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Karine Zbinden

Introduction: Who's Afraid of Humanism?

That humanism is closely linked to the notion of "man" in its wider sense, or of the human, is obvious. What is more difficult, as Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley suggest, is to define the human:

Too ungrounded and the human loses its critical edge, because everything from totalitarianism to raking gravel can be thought of as an expression of the human. An ethically and politically grounded humanism is surely necessary, for we have to have some sense of what a human being is to know when he or she is being degraded and what human agency is when it is denied. But too tightly defined, on the other hand, and the human is in danger of becoming a reified and prescriptive category. (*Critical Humanisms*'2)

The authors emphasize that humanism in the past thirty years has generally been defined and simplified by anti-humanists (3). To this remark, one can add that, if an antithetical approach *can* lead to a more balanced appraisal (according to Dialectic logic), it does not necessarily produce an objective, fruitful definition. Critical theory has during the same period been the object of a boom, culminating in the propagation of "French theory," particularly in literature departments in the United States, and has disseminated a popularized version of itself which has greatly contributed to the view that thought has progressed due not only to its rejection of an essentialist conception of "man" but to its doing away more or less entirely with the very idea of humanity. This view no doubt simplifies, in turn, the complex field and refined and diverse theories that make up "critical theory" but the fact that anti-humanist discourse has dominated the humanities in the past few decades, starting with the formalised studies of the 1960s and 1970s, which Todorov championed and at times spear-headed, is beyond dispute. What is still a point of slight

contention is that the dominant definition of humanism is little more than a straw"man."

Indeed, in the heydays of theory, at least in France (the Anglo-American world imported these debates, together with an aversion for "humanism," a little later), humanism became the convenient receptacle for all positions and conceptions that began to be perceived as outdated, such as the notion that language worked as a transparent medium to communicate thoughts, that the self was self-identical and unchanging, that reason alone could enable us to perceive reality undistorted or an uncompromising and rigid universalism (in fact more akin to uniformity), to name some of the most striking. Humanism, at least the one with the bad name, was constructed largely retrospectively and, most notably, *antagonistically* to further efforts of self-definition of newer trends. In fact, without going as far as calling anti-humanists "closet humanists," one could nevertheless construe the relationship between humanism and anti-humanists as rather more complex and fluid.¹ Similarly, all that has been superseded (transparency of linguistic medium, self-identical, unchanging self, etc.) or has been unmasked (the ethnocentric trend of some universalist discourses or their phallocentrism, for example) does not necessarily represent a true likeness of humanism, in spite of anti-humanists' claims. However, there is more at stake here than just the definition of humanism, it is our ability to overcome binary thinking that is called into question:

[I]t is a mistake to see all the good on one side and all the bad on the other. Our contemporary attachment to the values that have emerged from individualism (from humanism) cannot be called back into question. But it would be very much in our interest, as Louis Dumont has already suggested, to *temper* this humanism with values and principles from other horizons. This is possible whenever we are dealing not with radical incompatibilities but instead with rearticulations among dominant and subordinate elements. (*On Human Diversity* 398)

I am borrowing and slightly modifying Halliwell and Mousley's phrase: the authors suggest that a text such as Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" can be read from an anti-humanist perspective, as it usually is, or as a "closet humanist text" "merely replac[ing] one kind of subject (as core) with another (as linguistic/social process)" (15).

Todorov discusses a slightly different, but related, issue here. However, he does not merely rebut the idea that dressing up humanism as the devil is unproductive but, much more importantly, he also suggests that humanism is not a static, fixed and essentialist dogma but a set of values which needs to be reorganized and "rearticulated" in conjunction with "values and principles from other horizons," in other words, humanism should be constantly reassessed and redefined, criticized and brought up to date.

To return to Halliwell and Mousley's quotation, the political significance of a definition of the human is of primary importance and few theorists would actually deny it. Who has never signed a petition for the end to torture or the liberation of political prisoners? Who is not shocked by the treatment of prisoners, be they terror suspects, in Guantanamo Bay, or by the abuse inflicted to Iraqi detainees by Coalition forces, to take just two recent examples? Although it has been fashionable to express skepticism over the idea of the human (to put it mildly), its consequence, rejecting the notion of human rights for being ideologically suspect, is not acceptable (and rightly so) and not common in enlightened circles. However, the notion of human rights is grounded on a universal definition of the human and discarding the latter voids the former. Most people, it seems, would not reject the notions of equality or Justice and retribution (in one form or another) for crimes committed. But the judicial system and democracy, with all their faults, are based on the concept of human agency. Recognizing its limitations should not lead to, even less legitimize, its blanket rejection.

This volume arises from a conference held at the University of Sheffield in June 2004 and entitled "Tzvetan Todorov 2004: An International Conference." The conference objective — to bring together scholars working in a great many disciplines across the humanities — is reflected in the contributions which range from literary studies to history of ideas and history. Just as significant is the fact that the works of a thinker who is identified, by origin and by inclination, as European, attracted scholars from five continents. In the present volume, contributors from the Middle East, Asia and North America counterbalance Europeans. This equilibrium lends weight to the notion that investigations into human experience, the focus of Todorov's thought for over two decades, are relevant well beyond their place of origin.

