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ON NARRATING MORE WISELY
A Prosaic Supplement to Ricœur's Poetics of Narrative Identity

Abstract

This essay examines Ricœur's account of narrative identity and asks the practical question of what it looks like to tell our stories – and narrate ourselves – well. Ricœur sees good self-narration as freeing us from the grip of narcissism, and argues that literature offers models for telling our stories in a non-narcissistic way. I develop this insight by drawing on Gary Saul Morson's theory of prosaics, which shows how literature can form better habits of self-narration by training us to attend to the small, contingent details of everyday life. I illustrate this point with Morson's reading of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoj's masterpiece of prosaic fiction. This prosaic supplement to Ricœur's account of narrative identity can show us what it might look like to narrate ourselves more wisely.

Keywords: Fiction; Narcissism; Narrative Identity; Ricœur; Tolstoj

1. *How We Narrate Now*

Stories are everywhere. We are story-telling creatures, and we have been for millennia. It is only relatively recently, however – in the last decades of the 20th Century and the first decades of the 21st – that philosophers have begun to focus on the importance of stories for understanding the human being. Thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Iris Murdoch, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricœur have shown how selfhood, personal identity, and moral formation requires stories – or to use that more high-flown academic term: narrative.

Alongside this narrative turn in philosophy is another, more popular fascination with personal narrative. To know ourselves is to know our stories. This idea is not new, since it has a history running back through the Romantics, the Puritans, to Augustine¹. However, this newer fascination with personal narrative brings with it more worrisome tendencies toward subjectivism and narcissism. The self can't get enough of its own story. We witness this kind of obsessive self-narration in our therapeutic culture, identity politics, the cult of celebrity and the self-serving memoir, in personal branding and the self-promotion of social media. It can be self-aggrandizing or it can fixate on one's victimhood, but either way my story is my truth: above scrutiny and the basis for my self-assertion, self-justification, and self-promotion.

My purpose here is not to offer a moralistic complaint, but to sort out the good from the bad. The problem is not narration, but narcissism. After all, narrative is fundamental

1 Ch. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1989; A. JACOBS, *Looking Before and After: Testimony and the Christian Life*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2008, Kindle location pp. 80-81.

to being human, since our self-understanding appears in story form. As Ricœur argues, narrative is what makes biological life into fully human life². Life is an ‘incipient story’, which means it calls for – even ‘demands’ – narration. Thus the question is not whether to narrate or not, but how to narrate well rather than badly. To narrate badly is to narrate exclusively for self-justification or self-assertion. This is a practical question. What would a better, wiser, healthier – in Ricœur’s words, «non-narcissistic» – form of self-narration look like?

According to Ricœur, one of our best and most instructive teachers for self-narration is literature. On his account, «the stories passed down in the literary tradition» can actually be a pathway out of narcissism: «what we lose on the side of narcissism, we regain on the side of our narrative identity. In the place of an ego enchanted by itself is born a self [...]»³. How can literature help to deliver the self from narcissistic self-narration? One way, I will argue, is by forming better habits of attention. To make this case, I draw on Gary Saul Morson’s theory of *prosaics*, which holds that we need to learn to attend to the small, unnoticed aspects of ordinary life. When we narrate, we often overlook the ‘tiny bits’, focusing instead on grand dramatic events. Yet the tiny bits have the biggest influence on how our stories unfold. Literature – particularly realist, prosaic literature – can therefore help train our attention to see what we often overlook. As a case study, Morson’s reading of *Anna Karenina* draws out its prosaic wisdom and offers instruction for how to narrate ourselves more wisely.

2. Who Do We Think We Are?

We are our stories. In Ricœur’s words: «There is an equivalence [...] between what I am and the story of my life»⁴. Our lives are already implicitly stories, and by narrating we give a more explicit articulation of these nascent stories. ‘Emplotment’ achieves integration, giving concordance to the discordant elements of the self. With the story, the implied self can emerge.⁵ In Ricœur’s words, «selfhood is never given at the start»⁶ – i.e., prior to narration. Instead, the self is constituted by the interpretive task of narration.

