

## Literature and Ethics: nihilism and antinihilism

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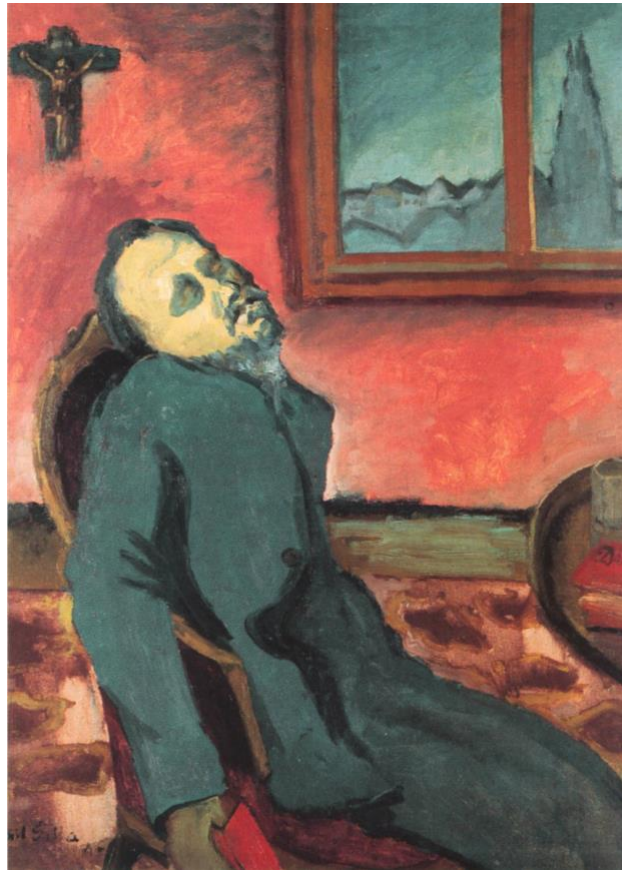


Figure *Reader of Dostoevsky*, by Emil Filla, 1907

Levinas's philosophical criticism of Proust's art, in which "all is dizzyingly possible", is an important starting point for thinking about the relationship between literature and ethics. The exile of the poet from the city that follows his entry into the vertiginous rhythm of aesthetics inaugurates an experience of nihilism that crosses modern literature and atrophies the "muscles of the mind" necessary for ethics. Levinas's judgment that "there is something egoist in artistic enjoyment" corresponds to the same hesitation in the face of aesthetics that we also find in Tolstoy, for whom the rhythm of art "dulls the mind" and could lead the firmest of consciences to dissolve in the mysteries of Sodom and Gomorrah. At the same time, the anti-nihilistic dimension present in modern literature, embodied in the art of Tolstoy himself, exposes a reality that questions the nihilistic character of literary experience and undoes, within the artistic process, the abyss that separates the ethical requirement from the aesthetic temptation. The antinihilist drive that shaped Ukrainian and Russian literature, from Nikolai Gogol to Vasily Grossman, points to the ethical requirement of a literature that exposes itself to the risks of non-meaning and swings between the pendulum of nihilism and antinihilism.