



Prosaics and Other Provocations

Empathy, Open Time, And The Novel

GARY SAUL MORSON

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press@academicstudiespress.com

www.academicstudiespress.com



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press@academicstudiespress.com
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Series Editor: DAVID BETHEA

(University of Wisconsin — Madison)



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For Jonathan and Fran

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When Academic Studies Press asked me to put together a collection of my theoretical essays, I thought the task would be easy: just pick out the ones that have (or in my view should have) attracted the most interest. But when I sat down to do so, I found that my method of thinking through a problem—keep approaching it from different angles and see what ideas emerge—created a lot of overlap from essay to essay. I eventually decided to combine different essays into a single coherent statement, drawing on already published ideas while making connections between them and tracing new implications.

And so the only essay that can be arguably called a reprint of one that appeared earlier is “Contingency, Games, and Wit,” which originally appeared in *New Literary History*’s special issue on play, vol. 40, no. 1 (Winter 2009). Alicia Chudo published a version of “An *Onegin* of Our Times” in *Formations* vol. 6, no. 1 (Spring 1991).

* * *

Developing ideas that have been with me since the early 1980s, this book reflects debts of many kinds to several people. It owes most to my wife Katharine Porter, who read every line and was there for me every moment. Emily Morson and Alexander Morson were always in my thoughts. Jane Morson helped me develop many primitive insights.

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Over the past three years I have had the singularly illuminating experience of co-teaching an interdisciplinary course with Morton Schapiro. His relentless sharpness and unfailing broadmindedness made learning about economics, education, and many other topics an adventure.

The late Michael André Bernstein not only inspired me with his amazing erudition and intellect but was also an incomparable friend since we met as students at Oxford in 1969. Not a day goes by when I do not miss him.

I dedicate this book to Frances Padorr Brent and Jonathan Brent, not only for their guidance, editorship, and wise readings, but also for a deep personal understanding that has made all the difference.

PREFACE

David M. Bethea

In her inspiring TED Talk (http://blog.ted.com/2008/03/12/jill_bolte_tayl/), Harvard neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor reprises how it feels to experience a stroke “from the inside out.” As someone who had deep personal reasons for dedicating her life to brain science—her brother had suffered from schizophrenia and had not been able, in her words, “to attach his dreams to a common, shared reality”—Taylor knew exactly what was happening when she awoke on the morning of December 10, 1996, with the symptoms of a serious stroke. She had a blinding pain above her left eye and her body was having difficulty obeying simple commands. The right and left hemispheres of her brain, which normally communicate with each other through the 300 million axonal fibers of the corpus collosum, were experiencing a kind of power outage in their back-and-forth circuitry. “Reality” was entering Taylor’s consciousness more and more through her right hemisphere, which can be likened to a “parallel processor” that operates exclusively in the present moment. Her body belonged, suddenly and weirdly, yet pleasantly, kinesthetically, to the energy flow of the universe; she sensed that her extremities were permeable edges where her molecules were intermingling with the molecules of the larger world in a massive oneness, and the pictures, the sounds and smells, that attended on this euphoric merging were beautiful.

At the same time, the left hemisphere, the “serial processor” that provides the sense of “I am” and that “thinks in language,” was in deep trouble. Without this left-hemisphere serial functioning Taylor literally could not picture herself as a discrete body in time and space, as a separate mind that could cast back into the past and project into the future. The left hemisphere’s “chatter,” which is to say its mode

of linking the individual to the external world (our proverbial “to-do” lists), was falling silent, surfacing only rarely and spasmodically amid the otherwise overflowing feeling of “Nirvana.” Fortunately, Taylor was ultimately able to dial the phone and communicate to a colleague her distress, after which she was rushed to Mass General and stabilized. Two and a half weeks later the surgeons removed a golf-ball size blood clot that was pressing on her language centers; it then took her eight years and Himalayas of pain and patience to be restored to her pre-hemorrhage state, although truth to tell, with her story, the state to which she was ultimately returned was in many ways a new world. As she says in her talk,

So who are we? We are the life force power of the universe, with manual dexterity and two cognitive minds. And we have the power to choose, moment by moment, who and how we want to be in the world. Right here right now, I can step into the consciousness of my right hemisphere where we are—I am—the life force power of the universe, and the life force power of the 50 trillion beautiful molecular geniuses that make up my form. At one with all that is. Or I can choose to step into the consciousness of my left hemisphere, where I become a single individual, a solid, separate from the flow, separate from you. I am Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, intellectual, neuroanatomist. These are the “we” inside of me.

