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Theory of Prosaics in Literature and History:
Leo Tolstoy and Lion Feuchtwanger

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THEORY OF PROSAICS IN LITERATURE AND HISTORY: LEO TOLSTOY AND LION FEUCHTWANGER

No historian would claim that his works are finer art than the works of an artist. But does the artist recreate the historical epoch better than the objective historian? This is a rather controversial question, which I attempt to answer by exploring the theory of prosaics as presented in the historical novels of Leo Tolstoy and Lion Feuchtwanger. I do not deny the utility of methodological and critical source studies undertaken by historians, but I tend to believe that a historical novel created by prosaic thinkers is suited better to portray history.

In this paper, I intend to explore the *theory of prosaics*, which offers a quite different approach to life and historical events in particular. This theory was introduced by the American scholar Gary Saul Morson. Morson coined the term *prosaics* in order to describe a concept that permeates the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian literary critic and philosopher. The most important concepts developed by Bakhtin are *prosaics* (Morson's and Emerson's term), unfinalizability, and dialogue. Bakhtin created also various theories: a comprehensive theory of literature that privileges prose and the novel, theories of languages, and of literary genres. Bakhtin was first rediscovered in the Soviet Union and the West in the 1960s and 1970s. Morson's and Emerson's work on Bakhtin's philosophy definitely contributed to the understanding of this original thinker.

Morson applies Bakhtin's prosaics theory to Leo Tolstoy's historical novel *War and Peace*. The similarities of Tolstoy's views on life and history and the views of the German author Lion Feuchtwanger, who lived half a

century later, led me to apply the theory of prosaics to Feuchtwanger's historical novel *The Jewish War*.

According to Bakhtin prosaics encompasses two related, but distinct, concepts. First, as opposed to "poetics", prosaics designates a theory of literature that privileges prose in general and the novel in particular over the poetic genres. Prosaics in the second sense is far broader than theory of literature: it is a form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, the "prosaic" and objects all attempts to reduce life and history to a system (Morson, *Bakhtin*, p. 15).

While developing prosaics in the second sense, Bakhtin follows a number of other thinkers, both Russian and Western, the most significant of whom was probably Leo Tolstoy. For Tolstoy the everyday is a sphere of constant activity, the source of all social changes and individual creativity. I will focus on the theory of prosaics in the second sense, that being the importance of the everyday and the ordinary in shaping of history, that is the sum of lives of all people, lived at all times. It would be helpful to clarify the basic characteristics of prosaic thought and to specify the role that Tolstoy played in developing this philosophy.

Prosaic thinkers believe that real ethical decisions are made, and one's true life is lived, through everyday moments which we rarely if ever notice. In Tolstoy's understanding, "true life begins where the tiny bit begins - where what seem to us minute 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 (Morson, *Bakhtin*, p.24).

Anything that darkens our judgment at any moment is potentially very significant, even if the changes are only trifling. Tolstoy declares that to

assume that only crucial decisions, which appear to have far-reaching effects, are important is "like assuming that it may harm a watch to be struck against a stone, but that a little dirt introduced into it cannot be harmful" (Morson, *Bakhtin*, p. 23).

Since history is a summation of lives of nations and of humanity, one cannot truthfully portray it without analyzing the life and activity of all those taking part in an event. The complex personal lives lived by men consisting of "the individual experience, the specific relation of individuals to one another, the colours, smells, tastes, sounds, and movements, the jealousies, loves, hatreds, passions, the rare flashes of insight, the transforming moments, the ordinary day-to-day succession of private data" is for Tolstoy what is genuine and "real" in history and not the so-called socioeconomic and political realities which historians consider as primary (Berlin, *Hedgehog*, p. 20). Tolstoy realizes that the best way to capture the spirit of a particular historical epoch is to portray the complex personal lives of people.

In his description of historical events of 1805 to 1812 in *War and Peace* Tolstoy concentrates mainly not on the grand events and grand figures, but on ordinary, common prosaic events and people. Historians accused Tolstoy of anachronism, of misrepresenting events to suit his own purposes in contradiction to the evidence contained in memoirs from the period. (Morson, *View*, p. 122). Tolstoy justified his description of historical events with his philosophy of history, which is that of prosaic thinkers:

I know what "the characteristics of the period" are that people do not find in my novel - the horrors of serfdom, the immuring of wives, the flogging of grown-up sons, Saltykova, and so on; but I do not think that these characteristics of the period as they exist in our imagination are correct, and I did not wish to reproduce them. On studying letters, diaries, and traditions, I did not find the horrors of such savagery to a greater extent than I find them now, or at any other period. In those

days also people loved, envied, sought truth and virtue, and were carried away by passion; and there was the same complex mental and moral life among the upper classes, who were in some instances even more refined than now. If we have come to believe in the perversity and coarse violence of the period, that is only because the traditions, memoirs, stories, and novels that have been handed to us, record for the most part exceptional cases of violence and brutality. To suppose that the predominant characteristic of that period was turbulence is as unjust as it would be for a man seeing nothing but the tops of trees beyond a hill, to conclude that there was nothing to be found in that locality but trees" (Tolstoy, *Some Words about War and Peace* , p. 1366).

In Tolstoy's view, the ordinary events of everyday life are "hidden in plain view"; they are not transcribed and are therefore imperceptible to a later generation. Tolstoy believed that it is these prosaic events which truly define the period. Even in times of crises people tend to lead prosaic style of life. Morson calls this kind of life "a swarm life". It is the "swarm life" that really shapes history and through the years this is what has saved Russia (Morson, *View*, p. 126).

