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What a lumbering poor vehicle prose is for the conveying of a great thought! ...Prose wanders around with a lantern & laboriously schedules & verifies the details & particulars of a valley & its frame of crags & peaks, then Poetry comes, & lays bare the whole landscape with a single splendid flash.

—Mark Twain

PROSAICS: AN APPROACH TO THE HUMANITIES

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IT IS A MELANCHOLY FACT that the best minds in the humanities have long been engaged in a series of futile debates. Two schools of thought stake out ever more extreme versions of their own positions, as each responds to the other's proofs that it is untenable. The accusations of each are correct, but neither can conceive of any alternative to its own entrenched position and style of thought.

A critic might be tempted to label one school "semiotic totalitarianism," and the other, its deathless enemy, "village relativism." Proponents of the first school assume that to understand any part of culture one must devise a system capable of explaining every part of it. All of human experience is subject to the system's totalitarian order. These thinkers assume that nothing is innocent of meaning and that all actions, events, or artifacts are signs that their system alone can decode; their mania for treating everything in terms of an occult language might be called "semiotic," although "cryptographic" might be just as apt. Naturally, Freud and Marx, who are read as offering keys to the psyche and the social world, are currently the great heroes of these thinkers.

The village relativists invariably detect metaphysical and epistemological errors in their adversaries' thought. The relativists agree that explanations are all-embracing systems but deny that such sys-

tems are possible. With a jargon no less daunting than their opponents', they repeatedly find new ways to demonstrate a rather simple point—that one cannot know anything with certainty—and, completely illogically, they go on to conclude that one therefore cannot know anything at all.

The most influential relativists have for some time denied the very existence of facts. They arrive at this curious position not by pointing to bias in all our perceptions. That rather moderate form of skepticism doesn't go far enough, because, after all, the very word bias might imply the possibility of something or someone without bias. No, these relativists argue that there are no "facts" because what we call facts are entirely the product of our individual or social interests, and therefore are entitled to no special "privilege." Adopting this form of relativism, one recent thinker has recommended that historians just invent whatever story best suits their political purposes, since there are no facts to violate anyway. Perhaps one is tempted to argue against such an approach on the grounds that it is illogical, because, after all, history is by definition a matter of facts. To this, any good modern relativist will supply the stock answer: logic itself enjoys no privilege, because it is just another form of rhetoric. The ease with which these thinkers can manufacture a reply to any objection prompts the name "village relativism," by analogy with village atheism.

Naturally, these two schools talk past each other. Semiotic totalitarians can always detect some form of bourgeois decadence or inner drive to repression in their opponents. For their part, the village relativists invariably uncover incriminating evidence that their opponents actually believe in something. Each group vies for a position "leftier than thou": one tends to the political left, the other to the epistemological "left" of radical nihilism.

There is an alternative to this endless oscillation of absolutes and absences. I call this alternative "prosaics," and in this essay I will sketch its implications for current thought. Coiners of neologisms have a special freedom in defining them, so I will stipulate at the outset that "prosaics" has two closely related meanings. It is, first of all, a way of thinking about human events that focuses on the ordinary, messy, quotidian facts of daily life—in short, on the prosaic. As it happens, this form of thinking also offers a reason to take novels with renewed seriousness: of all literary forms, novels are best able to capture the messiness of the world. Thus, the second meaning of "prosaics," which is opposed to "poetics," suggests an approach to verbal art that focuses not on epics or lyrics or

tragedies, but on the novel and other forms of prose. Prosaic facts have been best represented in prosaic art.

