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GREIMAS' SEMIOTIC SQUARE AND MODERN GREEK LITERATURE

It is not of course within my intentions to present a theoretical paper about the origins of the *semiotic square*. I am more interested in the application of this concept which was introduced by Greimas and Rastier. Nevertheless I think that it is worth our while to take a look at the past. In his renowned article «Les jeux des contraintes sémiotiques» A. J. Greimas remarks:

The preceding model is simply a reworked formulation of the one formerly proposed by the author in *Sémantique structurale*. This new presentation makes it possible to compare the model to Robert Blanché's *logical hexagon* (see Claude Chabrol, "Structures intellectuelles" in *Information sur les Sciences sociales*, 1957, VI - 5) as well as to the structures called the Klein group in mathematics and the Piaget group in psychology.

As we see there is no allusion to ancient Greek sources here. Mauricio Beuchot compares A. J. Greimas' *semiotic square* to the *semiotic square* that appears in several writings attributed to Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033 - 1109) and looks into the convergences and divergences between the two writers. In fact, he cites Aristotle's work *On Interpretation*, but does not associate it directly with the *semiotic square*. He emphasises Saint Anselm's contribution in connection with the Greimasian *semiotic square*. I think, though, that we should begin from the following text:

Now these terms are related to one another as follows. Let A stand for "to be good", B for "not to be good", C for "to be not - good" (this falls under B) and D for "not to be not good" (this falls under A).

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Let us transcribe the above remarks writing next to them the Greek words:

to be good / εἶναι ἀγαθόν

not to be good / μὴ εἶναι ἀγαθόν

A

B

not to be not good / μὴ εἶναι μὴ ἀγαθόν

to be not good / εἶναι μὴ ἀγαθόν

D

C

If we take a look at this diagram we can easily consider it, just as some of our first semester students do, as a Greimasian *semiotic square*. Nevertheless, the answer is somewhat different. It is an extract from Aristotle's work *Prior Analytics*, 51b 36 - 39. In fact, Aristotle gives some clarifications concerning the identity of the subjects just below:

Then either A or B will apply to everything, but they can never both apply to the same subject; and either C or D will apply to everything, but they can never both apply to the same subject.

We also have many oppositions in Aristotle's *On Interpretation* related to the Greimasian semiotic square. In the English translation of *On Interpretation* by Harold P. Cooke, in the "The Loeb Classical Library" series, which was first printed in 1938 and was reprinted many times, we come across the following diagrams:

1

Man is just	Man is not just
Man is not not-just	Man is not-just

(The diagram shows two diagonal lines crossing in the center, connecting the top-left to the bottom-right and the top-right to the bottom-left.)

2

Every man is just	Not every man is just
Not every man is not-just	Every man is not-just

(The diagram shows two diagonal lines crossing in the center, connecting the top-left to the bottom-right and the top-right to the bottom-left.)

3

Not-man is just	Not-man is not just
Not-man is not not-just	Not-man is not-just

(The diagram shows two diagonal lines crossing in the center, connecting the top-left to the bottom-right and the top-right to the bottom-left.)



Here in addition to the *semiotic squares*, we also have the diagonal lines which are so familiar to us from Greimas' diagrams. Consequently, it was not Saint Anselm of Canterbury but Aristotle who spoke about the logical categories which were to be used later by Greimas. We should also take into consideration the fact that whilst being occupied with the *semiotic square* Greimas quotes Aristotle. In his article "The Cognitive Dimension of Narrative Discourse" (1976) we have a characteristic expression: "we thus meet *again* with Aristotle's famous 'recognition'" (emphasis added). All these lead us to the conclusion that the *semiotic square* traces its origins to Aristotle.

Surely, though, we would wrong Greimas if we insisted only on the origin of the concept studied. We are more interested in both the way Greimas makes use of the *semiotic square* in text analysis, and in his own multiple transformations that allow us to talk about three generations of *categorial* terms, that is essentially about different variations of the *semiotic square*. How this application is made in texts of Modern Greek literature will be examined next.

