

Book Review

Gary Saul Morson. *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1994. xiv & 331 pp. incl. index.

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Gary Saul Morson's latest book is rooted in ground familiar both to him and those readers who have followed his work over the past fifteen years, but it ramifies into new territory—both more philosophical and, in its implications, more *political* than his earlier work. Morson, together with Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, can without undue exaggeration be called one of the three key figures in the introduction of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1895-1975) thinking and theories to literary and cultural scholars in this country. *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* is part of this body of Bakhtin scholarship, but it clearly breaks new ground.

A large part of Morson's work to date draws its inspiration from Bakhtin, while simultaneously presenting the ideas of this Russian thinker to an American readership. Morson's first major book, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (1981), explores the theoretical issue of genre classification and its impact on the reader's interpretation. *The Boundaries of Genre* adds two ambivalent groups of works to genre theory, "boundary works" and "threshold works," that is, works characterized by their generic ambivalence, such as, for instance, Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer*. Morson continues his examination of the boundaries of genre in his next book, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in War and Peace* (1987) and provocatively argues that Tolstoy's masterpiece, whose "idiosyncracies were deliberate and carefully planned" (*Plain View* 3), poses a strong challenge to the novelistic conventions. Because of its formal peculiarities, Morson maintains, *War and Peace* can hardly be characterized as a novel but rather represents a "satire of sorts." These two studies of narrative potentials in the novel, together with Morson's numerous publications on Bakhtin and Tolstoy, prepared the ground for his third major book, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990), written with Caryl Emerson, which is immediately relevant for *Narrative and Freedom*. *Prosaics* offers a coherent literary theory inspired by Tolstoy and distilled from Bakhtin's work.

The term "prosaics" is of Morson's own coinage and appears initially in *Hidden in Plain View*. Morson and Emerson differentiate between *prosaics* as a theory of literature that deals exclusively with prose and the novel and *prosaics* as a philosophy that goes beyond literature. In the latter sense it is described as "a form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, the 'prosaic'" (*Prosaics* 15). *Prosaics* is opposed to a romanticized and heroicized view of life and resists systems of thought that attempt to explain life through rules, laws or theoretical abstractions. *Prosaics* is closely connected with ethics because for Bakhtin the ordinary and the moral belonged together. Already in his early theoretical writings Bakhtin pointed out that non-prosaic, extraordinary events could easily be

used as "the large, impersonal mandate" (*Prosaics* 27) that dictates the person's actions and thus absolves him from moral responsibility rather than emphasizing his own conscious act. It is this non-acceptance of shifting an individual's responsibility onto things other than one's own conscience that led Bakhtin to reject "closed" theoretist thinking. Bakhtin's attacks are aimed at such thinkers as de Saussure, Bergson, the Formalists, and Freud. Implicitly, Soviet totalitarianism, as an example of closed systemic thinking, is also subject to this criticism. What Bakhtin disliked about these systems of thought—and this is the point that is especially important for *Narrative and Freedom*—is that they predetermine events and outcomes and thus close off time. But time, argues Bakhtin, is not linear and "irreversible." If we consider the uniqueness of each moment and its unrealized potential, we will discover its unfinalizability and its direct relation to freedom. In his work, Bakhtin consistently explored the function of time in European prose and demonstrated how different conceptualizations of time in the novel were connected with problems of freedom and necessity. It is this aspect of Bakhtin's *prosaics* that Morson amplifies in his *Narrative and Freedom*.

In a precise and lucid synopsis, Morson presents all the key arguments necessary for understanding *Narrative and Freedom* so that it can be read without reference to his own earlier work or, indeed, Bakhtin's. The study has, as its title suggests, precisely these two foci, *narrative* and *freedom*. Disparate as they may appear at first, they have in common *time* as their essence; and they are brought into closer and closer proximity in the course of Morson's argument. The very concrete and rather technical aspect of an author's handling of narrative time, temporality, and temporal perspective turns, in its philosophical extension and under Morson's admirably clear guidance, into the fundamental question of freedom in human action.

