

## **The False Dilemma of Historical Truth**

Some sixty years after the "Napoleonic" invasion of Russia, Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy published "War and Peace", a broad account of many interlaced instances of aristocratic life occurring prior, during and after that traumatic historical event. In this epic, the Russian author manages to alternate historical facts together with the fiction play of each of the several characters which the novel presents. To a certain extent, this broad range of characters can be seen as a representative palette which Tolstoy skillfully adopts to depict the formal Russian society; we then read about the philanthropist and idealist Count Pyotr Kirillovich, the pious Prince Maria, her stubborn father but also, and more rarely we read shorter descriptions about characters that are more directly involved with the actual conflict. Through Count Pyotr's imprisonment, the reader is offered an account of a French and a Russian soldier and through Prince Andrei's direct participation to the conflict, we have an account of high rank generals of each front, not to mention the actual heroes, the Tsar Alexander I and Napoleon himself. Despite for painting them rather differently, the former as a coward not interfering in military decisions and the latter as a first hand general stirring his army, Tolstoy makes several interruptions in his historical accounts to share his view on history. In these several interruptions which escalate more frequently towards the end of the novel, the author expresses almost redundantly his opinion and that is that it was not the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte who invaded Russia but Napoleon only happened to be placed as a representative of an inevitable force which wanted the West invasion of the East. Tolstoy's opinion is further validated by the following counter invasion from the East to the West that made the actual Tsar Alexander I the hero, despite his non-heroic and non-military constitution. The novel seems thus written by the author to almost prove his view of history as rather a clash of forces in which the characters and heroes are only accidental. In this respect Tolstoy was debating with all sorts of official forms of history which were proliferating at that time, namely the historical debate which arose a generation after the Napoleonic conflict in order to determine which character had more or less credit in the course of events.

As the official history keeps on adjusting itself based on one or the other truth, one may in fact start to wonder whether the fictionalized version of such an historical fact is a rather more truthful perspective which provides the remote reader with a broader sense of the characters and atmospheres of that particular time. As Charlie Chaplin later wrote in his autobiography, Sergei Eisenstein's "Ivan the Terrible" can be seen as a far more truthful account than the "distorted" views that the official history provides on that period.

As Thomas S. Kuhn's has suggested a century later when writing *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, there is in fact a common tendency to specify particular time and personages as the revolutionary genius of a particular discovery. Tolstoy, in this respect had similar claims in providing us with a lesson that such milestones in the history of humanity are rather a complex process which is not sudden but rather, it is a process involving several humans acting upon a force. This theory is further confirmed by, for instance, the rise in power of Benito Mussolini or better to put it, the rise of Fascism itself. Upon hearing about the violent riots that were arising in Milan, where a left oriented magazine was attacked, Mussolini immediately condemned such acts but later became its leader. This brutal force coming from below needed a representative and it is thus questionable to say that it came from the dictator himself or that the dictator wanted to be dictating in the first place. To put it then in Kuhn's words, such an emergence is quite a complex process which historians tends to generalize imposing unquestionable official truths which do not carry any of the nuance which would allow the recipients to have a broader "feeling" on the historical subject.

As history becomes more official and formally divulged among the social offspring, certain distinctions are inevitably carried on with it. Would have the Second World War being avoided if Adolf Hitler had read Tolstoy rather than misinterpreting Nietzsche? It is clear that in his text "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life", the German madman (as Foucault would later categorize him) is, in principle, spurring his people, and more particularly the German youth, to feed on Plutarch and use history as a source of inspiration rather than a source of captivation. It is quite the same dilemma faced by Rodion Raskolnikov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's character in *Crime and Punishment*, who was quite inspired by Napoleon and was quite seeking to accomplish something heroic in his life but yet ended up killing a Jewish moneylender. Nietzsche himself was quite inspired by this Russian novel aside for the very end when Raskolnikov, imprisoned in Siberia, gains his sanity in such an idyllic landscape watching a group of tartars crossing the horizon. Something is there then to disable modern men to become real historical heroes, but what is it? Has this something to do rather more with technology and the way it can amplify the will of a person? Are we to turn our reflections to Arthur Schopenhauer instead?