As a way of thinking about the cultural world generally, prosaics does not presume that behind all apparent disorder there lies a hidden order or system. It resists the impulse of semiotic totalitarians, who try to think away disorder by treating it as governed by an order not yet fully identified. On the contrary, prosaics assumes that the natural state of the world is mess, and that it is order, not disorder, that requires an explanation. Order does exist, of course, but it is always the result of work. It is never given, but always made.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson captured this prosaic insight in one of his splendid dialogues between himself and his daughter. Bateson called his dialogues “metalogues,” because their shapes illustrate their themes, and in “Why Do Things Get in Muddle?” father and daughter muddle and meander their way to a series of prosaic insights. “People spend a lot of time tidying things,” the daughter observes, “but they never seem to spend time muddling them. Things just seem to get in a muddle by themselves.” If one pays no particular attention to what one is doing, tidy things get messy, but messy things never tidy themselves. Why?

Bateson at last arrives at an answer, one that is disarmingly simple: there are an infinitely large number of ways in which things can be messy, but very few that one would call tidy. His daughter expresses dissatisfaction with this explanation, because she feels that there must be a reason, some sort of active force for disorder. Bateson answers that it is order, not disorder, that requires a reason in that sense:

D[aughter]: Daddy, you didn't finish, Why do things get the way I say isn't tidy?

F[ather]: But I have finished—it's just because there are more ways which you call “untidy” than there are ways which you call “tidy.”

D: But that isn't a reason why-

F: But, yes, it is. And it is the real and only and very important reason.

D: Oh, Daddy! Stop it.

F: No, I'm not fooling. That is the reason, and all of science is hooked up with that reason.

Whether or not all of science is hooked up with that reason, all of prosaics is. The natural state of the world is mess.

By contrast, consider Freud's assumption that everything in the psyche operates according to a complex system in which no accidents whatsoever are possible. Slips of the tongue and the forgetting of facts, however trivial, are always "Freudian": they result from a disguised "intention to forget." Characteristically, Freud moves from the insight that some errors serve a purpose to the insistence that all do. "Since we overcame the error of supposing that forgetting what we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory trace—that is, an annihilation," he writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, "we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances... it can be brought to light." Prosaics replies: why should we assume that the human mind is that efficient? Can it really be that each act of forgetting must be purposeful and requires work? If the natural state of the mind is mess, then most forgetting and errors result from the simple inefficiency of all things human. The burden of proof goes the other way. Memory requires a reason, and perhaps the forgetting of some things requires a reason. But the mere fact that I cannot remember every speck of dust on the way to work does not mean I intend to forget it.

The political analogue to Freudian logic is conspiracy theory. Such theorists hold that if you can identify a social problem, then you can identify someone or some group who planned it; and if no one can be proved to have planned it, then that only shows how effectively the conspirators have suppressed the evidence. In 1937, a trial in Switzerland established conclusively that the most famous modern conspiracy document, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was a forgery, but the proof did no good at all. Its Nazi circulators then and its leftist ones now simply argue that the trial itself proves the extent of the Elders' influence. If one argues with a Marxist, one must be doing so from class interests; if one argues with a Freudian, it must be from a desire to avoid the painful truth. Marxists sometimes resort to another version of conspiracy logic: if no one can be identified as the conspirator, then the conspiracy nevertheless exists "objectively." The idea that history doesn't fit a system is dismissed out of hand.

It was against just such system-mongering that the greatest thinkers of the prosaic tradition rebelled. Perhaps the greatest of them, Leo Tolstoy, sidestepped the whole debate over which system guaranteed social progress; rather, he denied that history was systematic at all. “I see no reason whatsoever to seek out general laws of history, not to mention the impossibility of doing so,” Tolstoy wrote. He saw that the thought of his time “from Hegel to Buckle” presumed that behind the chaos of daily events there must be some pattern. And he dedicated *War and Peace* to disputing that notion. Just in case readers missed the point, he violated novelistic decorum by including several essays demonstrating the logical fallacies behind all historical systematizing.