Firstly, we will focus on the comedy *Katzourbos* written by Georgios Chortatsis in the 16th century, the era of the blossoming of Cretan literature. In the play we meet a *Hero*, Nikolos, who is possessed by an intense appetite; he loves Cassandra. On the other hand there is his rival, old - Armenian. He too, just like Nikolos, wants to possess Cassandra. An overall approach to the text indicates that both Heroes conduct a struggle, each with his own weapons, to conquer Cassandra. In fact they acquire several *Adjuvants* and are faced with *Opponents*. Nikolos engages himself in the fight armed with two golden arm rings given to him by Cassandra to buy off Poulisena, that is the woman who had raised Cassandra, while the Armenian does not scruple to steal his wife's dresses, and offer money to Poulisena. Thus a vicious circle is formed.

However, Moustrouchos, the slave, learns that Cassandra is the lost daughter of the Armenian and his wife and informs them about it. This piece of news alters the situation dramatically. The Armenian changes attitude. He becomes aware of what danger he was saved from and is thereby transformed into an affectionate father who is happy to have found his daughter. He spends his money bounteously and gives Nikolos an ample dowry. He thus convinces the youth's father to readily consent to the marriage.

Up to now we have been focusing on the plot of the play. Now it is time we proceeded to a *deeper* level and studied the *values* concealed



by the text. We see that the play is produced by conflicts between systems of values with a view to giving a final and symbolic end to these conflicts. In particular we observe a *confrontation among personal, social and economic values*. That is, the values accepted by society are different from the ones accepted by certain characters and still others are eventually dictated by financial interest.

We will begin with the *social values*, because they are the ones we are interested in at this point. Here is how they are expressed in the text. We have on the one hand the love affair between two young people, Nikolos and Cassandra. It belongs to the category of *permitted relations* which the society sanctions and signals positively. Who could possibly reproach such a relation? The same applies to the Armenian's and his wife's conjugal life as well. Even though there are no extended references to this life in the play, we know that conjugal life is a vital, stable and well - accepted institution of the society and no one would dare attribute to it a negative dimension. This is the *positive axis* of the social values.

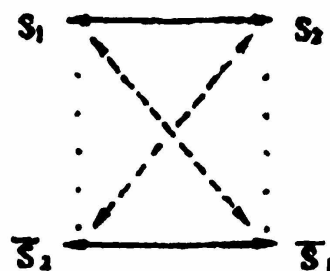
But there is also the *negative axis*, the Armenian's old - age love. This term includes a rich old man's desire to conquer a much younger girl though he is already married. Furthermore, he does not use his beauty or some other physical attraction to achieve his goal, but other means more material and convincing, that is gifts and money. Consequently this is about his extra - conjugal activities which cost him quite dearly. These activities are by no means sanctioned by his contemporary Christian society and are signalled negatively.

[In this way have reached four terms that can be articulated upon the *semiotic square*:

PERMITTED RELATIONS UNACCEPTED RELATIONS

love between two youths
(prescribed)

old - age love
(prohibited)



conjugal life
(not prohibited)

extra - conjugal activities
(not prescribed)



On the one hand, we have the *permitted relations*, that are the love between the two youths and the Armenian's conjugal life which society not only sanctions, but also in the case of puppy love imposes in a sense, and on the other hand, there are the *unaccepted relations* (old - age love — extra - conjugal activities) which are reprobated. One can easily understand that love between two youths and old - age love are two opposing categories, just like conjugal life and extra - conjugal activities are, exactly in the same way black is contrary to white. On the other hand, conjugal life and old - age love are contradictory things.

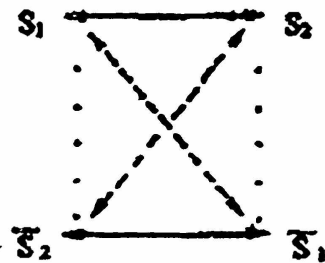
Now let us proceed to the *personal values*. Here, too, there are permitted and unaccepted relations. Desires are included in the first category, *phobias* in the second:

PERMITTED RELATIONS

(desired)

UNACCEPTED RELATIONS

(feared)



(not feared)

(not desired)

Everything would have turned out well in *Katzourbos* if all the characters accepted and signalled positively the two youths' natural attraction and admitted that it is an unsuitable thing to go after a young girl while being in an advanced age. That is, if the two youths' action was placed on the positive axis of the permitted and desired, and on the negative axis of the unaccepted the action that leads to extra - conjugal adventures, then the diagram would be as follows:

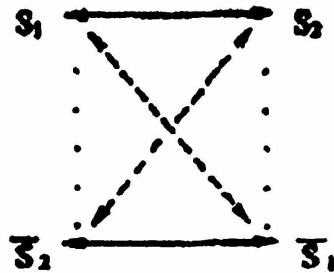


PERMITTED RELATIONS

love between two youths
(desired)