Morson pursues his central thesis, that narrative offers an accurate gauge of freedom (both individual freedom under actual historical social conditions and an author's critique of such conditions and his suggestions for change), on two tracks: First, as far as his selection of narratives is concerned, he focuses mainly on the great Russian realist novels of the nineteenth century--although not exclusively so. Chekhov's plays and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, among other works, complete the Russian component; Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a number of Charles Dickens' novels, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to name but a few examples of the West European novelistic tradition, are at least briefly discussed too, in a literary and critical spectrum that reaches from Oedipus via Apuleius' *Golden Ass* to George Orwell, science fiction, and B. F. Skinner.

Second, as regards the philosophical concepts underlying his discussion of determinism versus freedom of human action, he draws on William James and Bergson, as well as, briefly, on Kant, Hegel, and others. Morson reads realist novels as veritable philosophical treatises on the issue of time, its openness (or closedness) and its implications on human freedom (or the lack thereof) in an existential sense. What is striking, though, is to what little extent Morson adduces theory from outside to make his points. Rather, theory grows organically, as it were, from his close textual interpretations and the numerous and far-ranging examples he uses to

illustrate his points. His breathtakingly insightful interpretive analyses appear thus not as the *result* of any "application of theory" to a text, but rather, Morson's theory *emerges*, on some Bakhtinian foundations, as the *product* of the close-reading interpretive act itself.

Narrative and Freedom is divided into two parts, each further subdivided into three chapters. This main body is followed by a conclusion, notes, and a very complete and eminently useful index. The Introduction presents the book's fundamental preoccupation with the relationship between literary temporal models and people's actual lives and how the Russian novelistic tradition responds to that relationship. Morson interweaves theoretical concepts with textual interpretation, complementing the former by deductions and inferences from the latter as he moves along. Some of these concepts are no doubt familiar to Bakhtin readers, such as, for instance, *eventness* and the author's essential *surplus of knowledge*, whereas others are, if not invented, at least expanded by Morson. Thus he develops, by analogy to the long-accepted term and concept of "foreshadowing," his own complements of "backshadowing" and, central to his argument, "sideshadowing." It is the use by an author of this last feature, above all, that is significant for our understanding of a fictional universe as open, as "sideshadows" are the marks, more or less clearly or dimly perceptible, of events and outcomes that *might have been*—but were never actualized. "Sideshadows" are the characteristics of openness of time, absence of predetermination, and thus of true human freedom of action. Here, Morson marries the Bakhtinian concept of "eventness"—the notion that each moment in time is open and decisions can be made and actions taken that will have repercussions down the line—with concrete textual strategies to arrive at a philosophic-political assessment of fictional reality. ("Down the line" is, of course, an inappropriate expression as time, in this understanding, is precisely not a straight line, but rather takes the form of a branching tree). Sideshadowing and open time are the concepts Morson openly admits he wants to "recommend" and "advocate" (5). What indicates the closing of time in Morson's temporal-narrative universe are foreshadowing and backshadowing: the former because it predetermines the outcome of events by providing the reader with clues—signs—about what will happen in the future and thus excluding any options ("Foreshadowing makes the future not just an inevitability but a substantial actuality," [*Narrative* 49]); the latter because it foreshadows events after the fact and "assumes that the past contained legible signs of the future" (234). "Backshadowing," writes Morson, "blinds one to the lines of development that might have led elsewhere; that is, it obscures the sideshadows" (247).

These three concepts are carefully developed, scrutinized, and illustrated in literary works in the course of the book. In Part I, "The Shape of Narrative and the Shape of Experience," two temporal models of life are presented—open and closed. The former --through its presentness and eventness—leads to human freedom of action and moral choice; the latter—through imposing its laws on the individual—views life as product and thus excludes the possibility of freedom. Dostoevsky was one writer who wrestled with these two models and maintained that life was an undetermined process, characterized by eventness.

Chapter 2, "Foreshadowing," deals with models of closed time and provides an in-depth analysis of *Anna Karenina*, whose eponymous heroine's life is defined by the absence of freedom.

