

KARINE ZBINDEN

In Praise of Nuance: An Interview with Tzvetan Todorov

Introduction

There is something inordinately strange about “introducing” Tzvetan Todorov to the readers of *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, for he has been a prominent figure in the humanities since the 1960s, engaging with a wide variety of domains, from semantics to semiotics, poetics to ethics, history to philosophical anthropology. Rather than indicating fragmentation of thought, this diversity testifies to an enduring interest in humankind and human experience explored from many different angles. His books, many of them bestsellers, are translated into numerous languages. Strangely, however, there has to date been little commentary on his thought. Perhaps this is due to the fact that his activity eludes categorical definition (is he a historian, a philosopher, a literary critic, a writer, or even a linguist?) — a characteristic it shares with that of another thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin, who has played a part in Todorov’s intellectual development.

Todorov has crossed boundaries in various ways: literally, by emigrating from Bulgaria in his twenties and settling down in France; but also on an intellectual level, for he has acted as mediator between cultures. Shortly after his arrival in Paris, he translated some key Russian Formalist texts and helped introduce Roman Jakobson to a French readership; and later he wrote a critical introduction to the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle at a time when few texts were yet available in French. More recently, he has focused on classic texts of French humanist thought, thus reconnecting his contemporaries to their intellectual heritage and linking the ideas of some of the first modern thinkers to our present preoccupations. This is closely linked to Todorov’s conception of the place of subjectivity in the human sciences, according to which it is impossible to consider facts independently from values. In brief, Todorov cannot conceive of a fruitful study of a human “object” that does not entail taking a position — since humanity is a characteristic shared by both subject and object of study in the aptly named human sciences. On the contrary, he considers “the

separation between one’s life and one’s words, between facts and values” not just hypocritical (like his friends who nurse revolutionary ideals in complete contradiction with their “bourgeois” lifestyle) but “deleterious” (*On Human Diversity* x). There are distinct echoes of the later Bakhtin’s methodo-logical essays in this passage. But Todorov goes further than Bakhtin, in part because of the contrast between his experience of totalitarianism in Bulgaria and his life under a democratic regime, and declares that “thinking that is not nourished by personal experience quickly degenerates into scholasticism, and can satisfy only the scholars themselves” (x). For all these reasons the moral and philosophical essay appears well-suited to Todorov’s purposes, for it *mediates* between philosophical abstractions and everyday experience (xi).

But Todorov’s vocation for mediation may also be linked to his passion for literature. In spite of the variety of domains he has addressed, he has remained faithful to literature, even when his approach has changed radically. Literature crosses boundaries, in time, space, between cultures, and the very best examples even play with the limits

between genres, or with literature's own limitations. As privileged medium for accessing human experience literature is the Ariadne's thread guiding us through the diversity of Todorov's works. It provides the primary material for most of his studies: the accounts of the conquest of America in Aztec narratives and missionaries' chronicles, the survivors' testimonies of the concentration camps, the philosophical and political reflections on democracy in the works of Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Benjamin Constant, to name but a few. Yet the most original aspect of his thought may well be his own recourse to literature in order to expound his ideas: over the last twenty years his own writing has evolved towards a new genre, that of the *exemplary narrative*, a hybrid form "halfway between pure narrative and abstract debate" in his own words.

Somewhat intriguingly, Todorov has remained an outsider to the Parisian intelligentsia and its various *engouements* over the years. A little explanation is necessary here. Mediation implies a degree of marginality: as a consequence of crossing over boundaries, the mediator (or "*porteur*" according to the title of a recent book of interviews) becomes a kind of intellectual migrant who is at home in thought as a whole rather than in any particular domain. Making links between apparently distant disciplines to some extent condemns the mediator to the in-between. However, if we go back to Bakhtin, we see that this is a common, if slightly erroneous conception of intellectual activity — at least in the human sciences — as occupying a territory in the literal sense. Bakhtin envisaged thought as dialogic, in other words, as establishing connections, and stated that everything always takes place on boundaries. This implies a situation of outsiderness (or exotopy, in Todorov's translation of Bakhtin's term *vnenakhodimost'*) as a necessary first step in the cognition of the object. Later, the subject can reintegrate his/her position. This notion of exotopy is dear to Todorov, and is at the basis of mediation. Exotopy is valuable also for the accrued importance it gives to culture. In acquiring a new culture, a lengthy but realistic project, the self can gain a more insightful understanding of his/her culture of origin.