Again the question raised above whether the Second World War could have been all together avoided if Hitler read Tolstoy rather than Nietzsche, can also be questionable under Kuhn's and Tolstoy's way of thinking. According to them again Hitler would not be the author of Nazism. Micheal Foucault himself mentions, in his famous lecture on the "Discourse on Language" that such authorship becomes rather misleading and vague in

the realm of facts while it is paradoxically becoming more important in that of fiction. We can then elaborate further on the subject of authorship with a view on the cultural development occurring in France, in the place and time in which Foucault was active, and we will discover that in fact the author of fiction is becoming rather more preoccupied with facts and additionally he does so by using the constraints and mathematical formula that the French philosopher seemed so much to despise.

If we have then suggested that some production of truth may as well be more reliable when produced by a fiction author such as Tolstoy who did not belong to any discipline but could maintain his autonomous status till the end of his days thanks for his inheritance, how are we to view the trend of fiction authors becoming more concerned with the establishment of a discipline which could provide them with constraints and formulae? The Oulipo for instance, gathering the most renowned French speaking writers of the 60s, 70s and 80s can be seen as a cultural movement despising this freedom from artistic tradition and seeking for a re-establishment of a tradition in order to generate new fiction. The experiments conducted by these authors can be viewed as extremizing the potential of content generation where the fiction author becomes more of the normal scientist kind of the 18th and 19th century as described by Kuhn. We might also observe that science itself has adopted in the last century elements which were more pertinent to fiction. In this respect the evolutionary paradigm change envisioned by both Popper and Kuhn can be perceived rather as a swap.

The structure of artistic revolutions is as well a rather complex scenario if we are to juxtapose Kuhn's findings from the scientific realm onto the artistic one. Art history for instance, also tends to select and nominate the authors of artistic discoveries such as the avant-garde movements. With simple examples we could be able to prove, as Kuhn did by looking at the history of science, that the history of art is only providing a partial truth of far more complicated processes which gave rise to a significant period. The one example on Surrealism can be enlightening. According to the official history we could find in André Breton the originator of such current with his manifesto written in 1924. Scattered information and sources will instead reveal how Breton was actually influenced by the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio De Chirico, who again can be doubtfully the author of the Scuola Metafisica. In this respect we can mention that this simplification is necessary for human to remember a clear element and yet this is again only a selection which cuts out a far more complicated truth which possibly only a broad account depicting the moods and feelings of various representative characters can provide, bringing the reader both with his mind and soul in the "psychological waters" of the period.

The telling of the story becomes here a relevant component in the communication of truth. Thus, rather than communicating historical notions which can be manipulated and utilized in populist manners, leading to catastrophic events as it is recurrent in the history of humanity, the easy spread of negative affection can be probably alleviated by the spread of such “fictional” truths. Nietzsche's frustration is quite understandable in a time in which education itself is based rather on a divulgence of facts, data which can be elaborated to make up or buy any argument. Media itself may also be seen as transmitting indignation selecting out certain facts with which the mass is particularly obsessed. It is a narrow chain reaction which can only lead to more human conflicts. The feeling of empathy which a rather realist fiction can transmit can be seen as rather the opposite, as a moment of catharsis in the process of prejudice enforcement. Such catharses are the real moment of micro crisis that are able to provide fractures in the establishment of a paradigm, the human force that slowly but progressively emerges. It can be seen as inevitable, for instance, that immigrants will be kicked out from Sweden; Jimmie Åkesson will not be the author but rather a growing force of discontent emerging from the exposure to narrowed facts and the fact that real histories (are we to call them fictions) are not really transmitted between the hosting community and the community of refugees living quite emancipated from one another.

After reading Tolstoy, Hitler might have seen a different person when meeting for instance a Russian émigré. In his mass media formed conception of such a Russian, the fictional yet realistic account provided by the author might have offered him a wider panorama of feelings than simple hater for the revolutionary Bolshevik. Plutarch himself, as Nietzsche invites us to nourish on him, provides us with a narrated account of Roman emperors, Plutarch being a Greek. Here even one might question whether Hitler had ever had the chance to read any of such accounts which do in fact portray rather daring heroes but in fact we can barely find any of them who do not die rather pitifully, thus not really facing a noble death in the Celtic sense but rather dying with a knife on their back (Lucius Aemilius Paullus being maybe the exception).

