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The Creative Impulse in *Childhood*: The Dangerous Beauty of Games, Lies, Betrayal, and Art

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The heart has reasons which reason knows nothing of.
Pascal, *Penseés*

When you read Tolstoy, you feel that the world is
writing, the world in all its variety.
Isaac Babel, "Babel Answers Questions
about His Work"

'Betrayal . . . We betray to be loyal. Betrayal is like
imagining when the reality isn't good enough.' He
wrote that. Betrayal as hope and compensation. As the
making of a better land. Betrayal as love. As a tribute
to our unlived lives. On and on, these ponderous
aphorisms about betrayal. Betrayal as escape. As a
constructive act. As a statement of ideals. Worship. As
an adventure of the soul. Betrayal as travel: how can
we discover new places if we never leave home? 'You
were my Promised Land, Poppy. You gave my lies a
reason.'

John Le Carré, *The Perfect Spy*

I taught them to love the beauty of a lie.
Dostoevsky, "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man"

Without my Iasnaia Poliana I can hardly imagine Russia or my relationship to her. Without Iasnaia I could perhaps see more clearly the general laws necessary for my country, but I could not love my country so passionately.

Lev Tolstoy, *Summer in the Country*

For both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the rudiments and foundations of the creative impulse emanated from a complex compound of the real and the imagined, the remembered and the invented. Their descriptions of this process were remarkably similar, but, for Tolstoy, from his earliest fiction this impulse was marked with ambivalence—euphoria and moral guilt—whereas for Dostoevsky the creative impulse and the process ensuing from that impulse were affirmative, even when the undertones were dark. The real, the remembered, and the imagined combine in protean ways. In 1876 Dostoevsky wrote:

All through my four years in prison I continually thought of all my past days, and I think I relived the whole of my former life in my memories. These memories arose in my mind of themselves; rarely did I summon them up consciously. They would begin from a certain point, some little thing that was often barely perceptible, and then bit by bit they would grow into a finished picture, some strong and complete impression. I would analyze these impressions, adding new touches to things experienced long ago; and the main thing was that I would refine them, continually refine them, and in this consisted my entire entertainment.¹

This may be as close as Dostoevsky ever came to describing his actual creative process, although he wrote frequently about his fundamental ideas about art—about the importance of embodying ideas within characters, about his fantastic realism, about not showing his own “ugly mug” to the reader.

Art, for Dostoevsky, could express human and spiritual truths that other forms of discourse could not. Certain lies—the fictions—at the heart of the creative endeavor could operate in service of the truth and not really be lies at all. Other kinds of lies were clearly and unambiguously morally corrupt. But even in such instances, Dostoevsky could usually find a diamond amongst the filth. For example, those newly fallen people in “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” [“Сон смешного человека,” 1876], fictional products of the ridiculous man’s dream, who had learned “to love the beauty of a lie,” become more

precious to the ridiculous man (and by extension to his author, Dostoevsky) than when they were innocent, before he had corrupted them.² All of Dostoevsky's fictional works explore, in some way, the uneasy borders between lies and truths and how each can serve the other.

Tolstoy's stance toward the creative process, with its unavoidable mixture in art of the real and the imaginary, or put more starkly, truth and lies—and his attitude toward that complex compound—could not have been more different, even though the process itself was, in his description of it, similar. Where Dostoevsky embraced these intertwinings and variations on truth, lies, and fictions, Tolstoy wrestled with the nuanced tension between art and truth, the fictive and the real, games and betrayals, throughout his entire life. John Updike expresses a paradox about the tension between actual life and the rendering of it into art that was also operative for Tolstoy. In an essay appraising Updike's oeuvre, the novelist Ian McEwan wrote, “The plain facts of life were ‘unbearably heavy, weighted as they are with our personal death. Writing, in making the world light—in codifying, distorting, prettifying, verbalizing it—approaches blasphemy.’”³

Tolstoy's first published work of fiction, the semi-autobiographical novel *Childhood* [*Детство*, 1852], is drenched in death, blasphemy, and betrayal.⁴ It is his first meditation on “what is art?” It is a novel that also timelessly encapsulates the sunshine and magic of childhood. Most important, it renders numerous explorations of the creative impulse widely experienced by children and, with luck, by the adults they quickly become. In this essay I explore how Tolstoy, in this early work, hauntingly portrays the falsehoods and betrayals that art, play, and dreams can lead to.

Before Tolstoy settled on the version of the novel that he eventually submitted to Nikolai Nekrasov's journal *The Contemporary* [*Современник*], where *Childhood* was first published, he had written four separate drafts. In the second version, there is a chapter he subsequently omitted, but it contains a telling observation by the narrator about his creative process that bears a marked resemblance to Dostoevsky's description:

It is possible to write from the head and from the heart. When you write from the head, the words fall into place on the paper in an obedient and well ordered manner. But when you write from the heart, there are so many thoughts in your head, so many images in your imagination, so many

memories in your heart, that their expression is incomplete, inadequate, halting and crude. Perhaps I was mistaken, but I always used to stop when I began writing from the head and tried to write only from the heart.”⁵

Tolstoy describes the same crowding of images, the same mixing of memory and imagination, the same emphasis on the impressionistic over the rational that Dostoevsky had expressed. Chernyshevsky, whom Tolstoy was to ridicule later as “a gentleman stinking of bedbugs,”⁶ wrote the earliest and still most astute descriptions of the process emanating from Tolstoy’s creative impulse. In one of the first reviews of *Childhood* and several other early works of Tolstoy, not only did Chernyshevsky coin the important term “interior monologue,” but he wrote in minute detail of how he understood Tolstoy’s particular brand of artistic creation:

He is interested in observing how a feeling immediately arising out of a given circumstance or impression and then, subjected to the influence of memory and the powers of association in the imagination, turns into different feelings. . . . how a thought, born of an original sensation, leads to other thoughts, is carried further and further away, blends reverie with real sensations, dreams of the future with reflections on the present. . . . Count Tolstoy is most of all concerned with the psychic process itself, its forms, its laws, with, to express it precisely, the dialectic of the soul.⁷

Emphasizing words like “feeling,” “impression,” “imagination,” “sensation,” “dreams,” and “reverie,” Chernyshevsky comes close to duplicating both Tolstoy’s own idea about writing from the heart and Dostoevsky’s description of analyzing impressions and memories and then adding new touches to them. How doubly ironic that Chernyshevsky was to become, for both authors, an object of derision and a focus of ideological rage.

At the heart of the creative impulse we can consistently recognize elements of wonder, observation, and play. Before speculating about the creative impulse in Tolstoy’s *Childhood*, it is worthwhile to focus on the creative impulse, as distinct from the more elaborate creative process, in its most general, elemental contours. It is no surprise that scientists and those from other disciplines have learned from works of fiction (including in great abundance from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky) because the same elements of wonder, observation, and play lie at the heart of creativity for both the artist and the scientist.

Wonder, Observation, Play, and the Creative Impulse in General

The humanist and the scientist are not the proverbial farmer and cowman from the musical *Oklahoma* who cannot be friends. They are wandering the same precious terrain, observing it, playing in it, trying to understand and communicate it through conversation, discourse, and writing—whether through the language of words or of numbers. For both the humanist and the scientist, however deeply they seek knowledge, an ongoing sense of wonder and an acknowledgment that mystery constantly outpaces solution contribute to our joint awareness that all knowledge is provisional. Recently Freeman Dyson wrote about the ways in which “the information flood” and technology have brought enormous benefits to science. But, he goes on, “the public has a distorted view of science, because children are taught in school that science is a collection of firmly established truths. In fact, science is not a collection of truths. It is a continuing exploration of mysteries. Wherever we go exploring in the world around us, we find mysteries. . . . Science is the sum total of a great multitude of mysteries. It is an unending argument between a great multitude of voices. It resembles *Wikipedia* much more than it resembles the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.”⁸

Certainly for Tolstoy all knowledge was provisional; mysteries always outstripped solutions, the question of how to live and how to die could never quite be answered. Tolstoy frequently resorted to similes and analogies, that is, to artistic devices, to express the provisional quality of both knowledge and wisdom. Instances of this abound: remember, for example, Prince Andrei and the oak in *War and Peace* [*Война и мир*, 1869], Levin and the clouds in *Anna Karenina* [*Анна Каренина*, 1877], the narrator’s parable of the mice in *Confession* [*Исповедь*, 1882], and Ivan Ilych and the syllogism about Caius in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* [*Смерть Ивана Ильича*, 1886]. Indeed, similes and analogies are fundamental to Tolstoy’s way of understanding the world, his existence in it, and God. They are primary markers of his style.