Yet to say that ‘I am my story’ does not mean that my story alone constitutes my being. We do not create ourselves *ex nihilo* through self-narration. Ricœur argues that, regarding ourselves, we are narrators rather than authors⁷. Thus while selfhood is never given at the start of narration, neither is it simply created by a narrating ego. Our stories

2 P. RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator* in Id., *On Psychoanalysis: Writings and Lectures*, Vol.1., transl. by D. Pellauer, Polity Press, Malden, MA 2012, pp. 195-97.

3 RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, cit., p. 200. It is also worth noting that Ricœur reckons with Kohut’s argument that the healthy self is one in which narcissism is not simply cast off, but «transmuted into a mature form of narcissism» akin to Ricœur’s idea of self-esteem. See *The Self in Psychoanalysis and Phenomenological Philosophy* in Id., *On Psychoanalysis*, cit., pp. 79 and 92.

4 RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, cit., p. 201.

5 *Ivi*, p. 198.

6 *Ivi*, p. 200.

7 *Ibid.*

begin with given elements: our bodily being, history, location in place and time, activities and sufferings, connections to other people, abilities and limitations. Narrative seeks to understand the meaning given in this material by bringing it into a greater coherence. Consequently, Ricœur describes narrative identity as something we recover rather than impose. The result is a «nonsubstantial narrative unity»⁸. The narrative self is not a static or stable substance, a given thing that exists prior to all interpretation; nor is it a fluctuating state of consciousness, a Heraclitean river or Humean bundle of perceptions. To put it in Kierkegaardian terms, it is both a gift and a task, and part of that task is narrating oneself.

In addition to being non-substantial, Ricœur describes narrative identity as also non-narcissistic. He argues that if the subject were «given at the start» prior to narration, then «it would run the risk of reducing itself to a narcissistic, self-centered, and avaricious ego», in short, «an ego enchanted by itself»⁹. This self-enchancement is part of the human condition, but in modernity this condition has intensified because of the story modernity has told about the self. It is a flattering story, largely because it is a story the modern self tells about itself. Its hero is an independent, autonomous, rational agent, a thinking consciousness that stands above the body, positioned to master and possess nature by its own rational ingenuity. This self is a social atom, existing prior to relations to others, community, tradition, and authority. This self fights a heroic battle for liberation from oppressive institutions. This self constitutes objects and gives things their meaning. In sum, this self writes its own story.

Critics have often taken this modern self at its word and assumed that the modern self suffers from excessive self-confidence and is therefore narcissistic. Narcissism is not, however, simply overconfidence, selfishness, or excessive self-love. On the contrary, the narcissist's self-fixation is rooted in insecurity¹⁰. Consider Descartes, who contributes a key plotline to the story of the modern self. Descartes' retreat into the *cogito* was an attempt to overcome skepticism. *Cogito, ergo sum* was supposed to secure the self as an indubitable truth, but as Ricœur argues in *Oneself as Another*, this 'exaltation of the *cogito*' gave way to the 'humiliation' of the *cogito* by the masters of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud), who showed that the *cogito* is not its own master¹¹. Did Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud leave the self less narcissistic? They certainly shattered the false confidence of the *cogito*, but instead of forgetting about itself, the self became even more desperate to establish its identity. Narcissism is the self turned inward from frustrated desire, desperately attempting to secure its identity in pathological ways¹².

A similar frustration lurks in our post-Romantic ideal of the authentic self. Rousseau and the Romantics have contributed another vital plotline to the story of the self-en-

8 *Ivi*, pp. 199-200.

9 *Ivi*, p. 200.

10 This is Christopher Lasch's argument in C. LASCH, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1978.

11 RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*. Translated by K. Blamey. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 21.

