert Camus, Alfred de Vigny, Stéphane Mallarmé,

Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud. Greimas translated the following French writers into Lithuanian and presented them in Lithuanian periodicals with his introductory texts: Jean Paul Sartre (short story “The Wall”, 1946), Arthur Rimbaud (“Bad Blood”, 1954), and Albert Camus (an excerpt from the novel *The Stranger*, 1957). He also wrote studies in Lithuanian on the works of Maurice Rostand (the play *L’homme que j’ai tué*, 1944) and Pierre Corneille (1955). Greimas’s paper (Greimas, 1991, 420–423) written in Lithuanian on the poetry of Polish poet Czesław Miłosz (and on translations of his poetry into Lithuanian, 1959) is of exceptional note. The choice of a particular author’s work for analysis and presentation is to some extent related to aesthetic evaluation.

Greimas’s students have noted the beauty of his academic writing, which testifies to the author’s special aesthetic taste. According to Denis Bertrand, a student of Greimas:

One of the most striking features of Greimas’ text is its non-figurative character: there are no stories, no narrative, no images and metaphors, no rhetorical stylization. On the contrary, the tension between naming and defining is constantly maintained, controlling and suppressing every outburst of an inherently polysemous connotation, and thus presenting a discourse purified of its fleeting plaques, without for a moment losing sight of its object. [...] the most striking feature of Greimas’ way of writing is his constant attention to definition. As a result, Greimas’ text is characterized by a peculiar, delayed pace, which is an issue for the reader who is in a hurry, but a source of admiration for those who know how to exercise patience. However, there are also some quite poetic passages in his popular academic texts written in this way.

As Bertrand notes, “occasionally, figurative terms, images or metaphors appear. They emerge rarely, but constantly, and are all the more striking” (Bertrand, 2009, 32).

Another of Greimas’s students, semiotician Jacques Fontanille, in his book *The Semiotics of Discourse* (2008), notes that

Greimas dreamed of an impersonal semiotic discourse, devoid of subject and utterance; his ideal of scientific publication, partly influenced by the exact sciences, was a collective publication (by at least two co-authors), in which it would not be clear who had written one or another part of a text. However, in reality his ideal

could not be fulfilled, since in general, it would have been science without text. As soon as a semiotic theory appears in textual form, the skilled reader should be capable to identify the author [...]. (Fontanille, 2008, 231)

Many of Greimas's students described his French writing as an example of a particularly strict and scientific style, which nevertheless displays a certain level of irony and playfulness for the more attentive reader and includes rather poetic interludes, essentially revealing that peculiar ascetic poeticism which is characteristic of Greimasian poetics. Greimas's students have noticed his inclination towards poetry and his poetic taste. Moreover, semiotician Eric Landowski mentioned what he found beautiful in itself – the narrative structure that Greimas had created (Landowski, 2009, 14) – and that such an admission was very much admired by Greimas himself.

Let us go back to the relationship between the Lithuanian and the French Greimas. During the preparation of the collection of his Lithuanian articles, *From Near and Far*, he agreed with Saulius Žukas that his Lithuanian texts should not be directly linked to semiotics. The addressee of Greimas's Lithuanian literary criticism was the Lithuanian reader, the primary recipient of Greimas's more poetic and freer writings on Lithuanian literature.

In order to highlight Greimas's approach to Lithuanian literature, it is particularly worth pointing out his efforts to present the history of Lithuanian literature to the French reader. Greimas had written a summary of the history of Lithuanian literature in French. An article on Lithuanian literature written for a French audience was published by Gallimard in 1956 in the publication *History of Literatures* (Greimas, 1956, 1438–1450). By the way, that year became a particular turning point in Greimas's career as a scholar. Around that time, Greimas's “pre-semiotic” period had concluded. It was in that same year that he began to publish independent papers in French on linguistics (in the same year, he published the article “Actualité du saussurisme”, which laid the foundations for the Paris school of semiotics). It was the paper on the history of Lithuanian literature that Greimas mentioned in a letter to writer Antanas Vaičiulaitis in 1979, as if defending himself against possible reproaches for not promoting Lithuanian literature in the world and stressing that the best way to do it would not be through popular “propaganda” writings, but rather through serious academic writings. In that letter, Greimas lists more good examples,

such as his students' research on Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis' paintings and his own research on Lithuanian mythology.

