

On the Philosophical Origins of Greimassian Semiotics

Inna Merkoulouva

Associate Professor, Founder and Director of the International Center for Semiotics and Intercultural Dialogue, State Academic University for the Humanities (GAUGN), Moscow

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the philosophical origins of Greimassian semiotics. We analyze a little-known article “The Presentiment of Perfection” of the [French-Lithuanian](#) semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas. The article tells us about his relationship with the Russian philosopher, poet and historian-medievalist Lev Karsavin (1882–1952), his professor at the Lithuanian University in Kaunas, in the 1930s. Under the influence of Karsavin’s ideas, Greimas returns to the dialogue with him in 1987, with the book *On Imperfection (De l’imperfection)*. In the book, Greimas explores the human modes of textualising space in artistic languages. For Greimas and for Karsavin, a presentiment of perfection is the first step into the world of values.

Keywords: imperfection; presentiment of perfection; philosophical origins; history of semiotics

Introduction

In our article we will talk about a dialogue of two dimensions: semiotic and philosophical. We analyze a little-known article “The Presentiment of Perfection” of the [French-Lithuanian](#) semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992) about his relationship with the Russian philosopher, poet and historian-medievalist Lev Karsavin (1882–1952), who was his professor at the Lithuanian University in Kaunas, in the 1930s.

Modern semiotics as the science of signs, communicative systems and the manifestation of meaning is distinguished by an interdisciplinary approach and it continues the traditions established in the 20th century by two major European schools: Moscow-Tartu School and Paris School.

According to Vyacheslav Ivanov, semiotics “should help navigate history. Different approaches may be complementary to each other and make it easier to create a common picture of the signs and texts that make up the history of human culture” (Ivanov, 1999: 792). Juri Lotman also wrote about the importance of the relationship between history and semiotics. In his opinion, the task of historical science is to restore the past, “as it really was”. However, unlike the deductive sciences, the historian deals with texts, and “a text is always created by someone and for some purpose and events are presented in the text in an encoded form” (Lotman, 2001: 217). So, the historian acts as a decoder, trying to extract the event itself from the story of the event, and here semiotics can help him, by reconstructing the code used by the author of the text and its correlation with the researcher’s code. This is the so-called retrospective view of the historian (Lotman, 2004: 164).

In this context, the history of semiotics as a discipline acquires a special significance; the genesis of ideas, the analysis of contacts and connections between its representatives from different countries have become extremely important.

Dialogue between semiotician and philosopher

In 2017 a large number of international semiotic congresses (in Paris at UNESCO, in Moscow and in Kaunas) were dedicated to the centenary of the founder of the Paris semiotic school, French-Lithuanian semiotician and linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas. He was born in revolutionary 1917 in Russia, in Tula. After his family returned to Lithuania, he began his career as a law student in the 1930s at the Lithuanian University in Kaunas. Then there was an internship in linguistics at the University of Grenoble, return to Vilnius, The Second World War

and the final emigration to France, where he met Barthes and Lévi-Strauss and created his own school of semiotics, whose followers develop this discipline today all around the world. In 2022, the semiotic community celebrated two dates: the centenary of Lotman's birth and the 105th anniversary of the birth of Greimas.

Until now, the fact that during his studies in Kaunas Greimas attended the lectures of the Russian philosopher Lev Karsavin was practically unknown. After the revolution in Russia, Karsavin (a professor at Saint-Petersburg University and a brother of the ballerina Tamara Karsavina) emigrated to France and then to Lithuania, gaining a professor's position at the Department of World History of the Lithuanian University in Kaunas. Analyzing documents from the Vilnius National Library, we have found a special issue of magazine *Soglassie* ("The Convent") published in 1991, dedicated to Karsavin. Greimas' article, "The Presentiment of Perfection. The relevance of Karsavin" (Greimas, 1991a), a short page-sized text, was also published in this issue. We translated the article into French for the Congress at UNESCO dedicated to Greimas' centenary, and this historical evidence aroused a great interest in his disciples and the representatives of the Paris Semiotic School (Merkoulova, 2017: 127).