UNACCEPTED RELATIONS

old - age love
(feared)



conjugal life
(not feared)

extra - conjugal activities
(not desired)

We see, then, that the value system of some characters has deviated from the commonly accepted and transformed the positive to negative. We have here an incoherent social model that shows *violation* and *alienation*. To be more specific: personal conformity to social behests is a prerequisite for harmony in society. But when they go against and reject what almost everyone else accepts, then we can talk about violation of the social contract and social disorder. *Chaos* replaces *harmony* and conflicts are unavoidable. The *personal viewpoint* antagonizes the *social viewpoint* and what is socially prohibited becomes desired.

But this transgression is unavoidably followed by *alienation*, a negative situation where the same thing is perceived in a totally different way by society and the individual. Thus, while love between two youths is seen as something good and incumbent by the social perception and conjugal life is evidently accepted, we watch the lovebirds suffer from fears and conjugal life not being desired. The conflict of *individual vs society* is intense in *Katzourbos* up to the *recognition* scene, and this conflict is presented graphically in the diagram below:

TRANSGRESSION

personal viewpoint

social viewpoint

old - age love

old age love

—————
(desired)

vs

—————
(prohibited)



extra - conjugal activities		extra - conjugal activities
_____	vs	_____
(non feared)		(non prescribed)

ALIENATION

<i>Social viewpoint</i>		<i>personal viewpoint</i>
love between two youths		love between two youths
_____	vs	_____
(prescribed)		(feared)
conjugal life		conjugal life
_____	vs	_____
(non prohibited)		(non desired)

This is the situation on the deep level. Let us return to the surface level where things move towards the desired direction after the *recognition* takes place. We remember that with the dower given by the Armenian to his daughter all problems were solved. No one assures us that Nikolos's father would have eventually consented to a wedding without any financial motive. This means that on the deep level the financial values system agrees with the social values system. That is, the combination of the social values with the economic values formed an *ideal social model*. Love between two youths, which the society approved of, proves to be financially beneficial for both as well. From now on they will live richly. Needless to say, no one is opposed to that, especially not Nikolos's father. Old - age love is harmful for everyone's interests, while deviation from the roles established by age and marriage appears to be both ethically and economically harmful. Thus, the social viewpoint which determines what is prescribed and what is prohibited coincides with the financial facts and things are restored to the desirable situation:



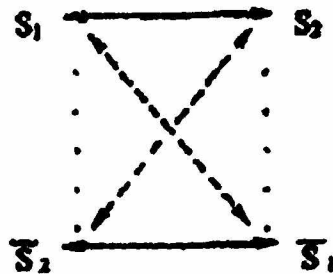
Ideal social model

PERMITTED RELATIONS

love between two youths
(profitable+ prescribed)

UNACCEPTED RELATIONS

old age love
(harmful+ prohibited)



conjugal life

(not harmful+ not prohibited)

extra - conjugal activity

(not profitable+ not prescribed)

Based on the above we can say that it is money that finally restores harmony in *Katzourbos*. In the world of the adults who make the decisions and determine the fate of the young, their own interest determines these decisions. It couldn't have been otherwise in a play where several comic situations are caused by the pursuit of profit. So in the end most *actors* gain something. This is natural in a society of the Renaissance where merchandise and profit constitute an important part of everyday life. Apparently the spectators would have loved to watch on the stage characters that struggle by means of money to conquer their lady - love. In such a society it seems reasonable that the hero's moral victory comes in the form of a rich wedding.

Within the ideological universe of the play there is a distinction between normal and non - normal relations. The biological factor appears as a criterion for the wedding. A young man has a good match only with a young girl. The old man who violates this rule becomes a figure of fun. This play has a subtle sense of the *suitable* and of the *unsuitable*. The mutual attraction of the two youths is a natural condition and its reversal is unacceptable on the natural level. *Katzourbos* highlights precisely this natural inclination. The tests the hero goes through stem from this reality and natural order is vindicated in the end.