As William Wordsworth has told us in the well-known poem “My heart leaps up when I behold” (1802), “the Child is father of the Man.”⁹ Adult scientists and artists frequently bump up against experiences reminiscent of childhood wonder. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in his *Biographia Literaria* (1834): “To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to

combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar . . . this is the character and privilege of genius."¹⁰ The rare ability for an adult to be able to continue to see familiar things as new constitutes the experience of wonder. For an artist to be able to inspire that feeling in his or her audience is to successfully use the technique of "defamiliarization" or "making strange" ["остранение"] as defined by Viktor Shklovsky in his seminal essay, "Art as Technique" (1917).¹¹

This wonder has often been born of spontaneous, close observation of the natural world in childhood. Biographer Janet Browne describes how Darwin pursued natural history "with total absorption" from a very early age.¹² His passion for observing the natural world, especially beetles, led him to create "entirely imaginary achievements": "He often told lies about seeing rare birds. Other times, more complicated stories emerged." He admits lying "for the pure pleasure of exciting attention & surprise," and Browne tells us, "to lie, and to make secret places and languages, was to construct a new world order. Natural history, even at such an early age, was for him inseparably linked with the heady power of games and creative speculation."¹³

Browne could have been writing about Tolstoy, who as a young child was also preoccupied with observation of the natural world, with the telling of lies, and with playing games.¹⁴ In *Childhood* Tolstoy's ten-year-old alter ego Nikolai scrutinizes the ants: "They hurried one after another along the smooth tracks they had made for themselves, some carrying burdens, others un-laden. I picked up a twig and barred their way. It was a sight to see how some of them, despising the danger, crawled underneath and others climbed over it."¹⁵ He is then suddenly distracted by the beauty of a butterfly and the appearance of a hare. Later that day he tries, unsuccessfully, with blue paint to transmit his wonder, his emotion about the day, his raw experience into art. He is ashamed and disgusted by his failure. But his efforts to transmit that wonder nevertheless continue.

E. O. Wilson describes how, as a teenager, "I had schooled myself in natural history . . . during solitary excursions . . . [in] my native state. I saw science, by which I meant (and in my heart I still mean) the study of ants, frogs, and snakes, as a wonderful way to stay outdoors."¹⁶ Soon afterward, Wilson's professor at Cornell, having listened to him "natter for a while about [his] lofty goal of classifying all the ants of Alabama," hands him a copy of Ernst Mayr's *Systematics*

and the *Origin of Species* (1942). Wilson undergoes what he describes as an “epiphany.” Sounding almost like Tolstoy, he uses the language of religious conversion: “I saw the world in a wholly new way.”¹⁷ Observation of the natural world and meditations upon it spark innumerable epiphanies and religious conversions in Tolstoy’s fictional and non-fictional writings.

Annie Dillard describes her creative impulses as resembling the motions of an inchworm and goes on to imagine the creative process of the writer through an extended analogy: “The line of words is a fiber optic, flexible as wire; it illumines the path just before its fragile tip. You probe with it, delicate as a worm. Few sights are so absurd as that of an inchworm leading its dimwit life. . . . It is a skinny bright green thing, pale and thin as a vein, an inch long, and apparently totally unfit for life in this world. It wears out its days in constant panic. Every inchworm I have seen was stuck in long grasses.” Yet Dillard goes on to describe the inchworm’s precarious, often panic-stricken, progress up the blade of grass—“every step brings it to the universe’s rim.”¹⁸ Cannot one easily imagine the mighty, weighty Tolstoy as an inchworm, stuck in long grasses and seeking to measure, with every step, the rim of his universe? Such is the creative process: the primary impulse of unpremeditated, sudden wonder through observation—“measuring the marigold”¹⁹—followed by the perseverance in this activity despite the heavy odds of failure.

This raw experience of wonder through observation seems nearly identical for the scientist and the creative artist. In his play *Arcadia*, Tom Stoppard’s young heroine, Thomasina, who invents statistical mechanics fifty years before Boltzmann, is an ardent lover of poetry, mathematics, and nature. She tells her tutor Septimus: “Each week I plot your equations dot for dot, xs against ys in all manner of algebraical relation, and every week they draw themselves as commonplace geometry, as if the world of forms were nothing but arcs and angles. God’s truth, Septimus, if there is an equation for a curve like a bell, there must be an equation for one like a bluebell, and if a bluebell, why not a rose?”²⁰ And in *Boyhood* [*Отрочество*, 1854] young Nikolai muses about symmetry:

Another time, standing before the blackboard and drawing various figures on it with chalk, the thought suddenly struck me: “Why does symmetry please the eye? What is symmetry?”—“It is an innate feeling,” I answered myself. “What is it based on? Is there symmetry in everything in life? On the

contrary, this is life”—and I drew an oval on the board. “When life ends the soul passes into eternity—here is eternity” and I drew a line from one side of the oval figure right to the edge of the board. “Why is there no corresponding line on the other side? And yes, indeed, how can eternity be only on one side? We must have existed before this life, though we have lost the recollection of it.” This argument, which seemed to me exceedingly novel and clear and whose logic I can now perceive only with difficulty, pleased me mightily.²¹

This passage is also significant in the evolution of Tolstoy’s literary style, for it may be the earliest instance in his fiction of a “reported dialogue” between two different aspects of a character (a common technique of Tolstoy’s). Interestingly, in this particular excerpt there is a third version of the self, for the dialogue is being reported by the adult that the child has become. This layered narrative is a consistent feature (which Tolstoy eventually found limiting) of the narrative texture of the trilogy as a whole: the child narrator, the adult narrator—a young man of twenty-four—are orchestrated by the author, Tolstoy, who allows himself occasional aphoristic intrusions into the text.²²

These children, fictional and real, school us in the nature of the creative impulse and its frequent fascination with the natural world, closely observed, played with, and then eventually transfigured into science or art.

In *Wonder and Science* Mary Baine Campbell is careful to distinguish the experience of wonder from the experience of the sublime. She describes wonder as something that “arrests the gaze, the intellect, the emotions, because (consciously at least) it leads nowhere, reminds us of nothing. It has no value. As a result, wonder is a form of perception now mostly associated with innocence. . . . And of course artists.”²³ In the wide-ranging passages I have drawn upon here, it is the complete openness to experience—most precisely the experience of wonder, the willingness to let observation lead where it will, whether to scientific pursuit, to lies, or to making art—that constitutes part of what is essential to the creative impulse. Tolstoy’s intense experiences of wonder, evident throughout his fiction and formally articulated first in *Childhood*, and his willingness to follow the tracks and implications of his own observations in his diaries, his fiction, his non-fictional writings, and, indeed, in his life—wherever they might lead—have alternately invoked joy and despair in Tolstoy himself and in his readers.

But what about play? The creative impulse in any discipline is more akin to play than to method. The scientific method, the sonnet form—these may indicate the important rules of a game, but they are always provisional, as is knowledge in any discipline or innovative expression in art. Without play there would be no actual creation. The scientist and the artist are always at play with both their subject matter and the standard methods or forms for its expression. The much discussed “eureka moment,” as satisfying as it must be, is always transitory. The structure of a gene may be elaborated, a poem or a short story completed, but the creative impulse to play continues. Indeed, the rise of modern science may emanate not from a Puritan or Protestant ethic, as is so often claimed, but rather from a fully hedonist impulse and an uninhibited courage in the formation of hypotheses.²⁴ Richard Feynman tells us that it was through “*play* with physics” that he “ultimately worked out what the motion of the mass particles is.” He describes being in a cafeteria and seeing “some guy, fooling around, throw a plate in the air. As the plate went up in the air I saw it wobble . . . I had nothing to do, so I start[ed] to figure out the motion of the rotating plate . . . for the fun of it. . . . It was effortless. It was easy to play with these things. It was like uncorking a bottle.”²⁵

It is always dangerous, however, to try to render the reality of play into a theory of play, a discourse of play, or a dictum that one must play.

To return to Tolstoy—we know that the games that he played, both positive and negative, were vital to his subsequent artistic work. Indeed, one can understand much about Tolstoy’s moral views through his depictions of games—whether “Robinson,” “robbers,” cards (especially the card game “Happy Families”), egg-rolling, horse-racing, hunting, or war. Most often recalled by critics is the story of the green stick. Tolstoy’s older brother formed with the younger boys an “Ant Brotherhood,” which became an elaborate game they played throughout childhood. The name of their brotherhood may well have been a misunderstanding of “Моравские братья” (“*Moravskie bratia*,” “Moravian Brothers”), which the brothers probably “transformed” into “Муравейные братья” (“*Muraveinye bratia*,” “Ant Brothers”). The latter name certainly made more sense for Tolstoy who, as a child, was so interested in the world of nature around him, especially the ants and the bees. These creatures, as I have written elsewhere, “exist enmeshed in a brotherhood that transcends the life of the individual, yet where individual choices and desires exist.

Entry into the Tolstoy children's 'brotherhood' had impossible but wonderful requirements such as to 'stand in a corner and not think of a white bear.'"²⁶ Somewhere, Tolstoy's brother told them, he had buried a green stick the discovery of which could make all men good and happy. Of course the children never found it, but at the end of his long and tumultuous life, Tolstoy asked to be buried in its vicinity. The game, freely embraced, endured a lifetime.

But such spontaneous, positive, creative play cannot be mandated. Think of poor Pip in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* when he is first brought to Miss Havisham's "to play." "'I am tired,' said Miss Havisham. 'I want diversion, and I have done with men and women. Play . . . play, play, play!'" The adult narrator Pip then comments, "I think it will be conceded by my most disputatious reader that she could hardly have directed an unfortunate boy to do anything in the wide world more difficult to be done under the circumstances."²⁷

The creative impulse in each of these broad areas—science and art—is virtually identical. It is no accident that Albert Einstein is reported to have said that Dostoevsky had influenced his thinking about the theory of relativity more than anyone, even the German mathematician and scientist Carl Friedrich Gauss. Tolstoy used his practical and scientific fascination with bees and swarm intelligence to try to understand in history the chaos of individual choices and acts, the potent mixtures of freedom of choice with determinism.²⁸ Had he been alive today, he would likely have had a profound interest in chaos theory. James Gleick writes in his book *Chaos*:

Watch two bits of foam flowing side by side at the bottom of a waterfall. What can you guess about how close they were at the top? Nothing. . . . Traditionally when physicists saw complex results, they looked for complex causes . . . The modern study of chaos began with the creeping realization in the 1960s that quite simple mathematical equations could model systems every bit as violent as a waterfall. Tiny differences in input could quickly become overwhelming differences in output. . . . In weather for example, this translates into what is only half-jokingly known as the Butterfly Effect.²⁹

As I have suggested elsewhere, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Honoré de Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Henry James, Virginia Woolf—many literary artists—have experimented for centuries with creative fractals, with small changes of input that result in vast differences of outcome, not unlike those of chaos

theory.³⁰ One could argue that this may be the primary focus of both *The Brothers Karamazov* [Братья Карамазовы, 1880] and especially *War and Peace*, but that is the subject for a different essay. At any rate, the creative impulse of the scientist and the artist is as one.