In Chapter 3, "Bakhtin's Indeterminism," Morson discusses Bakhtin's failure and success in developing models of interaction between the author and hero and how these models either undermine or confirm temporal closure and how they affect the hero's freedom. Bakhtin's first model presupposed "an essential surplus of knowledge," which the author possesses in regard to the hero. In this model, the hero's actions depend on the whims of the author and are thus confined to closed time, making it impossible for the former to act freely. Bakhtin's concept of the "polyphonic novel" addressed this shortcoming and established a world of free narrative interaction in which the dependence of the hero on the author is suspended and freedom and open time facilitated. But the "polyphonic novel" had its own limits, and Morson goes on to explain how Bakhtin corrected them through inventing the concept of chronotope, in which he combined freedom and eventness with historical and biographical continuity. In the subsequent discussion of temporality in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Morson points out that Bakhtin overlooked an important device used by both these authors, namely, the device of sideshadowing. It is in Chapter Four, "Sideshadowing," the first chapter of Part II, titled "Sideshadowing and Its Possibilities," that Morson's own theory gains prominence as he undertakes to mend the drawbacks of Bakhtin's models of temporality and their relation to freedom and narrative and proceeds to exemplify his concepts in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

After the celebration of openness and the present moment in Chapter Four, Chapter Five discusses various "diseases" of the Bakhtinian presentness: its "desiccation" under the threat from—or desire for—the impending future; its hypertrophy, where past and future all but vanish; its neglect when characters are never "quite there"; and its splintering under the constant co-presence of too prominent sideshadows. If the "desiccation" is the first disease, the second is "the isolated present," with its overemphasis on the present moment. In this mood of temporality the present moment is felt as completely isolated from the past and the future. Illustrations offered are of compulsive gambling or the temporal perception of the epileptic in his fit (Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*). The third disease is "hypothetical time" that assumes past, present and future states of time as unreal. Chekhov is presented here as a principal practitioner of such time. "Multiple time," finally, is unusual as it represents a model in which "whatever possibility is realized in one universe is realized in another" (*Narrative* 227). One example of this sort of time comes from Jorge Luis Borges's story, "The Garden of Forking Paths." This model deceptively suggests the idea of freedom while in fact unexpectedly promoting determinism.

Chapter Six is devoted in its entirety to a discussion of "backshadowing." Morson extends its meaning from literature to the critique of Soviet society and Marxism with its proclaimed inevitability. Chapter Seven concludes the book by paralleling free opinion and the world of possibility. In this union, sideshadowing plays a key role and promotes

intellectual pluralism and freedom. Morson's book ends with his assertion that "time is open and will always be open" and a moral address to the reader not to forget the present moment and to remember that "complex moral thinking, informed by a rich sense of temporality, may liberate us from the tyranny of the present instant" (282).

It is clear from what has been outlined here that novels are, for Morson, anything but instances of light literary entertainment. The great novels of the nineteenth century he puts at center stage are to be read as serious philosophical treatises on time, in fact the only possible analyses of time in action, so to speak. It is under this premise that his arguments, noticeably toward the end of the book, assume an increasingly moral undertone: from the discussion of fictional plots and their manifestation in narrative time-forms to philosophical-existentialist time as the realm of real human life and action; and from the description of political systems that "shut down" time and force their subjects to live in the backshadow of time, Morson leaves no doubt that "good" time is open time.

It is therefore not surprising that Morson wants no truck with Freudianism, and the book contains an underlying polemic against psychoanalysis—at least as a literary method. It is a thinking, in which the past throws its (too) long shadow over the present. Morson's dislike of Freud, like Bakhtin's, has its roots in the notion of "prosaics." What Bakhtin calls *theoretism*, or, in his later works, *monologism*, receives in Morson's and Emerson's *Prosaics* the pejorative label of *semiotic totalitarianism*. Whereas Freud claims that his approach to psychical processes is able to decode the meaning of certain human behavior Morson, together with Bakhtin, sees this thinking as *totalitarian* because it assumes the explanation of "the totality of things" (*Prosaics* 28); and it is *semiotic* because it postulates a system of signs that serve as clues in interpreting accidental events in human life. Freudianism, therefore, is an example of "systemic" thinking in psychology that predetermines human behavior and excludes the possibility of sideshadowing.