12 LASCH, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., pp. 32-33, 51, 232, 239.

chanted ego. This is the story of the self as a deep inner truth, unique and original to each individual. Discovering this identity requires a journey of self-exploration, with the goal of giving authentic expression to who we really are¹³. This Romantic mythos of the self has instilled in us fantasies of individuality, autonomy, originality, and spontaneity¹⁴. It promises liberation from tradition, authority, and institutions so we can live rich, vibrant lives of our own choosing and experience greater satisfactions in our work and relationships. But the flip side of this authenticity is a general malaise, a disappointment with what individualism hath wrought¹⁵. The result is greater narcissism, as the self tries to find itself while liberated – or rather, cut off – from the very stories, traditions, and institutions that once enabled us to know who we are.

This is a bad hermeneutical circle, a vicious cycle of frustration. The more attention we pay ourselves, the less we know who we are. These insecurities play out in our practices of personal narration. The need to tell our stories takes on a new urgency as the self is left feeling insecure and inauthentic. Narcissistic narration is less a symptom of excessive self-love than the desperate attempt of a fragile ego to find itself.

3. *Deliver Us from Narcissism?*

According to Ricœur, the self is not simply its own author. We are only able to narrate ourselves because we are heirs of a rich tradition of discourse that gives us the capacity to understand our experience¹⁶. We learn how to tell our own stories through the stories we have inherited. The self-enchanted ego becomes a self by being «instructed by cultural symbols»¹⁷. This includes religious symbols and narratives, as well as literature, which will be my focus here. In his essay *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, Ricœur points to the power of literature to help free us from narcissism. This claim might seem rather implausible. How can literature help with such a serious problem?

Literature has the capacity to refigure the world of the reader. Readers of Ricœur will be familiar with this point. The text is not a self-contained thing; it refers to a world in front of itself, proposing a horizon of new, existential possibilities. These are not projections of the reader into the text, but a new reality the text itself gives and the reader receives. The reader is not the giver of meaning but a recipient. With these proposed worlds, the reader receives an enlarged, expanded self¹⁸.

13 TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 372-73, 375-76. See also C. TRUEMAN, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL 2020.

14 S. GARDNER, *The Eros and Ambition of Psychological Man* in Ph. RIEFF, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*. 40th Anniversary Edition, ISI Books, Wilmington, DE 2007, p. 229.

15 See TAYLOR, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1991, chap. 1 pp. 2-4.

16 RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, cit., p. 200.

17 *Ibid.*

18 RICŒUR, *Appropriation*, in M.J. VALDÉS (Ed.), *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON 1991, p. 87.

The text expands our narrow horizons, enabling us to see beyond ourselves. It also instructs us. The stories we have inherited from our traditions give us models for the ‘emplotment’ of our own stories. Through «the stories passed down in the literary tradition», we receive a narrative unity¹⁹. We recognize our own stories in the stories we have received. This gives us a deeper, more firmly rooted sense of self as we recognize that our stories are not only our own, but part of a larger narrative tradition to which we belong.

The stories we hear and read provide models for our own self-narration. This does not mean these stories are ready-made templates. The meaning of the text requires appropriation, to make its meaning one’s own. Here it is important to clarify that appropriation is not simply ‘taking possession’, such that every book is ultimately about me. That attitude is what Ricœur calls the «“narcissism of the reader”»: to find only oneself in the text, to impose and rediscover oneself». Instead, the moment of understanding, of appropriating the meaning of the text, always involves a «relinquishing», «letting-go», «divestment», or «dispossession» of the narcissistic ego, so that I am taken into the world revealed by the text.²⁰ This is the hermeneutical transposition of Jesus’ saying: «Whoever who would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will live». The ego is lost but in its place comes the self, expanded by the text and delivered from its narcissism.

If literature can deliver us from the narcissism of the exalted *cogito*, it can also help free us from Romantic fantasies of originality. Literature connects us to traditions, communities, and institutions that precede us and will carry on after us. The Romantic story pits the self against all this, seeing these as sources of conformity and oppression; yet attempts to constitute oneself apart from them tend to be self-defeating. Here there is room to extend Ricœur’s critique of Romantic hermeneutics²¹ to include a critique of the Romantic hermeneutics of the self. Romanticism takes what is true about the self – that each of us is a unique individual – and amplifies it to the level of distortion by disregarding our dependence on others. For in fact, we are only able to realize our uniqueness, originality, and individuality insofar as we are already heirs to a particular tradition and fluent in a language and literary heritage, one that has revealed this truth about the self, and praised it as desirable²².

