

Round Table

Gary Saul Morson. Hidden in Plain View. Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987. 322 pp.

Five Critiques and a Reply

Freeman Dyson, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey

Two great spirits presided over the birth of modern science in the seventeenth century. Francis Bacon, the Englishman, said:

"All depends on keeping the eye steadily fixed on the facts of nature, and so receiving their images as they are. For God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world."

René Descartes, the Frenchman, said:

"I showed what the laws of nature were, and without basing my arguments on any principle other than the infinite perfections of God, I tried to demonstrate all those laws about which we could have any doubt, and to show that they are such that, even if God created many worlds, there could not be any in which they failed to be observed."

In the history of science, from its beginnings to the present day, the Baconian and the Cartesian traditions have remained alive, Baconian science emphasizing empirical facts and details, Cartesian science emphasizing general ideas and principles. The healthy growth of science requires that both traditions be honored. Bacon without Descartes would reduce science to butterfly-collecting; Descartes without Bacon would reduce science to pure mathematics.

What has the history of science to do with Tolstoy and with Morson's book? Since I am a scientist, I see Morson's dichotomy of literature into prosaics and poetics as analogous to the old dichotomy of science into Baconian and Cartesian. War and Peace, as Morson describes it, is a supreme example of Baconian literature. In his arrangement of incidents and characters, as well as in his historical interpretations, Tolstoy is following Bacon's dictum: "God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world." The Tolstoyan view of history is firmly Baconian. Strategic plans and theories are repeatedly shown to be illusory. The true cause of historical events lies in the innumerable and unpredictable details of human behavior. The aim of the novelist and historian

should be to observe and describe the details of events, "receiving their images as they are," not to explain them with preconceived theories.

In opposition to Morson's concept of prosaics stands the Aristotelian notion of poetics. According to Aristotle, poetry and drama must be subject to strict rules. The doctrine of the Poetics decrees that the portrayal of human destiny be squeezed into a formal structure. To a greater or lesser extent, all of classical literature from Plutarch's Lives to Milton's Paradise Lost followed the Aristotelian pattern. Man's fate is deduced from general principles. Nothing happens by accident. Tolstoy consciously and deliberately violated the Aristotelian rules. He held that the imposition of Aristotelian patterns upon history led to nothing but falsehood and illusion. If Tolstoy had been a scientist, he would have rejected just as vehemently the attempt of Descartes to deduce the laws of nature from philosophical principles. If Bacon had been a novelist, he would have approved Tolstoy's method: "I was more interested to know in what way and under the influence of what feeling one soldier kills another than to know how the armies were arranged at Austerlitz and Borodino."

Tolstoy failed to convert the majority of writers and historians to his way of thinking, just as Bacon failed to convert the majority of scientists. In science as in history, dogma dies hard. Deep in human nature is the desire to explain the cosmos with all-embracing schemes. In my own professional field of particle physics, the Cartesian spirit reigns supreme. The young explorers are furiously engaged in the search for a "theory of everything." Few of them are listening to the cautionary words of Bacon:

"The subtlety of nature is greater many times over than the subtlety of the senses and understanding, so that all those specious meditations, speculations, and glosses in which men indulge are quite from the purpose....The logic now in use serves rather to fix and give stability to the errors which have their origin in commonly received notions than to help the search after truth."

Likewise, few of our contemporary historians and sociologists have chosen to follow the method of Tolstoy as Morson describes it:

"Tolstoy's uniqueness lies in his profound understanding of the ordinary, and in the very ordinariness of his profound understanding. In his view, truth is not buried but camouflaged. Unlike most thinkers of his time and ours, he rejected philosophy's prevailing impulse to locate meaning in the distance, in a concealed order. Tolstoy was instead a philosopher of the present, of the open present, with all its unrealized opportunities and wasteful carelessness."