I begin my comments here with Jill Bolte Taylor’s story because it seems to me that to read this splendid collection of essays by Gary Saul Morson is to experience in a particularly vivid verbal form the two-cognitive-mind dialogue that lies at the center of Taylor’s amazing “aha” moment. Also, because Taylor’s story is actually many stories in one, and because it is all about narrating one’s position in time and space at a given moment, it is Saul Morson’s special province and intellectual homeland. The only individual in our rather small and often insular Slavic/Russian studies discipline who is a true public intellectual, and someone whose very substantial body of written work and pedagogical performance speaks uniquely to the larger world of ideas and contemporary culture, Morson is one of the most advanced “serial processors” of ideas of our generation. His passion is to place ideas in a series, but that series is not closed, and it merges palpably with the external world and a future that contains multiple options. “Contingency” is his best ideational friend. Fierce in his own

reading of things and ever eager to go against the grain of received thought, Morson also celebrates *what works*, so to speak, which is a most refreshing turn in today's academic landscape. He is willing to stand on the shoulders of giants, but he insists that they *be* giants. Thus, he is willing to celebrate when the occasion demands; however, that celebration will normally be expressed in a rather unorthodox, "misanthropological" (as he would put it) way.

In my remarks to follow I highlight ideas that are central to Saul Morson's approach to the study of literature, culture, and, more pointedly, the seam separating the social sciences and the humanities. These ideas, I would like to suggest, are not just compelling in their own right, which they are, they are also heuristic "therapies" for dealing with the discursive "stroke" that, à la the story underlying Taylor's TED Talk, has virtually paralyzed discussion (as in productive dialogue) in our time between the worlds of "scientific thinking" and—for lack of a better word—"spirituality." Whether what happened to Taylor on that December day in 1996 took place inside her head or outside of it makes no difference to Morsonian thinking. The human brain contains something like 100 billion neurons, of a thousand varieties or more, and those nerve cells are capable of making at least 100 trillion connections. In the modern world we have established that neurons fire and are connected, but how exactly they act in concert to govern behavior remains a mystery. Reading Morson and following him through the epistemological thickets of contemporary thought is, while perhaps not the same as reading neuroscience, a very good place to go to frame correctly the mystery of consciousness as it happens. Few thinkers are better at addressing the "'we' inside of 'me'."

Prosaics, Bakhtin, Misanthopology

More a philosopher than a literary critic/scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin made a career out of developing terminology that took on a life of its own and spoke with particular authority to the modern condition. Heteroglossia, chronotope, dialogism, polyphony, carnival, "outsideness," "unfinalizability," "word with a loophole"—these terms inevitably opened speech acts that had seemed closed, made fluid narrative hierarchies that had seemed fixed. Morson has not only analyzed Bakhtinian thought, often and to great effect, he has also built on the master's terminology, and in the process coined a powerful vocabulary of his own. Prosaics is, broadly speaking, the

methodology Morson has developed over the years as an antidote to “poetics” and “structuralism,” which latter tend to look at a literary artifact as constructed “from the end” in such a manner that every part fits tidily into the whole and that when the work is completed, it seems to be held in mind almost spatially (the late Joseph Frank’s term), all at once, beginning to end. It is in this sense that he means “structure is the literary counterpart of providence” and “in God’s world and the literary masterpiece, optimality—the best state of affairs or the best structure—reconciles free will and providence.” From the structuralist perspective, all detours along the way to the final product, all rough drafts and resets, serve as a kind of hologram that the creative brain holds in limbo until the finished product presents itself. The reader who applies this approach casts himself or herself in the role of the author’s implied psyche, foregrounding details and selecting out thematic and semantic parallels of which the originating creating mind may not be aware. In other words, in Morson’s version of a careful structuralist reading of a poem or a play or a novel (it is clear he prefers novels, following Bakhtin, as the form most accommodating to process) there is an engulfing intentionality that is always present, even subconsciously, as the writer composes his work. No afterthoughts, only forethoughts.