Although Todorov's early works fall under the broad category of "structuralism," from the very beginning he chose a slightly marginal approach, devoting himself to the development of poetics — concentrating on the forms that literature could take rather than the actual works themselves. He pursued the Russian Formalists' legacy by investigating forms of discourse, most notably with his introduction to *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. The originality of this study resides in the fact that the definition of the fantastic as a genre ultimately rests on the reader's attitude to a given text: if the events portrayed cannot fall under the category of the "normal" yet do not clearly belong to the uncanny (but real) or the marvellous (and supernatural), in other words, if the reader remains hesitant as to the nature of the events, then the text exemplifies the fantastic. Interestingly, by the end of the story the reader makes up his/her mind about the nature of the phenomena recounted, and thus emerges from the fantastic.

In turn in works on semiotics in the late 1970s the concern for "literariness" gave way to an exploration of meaning-production as the defining feature of human activity. *Theories of the Symbol* is an impressive survey of the various traditions and conceptions of the symbol from antiquity to the twentieth century, while a shorter volume, *Symbolism and Interpretation*, explored the modalities that trigger interpretation of a secondary, or double, meaning. In the 1980s Todorov's move away from structuralism is consummated definitively; as he himself puts it, he had spent long enough perfecting his analytical tool, and it was now time for him to use it. A major new theme emerges: the question of alterity, or otherness, and the encounter of cultures. This is best represented by *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*; by his work on theories of race and exoticism in *On Human Diversity*, or on the place of society in man in *Life in Common: An Essay in General Anthropology*; and by several works on French Humanist thinkers — *Frail Happiness: An Essay on Rousseau*, *A Passion for Democracy: Benjamin Constant*, and his latest book to be translated into English, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. To this one should add an important study which lays out his conception of ethics, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*,

as well as works of a historical nature, such as *A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944* which reconstitutes the events leading up to a massacre of Jews in Occupied France, or *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust*, which investigates another episode of the Second World War.

Within this diversity of interests it is possible to discern a number of constants: a determination to link cultures and to cross disciplines by refusing enclosure within narrow specialised fields, as we have already seen; a concern for relating the particular to the universal, in order to better understand the world, historical events and human behaviour; and, more recently, an interest in history from a moral point of view.

The universal and the particular

In spite of his interest in the universal Todorov has consistently avoided sweeping generalisations or ready-made answers. Rather on the contrary: he has sought to grasp the particulars of every event, situation, or work in their context, and has not neglected painstaking analysis of these details, which constitute the uniqueness of experience, in an attempt to identify their universal value. In the 1970s, the object of analysis tended to be the nature of genre or the structure of language, but it has long since been replaced by ethical principles and humanist postulates. A particularly enlightening example of this practice can be found in *On Human Diversity*. This book centers on the fate of ideas developed in the Enlightenment, later adopted and modified by a variety of thinkers, sometimes in order to defend nationalistic and colonialist agendas, in particular the notion of human diversity. Universalism is one of the more problematic issues. For example, although Rousseau did not consider humankind homogeneous, he did not abandon the idea of the unity of humankind. On the contrary, he considered that knowing the specificity of each people could provide access to the common features or unity of humanity. To put it otherwise, after observing the diversity of cultures and individual variations, one must re-embrace the idea of the universality of humankind. These three elements — diversity of cultures, individual variations and universality of humankind — constitute the core of humanist thought in Rousseau and Montesquieu, and form the basis of Todorov's position. But, this universality must not be the result of generalisation from our own particular (in other words an ethnocentric distortion of universalism), but the result of examination of at least two particulars and establishment of a dialogue between them. This is what Todorov calls "good" universalism, because it "does not deduce human identity from a principle, whatever it may be" (12). It is thus opposed not to the particular (quite on the contrary as we have seen), but to relativism, for relativism would deny the existence of the unity of humankind (with diversity) and consider only differences. Parenthetically, however, Todorov points out that relativism rests on a paradox because it does not consider its own theoretical stance as relative, but as universal, and uses this universal value to hierarchise differences, more often than not legitimising racism.