We will move on now to Manolis Anagnostakis, a contemporary poet who was born in Thessaloniki in 1925. He is considered one of the "social and political" poets of Greece. When one reads the poems of Anagnostakis' collection *The Target* (1971), one feels that they move in a space where action is limited, where monologue prevails, where the Heroes observe behaviours and reach conclusions. If, however, we limit ourselves to the surface level we will not be able to see that on a deep level huge contrasts are hidden, contrasts involving truth and falseness, the secret and the lie. We should mention that these poems refer to the years of the dictatorship (1967 - 1974), which had abolished democracy in Greece.

Truth

My child never cared for fairy tales

And they told him about Dragons and the faithful dog
About the journeys of Sleeping Beauty and the wild wolf

My child never cared for fairy tales

Now, in the evenings, I sit and talk to him
I call the dog dog, the wolf wolf, the dark dark,
I point out bad people to him, teach him
Names like prayers, I sing to him of our dead.

Enough! We have to tell our children the truth.
(MY CHILD...)

The reference to "*fairy tales*" indicates the denial of reality. The ones who travel in the area of myth cannot tell what is happening around them. Besides, in the time of the dictatorship, when the collection was published, many legends circulated (as for example the ridiculous slogan of the dictatorial regime: "Greece for the Christian Greeks") and these are refused by the poetic Subject. The contrast between the dog and the wolf is typical. The dog is the guardian of the sheep; the wolf is the one that eats them. So what we have is a reference to the concepts *enemy* and *friend*. In these specific socio-historical conditions it is important for one to know who can be trusted and who cannot. But this is not the only message of the poem. The syntagms



"I sit and talk to him", "I call the dog dog, the wolf wolf, the dark dark", "I point out bad people to him, teach him | Names like prayers", "I sing to him of our dead" show that the narrator is keen on matters concerning knowledge. On the basis of textual evidence, it is seen that the poem identifies truth (being+ seeming) with the literal meaning of things as well as with the knowledge of reality. Let us meet the people that surround us, the poetic Subject stresses here.

Falseness

I write poems within the guidelines set down
 by the services in charge
 Which do not contain the word: Freedom, the word:
 Democracy
 Do not shout out: Down with the tyrants or:
 Death to the traitors
 Which studiously avoid the so - called burning questions
 I write poems comfortable and relaxing
 no matter who the censor
 I steer clear of worn out expressions like: corruption
 or bastards or sell - outs
 In each case I choose the most propitious word
 The one considered 'poetic,': polished, virginal,
 ideally beautiful.
 I write poems that do not go against
 the established order.

(APOLOGIA OF A LAW - ABIDING CITIZEN)

As far as falseness is concerned, the poem "Apologia of a law-abiding citizen" is quite amusing. It is a case of a charming lie. In order to comprehend this, we must make a distinction between the data of the text and the impression that it creates in a reader of the poem. Both the title and the verses claim that the speaker is a law-abiding citizen, a person subdued by a tyrannical regime. However, we all smile with understanding. Despite his claims, the poetic Subject does not belong to the compromised ones. He creates poetry of the resistance and reveals the real face of the regime with his poetic stratagems.



Lie

You died - and you too became: a good
 A remarkable man, head of a family, a patriot.
 Thirty - six wreathes accompanied you,
 three speeches by vice - presidents,
 Seven resolutions for the superb services you offered.

Ah, Lavrentios old boy, only I knew what a bastard you
 were,

What counterfeit coin, a whole life of lies
 Sleep in peace I won't be coming to disturb your rest.
 (I will buy off a whole life of silence
 It will be very dear and not at the price
 of your miserable hide).
 Rest in peace. As you always were in life: a good,
 A remarkable man, head of a family, a patriot.

You won't be the first or the last.

(EPITAPH)

In the case of Lavrentios ("Epitaph") the opening verses refer to the funeral eulogies and the magnificent burial. But right below the demoralization of his image begins. On the one hand we have the collective viewpoint (the state, the society if you wish) which honours Lavrentios, and on the other hand the narrator's personal viewpoint which clearly despises him. Consequently, society interprets his action positively (he *is and seems to be a good citizen*), although the narrator disagrees. Lavrentios seems to be a good citizen, but in reality he is not. This different perspective between the society and the narrator, who possesses spherical knowledge, also proves who Lavrentios is. He is a double - faced charlatan and his entire life had been nothing but a lie.