The problem with this view is that it doesn’t accurately reflect how the mind operates as it interacts with recalcitrant reality. Reality throws curve balls. For Morson, whether we are looking at the reality of a verbal artifact or the reality of the three-dimensional world, the puzzle is not Leibnizian (the contingent is possible, but only if it implies no logical contradiction), but Tolstoyan (the contingent is so unexpected and so inherently contradictory that to claim God can “foresee” it is to attenuate the divine mind out of existence, which may be the point to some believers). What is needed to understand Tolstoyan reality is “not a poetics of structure but a prosaics of process.” Here I would only say, not necessarily disputing Morson’s underlying thesis but engaging it along a slightly broader spectrum, that a very tightly constructed lyric poem, say Pushkin’s “I recall a wondrous moment” (*Ia pomniu chudnoe mgnovenie*), does *tend more* to a spatial arraignment of part to whole, where the interplay between and among sound, grammar, meter, rhyme scheme, stanzaic form, subtextual allusion, and so on strongly suggest, if not a completely closed, then a “closing” structure.

If we take prosaics and translate it into the moral realm we get “misanthropology,” Morson’s witty term for the study of the “cussedness of human nature.” It is clearly, as the name implies,

a turning on its head of anthropology and the cultural relativism that often attends on that discipline. Here Morson examines the, in this case, social scientist's tendency to present the other that is distant in time or place with a phony neutrality, as in Margaret Mead's famous study of Samoans who in their sexual mores seem to have found a way out of western bourgeois repression. "Misanthropology," writes Morson, "focuses on human evil, and so by its very nature rejects relativism." Evil is fundamental to our nature, as is good. We develop as social animals, our identities being formed through speech with others that is internalized into thought (Vygotsky) or composed of innerly persuasive voices that become "accented" into personhood (Bakhtin). There is no state of human cognition or consciousness that is not already social. The difference between the misanthrope and the misanthropologist is that the former, say Jonathan Swift, is a "reverse sentimentalist" and a frustrated utopian—believing that humanity is simply perverse, like the Yahoos—while the latter, say Dostoevsky, sees "both the evil and good in human nature as 1) irreducible to each other, 2) ineradicable, and 3) fundamentally social." The process that brings one to view humankind misanthropologically is in effect the same process that brings one to read a novel dialogically, as a series of events involving human beings who can, in their present, evolve in different directions depending on the specific context and the choices that are made.

Aristotle, Part to Whole

One of the reasons prosaics is a potentially productive approach to a variety of topics from the humanities to the social sciences is that it looks at culture as an evolutionary process with "intelligent feedback loops." Of course, the "misanthropological" optic means that the feedback does not always happen and is not always intelligent.

As with all genuinely original thinkers, the originality of prosaic thinker is itself firmly contextualized, growing out of something and toward something else. What is fresh about such thinking is not that it takes place in a vacuum, but that it uses what has come before in ways commensurate with, and sometimes exceeding, the power of the precursor. One senses this especially keenly in Morson's case, with his comments about Aristotle, which eventually lead to analogous comments about Darwin, which are then themselves leveraged into forays into the social and psychological. Microeconomic theories about how an individual's choices in the marketplace are part of larger

patterns of consistency, or Freud's argument that the mind doesn't simply make mistakes but creates "slips" that are still meaningful, are precisely what is wrong, in Morson's opinion, with a modern scientific episteme that claims to follow Darwinian logic but in fact does not.

First, Morson's summation of Aristotelian versus Platonic thinking:

For Aristotle, form is inseparable from matter, because it inheres in matter and gives it shape. Form does not exist on its own, any more than there can be color or shape without a thing that is colored or shaped. Believing in the independence of forms, as Plato did, is like supposing that because we can mentally abstract the properties of color, somewhere, in absolute purity, color must exist by itself.

For Aristotle, soul shapes the matter of living things. Psyche is Aristotle's term for the form of the living object, and psychology is the study of the formal factor that makes a living object what it is. Psyche is therefore not separable from body. More accurately, form (or soul) is a shaping power, an *entelechy*, that is in the process of shaping matter. Thus, in nutrition (performed by the "digestive" soul), food becomes assimilated into flesh. Living involves not just form but forming.

This is an elegant encapsulation of the ancient philosopher's understanding of the origins of intelligent life: Aristotle's psyche is the feedback loop that joins form to function, organ system to consciousness (voluntary/involuntary response), without separating them from each other, since to do so is to end life. Disgust, on the other hand, as Morson argues elsewhere, is that moment when we see this living ensemble compromised: the guillotined head that blinks and stares, the compound fracture where the bone pierces the tissue.