In my book Infinite in All Directions, I have described the history of science as a dialogue between unifiers and diversifiers. Roughly speaking, unifiers are following the tradition of Descartes, diversifiers are following the tradition of Bacon. Unifiers are trying to

reduce the prodigality of nature to a few general laws and principles. Diversifiers are exploring the details of things and events in their infinite variety. Unifiers are in love with ideas and equations; diversifiers are in love with birds and butterflies. My friend and colleague, the physicist Chen Ning Yang, told me once that when he was a boy of six in China he looked up at the stars and asked what are the laws that make them move across the sky. I said, "But when I was a boy of six in England I looked up at the stars and asked what are their names." Yang was interested in stars in general; I was interested in stars as individuals.

In the sphere of history, Karl Marx was the great unifier, believing that with his single key of dialectical materialism he could unlock the mysteries of the past and future. Tolstoy was the great diversifier, believing that historical truth can only be found in details, in the actions of individual human beings. Yet Tolstoy understood, as the scientist studying birds and butterflies understands, that individuals are tied together in an infinitely complicated web of interdependence. Science is our exploration of the web that ties birds and butterflies together. History is our exploration of the web that ties human actions together.

Perhaps we may interpret the new revolution which Mikhail Gorbachev is trying to bring about in Russia as a move away from narrow Marxism toward a more Tolstoyan view of the human predicament. In many places in Gorbachev's book Perestroika, we hear echoes of the message that Tolstoy put at the end of War and Peace. Tolstoy was describing an analogy between the Copernican revolution in astronomy and the new view of history to which his study of war and peace had led him. Here is Tolstoy's final sentence, proclaiming the mutual interdependence which both East and West must learn to recognize:

"In astronomy we had to give up our illusion of fixity in space and accept an imperceptible motion; in exactly the same way, in history, we have to give up our illusion of freedom and accept an imperceptible dependence on one another."

The Three Last Pages

Alfred J. Rieber, The University of Pennsylvania

Saul Morson has done for Tolstoy and War and Peace what no one else has done. He has accepted Tolstoy at his word. The idiosyncratic form of War and Peace was a deliberate attempt to transcend all previous narrative conventions, whether literary or historical, and create something radically new. As proof of his intentions Tolstoy wrote War and Peace the way he did, and Morson has unravelled his

intentions in a work of Tolstoyan clarity, so that at the end we say: yes, that is the way it must have been written. It is not an immanent critique, to be sure. Morson has drawn on a vast critical tradition, with Bakhtin occupying the place of honor. But the scholarship is worn lightly, more lightly, it might be said than the historical sources that weighed down Tolstoi. But Morson has put his book together in a most unTolstoyan fashion. His argument is severely disciplined, constructed on triads; three parts each constituting the equivalent of three chapters and subdivided in rigorous order. The effect is symphonic, each section picking up the thematic threads of the previous one and working it into the text in fresh and imaginative ways.

It is mainly war: part one wars on narrative conventions; part two wars on conventions in history; finally part three introduces the peace of reconciliation or revelation, albeit "ambiguous." Having guided us through the negation of systems Morson brings us to Tolstoi's vision of the self. It is a modern (and very ancient) truth, a harsh truth. "The most profound 'revelations' about how to endow one's life with possible meaning comes to those who never consciously analyze the truths they live... The revelations that are recognized as such are never more than partial or negative truths." (One wonders how Tolstoi might have characterized his own revelations in War and Peace.)

It would be possible for me to go on in this frankly admiring manner for the remainder of the review. But I would prefer to engage the author in another episode of a dialogue begun long ago. He acknowledges my advice graciously, but I feel compelled to demur if only to be able to continue a discussion I have always enjoyed. There is above all the little matter of the last three pages, most appropriately entitled "The Afterword." It is not a conclusion but Morson's drawing out of the implications of Tolstoi's theories of history and psychology (and what of literature?) "for us today." Morson presents us with an almost irresistibly attractive picture of Tolstoi as the middle way between "semiotic totalitarianism" and "the silence of absolute negation," the ancient Scylla and Charybdis of determinism and relativism. Then, Morson enjoins us with Tolstoi "to have nothing to do with broad synthesis," to achieve a perspective "not by the construction of new interpretative telescopes but by careful attention to richly trivial events hidden in the diffuse light of plain view." As a historian who polishes lenses for new telescopes, I have to take issue; my honor is at stake.

