

*Some Comments on the Changes,  
Contradictions and Connections of  
Literary Theories in Lithuania*

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**Abstract.** The paper presents a brief history of literary theories that have been used in Lithuania for the last century (1918–2018). Certain general patterns of development are visible in Lithuanian literary studies: movements from positivist (M. Biržiška) to anti-positivist (V. Mykolaitis-Putinas) history and from Marxist history (K. Korsakas) to postmodern New Historicism. The mid-20th century marked the first applications of modern literary theories (first in exile, later among those who stayed in occupied Lithuania). A. J. Greimas became an eminent theoretician in exile, having established a world-famous school of semiotics in Paris. A large number of Lithuanian scholars worked in this field in Lithuania and abroad (J. Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Vytautas Kavolis, Bronius Vaškėlis, Violeta Kelertienė, Ilona Gražytė-Maziliauskienė, Viktorija Skrupskelytė, Tomas Venclova, Vanda Zaborskaitė, Kęstutis Nastopka, Albertas Zalatorius, Vytautas Kubilius, Viktorija Daujotytė, Irena Kostkevičiūtė), but except for the Greimas Paris School of Semiotics, which created its own field, literary theories had mostly a practical and educational impact on interpretations of Lithuanian disciplines.

After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, the renewal of literary theory reached its peak that lasted for about two decades. The J. Greimas Semiotics Studies and Research Centre (now the A. J. Greimas Centre for Semiotics and Literary Theory) was established at Vilnius University in 1992, books written by A. J. Greimas were translated into Lithuanian and the publishing of academic journals “Semiotika” and “Baltos lankos” started. The so-called second wave of postmodern theories (intertextuality, narratology, feminism, postcolonialism, sociology, anthropology, new historicism deconstruction, reader response) has attracted the attention of literary scholars, bringing discussions about literature back to the fields of history, culture and politics (Nijolė Keršytė, Paulius Subačius, Irina Melnikova, Marijus Šidlauskas, Birutė Meržvinskaitė, Eugenijus Ališanka). Theories have updated the concepts and vocabulary of literary studies and reading strategies and helped literary scholars integrate themselves into international research more successfully. Along with the hermeneutics of trust, the hermeneutics of suspicion – questioning and complicating interpretations and identities of all texts, was taking an increasingly important place in Lithuanian literary research. Nevertheless, at this time the strengthened position of post-

theoretical criticism cannot be anti-theoretical, ignoring the entire heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** reception of literary theories; directions of literary history; School of Semiotics, A. J. Greimas; Lithuanian literary criticism

## Directions of Literary History

The article will present a brief history of the predominant literary theories that have been used in Lithuania for the last century (1918–2018). My aim is to show the key points in the history of Lithuanian literary theory as well as to highlight the most prominent theorists and their works, while also providing some problematic considerations in the conclusions.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most important endeavours for Lithuanian literary scholars were studying literary history, forming the national canon of literature, and closely linking the aesthetic and the ideological functions of literary creation.

Two methodological directions in Lithuanian literary historiography are particularly noticeable: the positivist direction (the best examples of this are Mykolas Biržiška's books *Mūsų raštų istorija* (A History of Our Writing, 1920–1925), *Iš mūsų kultūros ir literatūros istorijos* (From the History of Our Culture and Literature, 1931–1938) and the anti-positivistic direction or “spiritual” history (the best example is *Naujoji lietuvių literatūra* (New Lithuanian Literature, 1936, by Mykolaitis-Putinas). Still, all Lithuanian literary historians have applied the same four basic methodological approaches in their research, albeit in unequal proportions: historical, psychological, aesthetic, and stylistic. They also practiced comparative (Antanas Vaičiulaitis, Lindė-Dobilas), biographical (Tumas-Vaižgantas), and formalistic (Juozas Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis) approaches.