Darwin, Solov'ev, William James

Darwin enters the picture by placing Aristotle's form/function correlation into at least two important nineteenth-century intellectual frames of reference: Thomas Malthus's views of the dangers of population growth (hence the "survival of the fittest" terminology) and Charles Lyell's discoveries about geological formations (including fossils) and their relations to continuous change over time (uniformitarianism vs. catastrophism), from which Darwin would extrapolate his ideas about species formation and natural selection. The distance from Aristotle to

Darwin is that between a “soul” which “shapes the matter of living things” and a panda’s thumb (made famous by Stephen Jay Gould), which is not really a thumb at all but an extension of the radial sesamoid that is *good enough* to function as an opposable digit and help the panda eat its bamboo. It is the logic of this “good enough” that is everything. It is also this same logic to which Morson keeps returning in his essays. Prosaics are, one might say, Morson’s “panda’s thumb.”

Two other thinkers with whom Morson is in constant, though largely implicit, dialogue are the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev and the American philosopher-psychologist-humanist William James. Once again I suspect the touchstones are Aristotle and Darwin, with Bakhtin’s leitmotifs of structure as open-ended (i.e. *evolving*) and consciousness as dialogic (i.e. always already *socially situated*) added in. In his amazing 1889 study of Darwin (“Beauty in Nature”), Solov’ev fully endorses the great naturalist’s argument that species adapt and change through time and therefore are not created once and forever by an omniscient deity. The aesthetic, which is also one of Morson’s favorite topics, arises in nature when matter is “enlightened” by spirit into something potentially new and beautiful. A lump of carbon is pure matter and light by itself is pure air, but rearrange the carbon molecules through intense heat and shine light on the result and you get a diamond. In the animal world we hear the aroused tomcat caterwauling on the rooftop and the nightingale singing its song. For Solov’ev, these are not the same thing. The sex drive, the explanation from origins, is insufficient to capture the full charm of the notes produced by the nightingale. There is something extra there, something more than a mating call.

On the other hand, a worm (say, an acanthocephalan) appears “ugly” (*bezobraznyi*, “lacking form”) because it is all feeding (endosmosis, *vsasyvanie*: i.e. it sucks nutrients along its entire surface into the hollow cavity inside) and reproducing (the “complex structure” of what Claus terms its “mighty genitalia”). The other parts of an organ system that might constitute a complex configuration of form and function are not found here, and thus the aesthetic as a potentially transfiguring element has not yet done its work. (To be fair to Solov’ev, messiness does happen and all is a work in progress.) Indeed, the aesthetic for Solov’ev is most present, most seen and felt, when the sex and feeding drives are not, when the latter have moved into the background and appear veiled: e.g., the elaborate design on a tortoise’s shell that hides and protects the unprepossessing and vulnerable creature underneath.

These ideas in turn find stimulating parallels in Morson's statements about disgust and voyeurism.

One also imagines inviting William James to this symposium-like roundtable led by Morson and joined in by Aristotle, Darwin, and Solov'ev. "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots," writes James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). With the first part of this sentence James quotes Matthew 7:20, while with the second part he makes the case for a spirituality worthy of the name and endorsed by the exacting standards of American pragmatism. "The roots [James's emphasis] of a man's virtue are inaccessible to us," and so why try to define that virtue by those roots? Curiously (is this the intellectual world absorbing Darwin deeper and deeper into its consciousness?), Solov'ev had argued exactly the same thing a decade earlier: "The question 'What is a known object?' never corresponds to the question 'From what or whence came this object?'" James, however, trained in medicine at Harvard and fascinated with the discipline of psychophysiology, moves discussion into the area of personal spirituality. As opposed to a Richard Dawkins, he does not want to deny from the outside the validity of an individual's experience of the divine, but he also wants to argue that that experience does exist in time, regardless of the protestations of the prophet or the saint. There is a "before" and "after," the serial processing of which Morson often reminds his reader. James tells us matter-of-factly how notions of the "deity" have been historicized, and his tone, almost magically, manages to be both urbane and compassionate:

In any case, they [i.e. the founders of different religions—DB] chose him [the deity] for the value of the fruits he seemed to yield. So soon as the fruits began to seem quite worthless; so soon as they conflicted with indispensable human ideals, or thwarted too extensively other values; so soon as they appeared childish, contemptible, or immoral when reflected on, the deity grew discredited; and was ere long neglected and forgotten.

Is this not Darwinian logic, the "good enough" of the panda's thumb, as applied to religious experience? Is this also not what Morson brings to the contemporary discussion of how the God of the Old and New Testaments (i.e. His scribal traces) *changed over time* and was therefore *not outside it*. Thus, concludes James, "it is the voice of human experience within us, judging and condemning all gods that stand athwart the pathway along which it feels itself to be advancing."