There is another way that literature can help deliver us from narcissism – one that goes beyond Ricœur’s account. In what follows I would like to suggest that literature can also help us to form better habits of attention that are very helpful to seeing ourselves in a more truthful, non-narcissistic way.

19 RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, cit., p. 200.

20 RICŒUR, *Appropriation*, cit., pp. 95-96.

21 Ricœur critiques Romantic hermeneutics for its view of understanding as a kind of psychic, empathic unity with the mind of the author, as well as its methodological opposition of explanation and understanding. See RICŒUR, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, TCU Press, Fort Worth, TX 1976, pp. 71-75.

22 This is Charles Taylor’s argument in *The Sources of the Self* and *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

4. What Moves the Plot Forward?

Literature forms our understanding. It does this in part by training our attention, helping us to identify and focus on details that matter – characters, motives, choices, and events. Events are vital to a story: they mark the beginning and ending of a story, and they move the plot forward.²³ But what counts as an event? What are the details that deserve our attention?

We often assume that the most important events are the biggest, most dramatic moments, whether in things that happen to the characters or in their moments of decision and decisive action. This interpretive bias can also impair our understanding of human situations and human actions. Iris Murdoch makes this point regarding the nature of choice. Both existentialism and analytic ethics have assumed a false idea of choice as the act of an «empty choosing will»²⁴. Consequently, both lack appreciation for what leads up to and precipitates the choice. The locus of freedom is not the moment of deliberate choice, but «what happens in between such choices» – namely, our attending, our looking and listening, which are ongoing. This means «the exercise of our freedom is a small, piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments»²⁵. In order to understand human agency and human action, then, we need to look at human attention:

If we ignore the prior work of attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify it with. But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continually it goes on, and how continually it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over²⁶.

Attention matters. Gary Saul Morson argues that directing our attention is the most frequent – and therefore most important – activity we perform²⁷. As Ricœur defines it, attention is «the power of making appear» of drawing an object out of the background into the foreground.²⁸ We are constantly attending, paying attention to one thing rather than another. What we attend to, and how we attend to it, is of great ethical importance. Murdoch puts this in terms of moral vision and moral imagination: «I can only choose within the world I can see»²⁹. Literature teaches us «how to picture and understand hu-

23 RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, cit., p. 188.

24 She refers specifically to Jean-Paul Sartre and Stuart Hampshire.

25 I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge, London and New York 1971, p. 36.

26 *Ibid.*

27 G.S. MORSON, *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2007, p. 225.

28 RICŒUR, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Transl. by E.V. Kohak, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1966, p. 156.

29 MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good*, cit., pp. 35-36.

man situations»³⁰. This means not only the moment of choice but the world in which we choose, including the «small, piecemeal business» that makes up this world. Literature, like philosophy, has the goal of helping us see the familiar with fresh eyes. It trains our attention so we can better understand the larger world in which we act.

This point is the crux of Morson's theory of *prosaics*, which is «a way of thinking about human events that focuses on the ordinary, messy, quotidian facts of daily life—in short, on the prosaic»³¹. Prosaics is concerned with (1) the contingent and (2) the ordinary. It attends to the contingencies that make up our experience. Life is not a system in which everything happens as part of a coherent rational whole, which means that no Newtonian social science is possible³². Instead, human life is full of unpredictable events and unintended consequences. Thus «the neater an account of experience, and the more it resembles a well-made story, the farther it departs from reality»³³.