Moreover, in a discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Todorov further defines three types of universalism: "starting-point" universalism; "end-point" universalism; and, in between these two, a universalism of "itinerary" (73-74). "Starting-point" universalism is generally humankind's capacity to acquire a culture (which is in fact (wo)man's distinctively human feature), while "end-point" universalism is the projected end result of a teleological conception of universalism which would postulate not only unity but also uniformity of humanity — Todorov here has in mind Condorcet's idea of a universal state, realized in totalitarianism with its dream of world supremacy. Universalism of itinerary, or method, is by far the most interesting because it only offers a frame of reference for dialogue between self and other; it is a common horizon which is posited to enable a dialogue, and it is made of categories which can only be more or less universal. Todorov defines universality as "an instrument of analysis, a regulatory principle allowing the fruitful confrontation of differences, and its content cannot be fixed: it is always

subject to revision” (390). He returns to the question of universality in *The Morals of History*, stating that universality is “not in the object, but in the project,” that “_t_hings are not universal, but concepts can be” (15-16).

Moral values and the everyday

The relationship between the universal and the particular is essential to moral actions, for it is precisely the link between the particular action and the universal value it embodies that constitutes its ethical status. However, Todorov insists, an action can be moral only when its subject himself/herself endorses the moral imperative; in other words, moral demands can be made exclusively by the self and to the self. Otherwise, we are dealing with moralistic behavior, preaching to others what moral actions *they* should accomplish, and there is no moral dimension in this — quite on the contrary. As he himself puts it: “Morally, one can demand only from oneself; to others one must only give.” In *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, Todorov explores how important moral actions were to survival. Indeed, against the widespread assumption which claim that the camps, be they Nazi or Communist, exemplify Hobbes’s predicament of the war of all against all and the disappearance of all moral sense in the prisoners, the presence of numerous counterexamples prompted Todorov to investigate precisely why these specific cases do not correspond to the general principle of immorality. In fact, he found things to be otherwise: the world we live in today is the same world where camps were in active existence for several decades and, more disquietingly, everyday experience is not all that different from experience in the camps in that there is a continuity between the two types of experience. In other words, the people involved in the experience of the camps, prisoners and guards alike, are our fellow humans. He does not level the (obvious) differences between them or between our everyday lives and life in the camps, but resists the shorthand solution of explaining the camps purely in terms of the monstrous nature of the Nazis. There are several reasons for this.

Perhaps surprisingly, Todorov finds in his reading of accounts of the Warsaw ghetto uprising that it is not heroes or saints who tend to survive extreme circumstances, but some very rare people who are no less exemplary. He opposes actions made in the name of an abstraction, be it the good of humanity or love of God, to actions directed at a particular individual, either a loved one or a complete stranger. Therefore, in Todorov’s view, “not all heroes are equally deserving of praise” (*Facing the Extreme* 58). But more importantly, moral conduct in the extreme circumstances of the camps is not the exclusive attribute of the hero. It manifests itself in all sorts of small actions, or gestures, that would otherwise pass unnoticed. As a pendant to heroic virtues, such as bravery, or self-sacrifice for a cause, etc., Todorov identifies what he calls “ordinary virtues” (in French “everyday,” “*quotidien*”): dignity, caring and the life of the mind. Dignity enables the subject to preserve self-respect but, to be a virtue, it must not be counter to the good of humanity. Caring seems the most surprising in the context of the camps. It is the maternal attitude *par excellence*, and is by common consent probably more feminine than masculine, which may explain why women have tended to survive the ordeals of the camp physically *and* psychologically better (proportionally) than men. Caring encompasses a variety of actions, from sharing a meager portion of bread to concealing somebody or choosing to die with or for somebody. Caring enables the agent to give a meaning to life but also increases personal resources; however, in the extreme situation of the camps, it can also make the carer more vulnerable (to guilt for not having done enough, or to grief should the beneficiary die). The last of these “ordinary” virtues is the life of the mind, which in itself is amoral, but can have a moral effect on the agent who improves himself/herself, and can contribute to the good of humanity in making the world a little more understandable. Todorov organises everyday virtues according to whom they benefit primarily: dignity benefits the agent, or *I*, while caring benefits the other, or *you* (but we have seen that the agent also gains something by being caring), and the life of the mind is directed at many more individuals, or

they. In this perspective ordinary virtues correspond to the structure of intersubjectivity, although in practice things are less clear-cut than the elegance of this analysis may suggest (97-103).