Once more it is what works in the here and now and what makes sense for our existential choices that is James's quarry, but also Morson's. Culture, including the spiritual side of human nature, moves forward the same way that Lyell's work moved forward and Darwin's work moved forward. We need to be cautious about those James called the "medical materialists," who today would be in the camp of Dawkins and the hard science atheists. If Saint Teresa's experience of revelation is too vague, too ecstatic to be taken seriously nowadays, then we should look more carefully at Tolstoy's conversion experience, which James certainly does and which Morson, one of our most eloquent students of the Russian author, might see as a process, an unfolding story, rather than a one-off turning point. In a word, our understanding of spirituality needs to be more intelligent.

Teaching

It is probably no exaggeration to say that Saul Morson is one of the great teachers in the history of Northwestern University. He has won awards for his brilliant presence at the podium, his classes routinely attract some of the highest humanities enrollments in the country, and he has been known to team-teach a course with the university president himself. This is all doubtless laudable, but is not really the point. It (the teaching "aura") is not a cause of anything, except perhaps local accolades; instead it is the byproduct of other choices, of "walking the walk" and living Prosaics in one's professional life with students. To fully absorb the lessons of Mikhail Bakhtin is to become at some basic level the intelligent anti-theorist. College students are not trained in theory and will in all likelihood never "apply theory" in their future lives. Reaching them and turning them on is, or should be, the goal of our pedagogical travails.

In his spirited chapter entitled "What is a Literary Education?" Morson explains why great literature, especially great novels, are needed on our campuses (and in our society for that matter), and why that literature is not being done any favors by the widely held practices of today's academy. It is not for the professor to "tell" Shakespeare what he "meant" to say with the help of Freud. Better to turn the tables and imagine how the creative genius Shakespeare might read the overreaching Freud. Going line by line through George Eliot or Tolstoy creates, as it were, organs of empathy in the individual who "lives into" each character's story. Morson encourages his charges to view unfolding

events as containing various possible futures. Novelistic characters are neither literary constructs (the formalist view) nor real persons (the so-called pathetic fallacy); they are rather “possible people.” Thus, Mary Garth of *Middlemarch* may share personal qualities with Mary Anne Evans, which is interesting and relevant in and of itself, but the more important exercise is “practicing empathy” by living with Mary as she experiences the ups and downs of her relationship with Fred Vincy. Each event in their lives presents a series of choices. How does Mary remain Mary while making those choices? How does Fred improve on Fred by coming under Mary’s influence? Here we see a glimpse of Tolstoy’s famous idea that great literature “infects.” Morson wants his students to “feel ideas” and to enjoy fully the process of “first-time reading” (not the “re-reading” of the literary critics). He encourages them to make use of the right hemisphere (*Anna Karenina*’s Levin mowing with the peasants) and the left hemisphere (that same Levin undergoing confession prior to marriage) and the chatter between them that tries to make meaning in our time.

Quotations

Last but not least, Saul Morson is a student of quotations and sayings as well as a uniquely talented producer of them. There is a distinct pleasure in reading Morson, not only because his thoughts are inherently stimulating, but also because they turn out to be eminently quotable. I close with some of my own favorite quotes from these essays, as, saying more with less, they capture the texture of his thinking better than a long-drawn-out argument.

- “Men’s work becomes meaningful when it partakes of the spirit of women’s work.”

- “Sinners love fatalism.”

- “Prosaics assumes that the natural state of the world—at least, the human world—is mess, and that it is order, not disorder, that requires an explanation.”

- “History is not a riddle with a hidden solution.”

- “True holiness, which never fits a pattern, grows out of the particular situations of daily life.”

- “One has a science when one no longer needs a story.”

- “Darwin offers us an example of non-Newtonian science, one that requires narrative.”

- “Social scientists practice Leibnizism without God.”

- “Re-reading almost inevitably diminishes suspense. . . . Literary critics are by necessity re-readers.”
- “Modern atheists are haunted by a theology they do not recognize as such.”
- “Superstition is the social science of others.”
- “By process I mean not just a sequence of events extending over time but a sequence in which multiple paths are open at multiple moments.”
- “One becomes a genuine ‘personality,’ rather than a thing, when one is not just the sum of one’s experiences and qualities. A personality retains the capacity to surprise.”