Prosaics also attends to the ordinary. It is normal that we take notice of the big dramatic moments, since these stand out from the flow of everyday life and often require close attention. This does not, however, mean they are the most important for defining and deciding our lives. Often the biggest influence on our lives comes from the small decisions and details that lead up to the big events. These little details are hidden in plain view. We don't see them because they are so familiar³⁴. Most of the time this is a good thing because it allows skills and habits to take over; if nothing receded into the background, we would be unable to focus on anything at all. The problem arises when we take these little things so much for granted that we overlook them entirely. The «tiny alterations of daily life»³⁵ often make the biggest changes. Learning to live more wisely thus requires learning to attend to the small, unnoticed details in daily life³⁶. It means learning to find our happiness in the prosaic details of ordinary life, rather than waiting for life to begin. As Morson puts it, true life begins «where the tiny bit begins»³⁷.

The same is true of true art: it begins with the tiny bit³⁸. Morson offers *prosaics* as a counterpoint to traditional poetics, which has focused on epics, lyrics, and tragedies. To be sure, we still have much to learn from works in those genres, as Ricœur shows with his reading of Aristotle's poetics. Poetry – in Aristotle's sense, narrative and drama – help flesh out ethics by presenting the imagination with 'sample cases' that teach us «to connect the ethical aspect of human behavior with happiness and unhappiness, fortune and misfortune»³⁹. An Aristotelian approach to literature attends to the quality of life as a whole rather than isolated actions, and this can help develop practical wisdom

30 *Ivi*, p. 33.

31 MORSON, *What is Prosaics?*, in *Id.*, *Prosaics and Other Provocations: Empathy, Open Time, and the Novel*, Academic Studies Press, Boston, MA 2013, p. 15.

32 *Id.*, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, *cit.*, p. 156.

33 *Ivi*, p. XXI.

34 MORSON, *What is Prosaics?*, *cit.*, p. 12.

35 *Ivi*, p. 13.

36 *Ivi*, pp. 18-19.

37 *Ivi*, p. 31.

38 *Ibid.*

39 RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, *cit.*, p. 190.

(*phronesis, prudentia*), which Ricœur refers to as «narrative intelligence» Nevertheless, Aristotle's poetics is not very attentive to the daily flow of mundane choices, largely because ancient Greek poetry simply wasn't attentive to ordinary people and everyday life. Hence Aristotle's famous remark that poetry is more philosophical than history: poetry reveals «universal aspects of the human condition», whereas historians are «overly dependent on life's anecdotal aspects»⁴⁰.

By contrast, for prosaics the «anecdotal aspects» of life are precisely the stuff of life, the place where virtues develop and happiness is enjoyed. Depicting these aspects artistically, however, required a new literary form unknown to Aristotle: namely, the novel. Morson contends that realist novels are best suited to depicting «prosaic facts» because they give the thick, detailed descriptions of real life experiences:

Novels allow us to trace the process of thinking and feeling as the character experiences it, in a way we never could in life. We feel what it is like to be someone else, to see the world differently, not in the abstract but in the shifting alterations of quotidian experience. We live into the character, we empathize. No other kind of knowledge does that, and no other art form does it as well⁴¹.

As examples of the prosaic novel, Morson cites the works of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoj. In what follows I will take a detour through Morson's reading of Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina*, which is a premiere example of prosaic attention and prosaic wisdom. It also suggests a potential pathway out of narcissism.

5. *Anna Karenina*

When we read, we are able to apply fictional narratives as models for our own narrative self-understanding. As Ricœur writes, «we apply to ourselves the plots we have received from our culture» and «try out [...] the different roles assumed by favorite characters in the stories we love best».⁴² These «imaginative variations on our ego» can bring a gain in self-understanding, but Ricœur recognizes this positive outcome is not guaranteed. «Does literature give us access to a deeper acquaintance with things or is it an obstacle?»⁴³ Both are possible. The literary imagination can lead us away from ourselves into a fantastic, distorted self-understanding, as in the case of Don Quixote, «who lives in an imaginary, fantastized relation to others»⁴⁴ Likewise in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland imagines herself living in one of the gothic novels she loves, and this leads her to a comical misinterpretation of her experiences.