The implication of Morson's last three pages is that Tolstoi is right about history and historians. What he ends of doing then is accepting Tolstoi's absolute skepticism about historical truth and his relative skepticism about literary truth. Tolstoi rejected history and...the novel; they are not equivalents. This comes close to accepting fiction and rejecting fact. Or better, in order to avoid these doubles entendres, to place istina over pravda. Ambrose Bierce (as quoted by Morson in a chapter heading) had it right: a nihilist is "A Russian who denies the existence of anything but Tolstoi. The

leader of the school is Tolstoi." (p. 93) I leave it to others better qualified to draw up a list of literary conventions that Tolstoi retained; of historical conventions he retained none.

Tolstoi catalogues the fallacies of historians: the arbitrary selection of events, presented in a gaggle of artificial conventions based on the false recollections of faulty memories by narrators hopelessly mired in their own time and place. To destroy history he created a parodic history, a form which destroys totally; to destroy the novel he merely disregarded some of its literary conventions. Tolstoi's skepticism about history has been shared by historians who are probably more skeptical about what they are doing than any other class of citizens. And they have done what they could, if they were any good, to guard against the fallacies. But parodic history is difficult to defend against because it is the most clever of iconoclasm. Tolstoi's parody of Napoleon is devastating. L'empereur, he would convince us, was a believer in systems who took as a great sign, nevertheless, the twitching in his left calf on the eve of battle. Napoleon's fatuous egotism blinds him to the haphazard in battle. Yet it was not Napoleon who favored the maxim "On s'engage, et puis on voit," that Lenin was fond of repeating and applying on more than one occasion. It is a mistake to make pictures before a battle, Napoleon counseled. It was good negative advice. When he disregarded it, Napoleon lost, but that is different from assuming he never understood it.

Great men have their limitations. For "while absorbed in their mundane interests," they are but "history's unconscious tools and organs." Thus, Hegel, who also had his moments. Tolstoi illuminated more clearly than anyone else the terrible truth that all events are determined in the sense that they are all caused, but since we have no way of knowing all the causes of a single event...this is also an empty truth. History or, to be fair to the best case Tolstoi makes, the outcome of battles is a matter of choice.

Before taking up chance, we might linger over battles, Tolstoi's preferred mis en scene for his historical ruminations. Battles are great set pieces; they have a beginning and an end and possibly even a middle. They are also the most dramatic, desperate and extreme form of mass human behaviour for the highest stakes. Battles offer the best chances that chance makes all the difference. An incident that under any other circumstances would be insignificant, such as a stumbling horse and a fallen standard or an impulsive Nikolai Rostov charging when he might have retreated, might when described by a skillful narrator and a veteran himself appear "to turn the tide of battle." But Tolstoi knows full well that such random events are taking place all over the battlefield. One would expect that thousands of random events would cancel out one another resulting in chaos. And this could be extended if one wishes for the moment to apply Tolstoi's dubious methods to history or indeed to all life. Yet the whole history of man is a struggle to reduce or eliminate chance, that is, the tyranny of nature over man. True, the

result may have produced just the opposite, order is not necessarily progress, but that is a different argument.

Morson mentions at least twice the role of chance or minute signs upon art. There is a case of the dripping candle accidentally altering a canvas with startling results and the artist Bryllov adding a stroke to a student's drawing that transforms mediocrity into, well, art. Another Tolstoyan trompe l'oeil! A canvas is like a battle, a restricted field of vision and of action; it is also frames. Art is not history; fiction is not fact; each has its own truths. But Tolstoi and "perhaps" Morson will have none of it, at least not in his "Afterword." The humanities, he admonishes us, should bury itself in "richly trivial events."