Now, find your own favorites and enjoy!

ABBREVIATIONS

Where no source of a biblical quotation is given, it is drawn from the King James version.

- 1984 George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1961).
- AA M. M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).
- APAristotle, "Poetics" in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 47-75.
- AWD1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, volume 1, 1873-1876, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993).
- BKFyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Random House, 1950).
- BoG Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's "Diary of a Writer" and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- BWA *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).
- C&G John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).
- C&P Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York: Random House, 1950).
- CAID Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).
- CWA2 *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

- DL Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- DD Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, n.d.).
- DJ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).
- EAHB Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- FTOS Alexander Herzen, "From the Other Shore" and "The Russian People and Socialism," trans. Moura Budberg and Richard Wollheim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- GDR Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *The Game Design Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- GPR Elie Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, trans. Mary Morris (Boston: Beacon, 1955).
- GT *The Portable Swift*, ed. Carl Van Doren (New York: Viking, 1963), 489.
- HC *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
- HIPV Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace"* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).
- HIQ M. J. Cohen and John Major, *History in Quotations* (London: Cassell, 2000).
- HoD Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The House of the Dead*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1959).
- I Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1962).
- L&S Gary Saul Morson, *The Long and Short of It: From Aphorism to Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
- LaR *The Maxims of La Rochefoucauld*, trans. Louis Kronenberger (New York: Random House, 1959).
- M George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Modern Library, 1984).
- MB:CP Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- MDQ *The Macmillan Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. John Dainith et al. (Edison, New Jersey: Chartwell, 2000).
- N&F Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
- NFP Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

- NFU Fyodor Dostoevsky, *“Notes from Underground” and “The Grand Inquisitor,”* the Garnett translation revised by Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: Dutton, 1960).
- ODQ *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, sixth edition, ed. Elizabeth Knowles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- OoS Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: A Facsimile of the First Edition* (Cambridge, MA, 1964).
- QOK *The Quatrains of Omar Khayyam: Three Translations of the Rubaiyat*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald, Justin McCarthy, and Richard Le Gallienne (California: Bardic Press, 2005).
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- PDP Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
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- PL *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).
- PSS L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [Complete Works], 90 vols., ed. V. G. Chertkov et al. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1929-1958).
- R&E Leo Tolstoy, *Recollections and Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1937; reprinted 1961).
- RtR Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- SEM Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972).
- SMW Gary Saul Morson, *“Anna Karenina” in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
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- VH Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
- W&P Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: Signet, 1968).
- WoO *The Words of Others; From Quotations to Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
- YBQ *The Yale Book of Quotations*, ed. Fred Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

INTRODUCTION

Looking back over decades, one can hardly avoid the fallacious impression that one was already there at the beginning. Retrospectively, it seems as if I tacitly knew all I ever would know even if it took me a lifetime to write it down. All those thrilling moments of creativity were so many illusions. At best, they were mere discoveries. Numerous critics have written biographies of authors from this standpoint, and when one becomes a critic of oneself, it is hard not to adopt the same narrative approach.

If so, how smart I was when young! On the other hand, how pointless the years have been!

I think the view of life as mere unfolding is mistaken. After the fact, a pattern appears, and so we think it is the only pattern that could have appeared. But if another pattern had emerged, we would have deemed it inevitable as well. You only see the road you took. Irrevocability is easily mistaken for inevitability.

The winner of a lottery feels chosen by fate, but, if someone else had won, he too would have felt chosen. The only thing really fated is that someone is bound to misconstrue his good fortune as fated.

The idea that outcomes are not inevitable even if they seem so has constituted one of my favorite themes. Time is open, the present moment makes a difference, and whatever does happen, something else could have. The dominant tradition of Western theology held that God foreknew all, and from the seventeenth century on, science has been mistakenly seen as proving determinism. Iron-clad laws of nature have played the role of a God substitute. We are still held captive by a vision at odds with our own experience. But other theologies and other views of the world are possible. Science, properly understood, does not dictate to the world what it *must* be like.

I believe deeply that at any given moment, more than one subsequent moment is possible. We live in a field of possibilities. It is not true that given all the facts about any moment, one could in principle predict every future moment and retrodict every past moment, as Leibniz, Spinoza, Laplace, and Einstein all believed. I think of myself as developing the ideas of the opposite tradition of thought, which holds that there are more possibilities than actualities. This counter-tradition includes thinkers as diverse as Aristotle and Tolstoy, who believed in genuine contingency, and Dostoevsky, who believed in human freedom. It is implicit in the temporality of the realist novel as a literary genre.