In the novel’s councils of war, Tolstoy’s generals and rulers always presume that a good plan will anticipate all contingencies. The wiser characters learn that battles, and all other historical events, are the product of “a hundred million diverse chances,” the result of an indefinitely large number of causal lines reducible to no pattern whatsoever, even in principle. Sometimes events happen for a specific reason, but sometimes they happen just “for some reason” (one of Tolstoy’s favorite phrases). The philosophers assume that history is a riddle and that it can be solved: but for Tolstoy, as for Ludwig Wittgenstein, a man who learned so much from him, “the riddle does not exist” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.5).

Tolstoy’s wisest characters give up the quest for certainty and instead seek ways of orienting themselves to act effectively in a world of contingency. The wisest general in *War and Peace*, Kutuzov, sleeps through councils of war, not to show contempt for his fellow officers, as some of them assume, but rather because he knows that war is too unsystematic for late-night planning to be of much use. In fact, it could actually hurt, he reasons, because in a world of uncertainty, alertness to the essentially unpredictable events of the moment is the most valuable tool. The best preparations for a battle, Kutuzov suggests, is “a good night’s sleep.”

War and Peace also illustrates another characteristic of prosaic thought. In contrast to most great systems, prosaics questions whether the most important events may not be the most ordinary and everyday ones—events that we do not appreciate simply because they are so commonplace. To adapt Abe Lincoln’s saying, God must have loved the ordinary events because he made so many of them. Cloaked in their very ordinariness, the prosaic events that truly shape our lives—that truly are our lives—escape

our notice. The truths we seek are hidden in plain view, and for that reason are all the more difficult to discern.

Most historians and philosophers tend to focus on the big events—on wars, revolutions, dramatic incidents, critical choices, and decisive encounters. Individual people, too, tend to tell themselves the story of their lives in terms of exceptional events and big decisions. But what if the important events are not the great ones, but the infinitely numerous and apparently inconsequential ordinary ones, which, taken together, are far more effective and significant? After all, memorable events are memorable just because they are exceptional. To imagine that they are important just because they are memorable and noticeable would be like concluding that because only treetops are visible on a distant hill, nothing exists there but trees (to use one of Tolstoy’s analogies).

It is often the small items in the background of old photographs that most powerfully evoke elusive memories of the past. The things barely noticed at the time and included only by chance may best preserve the feeling of life as it was lived. The furniture long ago discarded, a spot on the wall, a picture we had long ignored but that now suggests the habitual life we lived beneath it—these small items remind us of how it felt to live in a room. The intended subject of a photograph can seem much less important in comparison with its background; and perhaps that is one reason why professional photos without a background so often seem to miss the very point of photography.

Tolstoy’s characters achieve wisdom when they learn not to seek the great and poetic but to appreciate the small and prosaic. In *War and Peace*, Pierre spends his life looking for a grand meaning behind the daily flux of events. He oscillates between a belief in utopian systems that will explain everything and despair at the impossibility of arriving at such a system—between “semiotic totalitarianism” and “village relativists.” He eventually learns that meaning is not deep and distant but here and everywhere. “In everything near and comprehensible he had [previously] seen only what was limited, petty, commonplace, and meaningless. He had equipped himself with a mental telescope and gazed into the distance where the petty and commonplace had seemed to him great and infinite only because they were not clearly visible.”

Masonry, metaphysics, philanthropy, and philosophers of history all served as mental telescopes for Pierre, and he continually shifted between elation over his newest system for discovering the meaning of life and despair as each system betrayed a fatal flaw.

But wisdom does eventually come to Pierre: “Now, however, he had learned to see the great, the eternal, the infinite in everything, and therefore... he had naturally discarded the telescope through which he had till then been gazing over the heads of men, and joyfully surveyed the ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable, and infinite life around him.” The meaning Pierre has sought was not remote, but hidden in plain view. The light shineth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehendeth it not.