Greimas was concerned about bringing Lithuanian culture into global academic circulation, so that it would be widely and seriously read by intellectuals. The abovementioned paper on Lithuanian literature written in French by Greimas partly contributed to this goal. It has a very strong European cultural dimension, since Lithuania is seen as an integral part of Europe, an important "European periphery". This European dimension has been constantly present in Greimas's Lithuanian works of literary criticism. He begins his lesson in Lithuanian literature for the French reader with the appearance of the newspaper *Aušra* [Dawn] in 1883. Greimas calls its cultural program "the blossoms of late European historical romanticism", while also stressing that the "mythology of history" created in the *Aušra* has been an integral part of the "national consciousness" of the people of this region and that it has been influential in such regard. He argues that the "myth of the genius of the nation" is the "powerful thought" that leads to national rebirth. In his letter to Vaičiulaitis, Greimas talks about Kristijonas Donelaitis as a writer who created a Lithuanian epic. He considers the poem *Metai* [The Seasons] a masterpiece of Protestant literature, standing close to the language of the nation. Greimas argues that Donelaitis' unanticipated poem has been far superior to other poems of the time because "it does not speak of simplicity and naivety, but it itself is naive and simple".

He sees the ban on the Lithuanian press imposed by the Russian tsarist government in 1864 as a stimulus for the Lithuanian national movement to become more Western. Greimas calls the literature written after 1883 the literature of struggle. He looks for the origins of this literature in the work of Motiejus Valančius and Antanas Baranauskas, and considers them to be the moving spirits of realistic and romantic literature of struggle, respectively. Greimas called Maironis "the great poet of Romantic inspiration", who defined and legitimized the Lithuanian poetic forms and metrics.

One can see that Greimas considers the prose of the turn of the century to be weaker, because it contains a lot of schematic solutions to social problems and a strong position of the author. However, Greimas considers the "rejection of all psychological analysis" as an advantage of this "combat" prose, because in this way it becomes more influential. He mentions Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas and

Balys Sruoga as the best representatives of the symbolist movement, and Ignas Šeinius as a prime example of Lithuanian impressionism. Among the playwrights he singles out Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius and Vydūnas, who made an effort to reconcile two generations: the earlier one, concerned with the collective, and the later generation, which was concerned with the individual. Greimas introduces interwar Lithuanian literature by first presenting the avant-garde movement of *The Four Winds*, calling its leader, Kazys Binkis, the Lithuanian André Breton. In his opinion, this movement dissipated the mist of symbolism in the literature and opened up the infinite possibilities of irony in the Lithuanian language.

Greimas's French paper on Lithuanian literature is similar to his Lithuanian paper, because it essentially based on literary appreciation, which he has expressed on other occasions to the Lithuanian audience. The interpretation of the history of Lithuanian literature presented in this article is an important attempt by Greimas to feature his own relationship to important Lithuanian literary phenomena and the broader panorama of Lithuanian literature in a condensed way.

Comparing this French text with the Lithuanian texts on Lithuanian literature, one can note many similarities; however, Greimas's orientation towards an audience less familiar with Lithuanian literature adds an additional dimension to the interpretation of the history of Lithuanian literature. Among these additional aspects, one of the most important is the comparison of Lithuanian literature with the cultural context with which the addressee is most familiar, with the broader literary European and French phenomena, observing Lithuanian literature as if from the outside, from the point of view of a foreigner, but with evident sympathy. This is not a neutral narrative, because here, too, the observer maintaining a distance is combined with the speaker experiencing emotion.

For Greimas, the most valuable part of Lithuanian literature is poetry. Incidentally, he speaks of the importance of the avant-garde poet Binkis in a 1947 letter to his friend Aistis, whose poetry he admires:

It seems to me that at the moment, from an objective point of view, the novel is the most burning issue in the creation of Lithuanian literature. Poetry, thanks to you, or to the third or fourth poet, has reached the European level, and young people can now play with all kinds of existentialism, without downgrading it too much and

yet keeping all the positions won by Kazimieras Binkis and his apostles (on another occasion I will tell you of our plan to impose on the history of Lithuanian poetry, to the greatest Catholic outrage, a peculiar, true understanding of its evolution, according to which Binkis becomes the cornerstone of all post-war poetry; I was almost dealt with by the Catholics here for spreading such ideas). There is one or two short stories quite well written, but no such novel. Because, after all, one cannot call Dobilas's *Blūdas* or Putinas's autobiographical, though interesting, gibbering a novel yet.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to Violeta Kelertienė in 1981, Greimas expresses a similar distrust of Lithuanian prose: "I still do not believe in Lithuanian—and especially rural—prose: It can only bloom after the creation of an upper middle class [...] we have to wait for another literary generation, that's how optimistically I feel".