Morson's stance is also anti-romantic. Implied in his utterly convincing and coherent interpretation of *Anna Karenina*, in many ways the centerpiece of the book and the clearest instantiation of many of its theoretical points, is the rejection of the romantic-heroic self-conception of the novel's heroine. Anna sees herself cast—in fact, casts herself—as an *a priori* tragic figure that reads her future doom into (and out of) insignificant events and encounters, thereby neglecting her own decision-making capacity at each present moment. Morson's provocative interpretation of *Anna Karenina* emphasizes individual responsibility as well as freedom and necessity. If the reader of Tolstoy's novel customarily accuses the novelist of exposing Anna's moral fall and then punishing her for it, Morson lifts the blame from Tolstoy's shoulders and puts it on Anna's own. In Morson's scenario, because Anna follows a closed and therefore predetermined romantic narrative, she frames her life herself: there is no possibility for her to escape suicide as she is unwilling to accept the eventness of life and break out of her fictionalized world. It is not the novel's time, however, but Anna's own time that is based on foreshadowing and is thus closed. Anna has no freedom in her actions. *Narrative and Freedom* ends up on the side of

life as a prosaic affair, a series of small decisions to be made in, and as part of, the daily grind of human existence, a pragmatic progress from moment to moment—always open, it is true, yet never quite free. Morson sides with Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* [French original 1939]), the critique of romantic love in the European literary tradition. The "wrong" aspects of love have been emphasized and canonized, the extraordinary, the scandalous, the flamboyant and adulterous instead of the orderly, domestic, and faithful drudgery of ordinary marriages of ordinary people. Pictures of desire and imagination, grand gestures, self-glorification or posturing disappear from Morson's account or, more precisely, are disapproved of. The false, maybe, but also grandly false; the untrue, perhaps, but also the magic, the fantastic, the surreal, find little room in Morson's account. He assumes rational heroes, authors, and readers—something that is far from always the case.

Finally, Morson certainly wants nothing to do with deconstruction and discourse analysis which dissolve historically responsible subjects into mere textual networks. In this context a word needs to be said about Morson's choice of texts, most of them, as he himself states, "realistic novels, especially Russian novels of ideas [T]hese novels exhibit . . . a temporality" Morson himself wishes "to explore and recommend" (5). This is a crucial point as, indeed, Morson's conceptualization of narrative time only works in such novels. It does not cover, for instance, the modernist tradition. The works of Bely, Joyce, Proust and other modernist writers, precisely for their different structuring of time, cannot fruitfully be analyzed with Morson's temporal narrative concepts. The reason lies predominantly in the fact that the characters in these works no longer live in the stream of time (even if this stream is marked by forks and turbulences) but inversely, time lives *in* them. Time in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, to take the most obvious example, can no longer be related as a series of past moments to a present, as Marcel, the narrator, *hardly exists* in the present. He is a presence—but one that only emerges by means of and in his ramblings through his past.

Connected with this subjectivization or interiorization of time in the modernist tradition is another phenomenon: time, now no longer of real or at least realist essence, gives way to language itself as the connecting medium of the plot; and events, now no longer related in a necessary temporal sequence, follow the vagaries of unmediated linguistic articulations. It is at the point, where the realist tradition gives way to impressionism, decadence, and full-blown modernism, the point, where the narrative "I" begins to hypertrophy and swallow up real time that Morson's concepts of temporality begin to slip. This fundamental shift from a *temporalized* world to a *textualized* one (which has called forth its associated discourse: analytical concepts of interpretation) marks for Morson the end of the historically and morally responsible individual. His irony is hard to miss when he refers to "the stern tribunal of associate professors," caught in its own "chronocentricity" as the inevitable consequence of understanding (reading) the world as a text, that judges—and misjudges—historical realities, cultural heritages, and individual achievements "according to the latest orthodoxies of the academy" (279). It is this barely disguised polemic

that makes *Narrative and Freedom* so refreshingly old-fashioned. There is one last caveat, though, against siding unreservedly with Morson—and it can be made by deconstructionists as well as realists: like Bakhtin, Morson occasionally comes perilously close to the fallacy of equating literary characters with real human beings. And it is, perhaps, not unfair to ask if the same share of freedom is indeed allotted to real people in the real world as to literary characters in their fictional universes. While this is more than a quibble, it should stop nobody from reading this well argued, thought-provoking and provocative book that clearly challenges many literary-ideological positions held out of a reflex rather than true reflection.

WORKS CITED

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- and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.