Modern orthodoxy understands the self and meaning in quite the opposite way. In the shadow of Freud, most Americans, from Ann Landers to the most esoteric literary critic, have tended to assume that selfhood, no less than history, is a riddle with a hidden solution: to know oneself is to know the hidden self deep within us. But what if there is no central, core self? What if selfhood, like all forms of order and unity, is not discovered but made? This position was espoused by a remarkable minority of psychological thinkers. They rejected the Freudian model, and with it notions of the self as essentially complete by age five, hidden by layers of repression that only the analyst can probe.

Two Russian thinkers, the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin and the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, extended prosaic and Tolstoyan premises. They explicitly denied that the self is a system, however complex. On the contrary, they argued that the self is something much looser, an aggregate of habits, contingent facts, and clusters of order that continually interact with one another and with the hundred million diverse facts of daily life. Whatever wholeness we achieve requires enormous work, which is the effort of life; and that work is never complete. A self is not a gift, is not inborn and then distorted through socialization and repression. On the contrary, children only acquire a self as they are socialized. And that self, which can never achieve unity or fixity, changes throughout our lifetime.

Tolstoy emphatically rejected the idea of the self as a complex system, an idea associated in his day with that great inspirer of Freud, Dostoyevsky. In particular, Tolstoy disliked Dostoyevsky’s sense that people are driven by a deep inner conflict, leading either to salvation or catastrophe. Dostoyevsky believed that lives are decided at critical moments, and he therefore described the world as driven by sudden eruptions from the unconscious. By contrast, Tolstoy insisted that although we may imagine our lives are decided at important and intense moments of choice, in fact our choices are shaped by the whole climate of our minds, which themselves result from countless small decisions at ordinary moments.

Interestingly enough, Tolstoy chose to illustrate his thesis through an interpretation of *Crime and Punishment*, which he analyzes as if he had written it himself. The essay in which this analysis occurs—“Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves?”—might be taken as a central text of prosaics. Chapter 4 of that essay begins with an apparently minor point: that even an occasional cigarette or a glass of wine is harmful. People usually say that although drunkenness is harmful, surely “the trifling alterations of consciousness” produced by a cigarette or a glass of wine at dinner are not. Arguing in this way, Tolstoy replies, is like supposing “that it may harm a watch to be struck against a stone, but that a little dirt introduced into it cannot be harmful.”

Tolstoy then retells the story of the painter Bryullov, who corrected a student’s sketch. “Why, you only touched it a tiny bit,” the student exclaimed, “but it is quite a different thing.” Bryullov replied: “Art begins where the tiny bit begins.” Tolstoy then draws his prosaic moral: “That saying is strikingly true not only of art, but of all of life. One may say that true life begins where the tiny bit begins—where what may seem to us minute and infinitely small alterations take place. True life is not lived where great external changes take place—where people move about, clash, fight, and slay one another—it is lived only where these tiny, tiny, infinitesimally small changes occur.”

Tolstoy then turns to *Crime and Punishment* and transforms it into a Tolstoyan novel. “Raskolnikov did not live his true life when he murdered the old woman or her sister,” nor did he decide to commit murder at any single, “decisive” moment. That choice was made, and he lived his true life, neither when he entered the old woman’s lodgings with a concealed ax, nor when he made plans for the perfect crime, nor when he worried about whether murder is morally permitted. No, it was made when he was just lying on his couch, thinking about the most everyday questions—whether he should take the money from his mother or not, whether he should live in his present apartment, and other questions not at all related to the old woman. “The question was decided... when he was doing nothing and only his consciousness was active; and in that consciousness, tiny, tiny alterations were taking place.... Tiny, tiny alterations—but on them depend the most important and terrible consequences.”