Caring, Todorov notes, is generally socially undervalued:

If money does not make one person more deserving of living than another, neither does a commitment to the life of the mind, even though history may remember the names of poets and scholars and not those of the people who brought them tea in their bedrooms or sewed on their buttons. (107)

This underestimation of everyday life and activities knows one noteworthy exception in the history of art of Western Europe: Dutch painting of the seventeenth century, where everyday gestures suddenly irrupt into the world of art, and a woman peeling an apple under her child's intent gaze, another looking through a window, a mother holding her feverish child on her lap, a young woman drinking in the company of men become the main subjects of paintings. Everyday life is not opposed to beauty during that brief period, it holds beauty as well.

Moreover, caring is the only virtue that is rarely displayed by the guards themselves, whereas dignity and the life of the mind, mainly through music, were widespread among them. This partly explains the nature of evil that the camps display. Far from being extraordinary monsters, most Nazis were rather ordinary, which does not mean or imply that their crimes were ordinary, nor does it justify these crimes. But Todorov seeks the explanation for the existence of the camps in the totalitarian state that produced them rather than in the nature of the German people, and thus avoids the trap of collective guilt, which is a simplification all too commonly used. Thus under a totalitarian regime, the state, rather than humanity, determines the ultimate goals of society as well as the measure of good and evil. This has a double effect: it instrumentalises the people, by requesting from them that they perform actions without questioning their moral value, i.e. whether they are good or bad, and by demanding total compliance (and using terror to impose it). In this way, it can force people to perform certain prescribed actions without having to modify their moral structure, or without having to uproot all moral sense. Thus the guards are not deprived of ethics, which would deny them their human status, but are in fact provided with a new ethics by the state. This deresponsibilises them (at Nuremberg most of the accused pleaded not guilty). But even more perversely, it ensures their submission and the submission of their victims at the same time, which goes some way to explaining why Jews did not revolt before the Holocaust. The totalitarian nature of the regime simply made this impossible (124-32).

The benefit one can gain from studying life in the concentration camps is, according to Todorov, two-fold: firstly, however extreme the conditions of the camps in a totalitarian regime, he thinks that they reveal the truth of the human condition by acting as a magnifying glass for humanity.¹ But secondly, knowing the past is crucial to understanding the present, and is the only safeguard against repeating history. In *Imperfect Garden* Todorov makes the case for the necessity of knowing the past. Understanding and organising the world, he contends, is a fundamental human need, and the present can be transformed by knowledge of the past: the better judgment of men can in turn inflect their will. Todorov's stance may be viewed either as slightly optimistic or as rather cynical, since it rests on the notion that men always want their own good but do not always know where to look for it (226). Moreover, it is hard to see how this can be achieved entirely through reading, however enlightening the writings may be, in total absence of any form of political program. But this conviction of the necessity of enlightening the present by making the past more understandable is the source of Todorov's particular style. Apart from the clarity of his

1 Jan Philipp Reemtsma has taken issue with this statement, claiming not only that Todorov does not demonstrate it convincingly but also that he contradicts it in that he states that the camps are the most intensive and concentrated expression of the totalitarian regime and the negation of our democratic ideal (86). Although definitely a difficult question, which Todorov possibly treats a little lightly, this notion of the truth of the human condition in totalitarian camps rests on his conviction that there is a continuity between life in a democracy and life under totalitarianism in that the former does not guarantee the impossibility of the latter, in other words, that it could happen again.

prose, which testifies to his desire to establish genuine communication with his readers, he has developed a particular hybrid genre, halfway between pure commentary on the one hand and analysis of ideas and recreation of events in their narrative development on the other. In *Facing the Extreme* he uses a particular form of textual hybridity, interspersing his analysis of historical events and accounts with personal reflections, thus anchoring and relating himself as subject of his study to his object and enacting dialogic criticism to the letter. But he has practiced this genre of exemplary narrative in various ways over the years, the first time in *The Conquest America*. The notion of exemplariness is thus crucial in Todorov's thought and deserves more careful attention.

A poet in the town

Todorov distinguishes between two forms of truth: truth-adequation and truth-disclosure. The first type refers to facts and to the accuracy of the account. It is the verifiable part of a statement: for example, the greatest genocide in the history of humanity followed the discovery and conquest of America, because the native population diminished by seventy million within about fifty years (*The Morals of History* 138). However, historical interpretation goes beyond mere accuracy of facts — which is absolutely essential — and can only aim for truth-disclosure. In this, the ultimate criterion is no longer referential but intersubjective. Once again, Bakhtin is at the source of this distinction, as Todorov explicitly relates these two types of truth to Bakhtin's opposition between exactitude of knowledge and depth of penetration (122). This, in Bakhtin, is related to the nature of the "object" of analysis: an object in the natural sciences, but a subject in the human sciences. In view of the essential difference in the nature of their "object" Bakhtin describes the natural sciences as "monologic" and the human sciences as "dialogic." This distinction between natural and human sciences comes from neo-Kantianism, in particular Dilthey. To return to Todorov, historical interpretation elicits a meaning from bare facts. Whereas in the case of truth-adequation there is the lowest possible threshold of "false," there is no upper threshold in truth-disclosure: an interpretation can only be more or less revealing.