In a famous passage dealing with the state of Moscow in 1812 Tolstoy observes that, although one might think that Russians were absorbed entirely in acts of self-sacrifice and heroism, saving their country, it was not so. People were preoccupied by personal interests. The most useful to the country were those who went about their ordinary business without thinking about heroism or thinking that they were actors upon the well-lighted stage of history, and not those who tried to understand the general course of events and to participate in history. Tolstoy writes in *War and Peace* :

It is natural for us who were not living in those days to imagine that when half Russia had been conquered and the inhabitants were fleeing to distant provinces, and one levy after another was being raised for the defence of the fatherland, all Russians from the greatest to the least were solely engaged in sacrificing themselves, saving their fatherland, or weeping over its downfall. The tales and descriptions of

that time without exception speak only of the self-sacrifice, patriotic devotion, despair, grief, and the heroism of the Russians. But it was not really so. It appears so to us because we see only the general historic interest of that time and do not see all the personal human interests that people had. Yet in reality those personal interests of the moment so much transcend the general interests that they always prevent the public interest from being felt or even noticed. Most of the people at that time paid no attention to the general progress of events but were guided only by their private interests, and they were the very people whose activities at that period were most useful.

Those who tried to understand the general course of events and to take part in it by self-sacrifice and heroism were the most useless members of society, they saw everything upside down, and all they did for the common good turned out to be useless and foolish - like Pierre's and Mamonov's which looted Russian villages, and the lint the young ladies prepared and that never reached the wounded, and so on. Even those fond of intellectual talk and of expressing their feelings, who discussed Russia's position at the time involuntarily introduced into their conversation either a shade of pretence and falsehood or useless condemnation and anger directed against people accused of actions no one could possibly be guilty of. *In historic events the rule forbidding us to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is specially applicable. Only unconscious action bears fruit, and he who plays a part in an historic event never understands its significance. If he tries to realize it his efforts are fruitless.*

The more closely a man was engaged in the events then taking place in Russia the less did he realize their significance. In Petersburg and in the provinces at a distance from Moscow, ladies, and gentlemen in militia uniforms, wept for Russia and its ancient capital and talked of self-sacrifice and so on; but in the army which retired beyond Moscow there was little talk or thought of Moscow, and when they caught sight of its burned ruins no one swore to be avenged on the French, but they thought about their next pay, their next quarters, of Matreshka the vivandiere, and like matters (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p. 537, italics are mine).

In the essay "Some Words on *War and Peace*" Tolstoy argues that the divergence between his description of history and that given by historians stems from different methodological view-points that an artist and a historian occupy.

As an historian would be wrong if he tried to present an

historical person in his entirety, in all the complexity of his relations with all sides of life, so the artist would fail to perform his task were he to represent the person always in his historic significance. Kutuzov did not always hold a telescope, point at the enemy, and ride a white horse. Rostopchin was not always setting fire with the torch to the Voronovsky House ..., and the Empress Marya Fedorovna did not always stand in an ermine cloak leaning her hand on the code of laws, but that is how the popular imagination pictures them.

For an historian considering the achievement of a certain aim, there are heroes; for the artist treating of man's relation to all sides of life, there cannot and should not be heroes, but there should be men...

An historian is sometimes obliged, by bending the truth, to subordinate all the actions of an historical personage to the one idea he has ascribed to the person. The artist, on the contrary, finds the very singleness of that idea incompatible with his problem, and tries to understand and show not a certain actor but a man (Tolstoy, *The Author on the Novel*, pp. 1368-1369).

Since all historical events result from an infinite number of reasons, the only principle that might lead to a real understanding of history is the obviously impossible one of describing everybody and everything - "histories of all, absolutely all those taking part in an event" (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p. 1421). A historical novelist is well aware of the unavailability of all facts about a historical event. But as Tolstoy implies, an artist, by taking a middle ground between art and history and by describing complex relationships of participants of an event is more likely to give a more realistic account of history than a historian, who according to Tolstoy represents a historical personage only in his historic significance. The length of Tolstoy's historical novels, with so many details irrelevant to the overall plot, serves its purpose of attempting to describe everything that has to do with the event.

Tolstoy thought at first that history, the sum of the actual experience of actual men and women in their relation to one another and to physical environment, would give him answers to the ultimate problems tormenting him as a young man - about good and evil, the origin and purpose of the

universe and its inhabitants, the causes of all that happens, and the key to the mystery why what happened happened as it did and not otherwise. But being dissatisfied with the answers of historians he realized that "history will never reveal to us what connections there are, and at what times, between good and evil, religion and the civic virtues... What it will tell us (and that incorrectly) is where the Huns came from, when they lived, who laid the foundation of their power, etc..." (Berlin, *Hedgehog*, p. 13). Disappointed about history as a science, Tolstoy comes to the conclusion that a historical novel is a better reflection of reality and that it might also offer possible answers to the eternal philosophical questions. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy suggests quite a paradoxical solution to one of the main characters of the novel, Pierre Besuchov. After his liberation from the French captivity Pierre finds a solution to the philosophical problems disturbing him when he realizes they cannot have a philosophical solution. "The very question that had formally tormented him, the thing he had continually sought to find - the aim of life - no longer existed for him now... And this very absence of an aim gave him the complete, joyous sense of freedom..." (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p. 631). If there is a solution to the philosophical problem then it is not in the great and extraordinary, but in the unnoticed. "He (Pierre) felt like a man who after straining his eyes to see into the far distance finds what he sought at his very feet."

In everything near and comprehensible he had seen only what was limited, petty, commonplace, and senseless. He had equipped himself with a mental telescope and looked into remote space, where petty worldliness hiding itself in misty distance had seemed to him great and infinite merely because it was not clearly seen... Now, however, he had learned to see the great, eternal, and infinite in everything, and therefore - to see it and enjoy its contemplation - he naturally threw away the telescope through which he had till now gazed over men's heads, and gladly regarded the ever-changing, eternally great,

unfathomable, and infinite life around him (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p. 631).

Pierre escapes his skepticism when he comes to a renewed appreciation of the rich ordinariness of daily life. Ludwig Wittgenstein observed: "The solution to the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is this not the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have been unable to say what constituted that sense?)" (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 521).