Precisely because intentions are shaped continually, every moment of our lives has moral value. Because our actions reflect the whole climate of our minds, everything that contributes to that climate—

which means all of our thoughts and actions, however “inconsequential”—is potentially of great importance. In Anthony Trollope’s novel *Can You Forgive Her?* one heroine tells another to refrain from saying unkind things about her husband even to herself, lest she teach herself to think that way by habit. In fact, Anna Karenina does teach herself to think badly of her husband, and later of Vronsky, in just this way. Her life is ruined, and lives generally are saved or ruined by innumerable prosaic moments, which together shape the self and all its subsequent actions. If we are honest, we must be so moment by moment; there are no unimportant moments. Or as Bakhtin liked to say, “There is no alibi for being.”

Tolstoy’s most moral characters learn this truth. In *Father Sergius*, a novel written toward the end of Tolstoy’s life, a proud man trains himself to attain sainthood by grand gestures and noticeable acts of self-sacrifice that imitate incidents in *The Lives of the Saints*. But his quest fails, because no matter what he does to humble his pride he is still proud of his very humility. When he at last meets a true saint, he discovers that she and everyone else is unaware of her exceptionality. She is a mother who supports her daughter and her daughter’s neurasthenic husband and who reproaches herself for not going to church. She lives a life of daily kindnesses that are entirely undramatic, undiscerned, and inimitable. Sergius learns that one cannot become a saint by imitating a model, and that true holiness, which never fits a pattern, grows out of the particular situations of daily life. Saints are prosaic and never recognizable as saints. Sergius draws a characteristically Tolstoyan lesson: if one is canonized, then one cannot be a saint. One reason that Tolstoy was excommunicated is that the Christ in whom he believed was not divine, not a performer of miracles, and perhaps not even a great teacher, except by example: he was simply a prosaically good man.

Tolstoy never tired of teaching this lesson, which is the reason that the characters he truly admires are not the dramatic and interesting ones like Prince Andrei, Natasha Rostova or Anna Karenina but the “mediocre” ones like Nikolai Rostov or Dolly Oblonskaya. They lead undramatic lives, which are rightly lived moment to moment and which unfold only as background to the dramatic stories of the noticeable heroes. It could be no other way, because good lives don’t make good stories, because nothing especially narratable happens in them. “All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” wrote Tolstoy, because happy families are too prosaic to make a story, but each unhappy one has a story of its own.

Dolly Oblonskaya is Tolstoy's moral compass. Once she accepts her husband's genial and habitual infidelity, nothing happens in her life worth telling. We catch glimpses of her struggling with her children's all-too-familiar illnesses and mischief, talking with peasant women about women's daily cares, and even wondering whether romantic love might be more satisfying than her daily grind, but she nevertheless always does the right thing moment by moment. By contrast, her philandering husband Stiva, who would never deliberately harm anyone, stands as a symbol of prosaic evil, not because of any great sin or evil action but because he lives badly moment by moment. He has never trained himself to act responsibly and honestly in small ways.

Most literate and most Western thought has described evil as something grand, terrifying, and Satanic, but Russian literature teaches us that it is ordinary and banal. That great disciple of Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, always attributes ruined lives to daily pettiness. As Elena Andreevna tells Uncle Vanya: "Ivan Petrovich, you are an educated, intelligent man, and I should think you would understand that the world is being destroyed not by crime and fire, but by... all these petty squabbles." Dostoyevsky verged on a prosaic understanding of evil when he described the devil who visits Ivan Karamazov as petty, commonplace, fashionably liberal, and politely skeptical. Hell, it turns out, is just like our world—it has adopted the metric system—and the devil himself is, remarkably enough, an agnostic. Dostoyevsky's point is that evil is not alien or mysterious but derives from our most common wishes and thoughts, because we all desire "to kill our fathers" and to harm others and ourselves.

Tolstoy takes this insight one step further to a truly prosaic view. Evil usually results from neither grand nor banal desires, but rather from something closer to criminal negligence. Evil happens not because we subconsciously wish it, but simply because we do not pay attention, because we omit to develop the habit of evaluating and correcting "the tiny alterations" of our thoughts moment to moment. A true semiotic totalitarian, Dostoyevsky thought evil, like chaos, required a principle, Tolstoy knew that it is good that demands energy, like the moment-to-moment conscientiousness of a good mother.

