

## TSVETAN TODOROV, COMPASSIONATE PILGRIM

*David Jenkins*  
*Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv*

Tsvetan Todorov (1939 – 2017) was an internationally celebrated sociologist and literary theorist, who also made substantial contributions to the ongoing struggle to establish a viable humanist dialogue. This paper honors some of his contributions to the humanities, mentioning his work in genre theory and stylistics and emphasizing the importance of his work to increased intercultural awareness and tolerance, with specific reference to his characterization of the fantastic, his essay “How to Read,” and two of his monographs, *The Morals of History* and *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*.

**Key words:** *Tsvetan Todorov, genre theory, stylistics, humanism*



*Tsvetan Todorov (Цветан Тодоров) by the Seine,  
courtesy of Wikipedia*

Tsvetan Todorov’s abiding theoretical interests were shaped by the tenets of French structuralism and genre criticism, with its roots reaching as

deep as Aristotle. He was encouraged and influenced by such French luminaries as Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, and in 1970, with Genette he founded the journal *Poétique*, which Todorov edited until 1979. Under his and Genette's direction, the journal published, among many, many other articles, works on intertextuality and genre, by Michael Rifaterre; on irony, by Dan Sperber, M. Groupe, and Vossius; on the modes and forms of literary narcissism, by Linda Hutcheson; on the poetics of composition, by B. Uspenskij; on signs in the theatre, by N. Bogatyrev; on the narrative structure of myth, by H. Weinrich; and on narrative perspective (point of view), by F. Van Rossum-Guyon. The journal entertained a heady, eclectic mix of personalities and theoretical perspectives.

During this time, Todorov's work on narrative and literary theory and his codification of the genre of the fantastic earned him a well-deserved international reputation. In deciding whether an event is real or imaginary, Todorov tells us that we must make a few crucial distinctions. In the "fantastic uncanny," the described event is understood to be some sort of illusion, perhaps the product of dreams, drugs, or madness. Stories about disembodied noses and overcoats, or about a statue of Peter the Great that breaks free from its plinth to hound a petty clerk through the streets of Petersburg, would qualify.

In the "fantastic marvelous," it is assumed that the event has really occurred, and to account for it, we must reconsider and perhaps reconstruct our understanding of reality. All of the aspiring wizards at Hogwarts and their often embattled instructors; all of the Marvel superheroes; the ever-growing tribe of X-people; the 'droids, replicants and skin-jobs; and the entirety of the Matrix are presented as real and immediate – sometimes these fantastic creatures are the only hope and salvation of the world, while at other times they are monstrous threats to the world order, damned mutants to be hunted down and killed – or in the parlance of *Bladerunner*, "retired" – something I can relate to personally, since I was retired by Plovdiv University in 2014.

For a description or depiction to be purely and entirely fantastic in Todorov's scheme of things, it must be so finely balanced (or so ambiguous) that we cannot decide whether it is real or illusory. A ghost story often praised for just such a razor-edged balance, mainly thanks to the skill with which it makes use of what may or may not be unreliable narration, is "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James.

While he initially made his mark as a theorist of narrative and genre, Todorov was no more confined to those disciplines than Noam Chomsky limited himself to generative grammar. Todorov was an engaged and

concerned citizen – first in socialist Bulgaria, later as a permanent and celebrated resident of Paris, and ultimately, as a citizen of the world. He sought to discover who he was – who we all are – as human beings. What is our rightful place in the larger scheme of things? How can we learn from our mistakes and shared experience? How can we live together in a world that is too often distended, disjointed, and disoriented? A sampling of his work after 1980 includes the following titles. In 1982, he published a critique of European imperialism, *the Conquest of America*. In 1984, he explored the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*. In 1993, he presented his views on human diversity. Returning to the sometime brutal days of socialist Bulgaria, in 1999 he wrote on the heavy price exacted by totalitarian rule in *Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria*. (The horror of numbers: following orders, Stalin’s secret police executed 681,692 Soviet citizens.) In 2009, he published *In Defense of the Enlightenment*; in 2010, *Memory as a Remedy for Evil*; in 2011, *The Totalitarian Experience*; and in 2014, *The Inner Enemies of Democracy*.

