Todorov's Prophecy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Literary Thought

A superficial overview of Tzvetan Todorov's works may yield a deceptive impression: that his career is neatly split into two distinct periods, separated by a sharp break, his earlier works dealing with formal concerns in opposition to his later works focusing on content. Such a periodisation, for all the intellectual comfort it provides, presents the illusion that his current work represents a return to an old-fashioned type of criticism, dappled with ethical and humanist principles, a denial of his structuralist beginnings. Needless to say that a closer engagement with the evolution of Todorov's thought presents us with a significantly more complex perception. Moreover, a more nuanced conception of his intellectual evolution does not trivialise the significance of his change of approach but on the contrary precludes the hasty dismissal of the works of either the earlier or the later period. The present article will strive to demonstrate how Todorov's move from aesthetics to ethics is consistent with a growing concern for issues of deeper human interest but also is best understood within a framework of continuity.

"Continuity" should not be understood as a form of teleologism, or a prospective determinism, but rather as a certain coherence between thought and action on the one hand and on the other as a conception of knowledge seen as a development with shifts, changes of emphasis and direction, rather than a series of radical epistemological breaks, or revolutions. Indeed, although there are some radical breaks, landmark discoveries, in the history of thought, such as the Copernican revolution to name just one, most of the great changes have occurred in much more measured, tentative small steps. If reasonable and acceptable, this is a view that would seem to lack the necessary glamour to make it particularly popular. On the contrary, the opposite stance, which relies on the principle of the tabula rasa, appears far more seductive. It certainly allows more suspense and drama in its reconstruction, perhaps to the

expanse of veracity. This conception of the history of thought as constituted by sharp breaks and spectacular revolutions also supports the tenets of individualism and a Romantic faith in inspiration and genius. However, for all its appeal, this conception of epistemological evolution seems to constitute the exception rather than the rule. In fact, in the history of thought, more progress is achieved by building on what our predecessors have achieved than by reinventing the wheel over and over again.

But continuity also refers to Todorov's conception of humanity. In his 1983 introduction to Goethe's aesthetic writings, Todorov articulates three positions: a classical position, which is concerned with transcendental values; a romantic position, which situates values in the individual; and a modern position, which he describes as one of "lateral transcendence," where transcendental values are not absent but link one (wo)man to another and where continuity between beings is matched by a continuity between thought and action.

This continuity between men and women is expressed in the will to build on shared ground rather than widen the rifts, in the determination to emphasise the unity of humanity, while still being respectful of diversity. Similarly, the continuity between thought and action is realised in a dedication to match practice with theory, life with ideals and ideas. Todorov scourges his bourgeois friends, who, in spite of their very comfortable Western lifestyle, profess revolutionary ideals, which, were they to be realised, would signify the end of the cushioned life they, as well as we, lead ("Preface" to On Human Diversity ix). But he also emphasises the continuity between words and actions, which is rightly perceived in the case of racism or anti-Semitism but still controversial in the case of sexism. Although he is in little doubt about the connection between on the one hand "libertarian sexist discourse — exclusive to Western democracies" and, on the other hand, "the insecurity women suffer in the streets only in these same countries" (The Morals of History 156). One could, justifiably, object that non-Western countries have an equally sophisticated array of means to limit, repress and oppress women too, which does not invalidate his comment but merely points at the complexity of the question of sexism. In the concluding chapter of The Morals of History, entitled "The Modern Gadflies" — which loses its sting in translation, the French title being: "Les Taons modernes" — where he ponders the relationship between scholarly activity and political engagement (a term that he carefully avoids), he sums up the deleterious compartmentalisation of life into intellectual life and everyday life with a play on timetables:
These two activities — scholarly and political — of one and the same person, suffer equally as a result of being isolated from each other. But is it possible to imagine a relationship between the two other than alternation (scholar from nine to five, militant from five to nine)? (The Morals of History 209)

The direct consequence of this stance is his firm conviction in the continuity between facts and values as a necessary component of scholarly research. Instead of the pervasive relativism of contemporary academic discourse, Todorov prefers the commitment he sees in a Benjamin Constant, who refused to separate theory from practice, combining a political career (notably, as one of the leaders of the liberal opposition in the latter part of his life, 1817-1830) with the life of the mind, a life that found expression both in theoretical and creative writings.

However, the coincidence between life and work was not always at the heart of Todorov's thought. In his structuralist phase, Todorov opened up a number of new fields of enquiry, in particular: poetics, narratology (in collaboration with Gerard Genette), genre (or more precisely neglected genres, such as the detective novel and the fantastic) to name a few. The study of form took precedence over that of content, and the only closure that a so-called structuralist text analysis could bring was the revelation of a perfect match between form and content, and preferably at every level, from phonology to themes, organised in isotopic networks and binary oppositions. Thus every part of the text contributes almost organically to the elaboration of its meaning: alliterations, assonances, repetitions all help build a rhythm and evoke in the materiality of the text the themes openly discussed by the text. This leads Todorov to make a rather bold statement, which is totally congruent with this Jakobsonian conception of text, that literature talks about its own emergence. In his early study of Choderlos de Laclos's Dangerous Liaisons, he concluded that the "ultimate meaning of the letters" in Laclos's novel is that they "tell the story of the novel itself (Litterature et Signification 47). The letters are subsumed into the plot as the story is brought to resolution: no longer simply the medium by which the events are recounted, they play an important part in the events themselves. The possibility of their publication is used both as a narrative strategy and as a means for the author to convey his moral message. But they also perform a metalinguistic function, since they represent the production of the book itself, and in this way present the literary work as self-reflexive. Aesthetics thus forms a sort of loop, which is self-sufficient. The themes, the ideas discussed by the literary text are only a pretext to talk about itself, its own literariness.

Ironically enough, this view will constitute the buttress against which Todorov elaborates his conceptions of literature, thought and humanity in later years. Symbolism marks his departure from the orthodoxy of formalist aesthetics. He ponders the place assigned to truth in rhetoric, only to conclude that it is actually non-essential. He outlines the history of rhetoric along the lines of an increased awareness of its usefulness as an instrument rather than of any intrinsic connection it may have with the search for and revelation of truth. In his view, the move towards aesthetics signs the death warrant of rhetoric: at first thriving under democracy, rhetoric is used to convince and persuade. With the disappearance of democracy, rhetoric's function is reduced to making "beautiful speeches"; interestingly, this conception of "beautiful speech" is at the origin of our modern conception of literature, as Todorov points out in The Morals of History (127-37). Paradoxically, the rise of individualism, instead of reviving the rhetorical tradition, further undermines it: the individual is the repository of values, including aesthetic value, and therefore rhetoric's normative character is unwelcome.

Todorov's concerns in the early 1980s change dramatically. His engagement with Bakhtin's thought throughout the 1960s and 1970s, culminating with the publication of Mikhail Eakhtin: The Dialogical Principle in 1981 (translated into English in 1984), provides the predominant proof in print of his "ethical turn":

I am not trying to serve a contemporary political regime, or a class or a group of interests either: I want to be true. (Penser avec les mains 145, translation mine)

These words could have been written by Todorov, and indeed they sound as if they should have been. But they were actually penned by Denis de Rougemont, the philosopher and great propounder of federalism, in his 1933 book Penser avec les mains. To return to Todorov, with The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other, he inaugurates a different practice. No longer impersonal and sheltering behind the technicality of his topic, he addresses issues of human interest and, in a move which is not characteristic of academic research, involves himself as the subject of the research that he is carrying out. Taking up what he calls "Las Casas's Prophecy," words that the 16th-century Bishop of the Chiapas, Bartolome de Las Casas, wrote in his will, predicting the demise of Spain as punishment for the atrocities committed in the New World, Todorov first expands the curse, or rather the responsibility, to the
whole of Western Europe. In Todorov's account of the conquest the devastating sequence of events is due primarily to the capacity to understand (and hence manipulate, deceive and finally destroy) the other displayed by the Conquistadors, and above all by Hernando Cortes, as well as by the incapacity of understanding the other which causes the total ruin of the native populations.

Beyond the perhaps disappointing, and certainly, in our fast-moving academic culture, "dated" simplicity of the imperative to know the other, there is another argument, which is perhaps less conspicuous. In the epilogue to The Conquest of America, Todorov outlines the reasons for our collective responsibility not only for the subjugation (and destruction) of American natives in the sixteenth century, but also for the colonialist policies of Western powers which have well outlasted the sixteenth century. The other point he makes, which for us researchers in the humanities bears perhaps more significance, is the centrality of communication. If he at times embraces Bakhtin's "happy dialogism" with not much concern for the failures of communication, it is undeniable that in The Conquest of America he focuses his attention on the darker side of communication. Todorov builds his argument around the hypothesis that communication is divided into two large fields, or perhaps more accurately, that it gravitates towards two poles: on the one hand, there is communication with the world, or our ability to understand and interpret the world around us and feel in harmony with it. On the other hand, there is intersubjective communication, in other words, communication that occurs between two subjects and, unlike communication with the world, considers the addressee as another subject. Todorov makes the controversial point that the native populations practised a type of communication that was primarily centred around communication with the world. The Spaniards, and paroxysmatically Cortes, excelled on the contrary in intersubjective communication. One should not be too hasty to grant intersubjective communication a privileged status simply on the basis of its kinship with dialogism. Indeed, as Todorov strives to show, knowledge of the other is no great achievement if it is not accompanied by recognition of the other's humanity and dignity. Cortes learnt as much as possible about the cultures of the Indians, primarily with the help of native interpreters and informants, the most prominent of whom was La Malinche or Malintzin. Malinche was a Mayan, whom the Aztecs had reduced to slavery. She was thus rather well disposed to joining the Spaniards' side when the opportunity arose. Her linguistic abilities were matched only by her skills at interpreting and explaining the native cultures for Cortes. However, Cortes's interest in the other had little to do with a desire to expand his knowledge of exotic cultures or to initiate a genuine dialogue with the Indians. In fact, he uses his ability to put himself in the other's shoes (an unfortunate expression in this case) in order to manipulate and to deceive. His thirst was for power and riches at any cost and in any manner possible.

The missionaries of various orders present in America also display a desire to understand native cultures. Here again, these commendable efforts, which resulted in the careful documentation and preservation of large portions of native oral cultures which would otherwise have been completely destroyed, were motivated more by agendas unworthy for our contemporary, postcolonial sensitivities, namely total conversion to Christianity and eradication of paganism, than by a true ability to recognise and accept alterity. Todorov's argument hinges on the distinction between knowledge and ethics. Determining technological superiority does not amount to granting any kind of moral superiority (The Conquest of America 158-60). Quite on the contrary, Todorov disjoins efficacy from any sense of moral good. This separation has further consequences: just as the Spaniards, and by extension we Moderns, cannot be granted any moral superiority on the basis of technological superiority, the natives similarly are not granted any moral superiority on the basis of their technological inferiority, of their difference.

In "Las Casas's Prophecy," Todorov sums up four hundred years of intellectual history with the implied scheme of a dialectic of domination (which he does not designate as such):

In European civilization, logos has conquered mythos; or rather, instead of polymorphous discourse, two homogeneous genres have prevailed: science and everything related to it derive from systematic discourse, while literature and its avatars practice narrative discourse. But this second terrain is shrinking day by day: even myths are reduced to double-entry ledgers, history itself is replaced by systematic analysis, and novels vie with each other against temporal development and toward spatial form, tending to the ideal of the motionless matrix. (The Conquest of America 253)

Todorov does not develop or gloss the opposition between mythos and logos, or explain how these categories relate to mental schemes of thought and discursive forms. But one can, it seems, safely infer that he adopts a fairly standard definition of the terms and of their interrelationship — hence the absence of gloss or reference. In her study of Ancient Greek literature, Olga
is solitude, where man/woman can realise his/her spiritual aspirations, away from the morass of everyday life and forced sociability. The ideal of the hermit obviously pertains to this conception of humanity, where wisdom (and perhaps temptation too) will come only to the solitary. And here it may be important to remind ourselves that privacy is a relatively new concept, and even newer is the loneliness of the thirty-something unmarried professional or of old age; even nowadays, it is confined mainly to the affluent West. So, according to the asocial model, the ideal state of solitude is rare (and all the more desirable), not simply because it goes against the most fundamental traits of human nature, but because man (and unfortunately woman too) is weak. We are forced into an undesirable sociability only out of weakness: "Sociability is the real, but the ideal, the profound truth of our nature, is solitude" (Life in Common 2). The asocial model encompasses the Stoics, Michel de Montaigne, Jean de la Bruyere, Blaise Pascal, etc. Todorov dubs this point of view "moralist" because these thinkers agree on the need to curb the asociality of man with society and morality. The "immoralist" variant of the same asocial model encompasses Pascal (again), but also Francois de la Rochefoucauld, and even Sade. Whereas before, the nature of man was associated with the asocial ideal, while the reality of man was sociable, since the Renaissance the reality of humanity is its asociality: self-interest is the only drive that guides man's behaviour. Society merely provides a gloss by restraining humanity's selfishness somewhat. In his long introduction to La Rochefoucauld's works, Todorov writes that, if human nature cannot be improved, then appearances can still be saved. Social life becomes a comedy of sorts, an elaborate strategy of deceit, concealing "amour-propre" under a mask of virtue ("L'Homme mis en scene" 62-63): "Interest speaks all manner of Languages and acts all sorts of Parts, including that of a Man that hath no regard at all to Interest" (Maxims 37-38).

But Todorov contends that the asocial model, be it "moralist" or "immoralist," is mistaken, although one might add that instances of selfish and self-interested behaviour abound. It is not so much that it is wrong but that it does not exhaust all possibilities of social interaction and relationships. For Todorov writes, against La Rochefoucauld, that "my relationship to others is not the product of my own self-interest; it precedes both the self-interest and the T" (Life in Common 4). Indeed, although the view of man as essentially solitary is dominant in Western thought, there is another tradition of "social tendencies," going back to Greek antiquity. However, Todorov contends that this conception of humanity is not radically different. For one, all the "I"s, all

Freidenberg, the great Soviet scholar and founder of the Department of Classical Philology at Leningrad University, better known in the West as Boris Pasternak's cousin and confidante, to put things simply, relates myth to image and dramaturgic representation, while concept is linked to narration. She further associates story and speech with myth and indirect speech with narration and abstraction. It is important to note that for Freidenberg, concept is not simply the more developed successor of image; she writes: "Concept is built by means of the image. Concept is not a stage of the image that follows the image. Concept is a form of the image itself (Image and Concept 72-84 (79)). It therefore appears that Todorov has a different understanding of "myth" as an already more evolved form of interpretation of the world, as a narrative. Eleazar Meletinsky delineates the history of myth in the introduction to his 1998 study The Poetics of Myth. If classical philosophy opposed knowledge to myth, in a way which seems consistent with Freidenberg's definition, the Renaissance had a more positive understanding of myth as an "allegorical expression of religious, philosophical and scientific truths" (3). In the Enlightenment, myth takes on its negative veneer and becomes the "result of ignorance and delusion" (4), which will lead to the modern definition of myth. The Romantic era revalorised "myth" as an aesthetic phenomenon or "symbolic prototype of artistic creation," and Friedrich von Schelling will even define it, in Meletinsky's words, as "the most important act by which knowledge is acquired and an efficient means of overcoming the antinomy between subject and object, necessity and liberty, nature and spirit, and real and ideal" (8). Both positivism and nihilism will of course redress the imbalance that favours this positive view of myth and associate it not only with delusion but also with a primitiveness of thought. This short and no doubt reductive overview of the terms of "myth" and "logos" is important in that it reveals some of the negative assumptions we may automatically have in relation to "myth," which do not appear implicit in Todorov's use of the term. In a later work, Life in Common, Todorov starts off his inquiry into the sociality of (wo)man with an overview of the history of thought which reveals interesting developments compared to his earlier, sketchy outline in The Conquest of America. He diagnoses the predominance of the "asocial" model of humanity in all the most influential doctrines in Western thought, from Hobbes to Hegel's reinterpretation of Rousseau. As a brief reminder of his outline, the "asocial" model conceives of man (and woman too, unfortunately) as basically self-centred and self-sufficient. Others are not only unnecessary to him/her, but are also a distraction, an encumbrance. The ideal of humanity
subjects, are identical in Greek philosophy; there is no notion of incompleteness in the sense of a need for a complementarity that can only be bestowed by another, at least not beyond sexual attraction (10). For Todorov, a revolution happened in the mid-eighteenth century: the axis of our mental universe was jolted to an incline. This image, which comes from Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, is particularly evocative and Todorov seems fond of it:

He who willed man to be sociable inclined the globe's axis at an angle to the axis of the universe with a touch of the finger. With this slight motion I see the face of the earth change and the vocation of mankind settled. (quoted in *Life in Common* 13)

There is no humanity in isolation, being human is being sociable. The historical projection, as practised by Rousseau, is a methodological device, it is not to be understood literally. In Todorov's own words, "[s]ociability is not an accident or a contingency; it is the very definition of the human condition" (*Life in Common* 13). What Todorov values particularly in Rousseau and in Adam Smith's development of Rousseau is the notion of "recognition" which leads him to, as it were, rewrite La Rochefoucauld's maxim as: "The need to be acknowledged is not just one human motivation among others; it is the truth behind all other needs" (*Life in Common* 16).

Todorov takes particular issue with Hegel's view of intersubjectivity, at least in its reinterpretation by Alexandre Kojève for a French readership: on the one hand, he conceded that Hegel affirmed and expanded Rousseau's model by asserting recognition as the main characteristic of intersubjectivity and by presenting it in morally neutral terms: "The need for recognition is the fundamental human fact. It is in this sense that man does not exist before society and that the human being is rooted in interpersonal relationships" (*Life in Common* 20). But at the same time, the master-slave dialectic simplifies human relationships to the extreme of a permanent struggle for power, a tragic one at that, since the winner will gain recognition from somebody he cannot respect, the slave, and will thus be deprived of the full recognition he strives for.

To this, Todorov opposes the view that "[m]an is not born of a struggle but out of love" (*Life in Common* 23). He further asserts the need to overcome the notion of permanent war as the truth of humanity and human relations. He does not contest the master-slave relationship in itself, but just its claim to universality, emphasising that the human world is polymorphous. He then considers psychoanalysis and psychology and different schools which to a lesser or greater extent contested Freudian psychoanalysis, among them "object relation" psychology. Todorov asks a very simple question, and at the same time a very valid one, even if it is generally ignored: why do philosophy, psychoanalysis, and more generally thought, concern themselves so much with the question of the origin of the species, of which they will never be able to claim any firm knowledge, when the origin of the individual is so readily available for observation (*Life in Common* 43)?

Todorov proposes five explanations. Apart from the attraction of simplicity, one model for all relationships, he puts forward the confusion between psychological and moral concepts and hence the identification of isolation with selfishness and of relationships with generosity, which to some extent is another facet of the need for simplification, since the confusions he identifies are also spectacular reductions. The more convincing answer is that the division between philo- and ontogenesis, or the origin of the species and the origin of the individual, corresponds to the domains, biological and cultural, traditionally assigned to men and women.

He examines the parent-child relationship as another model of intersubjectivity, one in which the subject is formed specifically through its relationship with another, the parent, while the latter clearly draws from that relationship the recognition that he or she also gives to his or her child. Todorov is a little hasty, in my opinion, in confusing any sense of competitiveness to teenage rebellion (*Life in Common* 68), as much younger children do show ambivalent, if not very violent, feelings towards others, and not just their siblings or their peers, but their parents too, as signs of frustration, anger, grief, etc.

What the parent-child dyad also reveals is the importance of hierarchy. And this may also account, in Todorov's view, for the "repression" of the parent-child model of intersubjectivity. Our democratic commitment to equality is so deeply ingrained that we project the political ideal on to social reality (*Life in Common* 44). And in doing so, we make it impossible to account not only for the parent-child relationship but also for the relationships between "student and teacher, employee and employer, artist and public" (*Life in Common* 44).

Indeed, Todorov closes his chapter with a hypothesis about the general predilection for particularly dark accounts of human nature: vanity. The "thinker, scholar or philosopher" prefers to paint human nature as wicked,
because in doing so, "they declare themselves alone" (Life in Common 44). The benefit of this unflattering portrait outweighs the disadvantage:

In heaping these crimes on themselves, they can hide their basic incompleteness and present themselves as masters of thek destiny. They are ready to admit anything but their dependence, their need of others. They arrive at thek goal by considering relationships with others as purely optional. Thus the contents of the theory guarantee the value of the one who presents it. (Life in Common 45)

In this flippant way, and with a crafty pirouette, Todorov concedes victory to La Rochefoucauld after all: humanity is motivated by self-interest, exactly at the time of its self-definition. But does he really admit defeat so easily?

In fact, what is more interesting is that he redraws the opposition between mythos and logos. Indeed, he attributes the theories of the origin of the species to the realm of myth and ideology, while what he does not point out is that the origin of the individual, with its readily verifiable factuality, is more attuned to "logos," or reason.

In her "Reply to Tzvetan Todorov's 'Living Alone Together," Frances Ferguson contends that:

the central issue [of Todorov's account] is not whether a competitive scenario (as opposed to a mutually supportive one) is more nearly adequate to human relationships but rather whether a particular model of relationship has become so locally successful at identifying value and making it perceptible that one ceases to be able to imagine value outside the boundaries of that particular game. (29)

By envisaging the coexistence of several models of interaction as well as by promoting to the status of primary model the parent-child relationship (if this is really what Todorov is doing), he in fact propounds a vision of the self as a developing, multifarious identity, which rests on notions of continuity and the possibility of improvement. Ferguson considers that:

The very logic that claims that an individual comes to be an individual through his/her relationships in a variety of different groups can point to the positive importance of these groups, but it does not give a very clear sense of how one can measure what it means for one of these groups to fail, or to do harm rather than good. (30-31)

If she is undoubtedly right to point out the indeterminacy of group dynamics, Ferguson somehow implies that the individual is not subject to the same indeterminacy. This view is at odds with Todorov's (and Rousseau's) belief in the perfectibility of humanity, as well as its possible corruption. Humanity's indeterminacy is the cornerstone of Todorov's practice of exemplary narrative. In The Conquest of America, in the epilogue, directly following the quotation above about the gradual disappearance of mythos, Todorov explains:

I could not separate myself from the vision of the "conquerors" without at the same time renouncing the discursive form they had appropriated as their own. I feel the need (and in this I see nothing individual, it is why I write it) to adhere to that narrative which proposes rather than imposes; to rediscover, within a single text, the complementarity of narrative discourse and systematic discourse [...]. ("Las Casas's Prophecy" 253)

Furthermore, this hybrid genre, he contends, is better adapted to our heteroerality mentality (253). What Todorov appears to prophesy, at least to call for, is the surmounting of dialectical thinking, in its everyday interpretation as the reduction of two entities to a synthesis. Against the background of the dialectical struggle between aesthetics and ethics, Todorov practises their complementarity and argues, for the recognition of "literary thought":

The truth of literary texts is not narrowly referential; it is intersubjective and consists in the adherence of readers far beyond centuries or national borders. For this reason, Sophocles and Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and Proust continue not only to fulfill our aesthetic aspirations but also our need to know and understand. (Preface to Life in Common xi)

In his recent intellectual autobiography, Devoirs et Delices, Todorov expresses the urge to bring the human sciences closer not to physics but to literature (355). What literature has, and what systematic discourse lacks, is particularity: "even if the message is universal, here [in literary works] one individual speaks to another individual" (356 my translation). As image is still part of concept in Freidenberg's definition, literary thought operates both as transcendence and hybrid of mythos and logos.

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