After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and the Soviet occupation of the country, the tradition of Lithuanian literary history research was continued in exile. As an alternative to the Soviet Marxist histories *Lietuvių literatūros istorija* (History of Lithuanian Literature, Vol. 4, 1973–76) by Pranas Naujokaitis was published in Chicago. Two other books about the literature of émigré Lithuanians were published: *Lietuvių literatūra svetur, 1945–1967* (Lithuanian literature abroad, 1945–1967, 1968, ed. K. Bradūnas) and *Lietuvių egzodo literatūra 1945–1990* (Lithuanian Diaspora Literature 1945–1990, 1992, 1997, eds. K. Bradūnas, R. Šilbajoris). In contrast, literature historians in Soviet Lithuania such as

Kostas Korsakas (Korsakas 1957–68) and Jonas Lankutis (Lankutis 1979–82) had to learn the approach of socialist realism and rewrite the entire national literary history according to Marxist-Leninist principles of class struggle. After the restoration of Lithuanian independence (1991), it was necessary to return to the history of literature, which had to be rewritten in order to correct the ideological distortions of Soviet censorship and to link the literary histories of emigration and diaspora into one narrative: *XX amžiaus literatūra*, (Literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 1995 by Vytautas Kubilius,) *Lietuvių literatūros istorija: XIX amžius* (History of Lithuanian Literature: the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, 2001, ed. J. Girdzijauskas), *Lietuvių literatūros istorija: XIII–XVIII amžius* (History of Lithuanian Literature 1300–1800, 2003, eds. E. Ulčinaitė, A. Jovaišas). However, in many conferences and articles a critical look at the Grand Narrative emerged, and the reflections on how today's historical research could be methodologically updated became relevant (Samalavičius 1996, Sužiedėlis 1996, Putinaitė 2004, Jakonytė 2006, Miłosz 2002, Hutcheon 2002, Greenblatt 2002). A successful result of such reflections is the book *Sovietmečio lietuvių literatūra: reiškinių ir sąvokos* (Soviet Lithuanian Literature: Phenomena and Concepts, 2019) written by scholars of the Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institute. In this volume the authors managed to coordinate the encyclopaedic and historical genres: it is a unique collection of short narratives, because it provides the most important concepts of the Soviet period and at the same time describes their historical changes.

## Reception of Literary Theories

The first works of literary theory in Lithuanian were published only at the beginning of the 20th century, whereas Tsarist Russia until 1905 carried out very severe repressions against Lithuanian education and culture. The first Lithuanian books of literary theory continued the tradition of Aristotle's aesthetics (they described the composition of the literary work, the typology of styles and genres, artistic instruments, versification, the historical development and literary trends) and were intended for educational purposes: Kazys Bizauskas, *Raštijos bei literatūros teorija* (Theory of Writing and Literature, 1918), Motiejus Gustaitis, *Stilistika* (Stylistics, 1923), Steponas Češūnas, *Poezijos ir prozos teorija* (Theory of Poetry and Prose, 1925), Vladas Dubas, *Literatūros įvadas* (Introduction to Literature, 1927), Juozas Ambrazevičius (Brazaitis), *Literatūros teorija. Poetika* (Literary Theory. Poetics, 1930). The most prominent literary and cultural theorists at that time were Stasys

Šalkauskis, Mykolas Biržiška, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, Balys Sruoga, Juozas Girnius, Antanas Maceina, Antanas Vaičiulaitis.

At the beginning of the Soviet era (in the 1950s) vulgar socialist realism prevailed in Lithuania, and all Western and national literary theory and criticism developed outside the Soviet Union was criticized as hostile and bourgeois, decadent, wrong and even harmful. But we know very well that during the Cold War, the 1960s and 1970s were flourishing years for literary theories, such as phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, and others in the Western world, and that very important concepts such as “the author’s death” and “the reader’s birth”, “text” and “meta-language”, “phenomenological reduction”, “close reading”, “the art of interpretation”, “hermeneutics of suspicion”, etc. were legitimized in literary criticism. Most of the emigrant Lithuanian literary scholars and critics were well acquainted with these literary theories. A. J. Greimas became an eminent theoretician in exile, having established a world-famous school of semiotics in Paris and written fundamental works on his original theory: *Sémantique structurale* (Structural Semantics, 1966), *Du sens* (On Meaning, 2 volumes, 1970–83), *Sémiotique des passions* (Semiotics of Passion, with Jacques Fontanille, 1991). He understood language as a communicative structure of signs, rather than simply a means of expressing the reality of the world or human consciousness. Much like the structuralist linguists, he shifted the source of meaning from human consciousness to the structure of the sign of language. Greimas associated the description of elementary systems of meaning with a narrative syntax suitable for analysing various “languages”. He enriched semiotics with notions of the *isotopie* of meaning, narrative grammar, narrative program, semiotic action, semiotic communication, modality, competence and other concepts. According to Greimas’s theory, both conscious and unconscious human activity is a constant process of gaining or losing valuable objects, and the exchange of objects is the foundation that connects the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic origins into the totality of life and life narratives. Greimas’s semiotic ideas initiated theoretical criticism: the artistic language of literary works had to be transposed into the most accurate and professional theoretical language. It was a very difficult endeavour and created a whole new set of reading skills. The majority of Lithuanian emigrants who settled in the United States and taught at various universities (Vincas Mačiūnas, J. Grinius, J. Ambrazevičius-Brazaitis, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Vytautas Kavolis, Bronius Vaškėlis, Violeta Kelertienė, Ilona Gražytė-Maziliauskienė, Viktorija Skrupsėlytė, Tomas Venclova, and others) conducted their research based on other theories: new criticism, literary sociology, formalism, feminism, reader response and post-colonialism. The