40 *Ibid.*

41 MORSON, *What is Prosaics?*, cit., p. 28.

42 RICŒUR, *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, cit., p. 200.

43 ID., *Narrative: Its Place in Psychoanalysis*, in ID., *On Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 205.

44 *Ibid.*

Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina* is another, more serious, example of the power of literature to guide and misguide our self-narration. Anna has a passionate love affair with Count Vronsky, which leads to the destruction of her marriage, separation from her family, and finally her suicide. Anna imagines herself as a heroine in a romantic novel, and views her marriage and affair accordingly⁴⁵. As Morson observes, Anna is «a genre expatriate from romance in the world of the prosaic novel»⁴⁶. She tries to live out her affair according to the example of a romantic novel. She is even annoyed when Vronsky «does not keep to the script»⁴⁷.

Anna's self-understanding has been formed by the ideology of romantic love. Morson offers a helpful characterization of this ideology. It is extremist, convinced that intensity of feeling defines true love, and that this passion cannot be contained within the institutions of marriage and family, which are boring, conformist, and often hypocritical. The ideology of romantic love is fatalistic, depicting love as an irresistible passion that is unchosen and overwhelming. One *falls* in love. The lovers have been chosen by fate, destined for their love. And as romantic love is beyond choosing, it is likewise beyond good and evil⁴⁸.

Anna's actions are informed by this ideology. Anna is enchanted with herself as the romantic heroine, enchanted with her love even more than she is with her lover.⁴⁹ As Morson observes: «Imagining oneself as a tragic, romantic, or novelistic hero or heroine [...] confers a spurious sense of importance. It feeds narcissism»⁵⁰. This narcissism is evident in Anna's idealization of Vronsky, as well as her idealization of her love⁵¹. As Anna's affair with Vronsky continues, she runs up against the limiting power of reality. What will her new life with Vronsky look like? As Anna gives herself over to her affair, she becomes more narcissistic. Anna wants a self that lives at the heights of romantic passion, and her narcissism comes from her frustration at being unable to translate this exalted passion into the practical, mundane details of life. Having given herself over to her affair, she has nothing else. She is determined to make the passion everything, and it consumes her entire being and eclipses any mundane concerns. As a result, where she once idealized Vronsky, she begins to resent him because of the gap between her idealization and his reality. The course of the affair leads «from the narcissistic heaven of romance to the narcissistic hell of isolation»⁵². Anna's frustration slowly cuts her off from everything outside of herself and culminates in her suicide, which she sees as a similarly scripted conclusion to her story.

45 It doesn't help when others support this narrative, as when Vronsky's cousin tells Anna that she is «like a heroine from a novel». L. TOLSTOJ, *Anna Karenina*, ed. By G.S. Morson, transl. by M. Schwartz, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2014, p. 273.

46 MORSON, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, cit., p. 29 and 67.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ivi*, pp. 62-68.

49 *Ivi*, p. 66, 68.

50 *Ivi*, p. 227.

51 TOLSTOJ, *Anna Karenina*, cit., p. 328: «As at any rendezvous, she rolled into one her imagined notion of him (incomparably better, impossible in reality) and the way he really was».

52 MORSON, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, cit., p. 131.

Most readers and critics have read *Anna Karenina* as a story of passionate love defying (and ultimately crushed by) the hypocritical standards of bourgeois society. Morson's reading suggests the novel is actually a drama of attention. How does an affair like this happen? Anna's affair with Vronsky is punctuated by grand dramatic moments: their meeting in the train station, at the ball, the consummation of their illicit love, giving birth to a daughter and nearly dying, running off to live together, and Anna's eventual suicide. These events advance the plot, but they do not come from nowhere. Tolstoj shows how Anna slowly gives herself over to the affair through little shifts in attention. These little shifts are highly consequential choices, such as the way she allows herself to daydream about Vronsky and the way she starts attending to little oddities and irritations about her husband, Karenin, like his misshapen ears⁵³.

Anna's attention is a form of self-deception, or «studied misperception». She takes many tiny steps to train herself to misperceive her situation. Through small compromises of honesty, Anna slowly impairs her ability to perceive the truth. Anna depicts her husband and marriage dishonestly in order to justify her affair with Vronsky⁵⁴. In time, Anna comes to represent Karenin as an unfeeling bureaucrat: he doesn't know what love is; he is a hypocritical man only concerned with success and maintaining proper appearances; he is «a puppet», «a machine»⁵⁵. By indulging in these harsh judgments, Anna's imagination of her husband gradually grows more severe.