A Return to Childhood

It is illuminating to read Tolstoy's trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* [Юность, 1857] with broad considerations like these in mind. Tolstoy's preoccupation with his own childhood, with the depiction of childhood in fiction, and with actual childhood in general (both as he observed it in the world and through the works of writers like Laurence Sterne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rodolphe Toepffer, and, to my mind, especially Dickens, as well as Charlotte Brontë, to the extent that her novel *Jane Eyre* [1847] is refracted through *David Copperfield* [1850]), suggests that he would have engaged in contemporary conversations about the creative impulse and the child.³¹

The entire trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* offers an uncanny medley of the questions, locales, and narrative techniques that were to engross, inspire, and trouble Tolstoy throughout his life. The trilogy constitutes a virtual workbook for his future written output. *Childhood* alone has important scenes of *ostranenie* [making strange], descriptions of a holy fool, close observations of animals in nature, a hunt, a death, a "first love," a rivalry, a ball, and many other such elements that were to become touchstones of Tolstoy's later work. How do wonder, observation, and play figure in the world of lies, betrayal, and art with which the ten-year-old hero of *Childhood* grapples in the course of his moral and aesthetic growth?

Despite Tolstoy's later dismissal of this work as sentimental, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* forms a seamless piece with his entire oeuvre; indeed, such a late work as *What is Art?* [Что такое искусство?, 1892] can be read in part as a companion to this earliest of works. In 1903 Tolstoy was asked to write his reminiscences of childhood. At that time, he reread the trilogy. He deemed it so dishonest and sentimental that he regretted having written it: "It is so bad, so literary, so insincerely written."³² But a few years later, in 1910, shortly before his death, Tolstoy is said to have told V. Bulgakov: "When I was writing *Childhood*, it seemed to me that prior to me no one had ever felt or expressed all the poetry and wonder of childhood."³³ This statement implies a deep affection for his

early work. Clearly the old Tolstoy was ambivalent about this work, in part because in later life he emphasized its autobiographical aspects, which were of course inaccurate, and minimized the novelistic, since by then he had largely repudiated the novel as a genre.

Although as a young man Tolstoy had, on the contrary, insisted on the fictionality of his work, his own family, as well as Nekrasov, had all gravitated toward reading it as autobiography, even though the author's name was only given as L. N., which in itself argues, as Wachtel trenchantly points out, for its fictive essence. Wachtel observes: "There is evidence showing that the final version of *Childhood* contained enough autobiographical material for Tolstoy's immediate family to recognize themselves."³⁴ A.V. Goldenveizer describes the moment of recognition quite dramatically. It seems that I.S. Turgenev read *Childhood* aloud to Tolstoy's sister and brother before the identity of the author had been revealed: "From the very first lines Mariia Nikolaevna and Sergei Nikolaevich were stunned: 'But that's us he described! Who is this? At first we just couldn't think about Lyovochka,' continued Mariia Nikolaevna. 'He had gotten into debt and been taken off to the Caucasus. In all probability we thought about brother Nikolai.'"³⁵

In general, the reception of *Childhood* in Russia was positive. Russians all along the political spectrum, from Chernyshevsky to the Tsar, admired the work. Dostoevsky wrote to Maikov from Siberia in 1856, "I like L.T. very much, but in my opinion he won't write much (perhaps I'm mistaken however)."³⁶ Tolstoy himself writes to his brother in December of 1856: "I learned the other day that the Emperor read my *Childhood* to his wife and wept."³⁷

It is amusing, in contrast, against this backdrop of universal praise, to read the first review of *Childhood* in English (based on a poor translation). The reviewer seems to have missed entirely the point of the novel. An unsigned *Saturday Review* article characterized the "whole production" as "insipid," as a work whose "merits" are "mostly negative." The reviewer reads the work as purely autobiographical and chastises the author (Nikolai Tolstoy!) "for describing the shortcomings of his father to the world."³⁸

There is another layer of irony in the fact that, against Tolstoy's wishes, Nekrasov had entitled the work *The History of My Childhood* [*История моего детства*], instead of simply *Childhood*, as Tolstoy had wished. We know that Tolstoy considered the work fiction and maintained that Nekrasov's title

erroneously and without his permission implied that it was an autobiography. Tolstoy's later removal of the word "history" from Nekrasov's version of the title may also suggest that even at this early stage in his career he believed that the writing of true histories was impossible. Certainly, the other work that Tolstoy was laboring over at the same time, "The History of Yesterday" ["История вчерашнего дня"] is also an exploration of the impossibility of writing history, even a history of something as simple as one day—yesterday. *Childhood* explores the ways in which lies, self-interest, imagination, and the haze of memory distort any attempts to render an accurate account of any event, no matter how simple. From the outset of the novel, events, its "real events," are shaped and conditioned by lies—by false accounts—of events that never happened, and the ensuing chains of causality—real in the world of this novel—are forged from the combination of the real and the non-real or imaginary. This models the way Tolstoy later presents the workings of "history" writ large in works such as *The Sevastopol Tales* [*Севастопольские рассказы*, 1854-57]) and *War and Peace*.

The opening of the novel, with Nikolai awakening from sleep, illustrates this point: the young Nikolai wakes up because his tutor, Karl Ivanych, has swatted at a fly just over his head. The dead fly drops onto his head, and, still pretending to be asleep, Nikolai peeks out from under the bedclothes to knock the dead fly to the floor.

This incident precipitates a flurry of emotion in Nikolai: a sense of indignity, injustice, jealousy, and a belief that Karl Ivanych is being deliberately nasty to him. He finds everything about Karl Ivanych "disgusting" ["противный"], down to the tassel on Karl Ivanych's skull cap. Through this angry haze Nikolai is simultaneously aware of his love for Karl Ivanych, who starts to tickle his heels. Alarmed that he could have had such horrid thoughts and now annoyed with himself, he starts to laugh and cry at the same time. Nikolai reports, "I felt ashamed and could not understand how only a moment before I had hated Karl Ivanych."³⁹ In the meantime, Karl Ivanych becomes alarmed by Nikolai's tears. Nikolai, who has experienced at least ten different emotions within the space of a second or two, is suddenly overcome by affection for all the things about Karl Ivanych he has just hated; "even the tassel" seems a testament to Karl Ivanych's goodness. The result? Nikolai instinctively, without premeditation, tells a lie: he tells Karl Ivanych that he has been crying because he had dreamed that his

mother had died. The lie works to good effect—Karl Ivanych tenderly tries to comfort him.

It then seems to Nikolai that he actually had had the dream, and his tears become genuine. The imaginary dream—the lie—becomes powerful and takes its important place amongst the real events of the day. Nikolai's false account becomes entwined with the real and completely inseparable from it. Moreover, he uses the language of creativity rather than moral censure to describe his self-serving lie: "I invented [выдумал] all this."⁴⁰ The coexisting feelings of vexation and affection for Karl Ivanych, who has utterly failed to realize the range of emotions his swatting of the fly has provoked, and the fact of the dead fly unceremoniously dropping on the child's head, provoke Nikolai's lie—a lie told instinctively to mask these genuine feelings. The lie instantly earns him attention and sympathy; it also becomes more real to him than the initial event that inspired him to lie (the killing of the fly), which is almost forgotten. Instead, "the melancholy thoughts occasioned by the dream I had invented still haunted me."⁴¹

Most interesting perhaps, Nikolai has twice used the word "invention" for his lie. In his ten-year-old mind, he did not lie; he *invented* a dream, although the adult narrator (who is twenty-four) presents this account as a lie. His lie was an instinctive, unpremeditated creative impulse, a literary invention that worked successfully on both himself and his audience, and, once invented, it became somehow true. This first page of Tolstoy's first work thus radiates precisely the ambivalences about the making of fictions and the attempts at historical accounts that were to remain with him until his death.⁴² The lie also turns out to have predictive value.

This last real day of Nikolai's childhood before he departs to Moscow with his father marks both an example of a perfect typical day from childhood and the end of such days.⁴³ (This technique, in which a very particular day stands for many such days but is also the last of them, is reminiscent of the way in which Dickens in *David Copperfield* has his first-person narrator portray his idyllic childhood and its abrupt end when his mother marries Mr. Murdstone, although the periodic "reverie retrospectives" that Dickens inserts in the voice of his adult narrator David are far more sentimental than the comparable passages in *Childhood*.)