The idea of prosaics was not for the first time formulated by Bakhtin. In his meditations on the everyday and the ordinary he was influenced by a number of Western thinkers, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gregory Bateson, and Fernand Braudel. The idea of the Fernand Braudel's *long duree* helps us to understand better Tolstoy's and Bakhtin's ideas on history. Like Bakhtin and Tolstoy, Braudel objects, first to the attempt to reduce history to a system: "So we can no longer believe in the explanation of history in terms of this or that dominant factor. There is no unilateral history. No one thing is dominant" (Braudel, "Situations", 10). He also insists that history is not a matter of crises or dramatic events, which are themselves the product of an indefinitely large number of daily actions, habits, and rhythms. "To the narrative historians, the life of men is dominated by dramatic accidents... And when they speak of "general history", what they are really thinking of is the intercrossing of such exceptional destinies". For Braudel, narrative history necessarily tends to the dramatic. It therefore usually overlooks those ordinary elements of life that do not change, or change only imperceptibly. When historians look at such social realities, they treat them as mere "backdrop" instead of studying them "in themselves and for themselves".

Because ordinary events may have no discernable effect for long stretches of time, they do not lend themselves to narrative description, and scholars must be prepared for "a history slower than the history of civilizations" (Braudel, *The Situation*, p. 12) - *the longue duree* .

Feuchtwanger's interest in history accompanied him throughout his life. In fact, he was not only a talented and successful novelist and playwright but also a professionally trained historiographer, having earned his Ph.D in history at the University of Munich in 1907. Feuchtwanger was enormously influenced by Tolstoy. I believe that he incorporates Tolstoy's prosaic style in his historical novels, specifically in the *Josephus* trilogy. This is because Feuchtwanger's depiction of history is based not on crucial moments in lives of his characters, but on their "daily actions, habits and rhythms". Following Tolstoy's principle Feuchtwanger attempts to portray the destiny of a particular historical figure, a Jewish priest Josephus Ben Matthias (who later assumes the Roman name of Flavius Josephus), in a particular historical situation, the first century cosmopolitan Roman world. By analyzing the events of Josephus' life and people around him, Feuchtwanger allows us to get an insight in the particular historical event - the Jewish War of 75 -79 A.D. and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

Feuchtwanger organizes his historical novels around seemingly unimportant events in lives of important people. He takes Josephus Ben Matthias` a real historical figure and surrounds him with real and as well as fictional characters which allows us to see and experience Josephus in everyday life. Thus in order to preserve life in all its innumerable, inexhaustible manifestations, Feuchtwanger bases his narrative on the most inconspicuous events of Josephus' life, and if necessary violates the historical truth for artistic purposes. He does so in order to convey what he believes is

the most important purpose of a historical novel, that being truth of life, and not just historical truth.

When faced with a choice between adhering to verifiable historical facts or deviating from them for artistic reasons, Feuchtwanger chooses the latter because he is primarily an artist at heart. Feuchtwanger justifies these necessary violations in the genre of historical novel by pointing in his essay *Notes on the Historical Novel* to some of the greatest literary figures:

Homer, the authors of the Bible and Shakespeare:

The imaginary Odysseus is more alive than any historical chieftain or sea captain of any actual Greek island... And of all the heroes of history who ever fought for liberty, there is none so alive as the completely imaginary Swiss, William Tell. A fine legend or historical novel is usually more credible, truer, more alive, and more vital than any clear, exact representation of historical facts (Faulhaber, p. 70).

In *The House of Desdemona*. Feuchtwanger writes that although the stories of Moses' receiving the Tables of the Law on the Mount Sinai, of Salome's, dancing before Herod, of William Tell's, shooting the apple from the head of his young son, or of Shakespears' Othello are not historically verifiable, the heroes are nonetheless artistically real.

Since Feuchtwanger believes that it is often true that legends and sagas contain more vitality and reality than exact historical facts, he felt impelled to modify a historical fact if he did not feel that it had enough artistic depth (Faulhaber, p. 69). He believes that his poetic license justifies this violation of historical truth. That is the reason why, in his novel *The Jewish War* Feuchtwanger invents such characters as the three members of the High Council, the actor Demetrius Libanus, Josephus's first wife Mara, the daughter of the artist Fabullus Dorion and many others who never existed in the first century Rome. Through Josephus' relationships with these figures,

Feuchtwanger reveals different aspects of Josephus' character - his thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Josephus, the young litterateur and statesman, 26 years of age, comes to Rome in order to set free the three members of the High Council, who had been unjustly sentenced to forced labour. Feuchtwanger invents these three figures just to show us one of the most characteristic features of Josephus, his "furious ambition". "Josephus saw in his mission a great and eagerly longed - for opportunity to distinguish himself" (Feuchtwanger, *The Jewish War*, p. 6). When Josephus visited three men in the prison his attitude to the mission changed instantly. "These three men were half-naked, their clothes hung upon them in tatters, their faces were leaden". They looked like "middle - sized skeletons". The sight of these miserable men moved Josephus profoundly, they "set him on fire; he was filled with a religious pity that was almost unendurable" ... " He compressed his lips, firmly resolved not to think of himself until he had delivered these three miserable men" (Feuchtwanger, *The Jewish War*, p.33). Here we see the proof for one of the prosaic ideas: true life is not lived where great external changes take place - it is lived through everyday moments which we rarely notice. Josephus was moved by the *truth of the moment*. This concept is very important for prosaics, because it demonstrates that Josephus' actions and the actions of any individual are often not caused by historical necessity but by ordinary and sometimes even trivial feelings. Josephus' determination to set free the three members of the High Council was motivated by human sympathy.

Another Feuchtwanger's method which enables him to make a historical figure alive and memorable is by ascribing to him/her some peculiar qualities he/she never possessed. For instance, Princess Berenice's graceful walk is a small detail invented by Feuchtwanger. This detail plays an

important role not only because it turns the head of Titus, who made a promise to this "passionate, sensitive, and precious dame" that he would save the Temple of Jerusalem, but also because it conveys in some way Feuchtwanger's deepest conviction - the perceived mystery, and spiritual superiority of the East. The Roman Emperor Vespasian, whom princess Berenice describes as "a sly, a crafty peasant, rude and gross", feels in the presence of Berenice the same slight embarrassment that he felt occasionally with Josephus (Feuchtwanger, *The Jewish War*, p. 243). Titus, his son, at first being deeply disappointed by the arrogant Princess, falls madly in love with her when he sees her ascending the stairs with her brother:

Titus mechanically stared after her. He had involved himself in a sham fierce debate on military technique with Captain Jachim. Suddenly he broke off in the middle of a sentence, his restless inquisitive eyes became vigilant, and he stared intently at the pair going up the stairs. His somewhat too short lips were slightly parted. His knees trembled. Without ceremony he left the captain standing and hastened after Berenice and her brother. How beautifully that woman walked! No, she did not walk, there was only one word to describe her, she floated" (Feuchtwanger, *The Jewish War* , p. 263).