After publishing our translation into Russian of the book by Algirdas Julien Greimas and Jacques Fontanille *The Semiotics of Passions: From States of Affairs to States of Feeling* (2007, 2nd ed. 2015), we decided to take up the translation of Greimas' last semiotic and philosophical book *On Imperfection (De l'imperfection)*. While working on the text, we have found out that the book was written by Greimas under the influence of Karsavin's ideas. Therefore, it seems interesting to us to draw a parallel between Greimas' study *On Imperfection* (1987) and Karsavin's essay "On Perfection" (1952).

In the article "The Presentiment of Perfection" dedicated to the philosopher, Greimas writes that for Karsavin, a presentiment of perfection is the first step into the world of values (Greimas, 1991a: 3). Greimas discovers Karsavin's essay "On Perfection", originally written in Lithuanian and published shortly before in Vilnius, and it becomes an occasion to remember the years of youth at the university and the lessons of his teacher, which greatly influenced Greimas' career choice and his interest in Middle Ages:

"Tres faciunt collegium," Karsavin said, as in the memorable times of the Middle Ages, glancing at two students who just came in to listen to him, after he sat down and began the lecture. And now I want the three of us - Karsavin, me and you, my dear reader, to sit

down and have a friendly conversation about a person and about life. (*ibid.*, author's trans.)

Then Greimas confesses to his readers: like his teacher, Karsavin, he reflected on the problem of Perfection and Imperfection and wrote a book *On Imperfection*, which he considers as a spiritual testament to posterity. The more surprising: the book comes out at the same time when the work of Karsavin began to be published again and became known to the European reader:

And here is the last amazing coincidence: having decided to sing my swan song in short text and calling it "On Imperfection", then I was pleasantly surprised to learn about Karsavin's recently found latest work entitled "On Perfection". (*ibid.*, author's trans.)

Of course, Greimas writes, Karsavin and he are disproportionate: "it would never have occurred to me to compare myself with such a person like Lev Karsavin". However, using his very lofty right to *coincidentia oppositorum*, he suggests that even if there were no approaches and results, at least their intentions could be similar. In fact, "while I, having stuck in a swamp of imperfections, can only dream of an unattainable, perfect being, for Karsavin Imperfection itself inevitably leads to Perfection, a presentiment of perfection is already the first step into the world of values" (*ibid.*, author's trans.).

On perfection and imperfection

Perfection is the completeness, the universality of all that was, is and will be, the universality of being, Greimas quotes Karsavin. The philosophical thinking immediately indicates a possible way to read it: from metaphysical heights Karsavin offers another version of the great classical philosophical systems. The fullness of being is justified by the "unity" hiding under the plurality; the mobility of being is explained by its "timelessness". The affirmation of the existence of being is complemented by the properties of abstract "space" and transcendental "time". According to Greimas, "it seems enough to decorate this whole superposition of concepts with the label of God, and the problem of perfection will be completely resolved" (*ibid.*, author's trans.).

In his analysis, the semiotician observes one of the main problems of Karsavin's essay – the image of "I": "Starting epistemology, Karsavin immediately raises the problem of the relationship between a subject and an object, a person and a world, discarding not only extreme

disconnection, but also the mystical fusion of the subject with the outside world” (*ibid.*, author’s trans.). Karsavin raises the question of subjectification or objectification of phenomena, and introduces the relevant principle of participation of the subject in the creation of the world. In Greimas terms, such “ontologization” of the subject allows us to identify the subject, to approach the problem of the self, moving from the everyday “I” to the “I” of family, the nation and, finally, to the “I” of humanity. Thus, Karsavin clearly shows his preoccupation for the problems of individualization, the construction of the identity of society and of the individual.

Indeed, if we look at the original source, Karsavin’s essay “On Perfection” (originally written in Lithuanian in 1952 and published in Russian only in 2004), we will see the transition described in detail by the philosopher from one aspect of this “I” to another:

Imaging our Self, we stabilize it and limit it, we consider it as a constant value; many people think naively that the “I” is a soul separate from its moments, and unchanging, but, unfortunately, constantly running away from the mind and one that cannot be comprehended and described. But in reality, our “I” is constantly changing, pulsating. Here it narrows, concentrates, and falls down - turns into a small, self-enclosed, littered with small utilitarian affairs “ordinary I”. There, it pulsates, expands and rises, turns into the “I” of its family, nation, even humanity, the world. (Karsavin, 2004: 275, author’s trans.)