His essay “Comment Lire?” (“How to Read?”), which is included in the anthology *Criticism: The Major Statements*, edited by Kaplan and Anderson, presents a strategy for interpretative practice founded on dialogue. I included this essay in my own survey of literary and cultural theory, *The Maker’s Rage for Order: Theories of Literature and Culture*, published by Faber Press in English in 2007 and translated into Bulgarian by Dr. Juliana Chakarova in 2009 as *Стратегия на твореца за ред*. (Please see the list of works cited for page numbers.) The question that is the essay’s title – “How to Read?” – at first glance may strike us as curious, even a little silly. We may ask ourselves, “He is going to tell us how to *read*? Help us practice our ABC’s?” But we soon realize that what he really wants to teach us is how to read successfully, which is to say skilfully and insightfully. Instead of erecting grand global designs, Todorov counsels us to take each text on its own terms, its *parole*, while remaining on the lookout for the structural regularities (the evidence of a *langue*) that lend a text its coherence.

Before telling us how to read, Todorov tells us how *not* to read. As students of language and literature, Todorov says we shouldn’t fall into the habit of *projection*, which is an attempt to reconstruct the circumstances that led to the literary work, including the author’s state of mind at the time of the work’s creation. He is also troubled by an over-reliance on piecemeal commentary, what French critics call *explication de texte* (“unfolding” the text). Caught up in specific textual problems, such as

ambiguity, paradox, and irony, the textual commentator is in danger of becoming “infinitely specific,” while ignoring a work’s larger contexts.

A poetics, on the other hand, whether Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* or Aristotle’s *Poetics*, seeks to describe a text’s “constitutive elements.” The most important New Critics also do this, as Todorov points out, in their attempts to define tragedy, comedy, farce, the lyric, or any other genre, which would include his own efforts at defining the fantastic. But the problem with such approaches, as Roman Jakobson pointed out in 1929, is that “the end point of a study in poetics is always the ‘general’.”

Todorov would like us to establish a viable mean between these extremes. “But if we would avoid incurring the objections that there is no longer any place for the study of the particular work, we must posit alongside poetics, a different activity which it will be convenient to call reading.” By this he proposes an “asymptotic activity” that never presumes to take the place of the text, but instead “infinitely approaches it.” This kind of reading denies the substitution of one text for another, more “accurate” text; instead, it attempts to develop relations between textual layers.

Another “describable relation” that Todorov mentions is the one between *stylizer* and *stylized*, which he borrows from the Russian Formalist Tynjanov, and which recalls Saussure’s relation between the signifier and the signified. A clear-cut example of this relationship is the *caricature*. Whether comic, tragic, or realistic, this technique can be used to foreground physical or personality traits, as Sophocles does when he makes Oedipus so overbearing toward the blind prophet Tiresias, or when he gives the cursed king a limp. The emphasis on a work’s style encourages us to focus on the “character traits” that lend a text a particular narrative personality.

Todorov concludes his essay by reminding us that our readings and the theories that motivate them can only take us so far. “No doubt there is an untheorizable element in literature... if theory presupposes scientific language. One function of literature is the subversion of this very language; hence it is extremely rash to claim that we can read it [literature] exhaustively with the help of that very language it calls into question.” Literature defies conventions, subverts systems, and questions authority, including the authority of critical theories. The best we can hope for is to be productively and sympathetically *intersubjective*. To read is to enter into a personal relationship, and to engage in a *dialogue*.

In addition to this seminal contribution to stylistics, two of Todorov’s post-*Poétique* books also stand out for me, both because I find them outstanding in and of themselves, and because I feel they can stand for the

Todorov that I have come to admire. He was not a “sterile formalist,” but a compassionate pilgrim on this earth, an intrepid mental traveler who plotted a course past the shoals of cynicism and disbelief toward a more compassionate understanding of what it means to be human: for Todorov, to be human is to be humane. The legacy that Todorov left us, when he left us in February of this year, is one that highly values the values of the Enlightenment and that urges us to seek a way out of the darkness of mercenary trumpery, political, economic, and military imperialism, and the scourge of totalitarianism, to seek the light of an *enlightened* humanism.

The first of those books, and one that has occupied a pride of place on my shelves for years, demonstrates his concerns as a citizen of the world. In French, its title is *Les Morales de l'histoire*, published in French in 1991, and in English it is *The Morals of History*, published in 1995. In this collection of essays, Todorov offers us his views on various and sundry topics, such as the journey and travel writing; contacts among cultures; the conquest of the Aztecs, first as seen from the side of the European conquerors and then from the Aztec perspective; the possibility of arriving at truth in interpretation; toleration and the intolerable; democracy, theocracy, and the possibility of discovering shared values, with particular reference to the French thinker Louis de Bonald; and the debate on values, concentrating on the work of Max Weber.