As we find out later in the novel the reason for Berenice's divine walk was a very prosaic one. According to the Jewish Law, a virgin woman is supposed to wear a small chain between her ankles. This seemingly minor prosaic detail signifies a Roman sentiment of the East's spiritual superiority and mysticism. Feuchtwanger attempts here to show that behind mysterious phenomena there lies sometimes a very ordinary explanation. This device of prosaic theory is utilized to explain life through life, human behaviour through human motives and impulses, unusual and seemingly inexplicable events through ordinary and common reasons, and not through some extraordinary high values like patriotism or heroism.

In my understanding, Feuchtwanger's novels and personal theory exhibits one of the main aspects of prosaics, that is the importance of the ordinary and the everyday. First of all, Feuchtwanger stresses that he does not portray history for its own sake (Feuchtwanger, *Desdemona*, p. 130). History never really served him as an end in itself; it represented the attempt to give meaning to the meaningless. While Feuchtwanger never denies the achievements of the methodological and critical source studies, he reminds us that extracted facts, hypotheses and arguments can only furnish a neatly preserved "skeleton" for the flesh of fiction. The "skeleton," in itself a mere arrangement of data, (which usually tends to great figures and great events), represents the objective dimension of historical fiction. Most historical materials offer a kind of "firm skeleton or outline", and it is the task of an artist to surround it with the "living flesh". In his essay *The House of Desdemona* Feuchtwanger says:

I became conscious again and again of the fact that this "pure science" could produce nothing but skeletons. They are on occasion expertly preserved ones and observing them affords a kind of aesthetic satisfaction, but only the imagination of a poet can provide them with living flesh (Feuchtwanger, *Desdemona*, p.18).

In order to breath life into a documentary material and to a historical epoch, (that is to create life out this material and not just dry history, based only on fact), Feuchtwanger, in his depiction of a historical epoch, concentrates on the complex personal lives of historical personages, their everyday activity, thoughts, feelings, knowledge, poetry, music, love, friendships, hates, passions, and questions tormenting them. The historical novel would be the perfect means by which one can convey the subjective experience of people. That is why Feuchtwanger believes that historical

novel is better calculated to represent history, than all the cultural sciences; it is more credible, truer, more vital than any clear, exact representation of historical facts, which is as you can see, similar to prosaic thinkers. For Feuchtwanger as well as for Tolstoy, the dichotomy between an artist and a historian could be overcome through their synthesis in a historical novel,

In his unfinished essay *The House of Desdemona* Feuchtwanger speculates about the advantages of historical novel. The true historical novel attracts man to his past; abstract historical generalizations come to life, become present and moving (Keune, p. 92). Art naturally enhances the human capacity for lived experience, and genuine historical writing helps the reader to live his own experience and compels him to recognize himself anew (Feuchtwanger, *Desdemona*, p. 144). Tolstoy also assigns to the historical novel a special role in ethical education. He believes that it is a powerful tool for enriching our moral sense of particular situations (Morson, *Bakhtin*, p. 27). Moreover historical novels succeed better by appealing to a reader's emotions and feelings and not only to his intellect in making him an active participant of a historical event and in teaching him a lesson.

For Feuchtwanger, the question of whether man can understand history leads to the question whether man can understand himself or not. Feuchtwanger's reflections about history, as Keune correctly notes, are similar to Nietzsche's. Nietzsche, in his essay *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* writes that the past continually "streams" forth within men in a hundred waves, and the identity of man is nothing else but what he is able to experience of this continual process of "streaming". Nietzsche's man descends "into the river of his own being", whereby man's realization of his self is the realization of his totality of all that is past. Feuchtwanger according to Keune, believes that historical fiction reveals the essence of history and the

self. It is poet's task to give means of attainment to this state of consciousness (Keune, p. 93).

Another important function of historical novel for Feuchtwanger is that man can learn from history more effectively through a historical novel. Although, Hegel states that man cannot learn from history since a general maxim cannot pertain to the unique circumstances of the historical occurrence, Feuchtwanger suggests that while man is unable to learn from history as a scientific disciple, he should be able to attain an awareness of history through historical fiction (Keune, p. 96) While history appeals only to the intellect and deals with singular statements, the poet breaths life into the documentary material and approaches universal truth. Since the acceptance of any lesson presupposes an interrelationship of reason and emotion, a work of art is more likely to evoke emotional response and to teach a lesson.

Thus, in order for history to evoke emotional response and to teach a lesson it must remain alive; it cannot be reduced to any frozen system and analytically explained. That is why the second important concept of the theory of prosaics is the rejection of any kind of systems, in the sense used by structuralists and general systems theorists: a system being an organization in which every element has a place in a rigorous hierarchy (Morson, *Bakhtin* , p. 27). Prosaic theory rejects all systems of history which find order largely because they exclude evidence of disorder, and doubts that any aspect of culture, from the self to a language, from daily life to all of history, could be organized tightly enough to exhibit an all-encompassing pattern. Systems try to find and to explain the order in life and history which is hardly, if ever, possible because the natural state of things for prosaics is chaos.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson captured the prosaic insight in one of his splendid dialogues with his daughter. The daughter observes that,

"People spend a lot of time tidying things, but they never seem to spend time muddling them. Things just seem to get in a muddle by themselves. And then people have to tidy them again" (Bateson, *Muddle*, p. 3). If one does not work at it, tidy things get messy, but messy things never get tidy. Why? Bateson's answer is disarmingly simple. There are an indefinitely large number of ways in which things can get messy, but very few one would call tidy. His daughter expresses dissatisfaction with this answer, because she thinks that disorder must be explained by some active force for disorder. Bateson answers that it is order, not disorder, that requires a reason (Bateson, *Muddle*, p. 3). One cannot assume that disorder has any specific cause, it may happen just "for some reason", order, however, must have been a task.