Having placed an emphasis on the relevance of truth as produced by the fiction author, we might then come back to the ambiguous question of tradition. In the emergence and anomaly of scientific discoveries, Kuhn seems in the end to welcome such traditions as a necessary element for the production of new discoveries; he calls this resistance. In his “Discourse on Language”, Foucault seems rather to despise this given traditions, rules which can only be viewed under a negative way in which they limit the author under an imposed set of taboos and restrictions imposed by his or her discipline, probably even meant to protect the discipline established paradigm. Getting back to the example of

the Oulipo movement, we here find an absurdity, a whole generations of authors which could proceed without any imposed rule or taboo from any such traditions and yet find themselves lost in such freedom, the “myriad of possibilities”, as James Joyce previously defined. They seek their own limits and constraints; they build their own disciplinary prison, the one that even Nietzsche (who actually nourished from a tradition of ancient classics) so much invites to free us youth from. It is then a paradox to confront the words of such prophet like madmen inviting to liberate ourselves from pre-given traditions (or frameworks as Popper defines them) and then on the other side hear the voice of a hyper sane person like Kuhn (however ambiguous his belonging to any discipline might seem) and realize that the precondition to any discovery is the adherence to a tradition, else the breach to the new cannot be seen. One could in this respect mention that as for the Oulipo, the authors did build their own prison and, in this respect, it is better to live in a self-constructed one rather than become aware to be in a prison that has been imposed by others (as it is the case for instance, among intellectuals today living in countries like China). Said then that a state of freedom for the production of content (whether more or less close to truth) necessitate a certain adherence to some tradition, and said that there might be even a possibility to self-produce such tradition in case it is lacking (risking though to become a madman if this tradition doesn't get established), we may also mention Karl Popper's interesting view expressed in “Normal Science and its Dangers”. Here Popper sees a danger in specializations and dogmatization of scientists but admits that the clash that occurs when these specializations (as in Zarathustra's characters) tries to discuss is most fruitful. We can then admit as Hans-Georg Gadamer specifies in “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem”, that new knowledge is the recognition of a difference, but the quest for the new requires a familiar realm for the scientist to proceed ahead in the realm of the unknown. Under these premises one may venture to address then the fact that science could as well be aware of these facts, and rather than inviting multi-disciplinary approaches among specialized scientists, the very scientist could be educated in specialties, generating an inner clash, yet these specializations should be something his own will to knowledge pursue, in other words they should be facilitated but not imposed.

There is another issue however, that arises in our apparent illusion of freedom from any such traditions. The fact is that media apparatuses become less vulnerable to forgetfulness and tradition under the domain of an institution utilizing such media apparatuses, are likely to be more unable to accept a new historical entry. Both Foucault and Kuhn give accounts of the difficulties for certain pioneers of certain truths like Wilhelm Röntgen and Gregor Mendel, to be accepted due to the rigid paradigm in which

the societies in charge to approve such new truth laid, in their comfort zone keeping away any calamity. It is also the remarkable case of Benjamin Franklin accounted in his autobiography. His electronic discoveries were communicated to the European leading scientists and were highly rejected and made ridiculous. Can then the use of media within institutions be a further hinder to the discoveries of further truths and paradigmatic evolution? We are used to think of the contrary and yet it seems that knowledge production no longer appears in public forums but it is rather controlled and maintained by small circles who keep the levels of the channel through which knowledge is governed. The illusion of a participatory knowledge and truth production seems even more a threat. Using a Foucault-like metaphor we can view now knowledge as a penalty house with transparent glass walls where everyone seems to be able to interact with it but in reality its content is highly moderated as it is the case for Wikipedia, the most popular source of truth. The Nietzschean "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life" may in this respect be revised as "On the Use and Abuse of Media for Life". Even in Wikipedia we can see the predominance of a certain truth over another and the erasing of ambiguities for clarity sake. In the diatribe that again emerges in the imposition of a certain truth over another, the broader perspective of more loose and less historically strict fictions can be thus more revealing and to some extent less assuring of a simplified version of things. The question remains however whether such discourses have the possibility to be ever divulged on time as institutions with their media apparatuses are as well in full control of the distribution.