Of particular interest to me, as a permanent resident of the country, is his essay on French depictions of Bulgaria. “In 1869, Bardschka wrote that ‘the Bulgarians... are still located quite far down the ladder of civilization, and they have much to do in order to acquire the intellectual and moral development required to make them into a nation living its own life’” (Todorov 1995: 5). In 1876, Todorov reports, an engineer named F. Bianconi wrote, “Their customs and their character are so sweet that we call them sheep, and all the engineers agree... that to kill a Bulgarian is to kill a fly” (Todorov 1995: 6). In *Candide*, Voltaire depicts the Bulgar soldiers as merciless and bloodthirsty, reveling in carnage, though Todorov points out that Voltaire, who never visited Bulgaria, is attaching stock images of wartime brutality to the Bulgars in order to mount an attack on the Prussians, so that Bulgaria (the Bulgars) “is reduced to being a mere signifier” (Todorov 1995: 9) without any immediate basis in historical fact.

Of course Lamartine did visit Bulgaria; the house where he stayed is a regular stop on an itinerary of Plovdiv’s Стария град. But like the other French accounts that Todorov mentions, Lamartine’s *Voyage en Orient (A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land)* is a lamentable example what Edward Said called Orientalism, a species of Western imperialist thought: “our

civilization is *the* civilization, and... there is only one. Not to be like us is not to be civilized, to not *be* at all” (Todorov 1995: 6). As Todorov concludes, “It is precisely because these French travelers imagined that French culture was at the center of the universe that they were blind to the culture of others, in this case, the Bulgarians. It is not enough to be *other* in order to see, since... the other is a self, and all the others are barbarians” (Todorov 1995: 12).

So how to overcome this crippling, dangerous prejudice, the narrow-minded tendency to assimilate all others to oneself, thus reducing them to nothing, in and of themselves? There is the possibility of a gallant self-sacrifice, “effacing the self for the other’s benefit” (Todorov 1995: 14). However, this still leaves us with only one identity, the other’s. To achieve some semblance of understanding, it is necessary “to establish a dialogue between myself and them,” to recognize that “my own categories are as relative as theirs”. But there is one more step we must take, so that “the very opposition between inside and outside is no longer relevant... By interacting with the other, my categories have become transformed in such a way that they speak for both of us” (Todorov 1995: 15).

In another essay in the collection, Todorov distinguishes between *manipulation* (for example, America’s current blowhard President, the Tweeter-in-Chief) and *eloquence* (we might recall exemplary public discourse by other American presidents, from George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama). Of course there are many who would question these references, preferences and allegiances; as Todorov points out, “what is considered manipulation by one person could be considered, by another, a noble action that enlightens the mind.” But the essay takes as its provenance not the silly sophistry or solemn sophistication of American politics, but the sophistry of the Sophists in Attic Greece, opposing their devious trumpery to the moral attitude of Socrates, the amoral attitude of Aristotle (what we might now call scientific objectivity), and the aesthetic attitude of Quintillian, “the last of the great rhetoricians of the Greco-Latin era” (Todorov 1995: 134).

Todorov then traces these influences in more modern incarnations. The Sophistic attitude can be discerned in the works of Machiavelli (or the manipulative arguments of lawyers whose sole motivation is the hefty fee they receive for their services). The moral imperatives of the Socratic dialogues are evident in the teachings of Saint Augustine. Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is for Todorov an example of Aristotelian emphasis on logic and objectivity. The aesthetic motivation for rhetoric is to be found in Kant, who in *The Critique of Pure Reason*

“valorizes the art of speaking well over the art of persuading.” Here also is the inspiration of German Romanticism, which Todorov calls the beginning of modern literature. Returning to Socrates, the essay concludes by praising his courageous discourse, informed by a moral commitment that was the basis for his eloquence (speak truth to power), and that ultimately cost him his life.

A second book by Todorov that I recently added to my collection is his *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. In a lecture at the Royal Society of the Arts posted on *YouTube*, Todorov outlined the core Enlightenment values that he found essential to the humanist contribution, reprising many key points found in *The Imperfect Garden*. Let me summarize that lecture. First, he mentions the Enlightenment recognition of individual *autonomy*, stressing that the *human* becomes the rightful measure of things (anthropocentrism). People are encouraged to gain control over their own destiny, wresting it from the realm of supernatural or unexamined tenets in a religious or philosophical tradition. The result of such a thoroughgoing examination of received religion was the rise of natural religion – a commitment to observable truth (the world around us) as a basis for thought and action, evident in the writings of Wordsworth or Emerson. Let us love other human beings, say the Enlightenment humanists, and not just a transcendent, unknowable Creator. The desire for salvation becomes the pursuit of happiness: worldly success, reciprocal love, lasting friendship. Here is where the concept of unalienable human rights begins, including equal rights for all, including both the right to life and liberty. A child of the Enlightenment committed to the sanctity of human life accepts neither the death penalty nor the use of torture.