In a letter to Aistis in 1945, Greimas announced: "I feel neither pretensions nor passions to become a journalist. I have written with pleasure perhaps [only] about Binkis, Don Quixote, and Verlaine". In a 1947 letter, Greimas talks about his admiration for Balzac: "I am more and more fascinated by Balzac, whom I have already read almost all, or at least a great deal, of him: It takes a genius (and I don't like to use that word) to create and carry within oneself a real society of a few thousand persons". In a 1954 letter to Antanas Škėma, Greimas cites Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus as examples for writing plays.

In the abovementioned French paper on the history of Lithuanian literature, Greimas asserts that the generation of writers who had grown up between two world wars is clear proof that poetry and not prose is the strength of Lithuanian literature. He stresses the value of interwar Lithuanian poetry and mentions two of the most radical opposing cases: the Catholic "prophet" Bernardas Brazdžionis and the "anarchist and socialist" Kazys Boruta. He calls Aistis the most authentic poet. However, Greimas singles out the poet Henrikas Radauskas, who has overcome the realistic representation of his generation and thus became a strong influence on postwar Lithuanian poets, among whom he mentions the prominent writers Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, Henrikas Nagys, and Juozas Kėkštas. Greimas was a great admirer of Radauskas, whom he quoted fondly in his many Lithuanian texts. For example, in his letters to Kašubienė,

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1 Letters translated by Dalia Cidzikaitė.

he repeatedly quoted the following lines from “my friend Henrikas Radauskas”: “There is no night. The day will come. / And the angel’s laughter” (*Algirdo...*, 2008, 32, 58, 98, 173), “the talk of dogs” (*Algirdo...*, 2008, 36, 65).

It is interesting that in his letter to Žukas in 1989, Greimas includes Aistis among another group of poets: “Brazdžionis, Kossu and Boruta—realists, national poets, for internal use. Whereas Radauskas, Mackus and Venclova—already possible to export, of a European level” (Greimas, 2017, 366). By the way, in a letter to Tomas Venclova, Greimas wrote that after the unjust death of Radauskas, Venclova is now the king of Lithuanian poetry. According to Greimas, the realists are those who simply “describe nature, feelings, God, and the homeland”, essentially different from the poets who are “poetic, who already speak a poetic language”, and, as Greimas liked to say, are exportable to the world.

In 1980, the American-Lithuanian journal *Metmenys* published Greimas’s article “Ašara ir poezija” [Tears and Poetry], nowadays well known to Lithuanian semioticians and philologists, which analyses in detail the poem “Ašara, dar tau anksti ...” [Tears, it’s too early...] by the Lithuanian poet Marcelijus Martinaitis. In the analysis, Greimas makes a number of general remarks about the phenomenon of Lithuanian poetry and the peculiarities of its poetic language, which should be taken into account by the reader. Greimas once again showcases his excellent poetic hearing and insightfulness as a reader of poetry. His analysis is particularly impressive for the revelation of meanings invisible to the naked eye: focusing on the combinations of certain semes, Greimas decodes various figures lacking lexical expression, as well as the profound content of the poetic message. He convincingly demonstrates why poetry is a particularly informative language that needs special study. Martinaitis spoke with admiration about how Greimas’s analysis revealed the subconscious dimension of his text. Greimas’s analysis has insightfully grasped the foundations of Aesopic language; in this case, how a prayer can be written without mentioning the name of God.

Thus, Lithuanian poetry and its poets, such as Radauskas, Maironis, Binkis, Aistis, Mackus, Kėkštas, Venclova, and Martinaitis, could certainly occupy an honorable place on Greimas’s assumed personal bookshelf. These were the authors from whose poetry Greimas first collected material for his scholarly essays and reviews, and for the arguments in his letters written in Lithuanian.

To sum up, Greimas’s literary cultural horizons were extremely broad and impressive. He covered not only Lithuanian authors, but also French and

other authors, and not only those of his time or generation, but also some the oldest. This article had no intention to list all of Greimas's references to literature. The aim was to present the most important cases of literary allusions in Greimas's texts. However, I believe that it was sufficient to highlight the semiotician's literary preferences and his individual literary taste. Literature of high artistic value encouraged the researcher (who was fascinated by it) to pursue a reading adequate enough for the complexity of these texts and new methodological solutions that would help understand them better and explain their great aesthetic impact. Texts of complex meaning opened up the possibility of more than one reading, a multi-layered fabric of different shades of meaning. However, Greimas had successfully stood up against the challenged they posed.

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