Even as this lie becomes real to him, it is necessary, almost immediately, to hide it in the same way as he had hidden by means of this very lie his initial,

genuine, complicated emotions precipitated by the dropping of the dead fly. The lie about the dream, which converges with a kind of truth, is dangerous. In the opening of the second chapter, "Mamma," the adult narrator's retrospective tone alerts the reader immediately that Nikolai's mother is dead, although we do not yet know how soon she will die. The adult narrator tells us that "so many memories of the past arise when one recalls the features of somebody we love that one sees those features dimly through the memories, as though through tears."⁴⁴ Here, in an early Tolstoyan simile—a primary hallmark of his later writing—memories are likened to abundant and free-flowing tears, but because there are so many of them, they dim the primary thing which the speaker wishes to remember. The mist of tears provokes a synecdoche of recollection, where the dear remembered parts must stand in for the whole: he remembers her brown eyes, the mole on her neck just below the place where the short hairs grow, her embroidered white collar, and the delicate dry hand that so often caressed him and that he would cover with kisses. But "the complete image" escapes him. Are the recollected parts more evocative than a complete description would be? Here the reader witnesses Tolstoy developing his technique for physical description: we remember each of his characters in his many subsequent works of fiction precisely through such vivid, living descriptions of a few features. The part is greater than the whole.

His mother asks him if he has been crying. And then, "What were you crying about?"⁴⁵ Instinctively, instantly, he lies again, this time to shield her from the dream he never had. "I cried in my sleep, mamma," I said, remembering my invented [again, the language of creativity, not of falsehood] dream in all its details and involuntarily shuddering at the recollection."⁴⁶

The lie—the invention—continues to exert force and becomes ever more real. By the next chapter, "Papa," the lie has become, simply, true. Nikolai and his brother learn that they will travel with their father to Moscow that night to live with their grandmother. This news is a "terrible shock." Nikolai's instant reaction is to find predictive value in his lie: "So this is what my dream forboded? . . . God grant there may be nothing worse to follow."⁴⁷ His lie, within a short time, first earns him comfort and attention to soothe his bruised ego about the fly-swatting incident; it quickly precipitates the necessity for its own cover-up ("I cried in my sleep," also a lie), and, as it gains authoritative force, it is validated by the news that the boys are to leave their mother and move to

Moscow. Of course, the worst—his mother's death—is yet to come. By the time she does die, Nikolai's lie, his predictive dream, has been temporarily forgotten.

The next significant instance of Nikolai's creative impulse—his inventiveness whether in lies or vivid imaginings—occurs a few hours later during the hunt. He is assigned to wait and watch in a particular glade for the hare. He lies in the grass at the foot of an oak with the dog Zhiran, and he recollects: "My imagination as usual on such occasions far outstripped reality."⁴⁸ He imagines himself pursuing "at least" his third hare. Then, lulled by the noise of the actual hunt that grows fainter, he begins to observe a swarm of ants. As I have noted elsewhere, he becomes intrigued by their purposeful social activity, by how they respond, individually and as a group, to the danger he poses to them by endeavoring to bar their way with a twig. In sum, the ants act in various ways as individuals, but all of them work toward the aim of fulfilling a larger purpose for the anthill.⁴⁹ Then his "attention" becomes "diverted from these interesting observations" by a "butterfly with yellow wings fluttering most alluringly." Thoughts about social order give way to aesthetic considerations, to "the delight" of gazing at a butterfly. Suddenly the hare appears, and he releases the dog too soon. His reveries give way to shame and mortification—his mistake has been observed by the expert peasant hunter Turka. "For a long time I stood where I was in deep despair . . . only repeating as I slapped my thighs, 'Heavens, what have I done!'"⁵⁰ There is no overt lie here, but his creative impulses—his imagining of himself as the hero of a successful hunt and his dreamy observations of the ants and the butterfly—have distracted him from the actual hunt and resulted in another instance of mortification. Imagination and observation collide with efficient performance in the moment. As with the lie (the invented dream), once again the course of events is effected by the processes occurring in his mind. Here the outcome of the hunt for Nikolai has been altered not by concrete events but by the results of his own imaginings and reveries: the ants, the butterfly, and the fictive hares help the real hare to escape.

Next comes a foray into the imaginary world of games. After the hunt Nikolai's sister Liuba proposes that they play a favorite game, "Robinson," which consists in the children's enactment of scenes from the novel *The Swiss Family Robinson* [*Der Schweizerische Robinson*, 1812] by Johann David Wyss. The creative impulse shifts here from the individual (lies, imaginings, reveries) to the group and the goal is, simply, to have fun through the collective exercise

of imagination. This goal can be thwarted, however, if a single member of the group refuses to join in. Nikolai's older brother, Volodia, destroys "all the fun of the game" by his "lazy bored look." Volodia engages in a kind of reverse *ostranenie*, where, instead of something familiar being rendered strange by describing it in a new, elemental way, something playful and imaginary is rendered commonplace and boring. "When we sat on the ground, and pretending we were going fishing, began to row with all our might, Volodia sat with folded arms in an attitude which had nothing in common with the attitude of a fisherman. . . . Such talk and behavior had a damping effect on the game and were extremely distasteful, the more so because in one's secret heart one had to admit that Volodia was right."⁵¹ Nikolai remembers other such games—of hunting birds with a stick, of driving on chairs, of turning an arm-chair into a carriage on long winter nights. He exclaims: "And what adventures we used to meet on the way, and how gaily and swiftly those winter evenings passed! . . . If you only go by what's real there won't be any games. And if there are no games, what is left?"⁵² To play a game and know that it is not real but still to engage in it is to take a collective leap of faith, to play in the moment, to share and to have fun. This may be the ideal expression of the creative impulse.

Negative variations of game playing exist as well. Later in the novel, in Moscow, the younger Nikolai develops a kind of crush on the handsome, but morally compromised, Seriozha (who resembles the brave and handsome but immoral Steerforth whom the young David Copperfield so idolizes). He admires Seriozha's physical bravery for playing "Robbers" after having been injured: "I cannot express how impressed and enthralled I was by this heroic behavior: in spite of terrible pain he not only did not cry—he did not even show that he was hurt, or for a moment forget the game." (The analogy to war as a game is clear.)⁵³ Shortly afterwards, the poor and less attractive Ilinka Grap arrives, and when the boys go upstairs to show off their gymnastic prowess to each other, the act of playing turns ugly. Led by Seriozha, who increasingly resembles Steerforth in his combination of social snobbery, cruelty, bullying, and seductive power over the young narrator, Nikolai and the other boys force the unwilling Ilinka to stand on his head. The "cries of despair" of "the unfortunate victim," Nikolai admits, "encouraged us the more." The narrator depicts an incident of pure bullying in a game. Ilinka, endeavoring to right himself, inadvertently kicks Seriozha in the eye. Heroic no longer, he pushes Ilinka "with all

his might." Ilinka crashes to the floor yet again and mutters through his tears, "Why do you bully [тираните] me?"⁵⁴ Nikolai knows that his participation in this game has been wrong; he feels compassion for Ilinka but continues to admire Seriozha.

The adult narrator realizes what the child Nikolai does not—that Ilinka was crying not from pain but from being rejected for no reason by five boys whom he probably liked. The adult Nikolai asks himself why he had engaged in such cruel behavior: "Where was my tender heart which often caused me to sob wildly at the sight of a young jackdaw pushed out of its nest, or a puppy being thrown over a fence, or a chicken the cook was going to make soup of?"⁵⁵ He realizes that these instincts had been stifled by his affection for Seriozha and his desire to be attractive to him. The chapter closes with one of the only false notes in the novel, a sentimental outburst that is Rousseauian in its self-exoneration and dishonesty. "Contemptible then were both the affection and my wish to be a fine fellow, for they left *the only dark spots* on the pages of my childhood's recollections!"⁵⁶ Why the narrator chooses to ignore other such dark spots in his novel, spots that he has delineated for us in such detail but does not explicitly name as "dark spots," the reader can only conjecture. Indeed, most of the episodes described in any detail in *Childhood* constitute precisely such dark spots. Is it because these other dark episodes had something to do with creativity in some way? Nor does he seem to dwell upon this disturbing episode with Ilinka with particular shame. He seems deliberately to endeavor to cast a significant episode into a more minor key.

To return to the countryside and the day of the hunt—that evening the children gather with paper, pencils, and paints and their mother sits down to play the piano. Nikolai sets out to recreate the experience of his day through artistic representation of it: "I only had blue paint; but for all that I took it into my head to draw a picture of the hunt. After representing in very lively style a blue boy on a blue horse, and some blue dogs, I stopped, uncertain whether one could paint a blue hare, and ran into Papa's study to consult him."⁵⁷ The creative impulses of the child are in full swing at this point; his artistic vision can easily encompass a blue boy, fence, horse, and dog but it stops short at a blue hare. Why? Could it be that the hare and his shame at not catching it were the sources of genuine feeling for him in this episode, and thus its color must somehow be differentiated from the others?

He goes to consult his father: "Papa was reading something and in answer to my question 'Are there blue hares?' replied without lifting his head, 'Yes, my dear, there are.'"⁵⁸ Nikolai returns to the table, paints a blue hare, but "finds it necessary to turn it into a bush." He does "not like" the bush either and makes it into a tree, "then the tree into a hayrick, and the hayrick into a cloud, until finally I had so smeared my whole sheet of paper with blue paint that I tore it up in vexation and went off to meditate in the high-backed arm-chair."⁵⁹ What has happened?

The reader has witnessed a child engaged in acting upon a series of creative impulses. But impulse quickly gives way to process and to product. The child asks an adult for advice and guidance ("Are there blue hares?"). When the preoccupied adult gives an automatic, untrue answer, the consequences for the child are significant.⁶⁰ It is one thing to draw a blue hare from the pleasure of imagination; it is another to ask an authority if such a creature exists and to be told it does. Reality, an untruth about it, and an artistic impulse collide in an unsatisfactory way. Nikolai's attempt at authentic artistic creation—rendering his day's experience directly into art—fails, although such direct transformation of the real into art is the ideal way for artistic creation to work, as Tolstoy himself was to argue eloquently both in later fictional works like *Anna Karenina* in the scenes with the painter Mikhailov, and in the non-fictional "What is Art?" Here, toward the end of his life, Tolstoy writes:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling—that is the activity of art. . . . Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.⁶¹

Young Nikolai has been engaging fully in that "activity of art." Although his ten-year-old self may have failed to pass on through the external signs of his blue paint what he has lived through, his twenty-four-year-old self has, without question, succeeded in infecting his readers.