An acquaintance of mine, a justly obscure scholar, once devoted five years of his life to proving that a single entry in a massive statistical compilation had been falsely included. A Tolstoyan, sans qu'il le sache, no doubt. There was something heroic if futile about the exercise. Historians are painfully aware that there are always too few pieces of surviving reliable evidence to ever be sure about how, let alone why, a particular event or sequence of events occurred. That explains the obsessive search for new sources, the rummaging of archives, the reliance on new techniques of dating, of deciphering, of reinterpreting. Tolstoi, himself a seeker, should have understood. Historians constantly refute one another, declared Tolstoi; so do writers. If Aristotle had been right after all about art and the unities then there would not have been a Tolstoi.

Historians have also been painfully aware that historians have created dangerous myths. They have not been alone in doing this, as Russian literature among others reminds us. But this does not excuse them. The most dangerous myths are not, I believe, "semiotic totalitarianism" defines by Morson as "a pattern that can explain everything." In fact, I can think of no historian and few philosophers of history including Marx who ever believed in a pattern that explained "everything." The greatest historical myths are those that endow a particular group of people, race, class, nation or gender with superior moral attributes. The same, incidentally holds for literary myths. Sometimes I wish, for all my admiration for Tolstoi as an artist and for War and Peace as a work of art that he had found it in his heart to give us one decent Frenchman, un seul bon francais, ou meme une bonne francaise.

Cathy Popkin, Columbia University

As I have had occasion to affirm elsewhere (in Canadian-American Slavic Studies), Gary Saul Morson has written an important book. Lucidly argued, it recuperates the real idiosyncrasies of a work that has come to be regarded as smooth, canonical, the "perfect embodiment of the novel tradition." Morson succeeds in making palpable again the strange-

ness of a novel full of loose ends, characters who are developed only to disappear, incidents that lead nowhere, and philosophical tracts that leave the fiction behind altogether; and he demonstrates forcefully that this strangeness is integral to Tolstoy's intentions.

Tolstoy's innovation (and Morson's great insight) is to allow the random to stand as absolutely random and accidental. Both author and critic staunchly oppose what Morson refers to (with terminological felicity) as "semiotic totalitarianism," a tendency to assign meaning to everything, to see every detail as the sign of an underlying order or system, to explain every accident as somehow logically entailed. Tolstoy's principle of composition defies Chekhov's later credo about the gun that had better go off by the last act or never have been mentioned. *War and Peace* is full of such unfired guns because, as Morson explains, Tolstoy's hero is Truth, and in life, most weapons we happen across are never wielded; they remain pure potential.

Since Tolstoy's "creation by potential" includes guns and other effects by "happenstance" rather than according to consequence, we are in no position as readers to appraise the significance of all we encounter, some of which may turn out to be radically insignificant. Hence, *War and Peace* gives us a tacit but whopping lesson in "epistemic modesty" to counteract our semiotically totalitarian tendencies. Making sense is especially difficult because the truly significant, as Morson reminds us by peppering his prose with his title phrase, is "hidden in plain view," too ordinary to draw our attention. Tolstoy's novel is a celebration of "prosaics--...the infinitesimal, ...the accidental, ...the trifling incidents on which everything ultimately depends."

"Prosaics" has got to be one of the most intriguing aspects of Morson's descriptive project, because its implications are so wide ranging and compelling. If, for instance, life's random infinitesimals are more important than its splashy, heroic -- and memorable -- exploits, prosaics would force a reconsideration of most traditional modes of historiography, with their time-honored goal of discerning pattern and meaning in the events of the past and canonizing its larger-than-life figures; Morson's treatment of Tolstoy's historical polemics is especially suggestive in this respect. Interestingly, out of Tolstoy's original conception for a novel about the Decembrists there emerges a perception of both behavior and narrative practice diametrically opposed to that of Tolstoy's proposed heroes. (I refer to Lotman's essay on "The Decembrists and Everyday Life," in which he distinguishes "poetic" -- daring, memorable, historic, significant -- and "prosaic" behavior, noting that in the Decembrists' code of conduct, only the former was admissible. "Just as in literature," writes Lotman, every act had to be "suitable to be inscribed in the tablets of history," while the "prosaic" was regarded as incommensurate with both life and text.) Moreover, prosaics has much to say about the way we understand, remember, construct narratives about, and ultimately falsify the events of our lives if, paradoxically, what is noteworthy and memorable cannot be significant if structure and patterns are imposed, and most of

what we behold is not inherently meaningful.