The greatest novelists, and especially Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, posed what the Russians called the “accursed questions” (*proklyatye voprosy*): are we responsible for what we do or is it all determined for us? Are our choices real or do they only seem so? Does the objective view of the world include everything, or is it essentially incomplete? Does it in fact omit what is most valuable to us, our direct sense of a subjective self? Is our selfhood given to us by outside forces, or do we in part make it ourselves? Do we change in unpredictable ways or merely reveal already given qualities?

The tradition of posing such questions in novels, drama, and poetry characterizes Russian literature. It is reflected as well in Russian literary criticism, which has tended to raise philosophical problems by analyzing fiction. Russian philosophy often takes the form of commentaries on the great writers, Russian and foreign. To Westerners, Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World* best exemplify this peculiar tradition.

Like many earlier Russian critics, Bakhtin located the value of literature in its contributions to psychology, philosophy, and, especially, ethics. But he saw ethical and philosophical implications in the very shapes of works. Each kind of plot, for instance, represented a model for how events happen. With such analyses, he reconceptualized formalism as ultimately a matter not of form but of “ideology” (complexes of ideas).

Thus Bakhtin approached genres as palpable philosophies. In his view, each genre constituted a “form-shaping ideology,” a view of the world seeking expression through appropriate forms. The way novels represent heroes and heroines, their exploration of the way society and individual psychology interact, and their inclusion of immense everyday detail, project a specific sense of people in the world. They

embodied a philosophy that Bakhtin found immensely appealing. So do I.

* * *

If Tolstoy is considered the supreme example of realism, then the realist novel suggests that the most important events in life are not the grand, dramatic, and striking ones. They are, instead, the prosaic, undramatic, and ordinary ones we often do not so much as notice. Those events include the “tiny alterations” of consciousness, the infinitesimally small and vanishingly brief mental gestures making us who we are. Taken together, they make life what it is. By bringing such events to our attention, novels can change our view of our world and our selves.

I coined the term *prosaics* to express two related ideas. First, as the word itself suggests, it indicates that what matters most—in history and individual lives, in ethics and aesthetics—are the details. As Tolstoy’s greatest reader, Ludwig Wittgenstein, explained: “The aspects of things that are most important to us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one’s eyes). . . . And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful” (PI, 50e).

These details resist reduction to some overarching law. We would be mistaken to imagine that behind their inexhaustible variety lie some simple formulas, like Newton’s laws of motion. The world, especially the social and psychological world, exhibits infinite and irreducible complexity. Instead of trying to explain away that complexity by ascribing everything to some social scientific principles, as thinkers as diverse as Bentham, Marx, Freud, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, the rational choice theorists, and countless others have tried to do, we would do better to follow Wittgenstein’s repeated admonition: *Don’t think, but look!* Or rather (and this what Wittgenstein meant), appreciate the complexity of things before imagining they can be made simple.

The form of thought that best represents the prosaic view of life is the realist novel, and so the second meaning of “prosaics” is an approach to literature that, unlike “poetics,” focuses on prose generally and the realist novel in particular. As the term “poetics” implies, literary theory has seen prose as some sort of fallen poetry, literary only insofar as it can do what poetry does. That is why the word poetry often functions as a synonym for literature (not just verse) and why prose often means the opposite, whatever is unliterary. So we are told that poetry

draws attention to the means of expression, but “prose” is indifferent to them. The phrase “prose literature” then seems paradoxical or oxymoronic.

If one approaches novels in terms defined by poetics, one will seek out metaphors, symbols, and other poetic devices, and thereby miss the distinctive features that make novels what they are. One needs instead to approach them, and everything else in culture one would like to understand, in their own terms.

* * *

I begin this book with an essay on prosaics, which can serve as a kind of overture to everything that follows. The four other chapters of this volume develop “prosaics” in different ways. In each case, some new concern approaches this concept from a new direction and so, I hope, results in something valuable.

The second chapter concerns open time. It develops a “prosaics of process.”

I spent the academic year 1996-97 as a token humanist at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in order to develop ideas from my then-recently published book *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (Yale University Press, 1994). It was a year that had immense influence on my thinking. Hard-core Rational Choice theory dominated discussion. The methodology of economics, in its mathematicized form and most far-reaching ambitions, held sway.