Because they are suspicious of the grand gesture, prosaic thinkers tend to be debunkers. They are especially hostile to the ideology of romantic love, which regards ordinary marriage as uninteresting and great passion as real life. That classic of twentieth-century criticism, Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*, con-

tends that Eros and romantic passion render impossible the truest and most important kind of love, family love. One cannot marry Iseult (Mrs. Tristan?), nor can one imagine Romeo and Juliet routinely sitting down to breakfast. Romantic love comes complete with an ideology of transcendence and desire, and a utopian contempt for prosaic marriage, which it finds hopelessly boring and middle-class. But in fact “to love in the sense of passion-love is the contrary of to live,” de Rougement insists. “It is an impoverishment of one’s being... an inability to enjoy the present without imagining it as absent.” Marriage cannot be based on passion, because marital love and romantic love are as contradictory as prose and poetry.

De Rougement’s book reads like a gloss on the great prosaic novelists, from Jane Austen to Anthony Trollope to Tolstoy. One might say that Anna Karenina dies from a lack of prosaics, from her attempt to base her life with Vronsky entirely on passion and the excitement of desire. She refuses even to direct the household servants, who are compelled to receive their orders from Vronsky; and she pays almost no attention to her daughter. Tolstoy contrasts Anna’s rejection of the everyday world with Dolly’s conversation with the peasant women and Kitty’s involvement with her mother and the servants in making jam.

Tolstoy’s wife related her husband’s account of how the central idea of Anna came to him:

I was sitting downstairs in my study and observing a very beautiful silk line on the sleeve of my robe. I was thinking about how many people get the idea in their head to invent all those patterns and ornaments of embroidery, and that there exists a whole world of woman’s work, fashions, ideas by which women live.... Anna is deprived of all these joys of occupying herself with the woman’s side of life, because she is alone. All women have turned away from her, and she has nobody to talk to about all that which composes the everyday, purely feminine occupations.

For Tolstoy, those are really the only important occupations, and so he invariably described the usual world of men—Karenin’s politics, Vronsky’s military life, Koznyshev’s sterile philosophizing, everything but working the land—as essentially meaningless by comparison. In all of these masculine occupations, he detected a contempt for the prosaic, and therefore falsity. At the end of *Emma*, Jane Austen makes much the same point when she has Knightly distinguish between the male world of “the great” and the

prosaic stories describable only in “woman’s language.” Given that distinction, everything or almost everything important belongs to woman’s realm, including novels like *Emma*. Above all, anything that has positive moral value is to be found there.

For Tolstoy, Bakhtin, and most prosaic thinkers, a special conception of ethics was of supreme importance. For it is above all in the realm of ethics that the systematic view of the world is misleading and dangerous. Systematic ethics conceives of right and wrong as conformity or nonconformity to the moral norms discovered by ethical philosophers. The only alternative to such a view, it has often been stated, is one or another form of subjectivism, emotivism, or relativism, all of which ultimately make any true moral judgments impossible. Here again, one is offered a choice between semiotic totalitarianism and village relativism, both of which assume that without a system there is nothing. Tolstoy and Bakhtin believed that there is an alternative to these equally unacceptable positions.

If morality were a matter of rules, they reasoned, then the only work involved in making moral decisions would be in deciding which rules apply to a given situation. Moral agents, in such a view, come to resemble Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilych, whose brilliance as a jurist arises precisely from his adeptness at eliminating “all considerations irrelevant to the legal aspects of the case, and reducing even the most complicated case to a form in which it could be presented on paper only in its externals, excluding his personal opinion of the matter, while above all observing every prescribed formality.” Ivan Ilych is never led astray by irrelevant sympathies or particularities and judges every matter entirely according to abstract norms. Tolstoy directs his irony at a method that eliminates everything truly important in deciding moral questions. As Bakhtin puts it, one loses the very “oughtness” of moral decisions when they become entirely mechanical and are separated from the concerns of real people. In a novel, such a view could only be the object of parody; and it is novels, not philosophical or legal treatises, that are correct.