All of which goes to show that Morson has written an important book on more than just War and Peace, and I find myself reacting to it all the time -- both explicitly and implicitly -- in my own work. Morson's personal enthusiasm for "prosaic" vision is palpable as well. One senses considerable excitement in a critic whose own earlier position was substantially more "semiotically totalitarian": If a work is assumed to be complete, we are justified in hypothesizing the thematic and formal relevance of all its details," Morson had proposed in his Boundaries of Genre. "No detail...can be completely irrelevant." How liberating to discover that this may not be the case, that the reader's project need not be to explain each "hitherto unexplained detail." Although Morson confines himself to a brief pages of "Afterward" to explore the implication of Tolstoy's insights for "us," we somehow feel that we are being exhorted throughout to relinquish our own totalitarian expectations. The forward to Hidden in Plain View disavows adherence to the tenets of any theoretical or critical school; but to what extent is the book's program to establish one? Or am I reading into this book what I know to be a broader concern of Morson's? Is this exposition of Tolstoy's philosophical and aesthetic project purely descriptive? And what would the normative force of prosaics be for literary narrative in general?

The chief value of the narrative treatment of the accidental, the imperceptible, the "hidden in plain view," for instance, seems to be its representational probity. Works that, on the contrary, chronicle big events and perceptible changes lie about what life is really about. Good plot, narratable stories, are not "true." But just because Tolstoy's hero was "Truth," is the goal of all fiction invariably to avoid falsity? (Or, for that matter, is every writer's truth Tolstoyan, based on the insight that the fundamental state of things is disorderly?) Even if we concede that good stories are false, might they not nevertheless make good stories? Especially as, in Morson's words, "narratives -- all of them -- are lies"? Some of the aspects of storytelling that Tolstoy condemns as falsifying may well be the ones that have produced the most enjoyable stories. Even Morson admits that perceptible events may be interesting, but maintains that their visibility vitiates their real importance.

"Prosaically" speaking, what is important is by definition imperceptible; the deeds of real saints, we are told, are unnarratable. Prosaics -- perhaps in response to Tolstoy, in whose honor it has been defined -- seems to wield "significance" as not only a mimetic, but also an ethical scorecard, as an index of both realism and morality; something is "important" if it is true and virtuous, but definitely not if it is noteworthy. While I am more than willing to join Morson in discarding the prerequisite that an event be big in order to be significant, in the narrative context I find it difficult to eliminate the requirement that it be interesting or, at the very least, perceptible, a departure from the norm. Perhaps in narrative terms, the "important" is by definition what is "narratable," perceived as "worth telling" and consequently "worth reading." If the pleasure of reading derives from

the recognition of significance (Boundaries — or has this, too, been superseded?), but the perceptible structure readers crave necessarily falsifies, must we relinquish the very possibility of a "good read" in favor of Truth? It could be objected (as Morson has done in an earlier exchange) that War and Peace is a good read -- to be sure, we feel that this is so. But as Morson himself demonstrates in detail, Tolstoy's refusal to cater to the persistent "desire for narratable stories" is part of what made the novel so disconcerting and irritating to its first readers.

How, in short, does prosaics approach texts with goals other than those of Lev Nikolaevich? I fully realize that I am asking for clarification that goes well beyond the purview of the book under discussion, but part of its remarkable achievement is to provoke such questions. If prosaics does have broader aspirations, if all prose should be addressed not by poetics but by prosaics ("Prosaics: An Approach to the Humanities," American Scholar 57 [Autumn 1988]: 516) then I want to know more.