Ushio Ono's survey of Todorov's reception in Japan testifies to his wider appeal, although the breadth of references quoted is itself a challenge, compounded by the fact that Todorov often selects atypical works, thus providing his readers with a defamiliarizing outlook at ideas with which they

are generally conversant. Beyond the problem of the availability of the sources, the Japanese have a more complex conceptual obstacle to overcome with the term "humanism" than their Western counterparts who only have to take into account the post-Nietzschean, post-Freudian connotations. The translation of "humanism" into Japanese is complex and further impeded by the fact that an influential sect is designated by the least connoted of the three terms available. However, this Buddhist sect, Ono informs us, has a political branch, which is part of the governmental coalition sending support troops to Iraq.

Another commonplace objection discards humanism as an outmoded worldview and conception of humanity, which for its detractors amounts to little more than regression. In fact, as Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan points out, Todorov's concern with "the implicit definition of humankind itself "returns once again to some foundational questions which have been left behind in our specialized, compartmentalized world, but have never been truly resolved" (154). And Sam Ramer is more pointed when he writes that Todorov's "own vision of human nature is neither naive nor overly optimistic, and his ethical writing rests upon the assumption that human beings will often choose evil" (214). Rather than the expression of a nostalgic regret for a bygone world(view), Todorov's engagement with the humanist legacy is primarily focused on its relevance for the present. Stoyan Atanassov's reading of Todorov's *oeuvre* from the perspective of dialogue puts emphasis on the enrichment of the humanist tradition that Todorov's use of the "dialogic I" and the "hybridity of cultures" brings to the thinkers of the past. Reminding us that dialogue appears as "a conciliatory factor" among the multiplicity of influences and tensions in life, Atanassov suggests that dialogue brings about the dynamism which the unity of humankind requires but that "traditional moral thought cannot account for conceptually" (149).

If the text lacks the will necessary to make it a genuine interlocutor, on a par with the critic, contrary to what Todorov's dialogic criticism seems to imply, Atanassov seeks remedy in Bakhtin, arguably Todorov's most significant and most enduring interlocutor from the past, claiming in particular that Bakhtin filled this need with the "psychological category" of the superaddressee. It is an interesting consideration, worth examining in more detail. In the latter part of his career, from the early 1960s to his death in 1975, Bakhtin writes notes and thoughts in telegraphic form across a range of notebooks (later divided up and compiled as "essays" by one of his executors) published in English in the volume *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. In these, he expounds the idea of the "superaddressee" or "third." What is particularly

interesting about this notion for us is that it seeps into Todorov's thought and plays a very significant role, it appears, specifically in his examination of understanding but, quite significantly, it dares not speak its name. Indeed, it seems subsumed into a different notion, which we also find in Bakhtin and to which Todorov gives special prominence: exotopy, or outsidedness (although the concept of the third is also implicit to a lesser extent in such notions as dialogism or heterology).

In her article, Erdinast-Vulcan redraws the connection between the two thinkers, which is usually seen as one of legacy or of mere commentary, to consider it as a two-way relationship, where not just Todorov's thought is provided depth and relief by his engagement with Bakhtin but where Bakhtin's ideas and concepts also greatly benefit from Todorov's probing exposition. Thus, in Todorov's description of the four phases of understanding, which Erdinast-Vulcan details, there is a slight shift from what Bakhtin calls "outsidedness," which was essentially a methodological tool, to what now becomes part of "exotopy," or the capacity to step outside of one's own hermeneutic situation in order to grasp the issue from a distanced viewpoint. Rather than being an actual participant in any situation of communication, the third, or superaddressee, is a transcendental instance, an "ideal" in Todorov's formulation, which guarantees the possibility of communication and mutual understanding, by preventing dialogism from sliding surreptitiously into relativism. If "outsidedness" in Bakhtin was merely the possibility to distance oneself from one's own position, in Todorov, "exotopy" becomes a more defined state, a kind of awareness of the cultural specificity of one's own circumstances, which leads not only to the perception of one's own cultural bias but opens the way for surmounting it by attaining universality.

But intersubjectivity, or to put it more prosaically, the relation with the other, also provides the framework for the emergence of love and caring, an ordinary virtue which occupies a prominent place in Todorov's worldview. From the construction of identity in the parent-child dyad to the more abstract statement that "ethics needs to be complemented by love, which transcends ethics" (*L'Homme dépaysé* 174-75) individual relations between humans constitute the meaning as well as the richness of life, for which universal, abstract values can, and must, provide a framework. But it is the failure to recognize the humanity of the other in the clash between European conquerors and the native populations of Central America in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century which constitutes the backbone of his *Conquest of America*, a work which appears to be a key point not just in Todorov's

evolution but also in several of the contributions (Atanassov, Erdinast-Vulcan, Gallois, and Zbinden).