Individual autonomy includes the autonomy of knowledge derived from scientific observation, and looks not to a single divine light, but to the many sources of light all around us. The Enlightenment saw the rise of opinion and expression, including freedom of publication. During the Enlightenment, a recognition of human and ethnic diversity came to be seen as universal. In the arts, the rise of the novel and autobiography provided a way of recognizing and promoting individuality, and seventeenth-century painting took as its subjects ordinary gestures by ordinary human beings, as seen in the works of Vermeer and Breughel in Holland and Hogarth in England, among many others. In politics, power is to be found in or granted to the people, say Enlightenment thinkers. It is not a gift from God or an accident of noble birth. What’s more, an emphasis on individual equality could also serve as a basis for international

relations. Montesquieu could criticize the Persians, but he could also imagine the Persians criticizing the French.

How are these humanistic values associated with the Age of Reason to be defended in the face of the horrors of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries? While Hegel and Marx might insist on the possibility of not only progress but also human perfectibility, Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau saw the human condition as potentially both sublime and infernal. We are free to choose the kind of life we will lead. For Rousseau, good and evil flow from the same source, our human freedom of choice. This may be a blessing or a curse, but it is never the inevitable outcome of a political or economic system.

To preserve and inculcate achievements of the past, including the advances of the Enlightenment, are clearly central to Todorov's project. But he also counsels us to remain as critical of a heritage's weaknesses as Montesquieu's Persians were critical of the French (and after his essay on Bulgaria in France summarized above, we can add the entirely justified skepticism of Bulgarians). Todorov concludes by referring to the end of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Wall. These were momentous events, but what were the consequences? When the Soviet check on Western hubris was no longer viable, we witnessed a kind of "neo-liberalism" that Todorov saw as little more than a euphemism for the rise of the oligarchs and super-rich corporations. This economic neo-imperialism, aided and abetted in our digital age by an armada of digital apps and platforms, often constitutes an attack on due political process and the inalienable rights of the individual, rights that are enshrined in constitutions around the world but far too often ignored.

Throughout *The Imperfect Garden*, Todorov expresses a commitment to a humanism that is not only individual rights or individual freedom, but also a call to our responsibility as individuals to the greater human good. Reminiscent of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship, in which we must recognize the intrinsic worth of others, and not treat them as merely an "it" to be exploited or, much worse, exterminated, Todorov also refers us to the system of pronouns to describe this universal responsibility. It is "the finality of the *you*... the fact that I prefer to see human individuals as the goal of my action rather than to be satisfied with their exploitation as, say, agents of economic progress; and for the universality of the *they*, the respect due to all, and considered worthier than the preference for 'ours' over 'theirs'. In asserting these core values, Todorov appeals to the historical authority of the sixteenth-century philosopher Michel de Montaigne, generally considered to be one the most influential thinkers of the French Renaissance: "...The



various ingredients of the humanist doctrine are found united for the first time in France, in the writing of Montaigne... the autonomy of the *I* is implied by his preference for actions that flow from ‘our voluntary choice and liberty (*Essays*, I, 27, 134); the finality of the *you* by his declaration that the practice of friendship is more necessary and sweeter to man in ‘the elements of water and fire’ (III, 9, 750); the universality of the *they* in his adherence to this principle ‘I consider all men my compatriots, and embrace a Pole as I do a Frenchman, setting this national bond after the universal and common one’” (III, 9, 743) .

A final question or intellectual challenge occurs to me, one that also occurred to others who participated in the conference dedicated to the memory of Todorov at which this presentation was given. In particular consider the title of the paper presented by Dimitrina Hamze of Plovdiv University: „Интеграционизмът в творчеството на Цветан Тодоров“ (“‘Integrationism’ in Tsvetan Todorov’s Scholarly Work”). Is there a way to integrate Todorov’s far-reaching theoretical, historical, philosophical, and ethical interests and imperatives?