Text-internally, Hidden in Plain View presents certain difficulties of its own, but even these are less formidable than provocative. If, for example, conventionally novelistic, coherent psychological portraiture is false, does Tolstoy himself lie by making Kutuzov so consistently wise (and so consistently available to Morson as the perfect example of epistemic modesty)? Morson's reader, having accepted his terms, wants to object to the totalizing, iconic portrayal of a character whose very excellence lies in his refusal to subject life to totalitarian scrutiny.

Slightly more troubling is the Bakhtinian notion of absolute language addressed in the opening chapter. On the one hand, War and Peace is shown to be "saturated" with absolute language as Tolstoy, who aspires to be a prophet, attempts to speak trans-historically and omnisciently. At the same time, insofar as he flouts novelistic conventions and polemicizes at every turn with existing historical approaches, his word, even his "absolute" word, is fundamentally dialogic, addressed always to other words. The status of Tolstoy's own "scriptural" pronouncements is unclear, given his disdain for all human attempts to impose meaning on reality. At first this seems to be resolved by limiting Tolstoy's omniscience to his "negative absolutes," strategy of exposing the inadequacy of all who do presume to know. But many of the proclamations cited by Morson are affirmative ones. From his absolute perspective, for instance, Tolstoy identifies the happiest moment of Nikolai Rostov's life — something not even Nikolai himself could know. Tolstoy's insight that no individual enjoys a perspective privileged enough to discern relevance, to notice what is by definition imperceptible, at once necessitates absolute perspective and precludes it. While Morson acknowledges this paradox, what it actually means for War and Peace is unclear.

The problem is one of integrating the first chapter, which introduces the Bakhtinian issue, with the body of the book, which is

otherwise so carefully structured and such a pleasure to read. Only the final chapter exhibits a slightly less organic unity of topics. Where, for instance, does the sudden concern (not inconsistent, but seemingly unmotivated) with "Revelations" come from? And what does "The Imminency of the Word" have to do with Nikolai's quiet heroism? The move to elide falseness and language comes a bit quickly and seems less scrupulously derived than what has come before. And while we are more than willing to accept Princess Marya's remarkableness, its treatment is uncharacteristically sketchy. The chief index of her specialness seems to be her brother's inability to appreciate her (real heroes are by definition unrecognized; ergo, Marya is an unsung heroine).

If not knowing what will turn out to have consequences is so integral to reading War and Peace, is this a book that cannot be reread? By knowing its outcomes, do we begin to view its developments as inevitable? As Morson emphasizes, neither can we experience the important indeterminacy of length that so disoriented the readers of the original serial edition.

And is there something dangerous, given all the commitment to chance and randomness, in identifying a design behind Tolstoy's text? Is the study itself too coherent to be true to Tolstoy? Might the very project of selecting passages to document a critical assertion be compared to the historian's mendacious need to subsume data to preconceived patterns? If so, if this makes Hidden in Plain View a lie, it's still a terrific story, and good stories such as this are the greatest achievement of all.

Carol Any, Trinity College

The hallmark of Gary Saul Morson's work is his imaginative use and modification of modern critical theories to arrive at new interpretations of Russian literary classics. The title of his first book, The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's "Diary of a Writer" and the Traditions of Literary Utopia, was suggested by the Formalist notion of the fluctuating boundary between literature and byt; more recently, in Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace," he expands some of Bakhtin's ideas to give us the most coherent and complete reading yet of War and Peace.

For Bakhtin, Tolstoy was the quintessential monologist, who subordinated all other voices to his own. For the Formalists, he was a parodist whose parodies of Romanticism were mistakenly interpreted as realism. Hidden in Plain View, while making extensive use of the theories of both Bakhtin and the Formalists, arrives at conclusions that these critics would never have contemplated.