most recognised books were the ones written by Kavolis, Šilbajoris, Venclova. Birutė Ciplijauskaitė, a professor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1960–2000) who has written mainly on Spanish literature from a feminist standpoint, has been recognized in Spain as one of the best literary critics (awarded the prize “Encomienda de Alfonso X el Sabio”).

In Soviet Lithuania, two different directions of literary criticism have emerged and moved away from social realism since the 1960s: 1) formalist criticism (influenced by Jurij Lotman, Roman Jakobson, A. J. Greimas), which adopted a new meta-linguistic terminology and the theory of structuralism. Lotman’s student Tomas Venclova has published the article *Poetinio komunikato konstrukcija* (The Construction of Poetic Communication, 1969), and a book *Tekstai apie tekstus* (Texts about Texts, 1985) in emigration; Kęstutis Nastopka published a book, *Lietuvių eilėraščių poetika: XX amžius* (Poetics of the Lithuanian Poem: Twentieth Century, 1985), and 2) phenomenological essayistic criticism (mainly influenced by Roman Ingarden, Emil Staiger, René Wellek), emphasizing the aesthetic uniqueness of literary works, the significance of the writer’s imagination, and the dynamics of the reader’s response (Kubilius 1982, Zaborskaitė 1965, Zalatorius 1980, Daujotytė 1984). Literature researchers of this direction followed the neo-Kantian W. Dilthey’s idea separating the hermeneutics of human sciences from the natural sciences. Some valuable books on poetics, literary theory and aesthetic issues also were published: V. Sezamanas, *Estetika* (Aesthetics, 1970), anthologies of Western aesthetics and Literary criticism *Grožio kontūrai* (The Contours of Beauty, 1980), *Poetika ir literatūros estetika* (Poetics and Literary Aesthetics, ed. Zaborskaitė, 2 vol. 1978–1989), *Literatūros teorijos apybraiža* (Outline of Literary Theory, 1982), written by researchers of the Institute of Lithuanian Language and Literature, *Lietuvių literatūra ir pasaulinės literatūros procesas* (Lithuanian Literature and the Process of World Literature, 1983) by V. Kubilius. All these books legitimized the most important literary concepts of Western criticism and brought Lithuanian literature closer to Western literature.

After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, writing about national literary history became a subject for discussion and for several decades gave up the prestigious position it had held under the Soviets to literary theory. The A. J. Greimas Semiotics Studies and Research Centre (now A. J. Greimas Centre for Semiotics and Literary Theory) was established at Vilnius University in 1992, and the publication of the academic journals “Semiotika” and “Baltos lankos” started. The most active members of this centre were Saulius Žukas, Nijolė Keršytė, Arūnas Sverdiolas, Kęstutis Nastopka, Dalia

Satkauskytė, Loreta Mačianskaitė, Paulius Jevsejevas. Books written by A. J. Greimas were translated into Lithuanian (Greimas 1989, 1990, 1991, 2004, 2005). Greimas's followers, Eric Landowski and Jacques Fontanille, the latter a Professor at the University of Limoges, often gave guest seminars in Vilnius. Texts and visuals about A. J. Greimas were published in several sources of learning resources: [www.saltiniai.info](http://www.saltiniai.info), <http://www.greimas.eu>, <http://www.semiotika.lt/>. Several conferences were held in Paris, Vilnius, Rome, Baghdad, San Paulo, and Lima on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Greimas's birth, and a two-volume *Algirdas Julius Greimas: asmuo ir idėjos* (A. J. Greimas: The Person and His Ideas, Volume 1 – 2017, Volume 2 – 2018) were published. Furthermore, the researchers at Vilnius University have created a significant educational resource in the form of an electronic literary vocabulary, <http://www.avantekstas.flf.vu.lt/>).