While I would never claim to possess anything approaching privileged insight into Todorov’s personal or scholarly motivations, perhaps a somewhat unlikely analogy to an article by Katheryn Schulz from the *New Yorker* of November 6, 2017 might shed some light. The article I have in mind is “Fantastic Beasts and How to Rank Them”, which begins with these words:

In the fourth century B.C., several hundred years after the advent of harpies and some two millennia before the emergence of dementors, Aristotle sat down to do some thinking about supernatural occurrences in literature... if forced to choose, writers ‘should prefer the probable impossibility to an unconvincing possibility.’ Better for Odysseus to return safely to Ithaca with the aid of ghosts, gods, sea nymphs, and a leather bag containing the wind than for his wife, Penelope, to get bored with waiting for him, grow interested in metalworking, and abandon domestic life for a career as a blacksmith...

And later in the same article:

Although Walt Disney is best remembered for his Magic Kingdom, his chief contribution to the art of animation was not his extraordinary imagination but his extraordinary realism. ‘We cannot do the fantastic things, based on the real, unless we first know the real,’ he wrote by way of explaining why, in 1929, he began driving his animators to a studio in downtown Los Angeles for night classes in life drawing... all those talking mice, singing lions, dancing puppets, and marching brooms began obeying

the laws of physics... even those of his characters who could fly could fall, and, when they did, their knees, jowls, hair, and clothes responded as our human ones do when we thump to the ground... Alone among all the creatures in the world, we can think about fantastical things and, at least some of the time, bring them into being. Yet, in the end, what is most remarkable about our fantasies is not that our fantasies contain so much reality; it is that our reality contains so much fantasy... to know that what we feel in our happiest moments has some truth to it: life is magical.

Like Aristotle and Walt Disney before him, Todorov's contribution to our understanding of the fantastic shows that he understood that however far they may seem to be from our daily lives, the stories we tell are nevertheless erected on a foundation of fact and logic, arguing *a fortiori* from what we know to what we don't know, but would like to know or need to know.

A cynical response to the burgeoning Disney hegemony might be that the kingdom of this world is become the magic kingdom of this world, wholly owned and operated by its fabricator-proprietors. But as the work of the eminent Bulgarian Tsvetan Todorov constantly reminds us, our ongoing challenge as members of the always imaginative, too often punitive human race is not simply to create things that work in newer and better (or more devastating) ways, but to use our formidable collective creative capacities for the greater good of our fantastic, fragile species and the endangered planet that we all call home. That is a good place to stop, but I prefer to conclude this tribute to Todorov by quoting the final insight of a wonderful essay by Adam Gopnik, in the January 8, 1918 issue of the *New Yorker*, about Romain Gary, a writer who began his days as a poor Lithuanian Jew and then entirely and improbably reinvented himself as a French war hero, diplomat, and internationally celebrated Rabelaisian fabulist. "Compassion for the fallible is his chief lesson... to believe that the human and humane are naturally the same is one of the worst lies we tell ourselves; to think that they might yet become so is one of the better stories we share."

## REFERENCES

- Gopnik 2018:** Gopnik, Adam. "The Made-Up Man: The Truth About the Novelist Romain Gary," *New Yorker* 08.01.2018, no pagination; accessed in an electronic version for Kindle.
- Jenkins 2007:** Jenkins, David Bruce. *The Maker's Rage for Order, Theories of Literature and Culture*. Summary and Commentary on Todorov's essay "How to Read." Veliko Turnovo: Faber Press, 235-

244. Bulgarian translation by Dr. Juliana Chakarova: *Страстта на твореца за ред: Теоретични ракурси към литература и култура*: Пловдив, „Евро Принт“ ЕООД, 258-267.

**Todorov 1977**: Todorov, Tsvetan. “How to Read?” in *The Poetics of Prose*, translated by Richard Howard. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1977, 235-238; first published as “Comment Lire?” in *Poétique de la Prose*. Seuil, 1974, 241-253. The citation is from the English translation.

**Todorov 1995**: Todorov, Tsvetan. *The Morals of History*, translated by Alyson Waters. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995; first published as *Les Morales de l’histoire* in 1991. The citation is from the English translation.

**Todorov 2002**: Todorov, Tsvetanas *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. Translated by Carol Cosman. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002; first published as *Jardin imparfait*, in 2002. The citation is from the English translation.

**Schulz 2017**: Schulz, Kathryn. “Fantastic Beasts and How to Rank Them,” in *New Yorker* magazine, 06. 11. 2017, no pagination; accessed in an electronic version for Kindle.