If moral decisions were a matter of applying rules, then a computer could be the most moral of agents. But this is monstrous. “If human life could be [completely] governed by reason,” Tolstoy wrote, “then the possibility of life would be destroyed.” And yet, if morals are not a matter of rules then what can be said about how moral decisions are made?

Both Levin in *Anna Karenina* and Pierre in *War and Peace* learn after fruitless attempts to identify a guiding system that, in fact, they do not need one. When Pierre rightly lives moment to moment, when the tiny alterations of his thoughts take place in the correct way, he achieves a sensitivity to each situation that tells him what to do. He acts rightly, even though his actions conform to no rule. He becomes a good moral agent as Nikolai Rostov becomes a good soldier and Dolly a good mother—by learning and practicing what Tolstoy calls “moral alertness.”

Such a view carries with it an emphasis on the process of education and on daily experience. If moral decisions were made by rules, they could become automatic. But in Tolstoy’s view, moral decisions are necessarily matters of work in each case. There is no substitute for moral responsiveness to unique people in particular situations at a given moment of their lives, for it is in just such a complex nexus that morality lives: there is no alibi for being.

Tolstoy and Bakhtin do not mean to reject rules entirely. On the contrary, rules, principles, and maxims have their pedagogic function. When one learns where rules work and, still more, where they fail, one’s sense of moral complexity is enriched. Such enrichment is essential to moral education and is in principle endless. A moral resting point is never earned once and for all.

Such a view of morals suggests the importance of novels, and the connection between prosaics as a view of life and prosaics as a view of literature focused on novels. For where are we to look for description of situations rich enough to educate our moral sense? Surely we cannot look in philosophical texts, because even when philosophers talk in general terms about the irreducible importance of particulars, these observations are themselves too general to be of much use. We want life, and philosophers give us “being”; “praxis” is nothing but a philosopher’s notion of practice. In philosophers’ examples or thought experiments, one lacks a rich sense of the psychological and social milieu of living people. Sociologists’ case studies are no richer. And even in daily life, we do not see much of other people’s thought processes or know much of their experience before our seeing them. But the entire impulse of novels is to provide just such information, as “thickly” as possible. Ethics is a matter of prosaics, and great prose develops our ethical sense.

For such reasons, Bakhtin came to regard the novel as the highest art form—indeed, as the height of Western thought, more profound than abstract philosophy. In great novels, the texture of daily life is

described with a richness, depth, and attention to contingent particulars that no other form of thought or literary genre offers. In novels we see moral decisions made moment by moment by inexhaustibly complex characters in unrepeatably social situations at particular historical times; and we see that the value of these decisions cannot be abstracted from these specifics.

Thus, for reasons both literary and ethical, Bakhtin became the champion of the novel and the proponent of all traditional “poetics.” For, from Aristotle to the present, “poetics” has always identified the essence of literature with poetry, which is why poetics has become a synonym for “theory of literature.” Poetics recognizes in prose only those aspects it shares with poetry, and denies artistic significance to the rest. For Bakhtin, however, the greatness of prose art lies precisely in what it does not share with poetry—in its sense of the prosaic texture of life in all its richness and ordinariness. Consequently, to appreciate novels we need not poetics, but prosaics, a theory recognizing that novels provide a special way of thinking about the world before our eyes and about the ethical problems we constantly face.

This approach to novels is quite different from the one often taken in ethics classes. There students are encouraged to take the fiction as the instantiation of a norm, or as an example from which to derive a norm. A good student learns to think away all those “irrelevancies” that conceal the “essential problem.” But from the point of view of prosaics, the value of novels derives from these very “irrelevancies,” from what Bakhtin calls “the surplus of humanness,” which cannot be transformed into norms. Where traditional philosophy ends, prosaic ethics begins.

