
Language and Death in Tolstoy's *Childhood and Boyhood*: Rousseau and the Holy Fool

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The origins of Tolstoy's "endless labyrinth of linkages" may be uncovered in his very early works, specifically in his trilogy *Childhood-Boyhood-Youth* (1852, 1854, 1857). Here Tolstoy rehearses his thinking about language and about death, two concerns that were to influence his poetics profoundly.¹ In the trilogy, Tolstoy looks beyond the boundary of life to death and explores what is beyond the limits of language. By necessity, he had to develop innovative poetic and narrative strategies in order to find ways of representing chaos, the infinite, the ineffable, the unknown—all that defies representation. The commentary on death and language, embedded by Tolstoy in the narrative of the early years of Nikolai Irtenev, provides some possible keys to Tolstoy's theory—and practice—of language.²

The influence of Rousseau on Tolstoy is especially tangible in the trilogy.³ In his "Essay on the Origin of Languages" Rousseau outlines the development of mankind and of language, from primitive beginnings to more "civilized" stages. To some degree, the personal maturation of Nikolai Irtenev, documented in Tolstoy's trilogy, appears to mimic Rousseau.⁴ Initial, according to Rousseau, the extended family provided mankind with a complete and sufficient community; brothers mated with sisters, without passion. An analogy to this stage can be seen in the life on the Irtenev estate described in *Childhood*, when Nikolai and his quasi-sibling Katya (the governess's daughter) innocently pair off. According to Rousseau, with further development, mankind's

awareness of other families and social groups evolved and the importance of the family diminished. At this point, passions and new, more systematic languages develop, whereas previously families had communicated more spontaneously and directly.⁵ In like fashion, Nikolai, as the trilogy progresses, moves out of the bosom of his family's country estate into a progressively more complex and diverse social milieu in Moscow. In Moscow, he is exposed to possible mates from other family groups and he experiences more complex and confusing "passions" as a result. He also encounters new linguistic codes, conventions, and registers and must orient himself amidst them. At the university, he meets youth of other social classes who speak French poorly, stress words differently, pronounce foreign titles with a Russian accent, but have read exhaustively and for whom Pushkin is "literature" and not just little books with yellow covers that one reads and learns as a child.

Although *Childhood* seems to present a happy period during which Nikolenka lives content in the bosom of his family, conflict lurks in various places.⁶ Disharmony manifests itself on the linguistic level, where speakers seldom say what they mean or speak directly from the soul. The narrative constantly focuses attention on these dissonances. Tone and body language play important roles.⁷ To complicate matters further, four different languages—Russian, German, French, and Church Slavonic—are spoken at various times and under various circumstances in the life of the Irtenev household.⁸ The estate seems to be more of a Babel than an Eden.

In commenting on the different languages in the Irtenev household, Tolstoy shows in one microcosm Rousseau's theory in his "Essay" that each different language has a unique set of connotations and affects. Rousseau's theorizing fed into the desacralization of the word, which in turn has led to what some regard as semiotic chaos (see Tallis). Because language is "the first social institution" and because it "depends on locality and antedates even morals," a given language, as a consequence of Rousseau's theory, will to some degree dictate a certain ethos. What happens then in the Irtenev household where they phase in and out of various languages at various times? The speakers would seem, according to Rousseau's

theory, to be constantly switching from one social contract, from one ethos, to another. For example, German is the language Nikolenka and his mother use when they are alone to convey their all-encompassing love for each other. French, in contrast, is the medium used to make the children conform to accepted but arbitrary conventions and rhythms: it is the language of the “un, deux, trois...” used by the governess Mimi when the children play the piano. French is, naturally, the language of the “comme il faut” embraced by Nikolai’s father. