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Introduction: Reading and Thinking about the Other in Times of Uncertainty

The French journalist Catherine Portevin, who published a book of interviews with Tzvetan Todorov, writes that before meeting him, she thought that they were three people in the Todorov family – one theorist of literature, one historian and one philosopher (Todorov 2002a, 2008b). The misunderstanding seems completely reasonable, considering that Todorov moved between countries, academic fields and dealt with a quite broad spectrum of topics in his nearly 40 books. Is it possible at all and how Todorov's work could be summarized? What lies at the heart of his thinking? And how relevant are his ideas at the beginning of the 21st century?

Glancing through some of Tzvetan Todorov's book titles is enough to understand how well they fit today's current debates: *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique* (1981) "Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle" (1984a); *La Conquête de l'Amérique : la question de l'autre* (1982) "Conquest of America: The Question of the Other" (1984b); *Nous et les autres : la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (1989) – a title which was considerably altered for the English translation to: "On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought" (1993); *Une tragédie française, été 1944 : scènes de guerre civile* (1994) A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944 (1996b); *La vie commune : essai d'anthropologie générale* (1995) "Life in common: an essay in general anthropology" (2001); *La Peur des barbares : au-delà du choc des civilisations* (2008) "The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations" (2010); *Les ennemis intimes de la démocratie* (2012) "The Inner Enemies of Democracy" (2014).

Tzvetan Todorov was born in 1939 in Sofia, Bulgaria into a middle-class family that belonged to the intellectual elite of the small Balkan capital. Although his father, Todor Borov, who had studied in Germany, held left-wing political views, the family was not close to the communist regime in Bulgaria. The Todorovs were neither dissidents, nor members of the communist apparatus. The young Tzvetan attended one of the best Russian schools in Sofia, where he became

fluent in the Russian language and literature. He studied Bulgarian philology (a combination of Slavic and European languages, Bulgarian and European literature, and some theory of literature and language) at Sofia University from 1956 to 1961 (see Eftimov and Garnizov in this volume) and after he spent a year teaching in the village Dalgopol in northeast Bulgaria, he travelled to France in 1963 to undertake postgraduate studies (Atanasov 2011, 12). After successfully defending in 1966 his PhD thesis “*Litterature et signification*” written under the supervision of Roland Barthes (Todorov 1967) he decided to stay in Paris where he lived until his death in 2017. He served as a director of research at the French *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*.

Todorov’s work is typically divided into two periods. In the first period, which roughly spans the 1960s and 1970s, he deals with theory of literature and language, poetics and semiotics (Atanassov 2011, 180). The second period began in 1982 with the publication of “Conquest of America: The Question of the Other” (1982, 1984b), and was marked by the exploration of such a wide variety of topics, that it becomes difficult to identify a single label that encompasses them all.

Todorov designated himself as a “historian of ideas” and was referred to in various introductions and book reviews as a philosopher, anthropologist (see Garnizov in this volume), political thinker and intellectual historian (Atanassov 2011). Scholars familiar with Todorov’s early literary studies, recognize strong links between his literary and his philosophical periods (Atanassov 2011, Zbinden 2020, Fadel in this volume). This translation from literary criticism and theory to cultural studies and philosophy (de Berg 2020, 188) is also evident in the work of notable 20th century thinkers such as René Girard, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and others.

One could summarize the work of Tzvetan Todorov as a long journey towards understanding of “Otherness”. It begins with the understanding of the meaning of literary texts and language in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the following decades proceeds to the understanding of distant, different cultures (for example, Mesoamericans), other races, nations and religions. He was also interested in European colonialism, and in the reasons for xenophobia and Islamophobia in Europe and the United States. Moreover, Todorov was passionate not only about encounters with the external Other, but also in the domestic Other, such as migrants, expats and what he calls “inner enemies of democracy”.

Unlike Bronislaw Malinowski or Claude Lévi-Strauss, Todorov never conducted anthropological fieldwork in distant places. Unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, he was not imprisoned during wartime, nor was he a dissident against a totalitarian regime, like Václav Havel. He also never published a polarizing text that exposed him to strong criticism from large groups, such as Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil" (Arendt 1963). However, Todorov's biography is marked by personal experiences that lend depth to his writing. His origins in a small, peripheral Balkan country located at the 'bridge' or 'buffer' between Christian Europe and the Muslim Near East; his early years in a totalitarian country; his immigration to France, where he underwent a transformation from Bulgarian student to French intellectual; and his interest in otherness are probably the reasons for his self-perception as a '*passseur*', or go-between, as can be seen from the title of his and Portevin's 2002 book (2002a, 2008b).

Two important volumes of papers on Tzvetan Todorov were published in 2020, three years after his death (de Berg and Zbinden 2020; Znepolski and Damyanova 2020). The various case studies in these volumes situate Todorov within the turbulent intellectual history of the post-WWII world. He is seen as pivotal to understanding how humanitarian and social thought was influenced by the linguistic approach that emerged through structuralism and later informed post-colonial and post-modern approaches. These approaches clarified the interconnectedness of the 'colonizer' and the subaltern, the local and the foreigner, and the 'Other' and the 'I/me'.

Unlike some of the 2020 texts in the aforementioned collections of papers, the present volume lacks a thorough and incisive critique of Todorov. This is important because it is emblematic of a new perception of Todorov as a classical author: someone we read to find inspiration, to establish a connection with our intellectual heritage and to gain a broader perspective. While it is evident that classical texts contain enduring and profound meanings, they also contain outdated passages.

The present volume begins with **Maurice Fadel's 'Language, Man and World in Tzvetan Todorov's Poetics'**, which deals with Todorov's early literary period and addresses some of his key concepts. Although Todorov employs the vocabulary of structuralism and follows the 'grammar' movement in his early texts, Fadel identifies the seeds of a departure from the structuralist school in them. For Fadel, it is

important that Todorov, a structuralist, does not divide language into signifier and signified, but rather views it as an action. In this respect, Fadel places Todorov close to the English philosopher of language, John Austin, who, in the late 1950s, popularized the idea of the performative nature of language. If words do not have fixed, ascribed meanings and it is actions that determine these meanings, then the power of individuals and social actors may also depend on their actions and not only on their position in social hierarchies.

Although Fadel focuses on Todorov's early literary period, his essay seems to provide insight into the reasons behind the absence of the theme of power in Todorov's later work. While Cameron Laux may be exaggerating when he writes, 'The problem with Todorov's dialogic utopia is that there is a vacuum of power at its centre...' (Laux 1995, 203; Goergen 2000, 37), there is no doubt that power is simply present and lacks deeper analysis even in Todorov's later books, where he discusses colonisation, imperialism and globalisation.

We believe Fadel's essay is essential for understanding the under-representation of the 'We' in Todorov's thought. Following Fadel's inferences about how the early Todorov viewed language not as a context of various entities, but as an action, a practice and a performance, it seems to us that, for the late Todorov, society depends much more on the actions of individuals than on their groupings in various contexts.

Another significant contribution of this volume is the publication of **a letter from Tzvetan Todorov to Nikola Georgiev**, a Bulgarian literary theorist, which is analysed in depth by **Yordan Eftimov and Vasil Garnizov**. The letter was written at the end of 1963, during Todorov's first year in France. He had an uneasy start due to language and financial difficulties. However, despite mentioning his desperate financial situation at the beginning of the letter, it conveys the positive energy of two young men who share a passion for innovating literary theory. Todorov begins his letter by commenting on the state of literary theory in France. It seems strange to us today that, in 1963, there was little interest in structuralism in a country that we now consider to be at the heart of this important intellectual movement. The mention of the Russian Formalists is also important because it shows that Todorov was interested in them as early as 1963. This was two years before the publication of „*Théorie de la Littérature, Textes des Formalistes Russes*“

(Todorov 1965), which enabled him to enter the French literary theory scene.

Todorov's letters also tell us about his passion for a seminar in which scholars from various countries speak about their work on topics such as machine translation and linguistic statistics. However, Todorov is cautious about applying exact methods to literary studies and does not believe that statistics can improve our understanding of literary works. Todorov and his friend and colleague, Nikola Georgiev, stopped writing letters to each other. One probable reason for this is that Todorov moved away from literary studies in the early 1980s. His first non-literary book, "The Conquest of America", is probably also the one that is best known to a broader public (Todorov 1982, 1984b). In '**Tzvetan Todorov and Anthropology**', the anthropologist **Vassil Garnizov** discusses *The Conquest* in detail, examining both Todorov's influence on anthropology and what anthropology can contribute to his question, 'How does the self discover the other?'¹ The conquest of America by Spain and Portugal in the 16th century marked the beginning of a new era of intensive maritime trade and colonisation. As Todorov notes, the conquest of America was a catastrophic process that led to the deaths of a large proportion of the local population in the 16th century. He describes it as 'the greatest genocide in human history' (1984, 5).

The Spaniards and the Portuguese were interested in precious metals and exploiting other resources. Initially, Mesoamericans were mainly employed in mines, on plantations and in other profitable occupations. Todorov draws particular attention to the fact that Columbus shows more interest in plants and animals than in people in his letters and diaries. This is encapsulated in one of Todorov's most compelling statements: 'Columbus discovered America, but not the Americans' (1984, 49).² Thanks to his literary background and engagement with Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on dialogism and heteroglossia (Zbinden 2020), Todorov is very interested in these phenomena. He argues that the conquest of America did not lead to dialogue between Europeans and Americans. Rather, it resulted in the European presence and

¹ This section of the introduction is written by B.A. and M.M.

² Of course, Columbus was far from ignoring locals and the ways they appear in his texts may be influenced by many factors ranging from self-representation (for example in a letter to the Spanish king and queen) to remorse.

the destruction of local American cultures, without leading to the acceptance of American culture in Europe. Garnizov's detailed review of Todorov's work makes clear why this position seems too simplistic to cultural anthropologists, who have a solid theoretical and mythological framework for understanding the consequences of cultural mixing. Anthropologists point out that Todorov himself is a product of cultural hybridity, and that even the most aggressive and irresponsible colonial act – such as the conquest of America – changes both the coloniser and the colonised. Garnizov reminds us that, from an anthropological perspective, the mixing of Europeans and Americans led to the creation of Mesoamericans, despite all the traumatising aspects of this process. The realisation that contacts with the Other will inevitably influence and change you is one of the most significant contributions of postcolonial studies of the late 20th century. This can help us to understand aspects of today's anti-migrant and anti-globalisation movements: in a world that is changing too quickly for many people's liking, many want to minimise their encounters with the 'Other' in order to protect themselves from further change.

In "**The Encounter with the Evil and the Erasure of the Human: Psychoanalytic Meditations**", **Valentin Kalinov** elevates the topic of encounters from the realm of intercultural interactions to the realm of confronting evil, as exemplified on social media.

Although Kalinov's essay barely refers to Todorov's work, it could be seen as a continuation in a different genre and time of the fundamental questions that drove Todorov's enquiries: the dehumanisation that accompanied urbanisation, industrialisation and technological progress; and the fundamental question about the moral and intellectual foundations that shape our shared existence (Todorov 2006, 7). Kalinov begins with a notable novelty: due to unprecedented access to images and information on the internet and social media, humanity is confronted with evil on a scale much larger than at any other point in history. One of the most difficult questions in the aftermath of the digital revolution is how we can resist evil without ignoring it. As expected, Kalinov draws on various spheres, such as psychoanalysis, philosophy, and language. There is no simple formula since evil is subjective and embodied differently by different people. Feelings of loneliness, vulnerability and defencelessness are fundamental to understanding the world today. Although Kalinov does not explicitly mention it, this aspect of modernity appears neglected

in Todorov's work, which focuses more on values and morality and, in his second period, avoids psychology.

Magdalena Bozhkova offers hope in her text, '**Le professeur (im)parfait: À la recherche d'un professeur modèle, inspiré par la personnalité et l'oeuvre de Tzvetan Todorov**' '**The (Im)perfect Professor: In Search of a Model Professor, Inspired by the Personality and Work of Tzvetan Todorov**'.³ There is no doubt that it is becoming increasingly difficult to teach in a world that is changing so rapidly that we cannot predict what skills and knowledge will be necessary by the time students graduate. Moreover, the democratisation of access to and production of information and knowledge makes it difficult for professors to determine what is valuable, since these categories refer much less today to group identities (e.g. social classes) than to individuals. In these seemingly "difficult times", Bozhkova sees Todorov's optimism and his realistic and positive interpretation of the humanist tradition as an important source of inspiration.

Hristo Chukurliev also demonstrates the importance of education in times of uncertainty in his chapter, '**The Four Philosophical Families of Tzvetan Todorov and Universities: On the Degrees of Love and Language**'. In a way, he brings together the questions and approaches of Kalinov and Bozhkova. Building on his two recently published monographs on pedagogy and the role of universities (2024a and 2024b), Chukurliev addresses the dangers posed by the digital revolution while he suggests using the opportunities this digital revolution provides in order to overcome the problems it creates. Inspired by the four philosophical families defined by Todorov as ideal types in 'The Imperfect Garden' – conservatives, scientists, individualists and humanists (Todorov 1998, 2002a) – Chukurliev identifies characteristics that will help universities to better face the challenges of the digital revolution. The ability to communicate and engage in dialogue with 'others' is also crucial in this context. An important contribution by Chukurliev is his emphasis on the centrality of love. We consider this approach to be crucial since love is the most powerful antidote to fear, hatred and alienation, the latter of which is considered to be a most enduring disease of modernity.

³ The French word "*professeur*" means also teacher, instructor, mentor, tutor.

The decision to dedicate this volume of Acta Nova Humanistica to Tzvetan Todorov, his research and ideas, and their relevance today is motivated by the lack of interest and understanding of Otherness in the contemporary world. A significant concern today is the difficulty of engaging in meaningful dialogue with people who hold different views. The possibilities offered by new social media for restricting contacts to ‘echo chambers’ and information bubbles have made dialogue with like-minded people more difficult. The smartphone revolution, with its affordable devices, has enabled most of the world’s population to access the internet. Thus, the democratisation of access to information and entertainment has opened a door to polarisation and radicalisation, alongside many positive consequences. The situation today is more than just generational tensions, an economic cycle low point, or a power shift. Humanitarian and social scientists must contribute to finding convincing answers to important questions, such as whether it is possible to restore dialogue, strengthen the political center at the expense of radical formations, and overcome the ‘mid-life crisis’ of democracies. There is no doubt that these democracies are expected to ensure the redistribution of wealth between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ as prosperity increases worldwide (Acemoglu 2025). However, we also need the insights of classical authors such as Tzvetan Todorov to inspire us in the uncertain years after the digital revolution, and to help us better understand the importance of encountering otherness, evil, fear, education and love.

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