Economics was conceived not as a subject matter but as an approach to human behavior that just happened to have been developed by economists but is universally applicable. Thus, as Nobel prize-winning economist Gary Becker has famously argued, “the economic approach does not draw conceptual distinctions between major and minor decisions, such as those involving life and death in contrast to the choice of a brand of coffee; or between decisions said to involve strong emotions and those with little emotional involvement, such as choosing a mate or the number of children in contrast to buying paint; or between decisions by persons with different incomes, education, or family backgrounds.”¹

In one conversation, a social scientist offered an argument I shall never forget. No real science, he explained, requires narrative.

¹ EAHB, 8-9.

To the extent that one can account for phenomena by laws, one does not have to tell stories. Given Newton's laws of motion, there is no need to narrate the course of the planets. One can just derive their position at any chosen moment. When social science advances a bit more, with economics as its model, it too will dispense with narrative. Everything will be mathematicized. The only use for stories will be pedagogical, that is, as illustrative. But they will be superfluous for explanatory purposes.

It immediately struck me that if the world is *not* reducible to Newtonian formulae, then narrative *would* play an essential role. If open time exists, then predictability would be impossible and one would have to tell a story explaining how one outcome rather than another came about. The world would be characterized by *narrativeness*, that is, the indispensability of narrative for understanding. The first essay of chapter two, "Narrativeness," explicates this term.

The second essay of chapter two develops the concept of open time. The essay's first part, "The Vision of Poetics and Product," explicates closed time. When time is understood as closed, the world resembles a well-made literary work, a finished product described by poetics from Aristotle to the present. Such works create a sense of inevitability. Everything has to be just as it is: nothing in it is just there, and a sufficient reason accounts for each detail. Everything plays its part in a total structure. That is why, as we read a literary work, we can guess at its ending by imagining what an effective structure would require.

The essay's second part, "The Counter-Tradition: Presentness and Process," then explicates the alternative vision of a world in open time. In various forms, this vision has appeared in fields as diverse as biology, architecture, city planning, linguistics, and theology. Sometimes the traditional view of closed time is likely to prove more fruitful, as it did with Galileo, but at other times, the counter-traditional view fits the topic better, as it did for Darwin. I offer some rules of thumb for recognizing which situation is which. My overall point is that there is indeed a choice to be made. One cannot just presume the traditional view of closed time as if it were the only possible one.

If poetics and the works to which it best applies implicitly endorse closed time, are there literary masterpieces that poetics does not fit, works that exemplify open time? If so, how shall we describe their design?

In fact, there are many such works—including Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Byron's *Don Juan*,

Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Montaigne's *Essays*, and, if approached in the right spirit, the Hebrew Bible. To be understood, they demand not a poetics of product but a prosaics of process. The third part of this essay outlines such a processual prosaics.

* * *

My dear friend and pseudonym, Alicia Chudo, wrote the three essays constituting this volume's third chapter. Alicia is perhaps best known for her book *And Quiet Flows the Vodka, or When Pushkin Comes to Shove: The Curmudgeon's Guide to Russian Literature and Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), which succeeded in offending lovers of the Russian soul everywhere. People have often asked why I used a pseudonym for these works. The answer is, I found it helpful to think through a certain vision of the world in a forum in which I did not have to ask whether I believed all its implications. So I imagined a curmudgeonly personality whose view of human nature is decidedly bleak, and who invented a discipline she calls *misanthropology*, the study of the "cussedness of human nature."

Given such a view of humanity, Alicia despises all utopian visions. The worst suffering, she intones, has been caused by those who would abolish it forever. She prefers the great tradition of satire, from Swift and Pope to Voltaire and Gogol. Her favorite book of Freud's is *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Frequently quoting La Rochefoucauld, she sees history as Gibbon did. In her view, decline and fall is almost always far more likely than progress. She reminds us that there are no gains without losses, and that to soothe ourselves we usually underestimate the losses, especially if we would have to take responsibility for them. Original Sin, she remarks, is the one theological doctrine that has been empirically confirmed.

Noting that nineteenth-century thinkers typically envisaged the twentieth century as a time of great strides in human happiness, she points out that only Dostoevsky saw that it would witness the creation of totalitarianism and be the bloodiest century in human history. It gave birth to Auschwitz, the Final Solution, the Rwandan genocide, the Soviet Gulag, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the Khmer Rouge. If these events do not disprove an optimistic view of human nature, she asks, what would? Is it possible after these recent events to believe that History has an inevitable trajectory upward? And to believe that if only some set of reforms were adopted, we could rest easy?