Tolstoy, a precursor of prosaics, explicitly rejected the possibility of any laws of history or of any underlying order that could explain away the disorder of everyday life. According to Tolstoy, our ignorance of how things happen is fundamental and without remedy. The world fits no orderly pattern, and we must learn to negotiate the uncertainties of such a world.

Morson points out three reasons why Tolstoy believed that historians fail to represent history accurately. First, a process of reduction takes place in which only a few of an infinite number of causes are isolated and considered. Second, chance events, which are the crux of history, are impossible to know because of the nature of perception and memory. Third, it is impossibility for scholars to view history objectively (Morson, *View*, p.114). Tolstoy was mostly dissatisfied by the arbitrary manner by which historians select events for consideration. Out of the indefinitely large number of reasons which determine the life of mankind historians select just small number. Berlin says that historians, according to Tolstoy, would choose only some single aspect, "say the political or the economic, and represent it as primary, as the

efficient cause of social change; but then, what of religion, what of "spiritual" factors, and the many other aspects - a literally countless multiplicity - with which all events are endowed?" (Berlin, *Hedgehog*, p. 15).

Tolstoy's peculiar views on life in general determine his philosophy of history. Tolstoy thinks that we live in the universe of uncertainty governed by chance and chaos, "in the universe that permits no accurate account of the past or of human behavior,... in the universe whose governing principles change from moment to moment in response to a hundred million diverse chances" (Morson, *View*, p.128). An image of life which occurs to Pierre in *War and Peace* exemplifies Tolstoy's perception of history as an ever changing historical process. Pierre's old geography teacher showed him a globe, that was alive - a vibrating ball without fixed dimensions.

Its whole surface consisted of drops closely pressed together, and all these drops moved and changed places, sometimes several of them merging into one, sometimes one dividing into many. Each drop tried to spread out and occupy as much space as possible, but others striving to do the same compressed it, sometimes destroyed it, and sometimes merged with it. -"That is life," said the old teacher... Life is everything. Life is God. Everything changes and moves, and that movement is God" (Tolstoy, *War and Peace* , p. 608).

In the first Epilogue of *War and Peace* Tolstoy compares European history with the "storm-tossed sea". Though sometimes the surface of the sea of history may seem calm, the mysterious forces that move humanity (mysterious because the laws of their motion are unknown or unknowable to us) go on "as unceasingly as the flow of time". Elsewhere history for Tolstoy is "the unconscious, general, hive life of mankind" (Tolstoy, *War and Peace* , p. 343). This metaphor seems to stress the unpredictable nature of historical events, "their development according to random facts and their incommensurability with any systems.

Battle, dominated by the chaos, confusion and panic, serves as a metaphor for history as Tolstoy conceives it. Battle is a microcosms of the historical process. No one can understand a battle because it is essentially chaotic. Prince Andrei realizes that there is not and cannot be any science of war: "What theory and science is possible about a matter the conditions and circumstances of which are unknown and cannot be defined...? What science can there be in a matter in which, as in all practical matters, nothing can be defined and everything depends on innumerable conditions, the significance of which is determined at a particular moment which arrives no one knows when?" (Tolstoy, *War and Peace* , p.365). Before the battle of Borodino Prince Andrei asks: "But what awaits us tomorrow? A hundred million most diverse chances, which will be decided on the instant by the fact that our men or theirs run or do not run, and that this man or that man is killed..." Prince Andrei's view of battle coincides with Tolstoy's view of history. Just as for Andrei there can be no helpful "plan" of a battle, so for Tolstoy there can be no accurate account of the past.

Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* attacks all theories of history which try to show that behind the multiplicity of apparently accidental or random facts of historical life, there is really a set of rules, a system that can explain everything. But as Morson points out correctly, one must keep in mind that Tolstoy does not claim, nor does he need to claim, a knowledge of how events do occur; his arguments are based on the self-contradictoriness or implausibility of all received and all conceivable models of historical explanation. Tolstoy's is a typically Enlightenment attitude: one does not need to show God does not exist; one only needs to show that arguments for His existence do not make sense and are the product of interest and superstition rather than of evidence (Morson, *View*, p.102).

Logically, Tolstoy's theories of history lead to the conclusion that Tolstoy's own account of the past could not be accurate either. In fact, Tolstoy in his opening to *The Decembrists* includes himself among the objects of satire and, as Morson notices, in so doing denies to himself a privileged vantage point. In *War and Peace*, no one, including the author, can know the past. In his novel *Dekabristy* Tolstoy says:

He who writes these lines not only lived at that time, but was also one of the movers of society at that time. Moreover, he himself stayed for several weeks in one of the trenches of Sevastopol. He wrote about the Crimean war a work which brought him a great glory, and in which he described clearly and in detail how soldiers fired their guns from the bastions, how the dead were buried in the earth in the graveyard. Having accomplished these exploits, the writer of these lines spent some time at the heart of the state... where he received the laurels for his exploits... And he experienced in himself how Russia knows how to reward genuine service. The powerful of that world sought his acquaintance, shook hands with him, gave him dinners, extended invitations to him and, in order to learn from him the details of the war, narrated to him their own impressions. Consequently, the writer of these lines can appreciate that great, unforgettable time (Morson, *View*, p. 124).

Tolstoy explicitly denied the existence of a "law of progress" governing history, and insisted that neither that nor any other law could exist. In his *Confession*, Tolstoy explained how he came to renounce his belief in the law of progress as the driving force of history.