In his article, Greimas also describes the mythological thinking of the Russian philosopher, emphasizing a topic interesting to him (his book about the Lithuanian mythology, *Of Gods and Men* (Greimas, 2017b), was devoted to these issues):

By agreeing to descend from transcendental heights to the everyday life of the subject and generally accepted ways of thinking, Karsavin completes his Copernican revolution, becoming a thinking person from a classical philosopher. (Greimas, 1991a: 3)

The fact that Karsavin turns to mythology in search of similar patterns of thinking, that in ethnology he finds a different logic – of “participation”, that along with “discursive” thinking, he equally recognizes intuitive thinking – all this reveals to us the image of another Karsavin, “more human”, who consciously refuses abstract, theoretical metaphysics, concludes Greimas.

Greimas’ book *On Imperfection* is based on the same idea as Karsavin’s work: Imperfection itself leads to Perfection. The book contains several parts where, using the semiotic

method, literary texts are analyzed, each chapter is accompanied by an original title: The Fracture, Dazzle (hero Robinson, *Friday*, M. Tournier), Le Guizzo (hero Mr. Palomar, *Palomar*, I. Calvino), The Smell of Jasmine (R.M. Rilke, *Neue Gedichte*), The Color of Darkness (J. Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*), A Hand A Cheek (J. Cortázar, *Ceremonies*), Loopholes, Immanence of the Sensible (F. Schiller), A Foreclosed Aesthetics (H. Balzac, C. Baudelaire), The Expectation of the Unexpected, Conclusion.

The book opens with a chapter devoted to the work of the French writer Michel Tournier, the creator of the myth-making movement in 20th-century literature. Greimas was the first semiotician to pay attention to Tournier's texts, and since then the writer's novels have remained in the field of interest of narrative semiotics and the semiotics of passions. Greimas analyzes in detail the style of the novel *Friday or the Limbos of the Pacific* (*Vendredi ou Les Limbes du Pacifique*. Tournier, 1972: 92): Robinson's behavior is presented as an aesthetic "shock" or "crack" in the routine of everyday life. Robinson "suddenly awakens" from the "fragile silence" that opened up to him "after the sound of the last drop falling into a copper basin" (Greimas, 2022: 15).

According to Greimas, in this formula the author shows that a significant aesthetic event, a transformation, has occurred. The birth of a new meaning in the mythological plot reworked by the writer occurs in stages, through a detailed description of the components of the aesthetic shock: "absorption by everyday life, expectation, the cessation of isotopia in the form of a crack, the shock of the subject, the special status of the object, the sensory relationship between them, the uniqueness of the experience, the hope for complete unity in the future - this is the list of elements that create the aesthetic effect that Michel Tournier's text revealed to us" (*ibid.*, author's trans.).

We believe that Greimas' analysis is close to Karsavin's ideas about the constant "imperfect perfection of being": "Let us emphasize that the greater or lesser perfection of a moment does not rest, so to speak, on the straight line of the moving moment – this would make the moment only a means for the appearance of others – but it is the elevation of the moment into all-time perfection, preserving its absolute individual value" (Karsavin, 2004: 286).

The aesthetic "shock" or "crack" in the routine of everyday life in Greimas's analysis and in Tournier's text is nothing other than a continuation of Karsavin's critique of "development": "The imperfect "linear" concept of development, rejecting the upward movement of moments of

being, towards perfection, leads to a positivistic theory of progress, full of contradictions. The representatives of this theory either look at the perfection of being – first of all of humanity – as an endless, albeit indefinite (*indefinitum*) process, or must consider that absolute perfection is the end of the imperfect perfection of imperfect being. Thus, they deny the absolute value of each individual moment, making it only a means of “evolution”, devaluing the past and present of humanity for the sake of an unknown (!) future” (Karsavin, 2004: 286, author’s trans.).