Meanwhile, in the drawing room, Nikolai's mother is playing the piano—the second concerto of Field and then Beethoven's *Sonata pathétique*. The music affects Nikolai's memory powerfully: "My memories became sad, oppressive

and gloomy. Mamma often played those two pieces and so I well remember the feelings they aroused in me. They resembled memories—but memories of what? It almost seemed as if I were remembering something that had never been.”⁶² Not only does this passage clearly prefigure what was to become Tolstoy’s stance toward music at the end of his life, it also grafts powerfully onto the range of associations connected with the lie Nikolai had told earlier that day. The lie—the undreamed dream of his mother’s death—had affected Nikolai in ways similar to music. By the end of the day Nikolai is haunted by both a dream he never dreamt and by memories he never had. Yet these non-events are central to the later depiction of his childhood, and they are thus in some ways as real as anything else. As with the false dream, the lie—the false recollection—can become real and thus functions disturbingly as a kind of truth.

Correspondingly, “the truth” can also be a kind of lie. Right after Nikolai listens to his mother play the piano, he wanders to the door of his father’s study where his father has been meeting privately with Karl Ivanych. The adult narrator reproduces an actual document: a detailed “expense account” that Karl Ivanych had presented his father for costs beyond his salary. “Reading this note, in which Karl Ivanych demanded payment of all the money he had spent on presents, and even the price of a present promised to himself, anyone would conclude that Karl Ivanych was nothing but an unfeeling mercenary egoist—and everyone would be wrong.”⁶³ The accurate, detailed list of expenses misrepresents the essence of its author; it constitutes a kind of false evidence. Lies can express truth; a truthful list of facts can be a drastic distortion of what the list is actually seeking to convey. Although he never explores this dichotomy further, this paradox is what Nikolai learns on this last day of his childhood in the country.

Nikolai’s day ends much as it had begun—with a flurry of emotion in which feelings of having been insulted by a social inferior, anger, and shame give way to love. The day had begun with the dead fly dropping on his head; it ends with another undignified assault to his head, this time the memory of such an event. Nikolai recalls how once, when he had stained the tablecloth with some *kvass* (a lightly fermented beverage), Natalya Savishna had sprung out at him after dinner. He remembers that she “caught hold of me and despite desperate resistance on my part began rubbing my face with the wet cloth, ‘Don’t thee go dirtying tablecloths, don’t thee go dirtying tablecloths!’ I was so

offended that I howled with rage.”⁶⁴ As with Karl Ivanych, his fury gives way to love and shame when, a few minutes later, she asks his forgiveness (“Forgive an old fool”) and gives him two caramels and a grape wrapped in red paper. The experience of shame infuses all the important moments of *Childhood* in one way or another—the hunt, his painting, his poem, his bullying of Ilinka, his mother’s death. Curiously, Tolstoy later maintained that it can be a good thing for a child to witness an adult’s shame when that adult has made a mistake. In an 1865 letter to Countess A. A. Tolstaya, Tolstoy writes:

But you can’t deceive children—they are wiser than us. We want to prove to them that we’re intelligent, but they aren’t at all interested in this, but want to know whether we’re honest, truthful, good, and compassionate, whether we have a conscience, and unfortunately they see that beyond our efforts to appear infallibly intelligent, there’s nothing else at all. To make a mistake in front of a child, to be carried away, to do something stupid, humanly stupid, even to behave badly and blush in front of a child and admit it, has far more educational value than to make a child blush 100 times in front of you, and to be infallible. A child knows that we are more resolute, more experienced than he is, and we are always able to retain this halo of infallibility in front of him, but he knows that this doesn’t require much, and he doesn’t value such cleverness, but values the flush of shame appearing on my face against my will, telling him about all that is most secret and best in my soul. I remember how Karl Ivanych once blushed in front of me.⁶⁵

For all of Dostoevsky’s preoccupation with shame and its ramifications, he never depicted the positive aspects of a child witnessing an adult’s shame. Ilyusha Snegirov perhaps comes closest in his attempt to gain retribution on behalf of his shamed father (after he witnesses Dmitri Karamazov pull at his father’s beard in public), but his attempts, while deeply moving, do not have any positive outcome.

The end of these childhood days in the country is marked by a retrospective chapter that seems modeled on the several similar chapters the narrator in *David Copperfield* employs to demarcate various stages in his autobiography—his childhood, boyhood, and youth. Like Dickens, Tolstoy creates a narrative that mixes the general with the specific, in which the latter becomes the former. Likewise, there is experimentation with perspective. The little David, overcome with drowsiness, is sitting by the fire with his beloved Peggotty (the literary model for Natalya Savishna): “I had reached the stage of sleepiness when

Peggotty seemed to swell and grow immensely large. I propped my eyelids open with my two forefingers, and looked perseveringly at her as she sat at work.”⁶⁶ Tolstoy reverses the equation—his mother grows tiny, and instead of propping his eyes open like David, Nikolai squints them mostly shut. Gazing with adoration at his mamma, “with eyes drowsy with slumber . . . all at once she becomes quite, quite little, her face no bigger than a button; but I see it just as plainly still . . . I like seeing her so tiny. I screw my eyes tighter still, and now she is no bigger than a little boy reflected in the pupil of an eye, but I move and the spell is broken.”⁶⁷ Here the creative impulse of the child mingles with a near dream-like state: “Vague sweet visions fill your mind, the healthy sleep of childhood weighs your eyelids down.”⁶⁸

The opening of the novel, in which Nikolai told the lie about dreaming that his mother had died, now takes on frightening overtones by the end of this chapter, also entitled “Childhood.” The adult narrator, with extreme tenderness, lays bare the passionate force of his love for his dead mother and his living memories of her. His creative reverie transports him to the past. She brings the drowsing child up to bed: “There are no onlookers to restrain her and she is not afraid to pour out all her tenderness and love on me. I do not move but kiss and kiss her hand. . . . She puts her other hand round the back of my head and her slender fingers run over my neck, tickling me. . . . I feel all quivery with being tickled and roused from sleep; mamma is sitting close beside me; she touches me; I am aware of her scent and her voice. . . . ‘Oh, dear dear mamma, I do love you so!’”⁶⁹ Her reply brings us firmly back to the beginning of the novel, “If mamma was no longer here, you would not forget her? You would not forget her, little Nikolai?” Tears stream from his cheeks, and the chapter ends with the narrator’s retrospective, sentimental celebration of those tears—“the finest gift of all—the pure tears of emotion.”⁷⁰ This scene (besides being drawn from *David Copperfield*) recuperates in an unsettling way the opening of the novel: Nikolai is again tickled and caressed in bed, the theme of the loss of the mother is sounded, tears abound. But where the first scene reflected the emotional complexities of childhood with its anger, shame, lies, love, and creativity, the second—composed of nearly identical elements—renders them in the language of aching, intimate, sentimental love for a lost mother. Both are the product of the creative impulses and processes of a child; both are works of art.

In Moscow Volodia and Nikolai must each produce an artistic creation on demand: something for their grandmother's name day. Volodia, under the strict direction of the drawing master, executes in black crayon the head of a Turk in a turban. Nikolai decides to write a poem. The first two verses come to him easily, complete with rhymes. Then, "try as I would I could not produce any more."⁷¹ The would-be poet searches for inspiration from books, not from his own direct experience, "but neither Dmitriev nor Derzhavin helped me at all—far from it, they convinced me still more of my own inability."⁷² He snoops amidst Karl Ivanych's private papers for inspiration and finds, amongst transcriptions of German poems, one written by Karl Ivanych himself in Russian—a love poem. The child Nikolai in his prying does not acknowledge his betrayal of Karl Ivanych by this act. Moved by the poem (a very poor one), he memorizes it to use as a model.

Once his own poem is completed, he copies it (after several attempts) onto good paper. It concludes, he tells us, "thus: To comfort thee we shall endeavour, / And love thee like our own dear mother" ["Стараться будем утешать / И любим, как родною мать"]. Nikolai thinks to himself that the lines sound "quite fine" but acknowledges that "in a strange way the last line offended my ear."⁷³ He had chosen the last word "mother" for purely formal reasons—to rhyme with the last word of the previous line. He rereads the poem to himself (complete with gestures) up in his room, and although he recognizes other flaws in the poem, he is not overly concerned with them. "The last line, however," he recollects, "struck me even more forcibly and disagreeably than before."⁷⁴ He finally realizes that he had allowed the need for a rhyme to lead him to a lie: "Why did I put that? Why did I write a lie? Of course it's only poetry but I needn't have done *that*!"⁷⁵ Only poetry! He has committed an act of betrayal. Filled with dread, he joins the others in the drawing room to present their gifts. He has imagined his "good-for-nothing verses would be read out in front of everybody, and the words *like our own dear mother* would clearly prove that I had never loved her and had forgotten her."⁷⁶ He expects his father, when confronted with such "plain proof of want of feeling," to rap him on the nose—another insult to his face—and say, "You horrid boy, you are not to forget your mother . . . take that!"⁷⁷

This lie, this artistic invention, however, proves even more successful than his lie about the dream. The poem is a wild success; his father is proud; his

grandmother calls it “*charmant*” [“charming”] and kisses him on the forehead—again, his head—and he continues to be praised for it throughout his grandmother’s party. The germs of Tolstoy’s later guilt about and repudiation of his artistic work glimmer here with fleeting, firefly clarity. Art leads to artifice and a betrayal of the truth. “Why did I write a lie?” Nikolai’s question has no easy answer.