It was just the time when I was myself becoming more complex and was developing ... and feeling this growth in myself it was natural for me to think that such was the universal law in which I should find the solution of the question of my life. But a time came when the growth within me ceased. I felt that I was not developing, but fading, my muscles were weakening, and my teeth falling out, and I saw that the law not only explain anything to me, but that there never had been or could be such a law, and that I had taken for a law what I had found in myself at a certain period of my life (Tolstoy, *Confession*, pp. 24-25).

Tolstoy implied that it would be just as plausible for an old man to imagine that there is a universal law of decay as it is for a young man to believe in a law of progress. In rejecting a "law of progress", Tolstoy argues against the existence of any historical laws. Tolstoy complained that in substituting the experiences of Europeans for those of all mankind, historians who believe in universal laws usually restricted their sample even further by considering only Europeans of their own class. According to Tolstoy, the usual way in which an Englishman goes about proving a law of progress is by comparing England in 1685 with the England of his own day, and a central European may make a similar comparison between two centuries in the history of a German principality. In his article "Progress and the Definition of Education" Tolstoy observes:

We have noticed a law of progress in the dukedom of Hohenzollern - Sigmaringen, which has three thousand inhabitants. We are aware of China, which has two hundred millions of inhabitants and which refutes our whole theory of progress, and we do not doubt for a minute that progress is the general law of all mankind, and that we, who believe in it are wrong, and we go with cannon and guns to inspire the Chinese with the idea of progress (Tolstoy, "Progress", p. 333).

In short, "Progress is the general law for mankind, they say, with the sole exception of Asia, Africa, America, Australia, with the exception of one billion people... To say that progress is the law of humanity is just as unfounded as to say that all people are blond with the exception of those with the black hair" (Tolstoy, "Progress", p. 332-333).

Thus, the multiplicity of causal lines that produces historical events guarantees the potential significance of even the most ordinary action of the most ordinary person; the impossibility of knowing historical laws guarantees the meaningfulness of all decisions; and the impossibility of any

sure knowledge of what is important the value of human activity (Morson, *View*, p. 120).

In not believing that history can be systematizable and reduced to some universal laws, Feuchtwanger shares Tolstoy's distrust against historiography. In his essay *The House of Desdemona* Feuchtwanger quotes some of the "wise men of the past" to articulate his point of view on this subject. Schopenhauer remarked that "Clio, the muse of history, is as thoroughly infected with lies as a street whore with syphilis". David Hume was of the opinion that one should not be surprised that historiographers tell lies; men of every kind and period have done so. Voltaire asserted: "History consists of a series of accumulated imaginative inventions" (Feuchtwanger, *Desdemona* , p.16).

Feuchtwanger, like Tolstoy, believes that history has no clear shape, no beginning, middle and end. Historical events are unpredictable and do not fit a pattern. Feuchtwanger's refutation of historiography, according to Manfred Keune, rests on the assumption that insight into the essential character of history is insight into man's existential struggle, which in turn is accessible only to poetic exploration (Keune, p. 90). According to Feuchtwanger, history is not merely a chronological arrangement of historical events, but also an eternal struggle between reason and stupidity, between evil and good. History is "the struggle of a tiny, enlightened responsible minority against the vast, compact majority of the blind irresponsible, who are guided merely by instinct" (Feuchtwanger, *Ein Buch für meine Freunde* , p. 500).

Feuchtwanger acknowledged that in his historical novels he wanted to portray historical forces that guided people. In his trilogy *Josephus* , Feuchtwanger depicts the confrontation between two timeless historical forces: nationalism and internationalism, democracy and tyranny. The novel

treats the survival of the exclusive religious minority, the Jews, within the dominant military society of the Roman Empire. The struggle between the East and the West was an ancient one. The political superiority of Rome and the corresponding weakness of Israel are always present in Josephus' consciousness. And yet it was in his first confrontation with Rome that Josephus discerned the spiritual superiority of the East over the West.

What these men of the West could give - technology, logic - such things could be learned. What could never be learned was the East's visionary powers, its holiness. There the nation and God, man and God, were one. But its God was an invisible God, who could neither be seen or learned. One was either in possession of him, or not in possession of him. He, Josephus, possessed it, possessed the unlearnable. And he never doubted that he would learn the other, the technology and the logic of the West (Feuchtwanger, *The Jewish War*, p. 16).

The East's holiness and clarity of vision is perceived by Josephus as intellectually and spiritually superior to the West's rational civilization (which is rather concerned with its technological progress and not with its spiritual development). Josephus' goal was the union of Judaic and Roman cultures on a high cosmopolitan level, with spiritual leadership granted to Judaism by virtue of its "visionary powers" and religious superiority. Josephus' attempt to combine the two incommensurable worlds resulted in failure. "One cannot possess the unlearnable" - states Josephus himself at the beginning of the novel. The Western tradition was not sophisticated enough to comprehend with its rational minds irrational notions and ideals of the Eastern Religion. This is shown by the Romans' fear of what they could not understand. The best way to remove the fear was to destroy the object of the fear. The Temple of Jerusalem symbolized the East's spirituality and mystery. This mystery was destroyed by the Romans during the Jewish war in 75-79 A.D.

Neither Tolstoy nor Feuchtwanger believe in the existence of objective history. According to Feuchtwanger, one needs time and distance to get a better perspective on the historical events and thus to be able to evaluate them impartially. Thus, Tolstoy's view coincides with that of Feuchtwanger on such a pivotal issue, that the distance between a narrator and a historical event enables the former to better understand the forces and motives that caused the event. Feuchtwanger writes that only by means of a distance can one enhance a theme by giving it perspective. The perspective of the past alone enables the author to afford his reader a clear view of the grand outline. "One can appreciate the outlines of a mountain much better from a distance than from the center of the mountain itself..." (Feuchtwanger, *Desdemona* , p. 140). Tolstoy also believes that one cannot objectively comprehend a contemporary historical event. In order to achieve objectivity one must separate himself from an event in time and distance. Thus, Tolstoy expresses the same view without glamorizing the concept of "distance" as used by Feuchtwanger.