We would like to quote here two fragments of Greimas’ book (1987: 47, 51; 99) in our working translation into English (the main translation language is Russian), clearly expressing his style as a semiotician and as a philosopher and poet:

Colour of darkness

Tanizaki:

Have you ever, reader, ever seen the "Colour of Darkness by Candlelight"? It differs from the darkness of the twilight on the road; it seems to consist of the smallest particles, as if from the ashes, where each element carries a rainbow. It seemed to me that these particles of ash were about to hit my eyes, and against my will I squinted.

(Greimas’ comment):

So we better understand the meaning of this generalized approach to the object: the darkness that arises in the form of a set of particles produces black matter, which at a phenomenal level appears to us as an aesthetic object. As you know, the artist gets black by mixing on his palette primitive colours – yellow, blue and red. I was also told that a Chinese paint seller, if asked to sell black ink, will definitely tell you which black colour you need: black-red or black-blue. In other words, black as the absence of colour is an explosive presence that is hidden in this black colour. Perfect twilight virtually conceals in itself all the colours, all the beauty of the world, this is a prototype colour: therefore, it is not surprising that the energy of each particle of black “embosoms a rainbow”, and that the object appears before us as an indicator of the innermost corners of our existence.

Conclusion

The desire to express the ineffable and portray the unimaginable: evidence that one Thing, one of a kind, came to this world, and that another Thing became possible. Nostalgia and expectations feed the world of our imagination...

Attempts to subjugate our daily routine or to run away from it are in vain: so the desire for the unexpected becomes apparent. And at the same time, the so-called aesthetic values are the only true ones, because only they lift us up. Imperfection turns into a springboard from which we rush from insignificance to meaning.

To conclude

Analyzing Karsavin's essay, in the article "The Presentiment of Perfection", Greimas in a concentrated version presents his philosophical understanding of the pair of perfection/imperfection set described in the conclusion of the book *On Imperfection*:

And the present, that is, the "all-time" state of a person is much better determined by the "desire" of a person than by his "doing nothing", which is a state of immobility. According to Karsavin, a person's true problem is not "to be or not to be," but to "want or not want to be," that is, the state is not a static position, but a dynamic stress. Man has been given understanding of perfection from God, therefore his existence, that "half-existence", when he wants and does not want to be perfect enough, is nothing more than "nonsense that has become reality". This presentiment of perfection is already the first step into the world of values. The choice of metaphors is not so important: we can talk about languishing for the superman or about the constant deification of the called one. It is enough to see once these "shadows of values", so that they would be able to formalize being and – why not? – so that "the Word became Flesh." (Greimas, 1991a: 3)

The article "The Presentiment of Perfection. The relevance of Karsavin" was written by Greimas in March 1991, less than a year before his death, and four years after the publication of the book *On Imperfection* in the French publishing house Fanlac. If the article is a detailed analysis of the basic principles of Karsavin's philosophy, the book is an indirect appeal to the concepts of Karsavin by analyzing literary examples. This is a conversation (an imaginary dialogue) between two scientists over a distance and decades, in which Greimas appears not only as a semiotician, linguist, mythologist and structuralist, but also as a philosopher.

It should be recalled here that the distinguishing feature of Greimas' semiotics, which he defined as "a project", is its dialogic nature. According to the authors of the special issue of *Sign Systems Studies*, such framing "meant defining his work on semiotics as a continuous process and positioning it as an existential undertaking that cannot be separated from one's relationship

with the surrounding world and the desire to understand its workings” (Grigorjevas, Gramigna, Salupere, 2017: 8). Greimas, calling his work a “semiotic project”, like Karsavin, puts the idea of *development* (“evolutio, developpement, Entwicklung”) in the first place (Karsavin, 2011: 2).

Greimas’ “ scientific project ” is to be understood as an ongoing construction and as an open multi-dimensional program aimed at the next generation of semioticians. As Jacques Fontanille notes in a special issue of *Semiotica*, “Greimas himself treats only some of these problems and others are waiting for answers that his successors can bring” (Fontanille, 2017: 91).