Hidden in Plain View applies such Bakhtinian notions as unfinalizability and dialogism to the writer Bakhtin himself considered least

amenable to these theories. Although in his opening chapter Morson discusses what he calls Tolstoy's "absolute language," he goes on to show that War and Peace is a deeply parodic and therefore dialogic work. Thus in quoting historical accounts of the Napoleonic wars, Tolstoy inserts his own ironic comments, changes direct speech to indirect parodic speech, and counterposes to the historical accounts his own fictional, but more plausible alternatives.

Like earlier critics, Morson emphasizes the disunity of War and Peace. He is more sympathetic to those who have sought the merits of this disunity than to those who have seen it as a defect. In this, and in pointing out the parodic nature of War and Peace, Morson draws on the Formalists. He reminds us that Tolstoy refused to classify War and Peace as a novel, and in a move reminiscent of the Formalists, re-educates us as to the many ways in which Tolstoy broke with the literary conventions of the time. But while the Formalists tended to regard parody, disunity, and the breaking of conventions as artistic ends in themselves, Morson goes further. Tolstoy declared war on narrative, to use Morson's phrase, because he believed that traditional narratives, whether fictional or historical, falsify the way in which real life events unfold.

The disunity of War and Peace, in Morson's view, is intended as a practical application of Tolstoy's ideas on history, freedom, and necessity detailed in the non-fictional passages that interrupt the fictional narrative. As in real life, not every detail turns out to be significant. In order to make his narrative as true to life as possible, Tolstoy included events that lead to nothing, as well as characters like Dolokhov, whose apparent significance early in the book does not prevent him from disappearing from the rest of the narrative.

The triumph of Hidden in Plain View is that within the randomness of the "open" text that he believes War and Peace to be, Morson is more successful than any previous critics at giving us a comprehensive reading of Tolstoy's novel. It is, he tells us, a book about the large role played by accident in determining the course of events. Isaiah Berlin was wrong: Tolstoy was not masquerading as a hedgehog, he was a hedgehog. Morson believes that to demonstrate the importance of the accidental and seemingly insignificant incidents, Tolstoy built the potential for accident into the creative process of his own narrative. Each of the vast number of incidents in War and Peace has the potential to affect the further development of the plot, but not all of them actually do so. "Tolstoy's method of writing by potential allows incidents to achieve their own significance, unforeseen by the author and unrestrained by a usual plot." (188) Morson's interpretation makes War and Peace a novel in the Bakhtinian sense of the word -- a text that questions generic conventions and opens the way for change.

Was War and Peace really conceived and written "by potential,"

as an open text whose own author did not know how everything would come out in the end? Did Tolstoy purposely let characters like Dolokhov drop out of his narrative because that is how things happen in life? Or would he, if he had put the manuscript through further revision, have corrected such imbalances? Boris Eikhenbaum, in his pathbreaking Tolstoy in the Sixties, attributed these imbalances to what he believed was Tolstoy's changing conception of War and Peace during the six years that he was writing it. Eikhenbaum documented his position by tracing a succession of intellectual acquaintanceships that influenced Tolstoy at various times during this period. By the time Tolstoy finally finished the novel, says, Eikhenbaum, he had lost interest in making any but hasty and careless revisions.

Eikhenbaum's position is backed by historical evidence; Morson's is more speculative but gains credence in light of his new and persuasive interpretation of War and Peace as a book that, in both the story it tells and in its narrative technique, teaches the importance of the accidental and the unnoticed. Their views are not totally at odds; to write "by potential" is to grant oneself considerable freedom to modify the conception of the book during the writing. One could even cite Eikhenbaum's research on the novel's metamorphosis in support of Morson's hypothesis, discarding only Eikhenbaum's conclusion that Tolstoy could have been expected to eliminate inconsistencies and irrelevancies if he had been able to sustain his interest a little longer.

Whether Tolstoy really wrote War and Peace as an open text remains an open question. But on finishing Hidden in Plain View I had the satisfying feeling, to which few critics even today are indifferent, that the pieces of an elusive puzzle had been united.