Tolstoy in his explanation goes further and argues that distance would reveal to us not only the causes of the historical events, but also the really important events and people in history. With the distance one finds more and more different causes of a historical event. On the question of what caused the Napoleonic War 1812, historians, Tolstoy writes would tell us "with naive assurance that its courses were the wrongs inflicted on the Duke of Oldenburg, the nonobservance of the Continental System, the ambition of Napoleon, the firmness of Alexander, the mistakes of the diplomatists, and so on" (Tolstoy, *War and Peace* , p. 342). Since it is hard for the participants to get a clear vision on the events, it is natural that the countless and infinite quantity of other reasons would be named too by the men of that day. Only

time will sort out the infinite number of causes named by the contemporaries and illuminate for us the really important events in history. Tolstoy then points out that for those who will view the thing which happened in all its magnitude and perceive its plain and terrible meaning, the causes named by historians would seem insufficient (Tolstoy, *War and Peace* , p. 342). One realizes, looking back at the event then, that to understand the meaning of history "we must completely change the subject of our observation, must leave Kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved" (Tolstoy, *War and Peace* , p. 470).

Tolstoy's argument that history is not made by important historical personages results from his belief that man is not free. According to Tolstoy an individual is "in some sense" free when he alone is involved: thus in raising his arm, he is free within physical limits. But once he is involved in relationship with others, he is no longer free, he is part of the inexorable stream of history. Tolstoy denies the possibility of metaphysical freedom. From the divine point of view the lives of human beings are no less than those of nature are determined, men, unable to face the world of uncertainty seek to represent it as a succession of free choices. Tolstoy refutes determinism not on metaphysical but rather on epistemological grounds. The actions of human beings are determined, but they have no way of knowing it and perceive their actions as the result of their own free will. It is good because if "it is conceded that life can be governed by reason then life is impossible" (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p. 632). But life is possible, because reason cannot understand the principles of the events. Since we are not free, but could not live without the conviction that we are, it is better, Tolstoy concludes, to realize that we understand what goes on as we do in fact

understand it - "much as spontaneous, normal, simple people, uncorrupted by theories, not blinded by the dust raised by the scientific authorities, do, in fact, understand life - than to seek to subvert such common-sense beliefs, which least have the merit of having been tested by long experience, in favor of pseudo - sciences, which being founded on absurdly inadequate data, are only a snare and delusion" (Berlin,*Hedgehog*, pp. 31-32).

Thus, rejecting the idea offered by historians, that history can be directed by "heroes", by "individual men endowed with extraordinary superhuman capacity", Tolstoy points out that we must penetrate to the essence of any historic event - "which lies in the activity of the general mass of men who take part in it - to be convinced that the will of the historic hero does not control the actions of the mass but is itself continually controlled" (Tolstoy,*War and Peace*, p. 563). Tolstoy arrives at one of his celebrated paradoxes: "The higher soldiers or statesmen are in the pyramid of authority, the farther they must be from its base which consists of those ordinary men and women whose lives are the actual stuff of history: and consequently, the smaller the effect of the words and acts of such remote personages, despite all their theoretical authority, upon that history" (Berlin,*Hedgehog*, p. 17). Tolstoy declares : A king is history's slave and reveals to us the "real" significance of one of the "great men" in world history - Napoleon.

Napoleon, who in 1812, was more convinced than ever that it depended on him whether "to shed or not to shed the blood of his people" had never been so much in the grip of inevitable laws, which compelled him, while thinking that he was acting on his own volition (Tolstoy,*War and Peace* , p. 343).

Napoleon, by occupying such a high position on the social ladder and by being connected with many people and by having such a great power over others, is in fact not free, but quite the opposite, the predestination and inevitability of his every action is evident. In his novel *War and Peace* Tolstoy exposes the great illusion and denies that individuals can, by the use of their own resources, understand and control the course of events.

Feuchtwanger does not feel comfortable with this categorical statement and declares that since a man has little free choice in the shaping of large events and courses, the history's significance, meaning, and purpose, belongs not to the "great individuals" but to history itself. In his book *Proud Destiny* Feuchtwanger says:

That which was commonly called world history was stronger than the King of France and compelled him to obey its dictates. There must therefore be some meaning on history, some purpose which drove men in a certain direction whether they wished it or not (Feuchtwanger, *Proud Destiny*, p. 389).

Both Feuchtwanger and Tolstoy feel that the narrow images of important historical personages presented by historians have no significance in history. Tolstoy takes this idea to its ultimate extension, postulating that a figure who did appear in histories could not possibly have been important. Napoleon's character from *War and Peace* is suggestive of Feuchtwanger's Titus, an important historical character from *The Jewish War*. They are both unaware that they are not guiding historical events but are rather being guided.

Titus, who governed the siege on Jerusalem in 75-79 A.D., was disappointed to find that his orders to spare the Jerusalem Temple had not been followed. He realized that it was senseless to control the maddened

troops during the attack and to try to direct the wild confusion. "The whole army had been seized with an insane lust for slaughter". Titus himself tried to direct the wild confusion, but he found himself shouting with the others. "Set fire to the Temple, comrades". After the Temple fell, Titus wondered why in spite of his instructions to spare the Temple, it was destroyed. "Had not his orders been clear? Had he not always insisted that he should be implicitly obeyed? Titus is ready to believe at first, that it was the Gods who had decided otherwise, perhaps the Jewish god himself, angered by the blasphemy and stubbornness of his people..." (Feuchtwanger, *The Jewish War*, p. 268). Later, however, he understands that the destruction of the Temple, which would have been a Roman triumph, was the desire of the whole army and not of any single soldier. The intangible force called the spirit of the army determined their actions and not the arrangements and orders made by the staff, Titus or Vespasian.

Here Feuchtwanger wants to express the difficulty in comprehending the multifaceted nature of the human being. Because an individual is governed by passion and emotion, it is hard to predict what he/she will do. That is why Titus, who had initially planned to save the Temple, failed to do so. He could no longer hide his suppressed urge to destroy the Temple during chaos of the battle and found himself shouting with the others: "Set fire to the Temple!" This example illustrates the importance Feuchtwanger places on unintended action. This unpredictability of action serves to show that the principles governing historical events are incomprehensible and are by no means governed by single historical characters.