In addition to the studies of semiotics at Vilnius University, the so-called second wave of postmodern theories (intertextuality, narratology, feminism, postcolonialism, sociology, anthropology, new historicism, deconstruction, reader response, comparative studies) has attracted the attention of literary scholars, bringing discussion about literature back to discourse about history, culture and politics. They emphasized the inseparability of the text and its context, identity problems, difference, play, and other topics. The four-volume series *20 amžiaus literatūros teorijos* (20<sup>th</sup>-century Literary Theories, ed. A. Jurgutienė, 2006–2011), written by a group of contributing authors was devoted to the most important methodological problems within literature and applied to new courses of literary theory, established at Lithuanian universities. Consisting of a textbook, an anthology of translations of theory, and a collection of Lithuanian literature interpretations, it did more than just introduce readers to the diversity of literary theories and their impact on national literary readings, but also promoted their interaction and methodological pluralism.

The most significant works worthy of mention of the younger generation of theorists are books by: Algis Kalėda *Romano struktūros matmenys: literatūrinės komunikacijos lygmuo* (The Novel's Structural Dimensions: The Level of Literary Communication, 1996), Dalia Satkauskytė *Lietuvių poezijos kalbinė savimonė: raidos tendencijos* (Linguistic Self-awareness of Lithuanian Poetry: Trends in Development, 1996), Elena Baliutytė *Lietuvių literatūros kritika: 1945–2000* (Lithuanian Literary Criticism: 1945–2000, 2002), 2009, Eugenijus Ališanka *Dioniso sugrįžimas: Chtoniškumas, postmodernizmas, tylą* (The Return of Dionysus: Chthonicity, Postmodernism, Silence, 2001), Solveiga Daugirdaitė *Rūpesčių moterys, moterų rūpesčiai: Moteriškumo reprezentacija*

*naujausioje lietuvių moterų prozoje* (Women of Concern, Women's Concerns: Representation of Femininity in Recent Lithuanian Women's Prose, 2000), Paulius Subačius *Tekstologija: Teorijos ir praktikos gairės* (Textology: Guidelines for Theory and Practice, 2001), Irina Melnikova *Intertekstualumas: teorija ir praktika* (Intertextuality: Theory and Practice, 2003), Marijus Šidlauskas *Orfėjas mokėjo lietuviškai* (Orpheus Spoke Lithuanian 2006), Loreta Jakonytė *Rašytojo socialumas* (Writer's Sociability, 2005), Nijolė Kašielionienė *Lietuvos įvaizdis Prancūzų literatūroje: vienos barbarystės istorija* (Image of Lithuania in French Literature: The History of One Barbarism, 2011), Nijolė Keršytė *Pasakojimo pramanai* (Inventions of Narration, 2016), also publications by B. Meržvinskaitė, Rimas Kmita, Laurynas Katkus, Manfredas Žvirgždas, Saulius Žukas, Regimantas Tamošaitis, Giedrė Šmitienė, Audinga Peluritytė.

The international spread of Lithuanian literary studies is demonstrated by the latest collections of academic articles: *Baltic Postcolonialism*, (ed. Violeta Kelertas, Rodopi, 2006), *Transitions of Lithuanian Postmodernism: Lithuanian Literature in the Post-Soviet Period* (ed. Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, Rodopi, 2011), *Grotesque Revisited: Grotesque and Satire in the Post/Modern Literature of Central and Eastern Europe* (ed. L. Katkus, CSP, 2013), *Imagology Profiles: The Dynamics of National Imagery in Literature* (ed. L. Laurušaitė, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), *Literary Field under Communist Rule* (ed. A. Jurgutienė, D. Satkauskytė, Academic Studies Press, 2018). At the Vilnius Book Fair of 2019 a panel about the spread of academic literature was organized on these recently mentioned academic international collections of articles. The scholars came to the conclusion that the strongest assets and achievements of our national literary research can be attained when we are able to connect (widely) relevant theoretical issues to specific interpretations of national literature.