The prosaic approach to novels is also quite different from the method used in most literature classes today. Remarkably enough, moral approaches to literature have been essentially taboo in major American universities for the past half-century. At most, one can talk of moral themes, but ethical criticism per se has long been a relic. The New Criticism, which reigned so long in American academies, tended to deny literature any propositional or practical value and was, consequently, hostile to ethical criticism. Its successors have brought back the reader as interpreter, as evaluator, and as political actor, but not as moral agent. The very idea that there could be moral questions not subsumed by political ones is itself regarded as hopelessly reactionary. Moral questions can only be brought in through the back door—as questions of literary technique or as support for a political pronouncement. With only rare exceptions, critics avoid real ethical engagement with the text.

And this is very odd indeed. After all, one reason that people read literature is to understand other people and their moral decisions. Scholars today look down on such prosaic and vulgar interests and teach their students to be more “sophisticated.” But what if scholars are the ones who have lost touch, and it is students who see the matter correctly? Who should be teaching whom?


Given such questions, we might consider Bakhtin’s ideas and reconsider Tolstoy’s thoughts about the ethics of reading. I realize that in recommending *What Is Art?* and similar writings of Tolstoy, I risk seeming naïve, because all that most people remember about these essays is their narrow moralism—the very thing that has always given moral criticism a bad name. In reacting to such narrowness, we have mistakenly banned moral criticism altogether. But, for all of Tolstoy’s objectionable moralism, he also offers an approach to the ethics of reading that is both responsible and deeply prosaic.

He tells us that the explicit moral one may draw from a work is not what is most important about it, even from a moral point of view. What is important is how the work “infects” us with moral values that we as readers practice moment to moment while reading it. In one of his most interesting essays, Tolstoy argued that the overt moral of Chekhov’s story “The Darling”—the moral the author intended and his readers discovered—is a bad one but that nevertheless the story is a good one, because of what it does with us as we read it. We extend sympathy unawares to a character we ostensibly condemn. The effect contradicts the message. Like Balaam, Chekhov blesses where he means to curse.

One might make the inverse point about television programs that ostensibly preach an uplifting moral—say, the evils of sexual abuse of children—but that make such abuse interesting and titillating in the process. What really matters most in reading fiction, and in every other experience, are the tiny, tiny alterations of consciousness in process.

Perhaps the real education that literature provides lies in the moment-to-moment decisions we make in the course of reading: where to extend sympathy and where to desire a just punishment; when to be carried away and when to remain skeptical; whether or not (to use a phrase that has gone out of fashion) to “identify” with a character. Whatever conclusions we may explicitly draw, we have practiced reactions to particular kinds of people and situa-

tions, and practice produces habits that may precede, preclude, or preform conscious moral judgments in daily life.

Of course, it is easier to remember the conclusion, summary, or interpretation of a work than the whole process of reading it. But if prosaics is right, then the process itself affects us at least as much, for good or ill. When Tolstoy wrote that the only way he could tell what Anna Karenina was about would be to rewrite it, he was, I think, stressing not the intricacy of his text as purely formal artifact, but rather the complexity of reading as a series of small decisions and moment-to-moment judgments. This process is not just indispensable to the point of the book, it is the point of the book. Like true life, art begins where the tiny bit begins. 

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Professor Morson's work ranges over a variety of areas: literary theory (especially narrative); the history of ideas, both Russian and European; a variety of literary genres (especially satire, utopia, and the novel); and his favorite writers—Chekhov, Gogol, and, above all, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. He is especially interested in the relation of literature to philosophy.

Professor Morson has won “best book of the year” awards from the American Comparative Literature Association and the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages; he is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; and he is the only Northwestern professor to have held simultaneously two endowed chairs, one for research and one for teaching.

[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)

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