The question arises again in a slightly different form when Nikolai is flirting with Sonia at the children’s ball. Managing to escape ridicule over the torn dirty glove of Karl Ivanych’s that he had stolen in an effort to find a glove to wear at the dance, Nikolai instinctively turns her playful question, “Where did you find such a funny glove?” to good artistic effect. He offers up an ironic description of Karl Ivanych about “how once in his green overcoat he had fallen off his horse right into a puddle.”⁷⁸ Afterwards he asks himself: “But why did I ridicule Karl Ivanych?”⁷⁹ He realizes he would not have forfeited Sonya’s good opinion if he had simply told her the truth about the glove. His humorous rendering of Karl Ivanych’s character constitutes both a lie (because it does not convey his real feelings about him) and a betrayal of him. As “author,” Nikolai experiences both the pride of success and the pangs of guilt.

On the one hand, it might have been preferable, according to the rules Tolstoy seems to set here at the outset of his literary career, as well as elsewhere throughout his life, if Nikolai had composed his poem in direct response to his experience (like his attempt to draw the hare after the hunt) instead of using literary crutches and models. On the other hand, as Nikolai has told us, to the extent that the creative impulse is also play, a spontaneous game, it makes life worth living. “If you only go by what’s real, there won’t be any games. And if there are no games, what is left?” Perhaps Tolstoy himself was so critical of *Childhood* in later years because it was so redolent of his own readings of Rousseau, Sterne, Toepffer, and especially Dickens, although Tolstoy does not cite Dickens as an influence at this point. Moreover, Dickens drew heavily on the early chapters of *Jane Eyre* in composing some of the early chapters of *David Copperfield*, and those are the same chapters that hover clearly over *Childhood*. From the retrospective chapters, to the experimentations with perspective, to the depiction of the passionate love of the little boy for his mother (soon to be lost), to the pairing of the mother with the devoted, faithful servant who had also raised the mother and is beloved by the child (Peggotty/Natalya Savishna),

to the dark world of male sexuality, betrayal, and rivalry hinted at in both Mr. Murdstone and Nikolai's father, and, most compelling of all, the death of the mother and the layers of grief, both false and genuine, experienced by the child—all these elements and many more find their way from *David Copperfield* to *Childhood*. We do know that Tolstoy was reading *David Copperfield* serially in Russian translation around this time, and in 1853 he asked Count S. N. Tolstoy to get it for him in English. He amusingly alludes to Mr. Micawber in an even earlier letter to his brother Nikolai, teasing him that Nikolai's recent letter to him is like one of Mr. Micawber's—"a long epistle on one sheet of notepaper, two words to a line."⁸⁰ And he reportedly named his dog Dora.⁸¹ Most important, late in life, Tolstoy did include *David Copperfield* on the list of books that had most influenced him between the ages of sixteen and twenty. His diaries, letters, and notebooks praise the novel over a period of more than fifty years. "If you sift the world's prose literature, Dickens will remain; sift Dickens and *David Copperfield* will remain."⁸²

Seven months after their arrival in Moscow, Nikolai, his brother, and his father rush back to the countryside where mamma is dying. She dies in terrible agony. Later, Nikolai's reaction to the sight of his mother's dead face offers the first extended passage of Tolstoy's later trademark technique of *ostranenie*, described so succinctly by Viktor Shklovsky:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. . . . The narrator of "Kholstomer" ["Strider"], for example, is a horse, and it is the horse's point of view (rather than a person's) that makes the content of the story seem unfamiliar.⁸³

His mother's face had been the dearest, most familiar thing in the world for Nikolai. Now it becomes the least familiar. Gone are the brown eyes, the mole on her neck just below the place where the short hairs grow, her delicate dry hand—all the elements of the loving synecdoche that had constituted his earlier description of mother. Instead a new and frightening synecdoche presents itself to him, a familiarity suddenly bedecked with something too terrible and unknown to name takes over: "I stopped at the door and looked but my

eyes were so swollen with weeping and my nerves so unstrung that I could distinguish nothing. The light, the gold brocade, the velvet, the tall candlesticks, the pink lace-trimmed pillow, the frontlet, the cap with ribbons, and something else of a transparent wax-like color—all ran together in a strange blur. I climbed on to a chair to look at her face but there in its lace I again saw the same pale-yellow translucent object.”⁸⁴ The passage, with its strongly marked similarities to the experience young David Copperfield has beside his mother’s body, continues in this vein.⁸⁵ This instance in Tolstoy’s oeuvre of “making strange” is a making strange and terrifying of the dearest, most familiar thing in the world to Nikolai, *his mother’s face*.

Nikolai also describes his shame when he remembers the elements of “self-love” in his grief—“now a desire to show that I prayed more than anyone else, now concern about the impression I was producing on others.”⁸⁶ He feels even deeper shame when he observes the genuine grief of Natalya Savishna, who continues to perform her duties amidst her own terrible sense of loss.

All of these elements—the manner of describing the beloved dead mother’s body and the encroachments on that description of something completely unfamiliar and initially unnamable—the physical decay wrought by death (that is, the *ostranenie*)—the acute sense the child has of the pleasure of enacting his grief in front of others while not yet feeling it acutely, the observation of one whose grief is powerful, authentic, and modest—all these elements are imported wholesale into *Childhood* directly from *David Copperfield*.⁸⁷ Yet each of these elements becomes a hallmark of Tolstoy’s artistic vision. He replays each of them again and again in other works, whereas, oddly enough, Dickens does not. Tolstoy’s first use of *ostranenie* and his first primer on grief may emerge straight out of *David Copperfield*, but they are purely Tolstoyan for all that. A couple of passing scenes written by one author becomes emblematic, a quiddity, for another author. The sentiment, variously attributed to T. S. Eliot and Pablo Picasso, that minor artists borrow whereas great ones steal, proves true.

Observation, play, the experience of wonder, the telling of lies, the act of betrayal, the rendering of experience through art are as entangled *en masse* in the creative impulses of children as they are in those of adults.⁸⁸ Our most vivid realities and memories are always composed of mixtures of the real with the imagined. No one has portrayed these potent mixtures as compellingly as has Tolstoy, and perhaps no one has experienced such ambivalence over the fact

that this is the way things are or has struggled so hard to strip away artifice from the essential.

Endnotes

- 1 Dostoevsky, *ИСС*, 22:46. Quotations from Dostoevsky's fictional works are from F.M. Dostoevsky, *Полное собрание сочинений*, hereafter cited by volume and page number in parentheses. This quotation of Dostoevsky's *A Writer's Diary* [*Дневник писателя*, 1876-78] comes from the translation by Kenneth Lanz, 1:352. See also Robin Feuer Miller, *Unfinished Journey*, 76-77.
- 2 Ibid., 22:43. See Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, 1:347. See also Miller, *Unfinished Journey*, 19.
- 3 McEwan, "On John Updike," 4. McEwan is quoting from Updike's autobiography, *Self-Consciousness* (New York: Fawcett, 1990).
- 4 Many critics read *Childhood* as a largely cheerful, sentimental hymn to the happy memories of childhood. Andrew Wachtel, for example, writes: "If there is a simple overarching message in *Childhood*, it is that childhood is an essentially happy period" of "joyous innocence" (44). His primary interest is in how this novel set the standard for future representations of childhood in Russian fiction, and he analyzes at length the tension between Tolstoy's early descriptions of the work as a novel and his later harsh judgment of it as a failed autobiography. Wachtel also focuses on the three layers of narration present in the novel. Wachtel revisits some of these observations, placing them in a larger context in his rich and interesting *Russian Literature*, co-authored with Ilya Vinitsky, 147-151. Where Wachtel emphasizes the sentimental aspects of Tolstoy's *Childhood*, Donna Orwin argues that it was precisely Tolstoy's "realism in his depiction of children" that "affected Dostoevsky's sentimentalism. It is after the appearance of Tolstoy's trilogy that Dostoevsky . . . begins his more radical exploration of the damaged psyche of the abused child. This same novel also contains his first critique of childhood as Tolstoy portrayed it" (148). Nevertheless, Orwin, like Wachtel, argues for a generally optimistic, Rousseauian, and sentimental reading of this work and the trilogy as a whole, maintaining: "The following argument emerges from the trilogy. As long as we are children, conscience is not needed, and this is happiness.

Innocence keeps children both happy and virtuous” (140). My reading discerns little happiness and even less innocence in Nikolai’s experience, although the adult narrator may wish to smooth out his recollections with a patina of both. The present essay argues for a much darker reading of the work than either Wachtel or Orwin describe, in which the primary tensions are not between autobiography and fiction, but between truth and artifice, morality and play, honesty and betrayal. Justin Weir, in his excellent *Leo Tolstoy & the Alibi of Narrative*, engages, as I do here, with the theme of false memory in this novel. He labels Nikolai’s account of the dream of his mother’s death variously as a “false memory,” “a memory that recapitulates an event that never happened,” “a non-existent dream,” and a “fake dream” (64, 49). My reading is grounded in a more stark and dire sense of this dream as a lie, for my focus here is on the uneasy boundaries among lies and art, betrayal and games—boundaries that confound and confuse a child’s deepest sensibilities even as they help to shape them.