Prosaics as Narrative Politics

Anna A. Tavis, Williams College

In the late 1980s it is no longer new to assert that a text's initial message and its structural novelty eventually fades and disappears from overexposure to interpretation and criticism. It may also appear somewhat anachronistic to resurrect the Russian Formalists and their concept of "defamiliarization" in the wake of Bakhtinian dialogism and the post-deconstructionist debate. And not the least threat to one's critical reputation is to be seen falling out of step with the exhilarating glasnost opportunities by turning to Tolstoy's securely canonized novel War and Peace.

It takes Gary Saul Morson's critical insight and his perspicacity as a reader to accept the challenge of the familiar and recognize that to move away from critical cliches and stagnant reading strategies

often means to return and rehabilitate the past. A liberating and provocative perestroika move, indeed. Not only canonized texts should be carefully reread, but new critical practices should evolve based on these new perspectives.

In Tolstoy's case, Morson claims, the rehabilitation process should begin with a reformulation of the concept of the familiar. For Tolstoy, Morson persuasively argues, life's inner essence hides in plain view of everyday rhythms and is consequently all the more difficult to discern. The seeming importance of revolutions, wars, and Freudian unconscious drives only distracts from the main issues; they are no more than intellectual constructs invented by the historians, philosophers, and psychologists of later time. For a writer who seeks "truth," however, these climactic events are only a flashy surface which should be of no concern to a serious thinker. Tolstoy's own writings, Morson reminds us, are conceived as an extension of his philosophy of life, history, and human behavior. His major political program consists in the denial of riddles at all levels, existential, metaphysical, and narrative. In Tolstoy's world all answers are already given; once they are perceived, no questions need to be asked. The problem humankind has, however, is in seeing the obvious. (p.5) Thus Tolstoy extends his own Borodino battle to arrive at lucid meanings beyond the limitations of language. War and Peace emerges as a perfect example of Tolstoy's powerful anti-narrative politics; the message of the work situates itself in the totality of life's meanings, never in the language alone. Tolstoy uses language as a weapon in a strategic move to reveal life's creative potential. He sets up a perfect trap, however, which whole generations of readers have failed to detect. As Morson persuasively demonstrates, literary poetics fail as a critical approach to Tolstoy's texts. In response to this recognized failure, Morson develops his own anti-poetic critical method of prosaics which better recognizes Tolstoy's creative project and responds to his anti-narrative creations. If indeed Tolstoy used absolute language to create his anti-novel, Morson argues, he never became semantically totalitarian but instead opened himself up to freer dialogic exchange. Morson's study of Tolstoy's narrative politics represents a new reading of the text and shows how earlier interpretative tactics shortcircuited into gross misjudgments of Tolstoy's magisterial study of life and language.

In the palimpsest of critical responses to Tolstoy's War and Peace, Morson argues, only the first ones captured the extent of the work's formal and thematic originality. Ironically, however, these first interpreters were also the ones who started its canonization. Since the first publication, the "snowball" effect of popularity has taken its toll. The seeming simplicity of Tolstoy's style and mistakingly applied poetics where prosaics was at work, misled even such astute interpreters of discourse as Bakhtin, Leontiev, and Merezhkovsky; not to name the majority of Western scholars. Thus it came about that Tolstoy, one of the foremost encyclopedic minds of the 19th century, began to be

represented as a primitive and untutored genius, "the least self-conscious in his use of the literary medium."¹ Tolstoy's works were read as direct outpourings of raw thoughts onto paper.

Morson delivers his project with clarity and persuasion. Having shown what went wrong with the preceding critical strategies, Morson restores the unspoiled plain view of the initial reception and produces the definition of Tolstoy's art as an anti-narrative means. By situating War and Peace in its proper dialogical context of Tolstoy's life and ideas, Morson leads his readers to an exciting discovery of narrative and creative potentials in War and Peace.

1. Philip Rahv, "Tolstoy: The Green Twig and the Black Trunk" in: Rahv, Literature and the Sixth Sense (Boston, 1970): 134-5. Quoted in Morson: 2.
