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

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

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The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something - because it is always before one's eyes.)... And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

No historian would claim that his works are finer art than the works of an artist. But does the artist recreate the historical epoch better than the objective historian? Generally historians assume that only significant moments make history. In describing the life of a people they tend to focus on monumental events and grand figures, neglecting ordinary events of everyday life. These ordinary events and people are disregarded as historically irrelevant. Leo Tolstoy argued that historians have no reliable way of assessing significance or of formulation generalizations. He rejected the idea that history consists of only celebrated events. According to Tolstoy "lives consist of a series of almost imperceptible choices; it is the myriad infinitesimally small decisions we make and the aggregate of habits we acquire from moment to moment that shape selves and constitute personal identity". Since life is so complex and diverse, the most important events in history, culture and psyche may be the most ordinary and prosaic events. Tolstoy declares that it is in the rhythm of everyday life, in the ordinary and unnoticed, that the meaning of life in history is to be found. Lion Feuchtwanger, the German historical novelist, is greatly influenced by Tolstoy. He incorporates Tolstoy's prosaic style in his historical novels, specifically in the *Josephus* trilogy.

In my study of Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* and Feuchtwanger's historical trilogy *Josephus*, I investigate the proportion of significant and insignificant events in the description of historical epochs. In my paper I will explore the theory of *prosaics*, presented by an American scholar Gary Saul Morson, and apply it to the historical novels of Tolstoy and Feuchtwanger. Morson argues that in these novels the writers attempts to redirect our attention from great striking dramatic events toward the complex process of daily life, "toward richly trivial events hidden in the diffuse light of plain view".