- 5 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 1:208; quoted in Christian, *Critical Introduction*, 23. Quotations of Tolstoy’s works in this essay, unless otherwise noted, come from one of two sources: the online *Полное собрание сочинений* [*Complete Collected Works*] in 100 volumes, hereafter cited by volume and page number in parentheses, or the hardcover *Полное собрание сочинений* in 90 volumes, hereafter cited as Chertkov edition, followed by volume and page number in parentheses. See also Note 15 below.
- 6 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 60:74. See the fine essay by Anne Hruska, 64.
- 7 Quoted in Knowles, *Tolstoy*, 59-61.
- 8 Dyson, “Information Flood,” 10.
- 9 In “My heart leaps up when I behold” Wordsworth was, in part, writing about the creative impulse through his observation of nature: “My heart leaps up when I behold / A rainbow in the sky,” an impulse first experienced in childhood and then throughout life.
- 10 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 55. In this passage, Coleridge is writing about Wordsworth.
- 11 “Art as Technique” [“Искусство как прием”] became the first chapter in Shklovsky’s influential *Theory of Prose* [*О теории прозы*], published in 1925.

- 12 Browne, *Charles Darwin*, 13.
- 13 Ibid., 13, 15.
- 14 The correspondences between Darwin's and Tolstoy's experiences of childhood wonder are particularly interesting in the light of Tolstoy's growing antipathy toward Darwin's writings, even when he agreed with them. In fact, Darwin was to join the pantheon of writers of whom Tolstoy was suspicious, whom he disliked, of whom he was probably jealous, and by whom he was undoubtedly influenced: Dante, William Shakespeare, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others. Readers interested in Tolstoy and Darwin should read the outstanding chapter by Hugh McLean, "Claws on the Behind: Tolstoy and Darwin," in his *In Quest of Tolstoy*, 159-181. Tolstoy's resistance to Darwin is epitomized by the following: "When the ordinary person asks, how should I live, how [should I] relate to my family, to my neighbors, and to foreigners, how can I control my passions, what should I believe and not believe, and much else, what does our science answer him? It triumphantly tells him how many miles separate the earth from the sun, how many millions of vibrations per second in the ether constitute light, how many vibrations in the air make sound. It will tell about the chemical composition of the Milky Way, about a new element called helium, about microorganisms and their excreta . . . about X-rays and so forth. 'But I don't need any of that,' says the ordinary man. 'I need to know how to live'" (Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 31:89-90, cited in McLean, 164-65). Tolstoy's somewhat disingenuous rant also shows how carefully he kept up with developments in science.
- 15 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, online edition, 1:30; 34. All quotations from *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth* are from volume 1 (2000-) of the online *Полное собрание сочинений* [*Complete Collected Works*] in 100 volumes, hereafter cited by volume and page number, followed by page numbers from the English translation of *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth* by Rosemary Edmonds, all in parentheses.
- 16 Wilson, *Consilience*, 3.
- 17 Ibid., 4.
- 18 Dillard, *Writing Life*, 7-8.
- 19 In an email of March, 2011, Judith Shapiro has reminded me of an old favorite, the inchworm song sung by Danny Kaye "in the movie where he

plays Hans Christian Andersen. He sings it to a group of children outside playing hooky in order to hear his stories as the other children are heard from inside the school reciting their math lesson”:

(Two and two are four
Four and four are eight
Eight and eight are sixteen
Sixteen and sixteen are thirty-two.)
Inchworm, inchworm
Measuring the marigold

You and your arithmetic
You'll probably go far
Inchworm, inchworm,
Measuring the marigold
Seems to me you'd stop and see
How beautiful they are.

- 20 Stoppard, *Arcadia*, 37. The lovely Thomasina from Stoppard's play does indeed both measure the marigold and see its beauty. The two pursuits are simply one, facets of each other.
- 21 Tolstoi, *ITCC*, online edition, 165-66; 158.
- 22 Wachtel describes this strategy of layered narrative at length in his chapter on *Childhood* (1-57). Interestingly, Tolstoy complained that he found the narrative technique he had devised for the trilogy quite burdensome and was tempted not to complete it. He wrote to Nekrasov, "The autobiographical form that I chose and the obligatory link between the following parts and the preceding one so constrain me that I often feel the desire to abandon them and leave the first part without a continuations" (Tolstoi, *ITCC*, Chertkov edition, 1:330). This passage is cited by Wachtel in *The Battle for Childhood*, 11.
- 23 Campbell, *Wonder and Science*, 3-4.
- 24 See Lewis S. Feuer, especially p. xi.
- 25 Feynman, "Dignified Professor," 67.
- 26 Miller, "Tolstoy's Peaceable Kingdom," 58. The account Simmons gives is the most vivid in English. He states that Tolstoy's brother Nikolai told the

other boys that he possessed a wonderful secret. If it became known, a Golden Age would exist on earth—the earth would be without disease, misery, and anger. All would become “Ant Brothers” and love one another. The children, as in *Childhood*, would huddle under chairs or boxes covered with shawls. Nikolai devised conditions under which he would show them a secret place: “The first was to stand in a corner and not think of a white bear. The second was to walk along a crack in the floor without wavering; and the third was to keep from seeing a hare, alive or dead or cooked, for a whole year” (23). Nikolai also invited them to share one wish that would come true: “Seriozha wished to be able to model a horse and a hen out of wax; Mitenka wished to be able to draw everything in life size, like a real artist; and the five-year-old Liovochka, clearly puzzled, lamely wished to be able to draw things in miniature” (24). For another account of the significance of this childhood game, see Miller, “Tolstoy’s Peaceable Kingdom,” 58.

27 Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 88.

28 See Miller, “Tolstoy’s Peaceable Kingdom,” 58, 65-66. See also Thomas Newlin’s excellent recent article.

29 Gleick, *Chaos*, 8.

30 See Miller, *Unfinished Journey*, 186-188, 229.

31 All of the modern critics I have already cited take these influences into account. See also the landmark work by Boris Eikhenbaum, *The Young Tolstoi*, 48-67.

32 Tolstoi, *IICC*, Chertkov edition, 34:348-349. Wachtel discusses this passage in *The Battle for Childhood*, 14. Weir does not take this comment of Tolstoy’s at face value, however. He asserts, “Wachtel’s interpretation of *Childhood* may have been influenced by Tolstoy’s later statements on his early fiction, especially his *Reminiscences*, a particularly untrustworthy work, which was written for a favorite biographer, Pavel Biriukov. In that work, Tolstoy accuses himself of writing *Childhood* too literarily and insincerely [Tolstoi, *IICC*, Chertkov edition, 34:348], suggesting, among other things, that he will now write ‘the veritable truth’ [Tolstoi, *IICC*, Chertkov edition, 34: 345]. Eikhenbaum, who notes his lack of access to Tolstoy’s archives, also relies on Biriukov, and he says much the same thing” (Weir, 247-48). Nevertheless, it still seems safe to postulate that the old Tolstoy was ambivalent about this early work.

- 33 Quoted in Wachtel, *Battle for Childhood*, 211.
- 34 Ibid., 12.
- 35 Ibid., 52-53.
- 36 Dostoevsky, *ПСС*, 28(1): 210.
- 37 Tolstoi, *ПСС*, Chertkov edition, 60:137. This translation comes from Christian, *Letters*, 1:84.
- 38 Quoted in Knowles, *Tolstoy*, 74. Unsigned review from *Saturday Review*, 29 March, 1862.
- 39 Tolstoi, *ПСС*, online edition, 3-4; 13-14.
- 40 Ibid., 1:11; 14.
- 41 Ibid., 1:12; 14.
- 42 Tolstoy would use this technique again, as, for example, in *War and Peace* in the scene in chapter twelve of Book VII when Sonya interprets the signs in the wax for Natasha and says she sees Prince Andrei, although she “had not seen anything.” She tells Natasha that, although Andrei was lying down, “‘his face was cheerful, and he turned to me.’ And when saying this she herself fancied she had really seen what she described” (471).
- 43 Eikhenbaum writes of Tolstoy’s futile struggles to create a “second” day after this first one. See *The Young Tolstoy*, 56-60. Perhaps because the day is so completely archetypal, it cannot be represented as one in a sequence.
- 44 Tolstoi, *ПСС*, online edition, 1:15; 18.
- 45 Ibid., 1:17; 19.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid., 1:17; 22.
- 48 Ibid., 1:32; 33-34.
- 49 See Miller, “Tolstoy’s Peaceable Kingdom,” 58-59. The reader familiar with Tolstoy’s oeuvre senses the looming of *War and Peace* with its massive exploration of the intersections, collaborations, and clashes of individual free choice and the inexorable workings of contingency on a global scale.
- 50 Tolstoi, *ПСС*, online edition, 1:33; 34-35.
- 51 Ibid., 1:34-35; 36.
- 52 Ibid., 1:35; 36-37.
- 53 Ibid., 1:69; 69.
- 54 Ibid., 1:70-71; 70. Tolstoy’s sheltering under Gogol’s “Overcoat” [“Шинель”] at this moment is evident. Hruska trenchantly analyzes the

significance of this passage at some length, pointing out its Biblical parallels (and the connection in Tolstoy's work between Jesus and the victim), as well as those to Gogol. She points out that Nikolai himself echoes Grap in chapter 22 when he asks, "Oh Lord, why dost Thou punish me so dreadfully?" See Hruska, 77.

55 Ibid., 1:72; 71.

56 Ibid., 1:72; 71; my italics.

57 Ibid., 1:38; 40.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 See Miller, "Tolstoy's Peaceable Kingdom," 57-62.