Tolstoy shows in *War and Peace* how Prince Andrei comes to the realization that history is not governed by human beings, however important they appear to be but rather by "feelings", that are usually disregarded by

historians. Prince Andrei begins to understand that he was deluding himself when he made efforts to meet the "important persons", who seem to be guiding the destinies of Russia, and when he supposed that their activities, their words, memoranda, orders, resolutions, etc., to be the motive factors which cause historical change and determine the destinies of men and nations. On realizing this, Andrei decides to remain at the front with Prince Bagration's detachment, where he finds himself more useful than at the head-quarters. He explains this decision to Pierre:

Believe me, if things depended on arrangements made by the staff, I should be there making arrangements, but instead of that I have the honor to serve here in the regiment with these gentlemen, and I consider that on us tomorrow's battle will depend and not on those others... Success never depends, and will depend, on position, or equipment, or even on numbers, and least of all on position... (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p. 441).

Andrei explains to the bewildered Pierre that the success of the battle depends on the feeling that is in him and in each soldier.

The general Kutuzov is of the same opinion as Andrei. He recognizes the absurdity of trying to influence the direction of history. From long years of military experience and with the wisdom of age, Kutuzov knows that it is impossible for one man to direct hundreds of thousands of others struggling with death, "and he knew that the result of a battle is decided not by the orders of a commander in chief, nor the place where the troops are stationed, but by that intangible force called the spirit of the army, and he watched this force and guided it in as far as that was in his power" (*War and Peace*, p. 460). Since historians deal with the results of the events and with the facts that can be proved, these inner, intangible factors which, according to Tolstoy, are the most important are not taken into consideration by the historians.

Feuchtwanger pays as much attention to the inner motives in individuals, which he believes cause historical events, as does Tolstoy. In describing Josephus' life, Feuchtwanger emphasizes the great role of Josephus' "inner voice" that very often determines decisions taken by Josephus. This "inner voice" told him that however painful it might be to see the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, it is his duty to experience it and "to drink all the bitterness of seeing his own city brought to destruction", instead of going with Vespasian to Rome, where he would "rise in the world and achieve many things". Josephus realizes that if went to Rome, his life would be a happy one because he would have the Emperor, and Dorion. "But if he went to Rome, he would see nothing of the destruction of his city, and his country and the House of God would go down unsung; the Temple would be razed to the ground and nobody in later ages would know anything of its destruction" (Feuchtwanger, *Josephus* , p. 344). Josephus understands that he must flee from Vespasian, "for if he stayed any longer with him his longing for power would grow more and more. And power made one stupid and stifled *the inner voice* " (Feuchtwanger, *The Jewish War*, p. 344, my italics). Josephus reasons, like Prince Andrei that he would be more useful in Jerusalem, witnessing with his own eyes the consummation of the campaign and describing later the history of the Jewish War objectively.

Suddenly an immense longing for Judea filled him. He had a mad yearning to be there, to gorge completely his eyes and his heart when the white and golden marvel of the Temple was being destroyed, when the priests were being dragged along by their hair and their sacred blue robes were torn from their backs, and the golden cluster of grapes over the door of the inner Temple melted and dropped into a mire of blood and mud and filth. Yes, and together with the Temple his whole race would be exterminated in a reek of savage butchery, a burnt offering to the Lord (Feuchtwanger, *Josephus* , p. 344).

While still hesitating and trying to reason his decision, weighing the factors involved, *something* happens inside Josephus which determines his final decision. Historians would not explain this inner urge as it relates to history in their records, because it is of a "spiritual nature". Feuchtwanger stresses here the idea that an individual is not just a passive reflection of history. Only when actively and passionately experienced by man does history become life.

Thus, prosaics generally opposes the idea that history tends to focus on great events and grand figures, novels on dramatic incidents; and psychology on critical moments. Prosaics suggests that the most important events in history, culture, and the psyche may be the most ordinary and prosaic ones, which we do not notice. They consider ordinary events as the most important. It does not mean that they deny that great events can be important. It is quite possible that great events shape history, as long as one does not insist that those events conform to any discernable laws. Prosaics is concerned that much more important events have been overlooked because they are not striking. It is true because it is hard to study and to notice ordinary unsystematizable events. Morson in his work on Bakhtin's philosophy quotes a famous German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who believed that:

The aspects of things that are most important for 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 (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 129).

It is interesting to observe that Feuchtwanger developed similar prosaic ideas later in his own way. This is due to the fact that Feuchtwanger,

however original his philosophy is, emerges as a man thoroughly trained in the classical Western tradition and therefore can be considered to be a precious product of the world literary heritage. The influence of such German thinkers as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Theodor Lessing and Goethe is unavoidable on Feuchtwanger's *Weltanschauung*, but Tolstoy's impact is unmistakable. The continuity of the Western heritage is manifested in his novels and theoretical essays.

One should appreciate the theory of prosaics created by Bakhtin and Tolstoy. These two "prosaics ideologists" offer a totally different and original way of looking at the world. According to Tolstoy "lives consist of a series of almost imperceptible choices; it is the myriad infinitesimally small decisions we make and the aggregate of habits we acquire from moment to moment that shape selves and constitute personal identity" (Morson, *View*, p. 269). Life is lived at everyday moments we rarely or ever notice. It is not critical decisions made at crucial moments but rather the ordinary, prosaic activities of the everyday which define human life. Both thinkers attempted to redirect our attention from great striking dramatic events toward the complex processes of daily life, "toward richly trivial events hidden in the diffuse light of plain view" (Morson, *View*, p. 271).

Feuchtwanger was pronounced by some critics the greatest historical novelist of modern times and one of the truly sophisticated vivifiers of the past. The writings of this German historical novelist are in line with the theory of prosaics created by Bakhtin and Tolstoy, which he applies at a later time and on a different material. For Feuchtwanger as well as for other prosaics thinkers prosaics serves one and the same purpose, that being to lend life to history.

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