Greimas’ final book, *On Imperfection*, which has grown significantly in the scientific community in recent years, is, in fact, a confirmation of the dialogue that he conducted during his life with Karsavin, his teacher, about the humanistic values of human life (we could call it a dialogue with “other sciences of meaning”: Fontanille, 2017: 91).

In conclusion, returning to the history of the discipline itself, we would like to refer to the words of Greimas’ disciples, who are developing semiotics in France and Finland today.

Eero Tarasti looks at the history of semiotics:

What made semiotics something new in the 1960s, in the glorious days of structuralism, when it became institutionalized? On the one hand, traditional high-culture topics in the arts, history, mythology and cultural heritage were studied from radically new viewpoints of information theory, linguistics, cybernetics and computer studies. These new viewpoints and frames of reference provided these topics with an estrangement effect, such that they were suddenly seen in a totally new light, as fulfilling the epistemic ideals of efficiency, formalisation, and structural analysis. On the other hand, the study of popular, “low-culture” phenomena and “lesser arts”, such as cinema, advertising, fashion, food, and media, with a rigorous and formal discourse, elevated all those to a status of sublime and noble objects worthy of serious academic study. (Tarasti, 2009: 4)

Jacques Fontanille moves from history to the current state of science and poses a radical question: what is the place of semiotics and its application in universities? In his opinion, in any field of knowledge there is no scientific research outside institutes and universities, and even the most independent individualistic researchers cannot do without institutes that organize congresses and colloquiums, create journals and series of publications:

The measurement of the institutionalization of a discipline for the purpose of teaching is the existence of a certain doctrine common to certain scientific circles. However, being initially a specific and independent scientific project, semiotics exists immediately between several “paradigms”: some theoretical movements arise and disappear, others expand and transform. In addition, being at the intersection of many disciplines, semiotics itself participates in the evolution of these disciplines. If today the task is to develop a complete educational program on semiotics, we will be able to reach consensus using the texts of the founding authors of the discipline: Saussure, Pierce, Hjelmslev, Benveniste, Greimas, Lotman and Eco. [...] Paying tribute to the founders of semiotics, in particular Greimas, it needs to pay attention to the functioning of science in the institutes that we created to continue his work, whether it is research laboratories, training programs, participation in international competitions or the formation of a theoretical and methodological base. I think that saluting Greimas is not only to remember him. It would be a profound mistake to consider a tribute to the founder teacher the opinion that his scientific thought would be preserved through the endless reproduction of itself, using past working methods. Today it would be much more convincing to propose an institutional organization on the basis of which Greimas’ thought could live and develop in the future. (Fontanille *et al.* , 2013, author’s trans.)

Remember the roots and connections of semiotics with other disciplines, the polemics and common ground in different approaches of scientists: we hope that our study of the scientific dialogue between Greimas and Karsavin will make a modest contribution to this task.

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About the author

Inna MERKOULOVA, PhD in Linguistics and Semiotics, is Associate Professor, Founder and Director of the International Center for Semiotics and Intercultural Dialogue, State Academic University for the Humanities (GAUGN), Moscow. Associate Researcher at the «Sense-Text-Informatics-History» laboratory, Sorbonne University. Vice-President of the Asian Semiotics International Association (ASIA).

After a doctoral dissertation on graphics and enunciation (supervisor Jacques Fontanille), she focuses her research on literary semiotics, intercultural dialogue, theory of translation (more than 70 articles in Russian, French, English, Spanish and Portuguese in indexed journals).

In particular, she published the books: *Semiotics, Graphics and Enunciation in Contemporary French Prose* (Moscow, GAUGN, 2019), *New normality, new life forms: semiotics in the era of crises* (ed., Moscow, GAUGN, 2021). She also translated the works: *Culture and Explosion*, by Y. Lotman (Limoges, Pulim, 2004); *The Semiotics of Passions: From States of Affairs to States of Feelings*, by A.J. Greimas and J. Fontanille (Moscow, LKI, 2007); *On imperfection*, by A.J. Greimas (Moscow, Integratsia. GAUGN-Press, 2022).

She is the author of the project STUDSEMIOTIDAY – International Day for Students of Semiotics.

E-mail: igmerkulovala@gaugn.ru