61 Tolstoi, *IICC*, online edition, 30:65. These quotations of *What is Art?* come from the translation by Aylmer Maude, 50-51.

62 Ibid., 1:39; 40. Numerous readers have noted this early expression of Tolstoy's later deep ambivalence about music and his responsiveness to it mingled with his disgust. See, for example, the excellent essay by Caryl Emerson, "Tolstoy and Music," 16-17, and Weir, 64-65. Christian cites a lengthy deletion from the final version of *Childhood* that sheds important and fascinating light on the young Tolstoy's thoughts about music and art in general. The young hero's mother is playing Beethoven, and the narrator regards his childhood response as affected: "In a certain French novel, the author describes the impression made on him by a Beethoven sonata [Christian points out that it is Balzac in *Cesar Birotteau* (1837)] and says that he can see angels with azure wings, palaces with golden columns . . . in short, strains every fiber of his French imagination in order to draw a fantastic picture of something beautiful. . . ." In another version of this same "discarded chapter," Christian points out another even more significant passage about music:

Music does not affect the mind or the imagination. While I am listening to music, I don't think about anything and don't imagine anything, but a strange delightful feeling so fills my soul that I lose all awareness of my existence: and this feeling is –recollection. But recollection of what? Although the sensation is acute, the recollection is obscure. It seems as if you are recollecting something which never happened. Is not recollection the basis of the feeling which any art

arouses in you? Does not the delight afforded by painting and sculpture come from the recollection of images? Does not the feeling inspired by music come from the recollection of feelings and the transitions from one feeling to another? Is not the feeling inspired by poetry the recollection of images, feelings and thoughts? (quoted in *Critical Introduction*, 25-26).

As Christian reminds us, Tolstoy retains very little of this passage. Tolstoy's creative processes of deletion are as fascinating in this early work as they are in the many drafts of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

63 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, online edition, 1:40; 42.

64 Ibid., 1:46; 47.

65 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, Chertkov edition, 61:122, quoted in Christian, *Letters*, 1:202. Readers are urged to read this extraordinary letter in its entirety.

66 This is one of dozens of sharp correspondences—direct borrowings—by Tolstoy from a novel he continued to cherish all his life. See Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, chapter 2. In both novels the beloved mother and the adored servant who is also a mother figure share the same first name. For more on this subject, see note 83 on Dickens below.

67 Tolstoi, *ИСС*, online edition, 1:51; 52.

68 Ibid., 1:52; 53.

69 Ibid., 1:52; 53. Compare the fictional Nikolai's dreamy idyll of his mother to the following note, which Daniel Rancour-Laferriere highlights: "On 10 March 1906 the aging Tolstoy wrote the following note to himself on a stray piece of paper:

A dull melancholic state all day. Toward evening this state changed into a tender feeling, a desire for affection, for love. As in childhood I longed to cling to a being who loved me, who took pity on me, and to weep tenderly and be consoled. . . . To whom can I cling? I'd like to make myself small and cling to mother as I imagine her to myself. Yes, yes, mommy [маменька], whom I had not even yet called by that name since I couldn't speak. . . . That's what my better but tired soul yearns for. Yes, mommy, come cuddle me [Ты, маменька, ты приласкай меня]. All this is insane [безумно], but it is all true (quoted in Rancour-Laferriere, 46-47).

See also Richard Gustafson, 14-15. Gustafson too highlights this passage; his reading of *Childhood* eloquently elaborates the importance of the garden to Nikolai's feelings of belonging and his love for his mother.

70 Tolstoi, *IICC*, online edition, 1:52-53; 54.

71 Ibid., 1:54; 55.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 1:55; 56.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid, italics mine.

76 Ibid., 1:58; 59; italics Tolstoy's.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 1:79; 78.

79 Ibid.

80 Christian, *Letters*, 1:11.

81 For the reference to the dog Dora, see Christian, *Critical Introduction*, 28.

82 For many astute and carefully observed insights into Tolstoy's reading of Dickens, see the outstanding essay by Philip Rogers. Rogers is here citing the semi-reliable memoir of Tatyana Tolstoy. But the textual comparisons he makes between the two works are completely compelling. See also Tom Cain, "Tolstoy's Use of *David Copperfield*," and Henry Gifford, "Dickens in Russia." For more commentary on the list of books that Tolstoy made late in life to chronicle what literary works shaped his sensibility, see Christian, *Critical Introduction*, 26-28. For the actual list, see Christian, *Letters*, 2: 484-486. On October 25, 1891, Tolstoy wrote to M.M. Lederle, a Petersburg publisher, who had written to many other well-known people for a list of the one hundred books that had most influenced them. Warning that his list was incomplete and not ready for publication, he sent it on nevertheless. Tolstoy divided his list (not even close to a hundred books) according to the age of reading (childhood to 14, 14-20, 20-35, 35-50, 50-63) and degree of influence—enormous, very great, and great. For the ages of 14-20 (this does not quite correspond to the year in which he read *David Copperfield*, for he was 22), he lists 17 books, 5 of which receive the designation "enormous": "Matthew's Gospel: The Sermon on the Mount," Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Emile*, Gogol's "Viy," and *David Copperfield*.

83 Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 16.

- 84 Tolstoi, *ITCC*, online edition, 1:94; 92-93.
- 85 David describes Peggotty bringing him to his mother's body as a "time of confusion": "I only recollect that underneath some white covering on the bed, with a beautiful cleanliness and freshness all around it, there seemed to me to lie embodied the solemn stillness that was in the house, and that when she would have turned the cover gently back, I cried, 'Oh, no! Oh, no!'" His mother's familiar beloved body becomes unfamiliar—an embodied solemn stillness from which he draws back crying aloud (see Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 124-125). It is interesting that George Steiner, rather than noting the powerful echo of *David Copperfield* in this passage, instead links this scene to the affinities he discovers between Tolstoy and Homer: "But in the unflinching clarity of the Homeric and Tolstoyan attitude there is far more than resignation. There is joy, the joy that burns in the 'ancient glittering eyes' of the sages in Yeats' "Lapis Lazuli" (77). It is curious to note that Tolstoy himself had already linked the work of writing *Childhood* to Homer. In 1852, describing his many revisions of the text he wrote (in French) to his beloved Aunt T. A. Ergolskaia, the model for Natalya Savishna, "Perhaps this will be like the labor of Penelope; but I don't find that distasteful. I don't write from ambition but from taste. I find my pleasure and my usefulness in working, and I work" (translation from Christian, *Letters*, 1, 26).
- 86 Tolstoy, *ITCC*, online edition, 1:96; 94.
- 87 The fine, close reading offered by Rogers enumerates these many affinities between the two works. He quotes in full many of the passages I allude to in this essay. Any reader who reads these two novels in tandem will be struck by the close parallels between them, yet each text remains quintessentially of its own author.
- 88 Thoughts for an essay on *Childhood* have been percolating in my mind for decades. Since *Childhood* is dominated by Nikolai's lost mother, it does not seem inappropriate to cite here a letter from my late mother, Kathryn B. Feuer, a scholar of Tolstoy. Readers who dislike personal intrusions are urged to skip this note. I found this letter as I was working on this essay; it fell out of a copy of Tolstoy's novel that I keep at my summer house. Dostoevsky might say it was a recollection that appeared at the needed time. It is dated Sunday, January 4, 1981.

Dearest Robin,

This is a thank you letter. Thank you for a lovely Christmas visit. . . . I'll never forget Christmas Eve put-together time. I still have a few bloody knuckles, yet I accomplished nothing.

... I play the Bette Midler record a lot, am learning to love it. For me, she'll never match "Songs for a New Depression," every single one of which I love. But this is a good one.

I wish I knew your schedule. Mine this term is T-W-Th (What a pleasure!), but I'd love to give you a day off and take your *Childhood* session. . . .

Poor Folk—right at the beginning Makar writes of the dear little birds tweet-tweeting and then quotes (roughly), "I wish I were a bird, *a bird of prey* [*italics hers*]. I consider this important, that the factor of will, aggression, is there from the start. Like Golyadkin Jr's "annihilating look" about which, if I remember correctly, he even consults his doctor. . . .

Childhood. Here I do a 3-tiered thing which you may or may not approve of, but I offer it as something to fall back on. First, it's about art—T's life-long dilemma—can beauty which is created=artifice=falsity be good? Here you get it in various isolated moments. It's possible to draw a "blue hare" (in art) but none exists in life (in Truth). N's father's ability to tell any story so well that what was good came out foolish, what was bad was affectionately laughable. And others.

Second tier—games. When his older brother won't "pretend" to play, the Swiss Family Robinson game flops. The game of cops and robbers—episode with Ilinka Grap (this episode and the one with Natalya Savishna and the tablecloth I consider the 2 fulcrums of the work) (fulcra?)

Third tier—games are another form of art—artifice—but what makes the book good is that T. offers no easy answer—sincerity or love as the solution. On the contrary, he shows the insidious double-facedness of love, pure innocent love. Nikolinka's love for Seriozha makes him cruel to Ilinka. His true innocent love for Sonechka leads him to betray Karl Ivanych—making fun of his gloves.

Here in this last point I think T comes to grips with Sterne. The chapter titles and method come from *Sentimental Journey*, but the message, I think, queries the assumption in *SJ* that natural feeling will always result in virtue. You're not doing *WP*. If you were I'd make a point of the author's

digressions beginning here. Anyway, along with your own ideas on *Childhood*, which I know are numerous and very different [they clearly aren't, RFM] I hope the above will give you an easy class. [The letter continues on with more personal matters.]

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