But the other is also essential to epistemology and to modes of telling, as Erdinast-Vulcan points out, thus drawing attention to the status of aesthetic writing. One of the legacies of the conquest is the domination of one mode of knowledge, logical argumentation, over all others, and in particular what Todorov designates as *mythos*, a mode of writing/knowing, which, as I attempt to show, he seeks to revalorize with the notion of literary thought.

In his own practice, Todorov has developed the hybrid genre of the "exemplary narrative" which blends narrative, based on as accurate as possible a reconstruction of the events recounted, with logical argumentation, focusing on the moral meaning and the lesson for the present that the reader will be able to infer from it. The narrative has a longer lasting effect too as the story recounted will remain in the reader's memory in a very different way than abstract debate. But the stronger emotional impact of the narrative is crucial to the genre: not only does it open it to a non-specialist public but it also enables us "to live an experience which has not been ours," with the effect that "we can project ourselves on the characters, real or imagined, and come out of it transfigured" (*Devoirs et Delias* 192). The particular here leads to the universal.

Eugene Goodheart explores Todorov's "universalist bias" in relation to his study of the Holocaust and his impassioned resistance to the combined reductions of radical uniqueness and collective guilt, which are at best sterile. And Goodheart doubtlessly values Todorov's attempts "to find in particular human experiences (no matter how exceptionally wonderful or awful) their universality" (190). However, while affirming strongly the need for moral universals, Goodheart is also sensitive to the limitations that too abstract an approach to human concerns can at times entail. But he goes further and asserts the need to complement Todorov's assessment and critique of the French Enlightenment with a historical perspective. Historical context may even be the only resource available to resolve "value conflicts within a culture" (187).

The concrete example of cultural hybridity and of peaceful and harmonious coexistence of several cultures in pre-modern Iberia ("al-Andalus"), from the eighth century to 1492 C.E., when Spain was unified, prompts William Gallois to bring up the need for "deeper moral investigations into al-Andalus so as to excavate cosmopolitan forms of ethics and politics" (208). The victory of the parochialists over the cosmopolitans, he argues,

should make us reconsider the year 1492 C.E. not as a beginning but more aptly as an ending. This view is put into perspective by Goodheart's admonition to rethink nationalism, "to try to humanize it" (189) rather than to endure it merely as an "antithetical reality" (189).

But for Gallois, the main point resides elsewhere: Todorov's "gift" to the discipline of History is to show in action a practice of History, ethical history, which was passed over in favor of empirical History at the very moment when the discipline of History was created. By offering a more flexible conception of disciplinary boundaries, moral or ethical history can benefit from the advances in critical theory and philosophy and enrich its debates. But most importantly, moral history "conceives of history as a vehicle for moral discussion rather than an end in itself" (196).

The predominant concern for the present in the scholar's activity (rather than an orientation toward the past for its own sake) is taken up by Ramer with greater urgency in his inquiry into the ways in which Todorov's universalist framework can help us understand, and ultimately contend with, evil. Ramer indicates that Todorov's use of the term actually "challenged the cultural and moral relativism that had become characteristic" of the "Western intellectual and scholarly world of the 1980s" (211), perhaps, one might add, as a result of an increasingly leading political correctness. However, the current recourse to evil in politicians' rhetoric has little in common with Todorov's analyses, which resist Manichean reductionism and emphasize the need to valorize "more moderate means of contending with evil" than capitulation or bombardment (225).

The value of human life is a constant in Todorov's works and is arguably the cornerstone of his worldview. If the sacred has been brought down from heaven to earth, as Todorov puts it, whereby "the cult of gods has been replaced by the cult of collective human entities" (230) at first, such as nation, race, or class, a new ideal soon emerges which sees the perfection of the individual being as its goal rather than his/her sacrifice to an abstract cause. Todorov explores the concrete implications of aestheticism in the works and destiny of two major artists, Oscar Wilde and Rainer Maria Rilke. His lecture, "The Replacement of Ethics by Esthetics," and his article, included here as "Le Remplacement de l'éthique par l'esthétique," seem to inaugurate a new practice: to study the work and the life of an artist as two complementary parts, each one casting light on the other — an important departure from the positivistic, pre-formalist readings of biography as interpretative key to the work, a practice with which it should not be assimilated. Thus the thought of

the writer cannot be separated from the worldview that has shaped his/her life. This position is consistent with Todorov's stance for continuity between words and actions, between thoughts and life. In his introduction of the compilation of Marina Tsvetaeva's biographical writings, Todorov states: "With her, one cannot separate the work from the life: 'It is not a question of: living and writing, but of living-writing and: writing is living'" (*Vivre* 11, Tsvetaeva's entry "16 February 1936" quoted in *Vivre* 267). Writing, or esthetics, and living, or the ethical choices it entails, are no longer opposed, or vying with each other for dominance, but interrelated and codependent. And scholars rediscover that they are first and foremost human beings, in the here and now, and that their thoughts and words, spoken and printed, change the world, if ever so slightly.

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