It is also quite evident that throughout the last decade theory has attracted more scepticism and criticism: are these theories just other academic disciplines with unwieldy vocabulary and an increasing alienation of society and literature? Yet such criticism from a post-theoretical point-of-view cannot be anti-theoretical and ignore the whole heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Conclusions and Considerations

Certain general patterns of development are visible in Lithuanian literary studies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Movements from positivist to anti-positivist history and from Marxist history to postmodern new historicism are among such developments of literary history studies.

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century marked the first applications of modern literary theories (first in exile, later among the Lithuanian diaspora), which initially had a conflicting nature (a formalist scientific direction opposed to a subjective essayistic one). After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, the renewal of literary theory has peaked; it lasted for about two decades. Today a post-theoretical tide of thinking is visible and dominates the integration of theoretical approaches with the new concept of literary culture and the spread of interdisciplinary research.

In Lithuania the growing significance of literary theories marked the beginning of a critique of outdated dogmas of long-standing essentialist thinking and eternal “self-evident” truths (such as historical causal laws and historical progress, the strict determination of national identity or literary identity, a simplistic concept of language as a means of expressing reality, a radical separation between high culture and mass culture). More emphasis is placed on exploring the horizon of reader’s expectations, aesthetic conventions, and habits in contemporary literary studies. Along with the hermeneutics of trust, the hermeneutics of suspicion – questioning and complicating all identities, is taking a more and more important place in literary research (it should not be confused with the Marxist-Leninism that dominated during the Soviet era).

Except for the world-famous Greimas Paris School of Semiotics, literary theories had mostly a practical and educational impact on the interpretations of Lithuanian literature. A large number of Lithuanian scholars worked in this field in Lithuania and abroad. They helped develop close reading skills and complemented it with various contextual aspects. Methodologically renewed literary studies have taught the reader to look at literature as a phenomenon of language and to perceive the whole world as intertextual. Theories have updated the vocabulary of literary studies and reading strategies that helped literary scholars integrate themselves into international research more successfully.

It is possible to conclude that contemporary literary hermeneutics had a major impact on the democratization of post-Soviet society. Phenomenologically recognizing that understanding the world means revealing our relationship to it (because the phenomena surrounding us do not have their own meaning and being, only their meaning for us), brings us to the idea that the understanding of the text is inseparable from self-understanding. The subject/object opposition that twentieth-century hermeneutics overcame allows us to posit that, to some degree, we share a common world and therefore a dialogical understanding about it can be possible. For this reason, by

preserving aesthetic categories, literary critics drew attention to the danger of the aesthetic consciousness becoming alienated, and aesthetic understanding becoming isolated and one-sided, they made a stand for the “open literary work” and its new different interpretations, relativist concept of understanding and methodological heterogeneity.

A more critical assessment of the reception of literary theories in Lithuania reveals that the analysis of theoretical translations could be more professional. Due to a lack of funds, the publishers published many complex international theoretical books without even preparing introductions (those of Julia Kristeva, Toril Moi, Wolfgang Iser, Edmund Husserl, Jacques Derrida, Stephen Greenblatt, etc). The Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institute had plans to publish more literary theory, but publication never started. The Lithuanian Science Council supports scientists for international cooperation, but its possibilities are not sufficient and the bureaucracy is frustrating. The main concerns regarding the study of national literature are based on the lost prestige of the scholarly profession, its low salaries and the stagnation of higher education reforms. Politicians talk a lot about the need to optimize (let's face it: this means downsizing them) universities, higher and secondary schools, but it is a subject dear to politicians and bureaucrats which they attempt to carry out without including the scholars and teachers who work there in their deliberations. As in much of the Western world, the prestige of literary studies has suffered and the situation is not improving.

Disputes over the teaching of literature in schools are ongoing in Lithuania. Currently, radically alternative questions are raised: whether schools should present a coherent historical narrative of national literature and foster the national identity of their students, or whether teachers should only develop reading skills and treat national literature as a phenomenon of world literature, European identity and globalization. It seems to me that these radical alternatives could be successfully reconciled, if they were not influenced by ambitious individuals and their friends with their own interests (textbooks are after all a profitable business). As a result, disputes are still escalating and the reform of literary teaching in schools is stalled.

If we perceive modern comparative studies as research in reception and intercultural dialogue, rather than influences, it will be possible to perceive the development of literary theories in Lithuania and in other European peripheral (“not-centric”) countries as a smaller, but nevertheless an equivalent phenomenon to that of Western Europe. With this in mind, studying the heritage of the greatest literary theorists also becomes a common undertaking for all European researchers.

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