Anna's husband Karenin also shows the power of small acts of attention, and the power of not giving them. He is quite adept at refusing to attend to what is happening with Anna, distracting himself by inventing work, and achieving a «mastery over his thoughts» in his ability to ignore what he prefers not to see – until it is so obvious as to be undeniable⁵⁶. Anna's brother Stiva is even more adept at the art of not attending. He is good at suppressing his conscience by simply directing his attention away from anything that disturbs it, whether his habit of cheating on his wife Dolly, or when he intercedes for Anna and manipulates Karenin⁵⁷.

6. *The Higher Life of the Prosaic*

Just as Anna sees her story as a grand passionate romance, so have many readers of the novel. Morson proposes a contrary reading, showing how the novel critiques the false – and frustrating – ideology of romantic love. Tolstoj's novel is not, however, the work of a killjoy trying to coerce readers to behave themselves. Instead, the novel offers an attractive vision of the stable, enduring happiness that is found in the prosaic. Tolstoj's

53 TOLSTOJ, *Anna Karenina*, cit., pp. 96, 104.

54 MORSON, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, cit., pp. 94, 103.

55 TOLSTOJ, *Anna Karenina*, cit., pp. 136-37, 175, 331.

56 *Ivi*, pp. 186, 256ff.

57 *Ivi*, pp. 392-93. Tolstoj signals Stiva's lack of attention early on, describing how he forms his opinions and views – not consciously changing them, but gradually shifting with majority opinion and the opinion of the newspaper he reads.

prosaic vision is an antidote to romantic narcissism. Life, love, and happiness take place in the ordinary and every day. We see this with Levin and Kitty. Whereas Anna is in love with an abstract ideal of love, Levin and Kitty learn to love each other as real persons. Thus while Anna sees marriage as the end of passion, a life of duty rather than the devotion of intense desire, Kitty and Levin discover that prosaic love leads into the real intimacy of mutual understanding.

The modern romantic imaginary pits the immediacy of erotic passion against the mediating institutions of marriage and family. In this romantic fantasy, authenticity means following one's own individual, original, spontaneous desires. No matter the cost, one must be true to one's own passions. Yet this pursuit of authentic, erotic self-expression is self-defeating because it undermines the conditions under which genuine intimacy and mutual understanding are possible. The prosaic life of marriage offers a higher level erotic satisfaction, but it requires attention. This higher eroticism depends on sustained intimacy, understanding each other emotionally and physically⁵⁸. It also includes non-erotic intimacy of touch and communication that come with sustained closeness⁵⁹. This experience requires the ego to transcend itself and see that which is right in front of one's eyes.

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch argues that narcissism occurs when one is unable or unwilling to confront the fundamental limitations that reality imposes on human existence. The narcissistic ego retreats into its own fantasies of power, freedom, and self-sufficiency as a way of avoiding the limitations – and ‘terrors’ – of existence. Lasch takes this idea from Freud, along with the suggestion that the «homely comforts of love, work, and family life» can serve as defenses against narcissism. Why? Because love and work «connect us to a world that is independent of our wishes yet responsive to our needs». These prosaic goods «enable us to explore a small corner of the world and to come to accept it on its own terms»⁶⁰.

This prescription of work, love, and family could sound like a real lowering of horizons, leaving the self with no higher aspirations than a comfortable domestic life. It was Freud, after all, who helped install a therapeutic culture that discarded spiritual striving, and in which there is nothing at stake beyond a sense of personal well-being⁶¹. This is not, however, Tolstoj's vision of the prosaic. One of the novel's main narrative arcs concerns Levin's struggle with the terrors of a meaningless existence. He does not however settle for a Freudian acceptance of *Anankē*, the tragic, harsh necessity of reality. Instead, Levin experiences a genuine religious conversion. What is remarkable is that Levin's faith, and his abiding sense of the meaning of existence, does not belong to some sepa-

58 MORSON, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, cit., pp. 69-72.

59 *Ivi*, pp. 71-72.