Todorov relates this articulation back to a long-standing opposition in the Western tradition which he summarises in *The Morals of History*. Plato (and Socrates) considered that the essential relation was between words and objects. They rejected rhetoric specifically because it privileges the intersubjective dimension of communication, that is, the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, and is concerned more with the effect of the speech on the addressee than with its truth-adequation with facts. For this reason, Plato (and Socrates) considered that their ideal republic would be better off without poets and rhetoricians, such as the Sophists, who neglected to consider the moral dimension of their discourse. Plato and Socrates's moral position was immediately contradicted by Aristotle, who thought that rhetoric in itself was no more than a technique and therefore did not have a moral dimension. Only the aim for which it is used can be moral or immoral. In brief, Aristotle claims that language is not a transparent medium for describing the world, but can be used to various ends. Later, in the first century A.D., Quintilian will criticize the characterization of rhetoric purely in terms of the end result, in other words as an art of persuasion. He will define rhetoric as the "science of speaking well." His position will consist in seeing beauty and harmony as virtues and considering a beautiful discourse virtuous. Kant will adopt the aesthetic attitude to ethics, which through German Romanticism will eventually form the basis of the modern conception of literature (127-37).

Todorov's position is slightly different from the polarised attitudes to rhetoric that he outlines. He considers that the relationship between language and the world on the one hand and the relationship to the addressee on the other are not mutually exclusive. For a start, the decision to seek to have an effect on the addressee has something to do with what one wants to talk about (137). He further points out that the intersubjective dimension of truth-disclosure means that the form of the interpretation is of prime importance for its effect on the addressee:

“...from this new point of view, interpretation is indissociable from its own literary form” (138). These considerations are significant for understanding his use of the specific form of writing that is “exemplary narrative.”

Interpretation is central to his book on *The Conquest of America*, for much of it discusses attempts by the Spanish Conquistadors, in particular Cortés, and the Indians to interpret and understand their respective other. Todorov starts by explaining the genre he has adopted: “I have chosen to narrate a story” (*The Conquest of America* 4).² He adds that this story is both true and exemplary, thus reconciling history and ethics and relating the past directly to the present. He further describes the book as alternating summaries with scenes, quotations and omissions, “rather as in a novel” (4). Nevertheless, in spite of, or perhaps thanks to, its novelistic appearance, this interpretation fulfils a double requirement, which Todorov considers a duty: to seek the truth and to make it known (247). He has succeeded, as not only is the tragic story of the Mayan woman devoured by dogs to whose memory the book is dedicated not forgotten, but also its power will impress upon his readers the importance of “discovering the other.” Hopefully, this will also suffice to prevent such a thing ever happening again. Todorov’s position suggests, more problematically, that his aesthetics can overcome the limitations of logical argumentation.

The first volume of Todorov’s research into humanist thought and the principles of democracy, *On Human Diversity*, concluded on a note of measured optimism. An individual’s flaws are just as much characteristics of human nature as a sense of equity, ethics and the capacity to rise above oneself. Only a constant effort and personal will can make the best prevail in oneself. Humanism is not a doctrine that can provide ready-made answers, but merely offers some enlightenment about the complexities of human life:

Wisdom is neither hereditary nor contagious: one attains it more or less, but always and only alone, not by virtue of one’s membership in a group or a State. The best regime in the world is never anything but the least bad, and even if it is the one under which we live, everything still remains to be done. Learning to live with others is part of this wisdom. (399)

Another part of this wisdom consists in accepting the imperfect garden as emblematic of our human condition, and continuing to search for the truth.

The interview was conducted by e-mail, following a meeting on 14 June 2002 in Paris.

Bakhtin Centre, University of Sheffield

² The published translation uses “history” in this instance. However, I think that the French *histoire* is best rendered by “story” in the present case. The text goes on to use “story” when characterising its truth and exemplariness.