Secret

First I'll take your hands
 To feel your pulse
 Then we'll go into the woods together
 Put our arms around the big trees



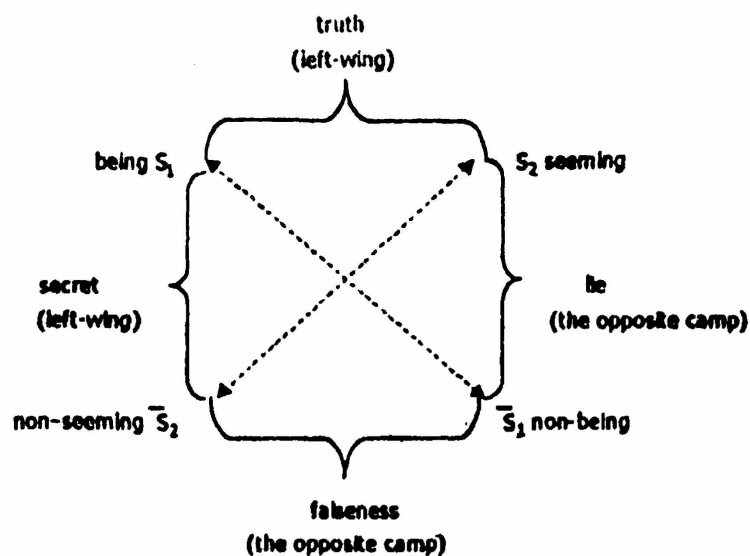
Where years ago we carved
 The holy names on every trunk
 So we can read them slowly together
 Count them one by one
 With our eyes turned to the sky as in prayer.

The sky does not conceal our forest.

No woodsmen pass through here.
 ("THE SKY")

Finally, the *secret* is represented by the poem "The sky". We see that the forest is unknown to both the lumber-jacks (that is its ravagers) and the enunciator. The holy names carved on its trees refer to a tradition of struggle and sacrifice. We have here a reference to the struggles and sacrifices of the narrator's generation. The forest does not exist in the real world (non-seeming), but exists in the conscience of the fighters.

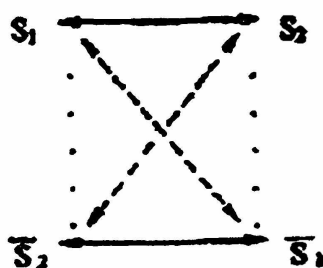
Of course it is not within our intentions to delineate here an era or to present all the details of the universe of this collection. Nevertheless, the classification that will follow, at a paradigmatic level, will allow us to view a specific perspective of the poetic Subject in the years of the dictatorship. This potential is provided by the *veridictory square*. If we take into consideration the space where each *actor* moves we have an adequate criterion for the classification and finding of relations. Thus truth and the secret are identified with the political left wing, whereas the lie and falseness with the opposite camp; so we have:



One of Anagnostakis's contemporaries is Tasos Livaditis (1922 - 1988). His poems render experiences from the Greek civil war (1947 - 1949) that began right after World War II. In one of his poems called *Cantata*, he gives us the woman's place in post-war Greece. There we can discover a pattern of sexual relationships which reminds us of A.J. Greimas's "Social Model of Sexual Relations".

conjugal relations

abnormal relations



normal relations

extra - conjugal relations

There can be no ambiguity of the term «conjugal relations». These are the sexual relationships among spouses, which our society considers both as legitimate and incumbent. For some characters of the collection we are discussing, what constitutes "abnormal relations" is the treatment of a whore not as a sex object, but as a sanctified object. But for the protagonist of the scene the evaluation criteria are completely adverse.

Lately about a strange occurrence we read in the news -
papers —

a man went to one of these "houses", took
a woman,

but just as they enter the room, instead of undressing and
repeating the eternal movement,

he knelt before her, it is said, and would keep asking her to
let him

cry at her feet.

In the system of values of the *Cantata*, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is considered a "natural relation". It is a normal



relationship, resulting from the attraction of the two sexes. The performance of the sexual act between a male and a female is a natural function. Extra - conjugal relationships are focused upon female adultery and are considered as unaccepted.