60 LASCH, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., p. 248.

61 The therapeutic replaces the ascetic renunciations traditionally required by religious, philosophical, political, and artistic pursuits, along with the traditional consolations for these renunciations: the good, the true, the beautiful, and salvation. The therapeutic standard is not the good life but ‘better living?’. RIEFF, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, cit., pp. 10, 16, 19, 32, 48-49, 206; see also Gardner's essay in the same volume, p. 240.

rate, special realm of life. It takes place within his relation to his wife, family, and work. Levin's relation to the higher is thoroughly prosaic⁶². It does not consist in ecstatic moments of religious experience, but in a gradually dawning awareness that his life, work, and relations are meaningful rather than absurd. This did not come through metaphysical deduction, and it cannot be expressed in propositions, but it is given in the fullness of his daily life. It does, however, require attention.

Recall Ricœur's appeal to the saying of Jesus: «Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it». Then note what Jesus says in the preceding verse: «Whoever would be my disciple must deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me» (Luke 9:23). Taking up the cross, losing one's life – only rarely are these triumphant moments of martyrdom; most of the time, they are small acts of daily devotion. Great spiritual battles are fought in ordinary life.

The question, then, is how we view work, love, and family. If we look to these as platforms for our own performance and as occasions for our own self-fulfillment, we will end up frustrated and remain in the circle of narcissism. As Lasch writes, «Our standards of 'creative, meaningful work' are too exalted to survive disappointment. Our ideal of 'true romance' puts an impossible burden on personal relationships. We demand too much of life, too little of ourselves»⁶³. Work, love, and family give us meaningful activity insofar as they teach us to transcend ourselves toward that which is higher than ourselves. That is where to find the security to leave behind our narcissism.

This self-transcendence also has implications for how we tell our stories. I have maintained that self-narration is a good thing. It is essential to being human. At the same time, part of learning to tell our stories in a non-narcissistic way is to recognize the limits of our own narratives. As Ricœur observes, when Jesus tells his followers, «Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will live», he effectively pronounces the impossibility of formulating a self-sufficient identity: «Any project of making a continuous whole of one's existence is ruined»⁶⁴. This does not spell the end of narrative identity. «Lose your life to find it» is a paradoxical teaching, which «implicitly affirms that, in spite of everything, life is reconciled and harmonious even through its paradoxical nature». This has a beneficial relativizing effect. The stories we tell about ourselves are not the last word, and our narrative identity, while a good thing, is not the most needful. I suspect this is the key to learning how to narrate in a non-narcissistic way.

Conclusion

Real life is lived in the prosaic. Literature like Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina* does us a great service when it trains us to be more attentive to the prosaic details of life. As Morson

62 MORSON, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, cit., pp. 210-12, 220.

63 LASCH, *The Culture of Narcissism*, cit., p. 248.

64 RICŒUR, *Manifestation and Proclamation*, in ID., *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. by M.I. Wallace, transl. by D. Pellauer, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1995, p. 59.

writes, «Wisdom is acquired by attentive reflection on experience in all its complexity»⁶⁵. He says something similar of art: «Genuine art is made from experience observed with great sensitivity»⁶⁶. We might say the same of narrative. What Ricœur calls «narrative intelligence» is a kind of practical wisdom that makes us better readers and tellers of stories. Better self-narration requires sensitive, careful attention to the complexities and finer details of experience. In short, we need good habits of attention. This means attending prosaically, so we have wiser expectations of life and better judgment regarding the stories we hear, read, and tell. We need to discern when a story is telling the truth – the truth about life, human existence, human relationships, and human actions – so it can illuminate rather than obscure our own self-understanding. We need to know what makes for a good story, so we can make wiser choices in our own lives. All of this requires attention to the prosaic details we often overlook, and thus to learning to narrate ourselves in a wiser, less narcissistic way.

65 MORSON, *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, cit., p. 223.

66 *Ivi*, p. 230.