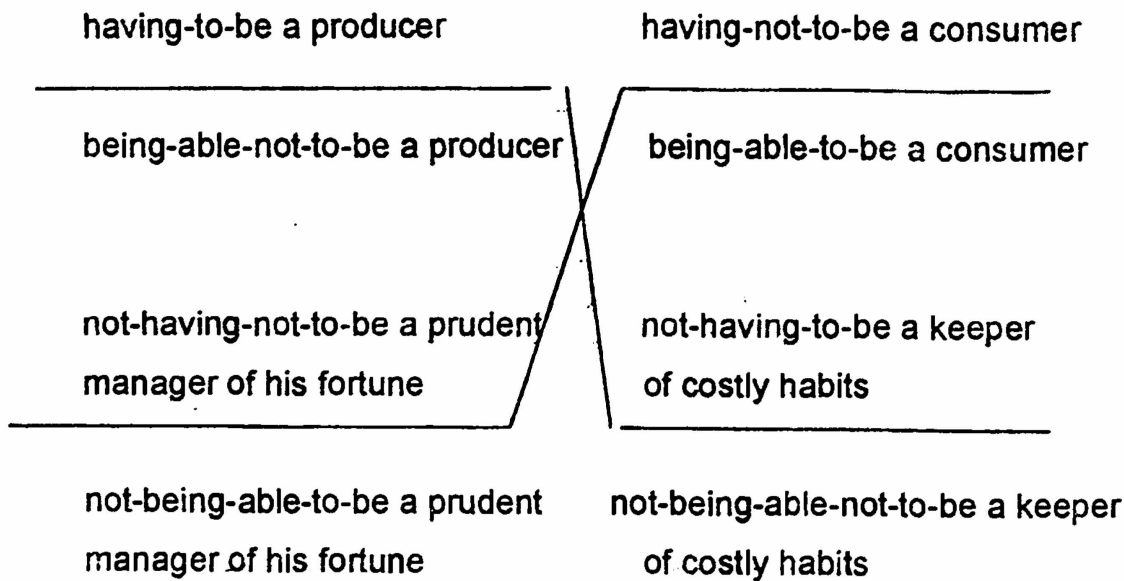
Now, if we take a closer look at the result of these sexual relationships from the point of view of the woman - Subject, we will see that it signals a condition of *lack*. The woman is deprived in all sexual manifestations. Sexual communication with the male is not restored.

Some wonder whether it is feasible to put into practice in literature the *semiotic squares* proposed by A. J. Greimas in his article "Pour un théorie des modalités". One example will demonstrate this to us. Grigorios Xenopoulos (1867 - 1951) is a playwright. His plays are generally described as urban, secular and modernist. In his play *The Secret of Countess Valerena*, Xenopoulos speaks about Manolis, the son of Countess Valerena, a noble man who has lost his fortune. So, instead of becoming a producer and finding money for his family, he sells his mother's books to cover his needs. In fact he has his own views about it:

Manolis: Yep? Are you able not to eat? Not to dress? Not to wear shoes? Not to go to the theatre when an opera's in town? Not to go to the Casino in Carnival? The primadonna on her opening night and you, a cound, not send her a flower? And what about the boy? ...he's a fifteen year - old lad now!

In this passage the hard demands of everyday life related to living are listed. Food and dressing are indispensable for humans. The raising of children and the special care parents must show towards them also emerge from the passage. But if one can agree with Manolis on all these, this is not the case with all the costly habits he continues practicing though he is short of money. He goes to the theatre, plays in the Casino and sends gifts to the primadonnas. That is, we see Manolis signalling positively things which do not have social approval, like extravagance and costly habits. In this case we have a conflicting situation between *having - to* and *being - able - to* which is shown schematically in the following *semiotic square*:





We have seen that the use of the *semiotic square* in analysing Modern Greek literary texts has shown a rich pattern of *sexual*, *social* and *economic* relations. It shows not only the conflict between humans and society in different periods of time, but also the transcendence of the conflicts that leads to a euphoric condition. The texts we used are simply indicative. Our studies on Modern Greek literature have showed that the *semiotic square* and generally A. J. Greimas' model proves to be a useful tool in the ideological coordinates of the text. If I had more time at my disposal, I could have also spoken about the application of the *semiotic square* to the novelist Constantine Theotokis (1872 - 1923) who deals with human passions in their Greek version. I would have spoken about *narrative programs of vengeance*, about settlement of passions through social processes and generally about the passage from a state of chaos to a state of order.

But one should not think that the above - mentioned examples exhaust all the cases where the application of A. J. Greimas' *semiotic square* is advisable and useful from a hermeneutic point of view. We think that the *semiotic square* is a methodological instrument of wider range which contributes to highlighting and codifying the systems of value contained in the text. This is our debt both to A. J. Greimas and Aristotle.



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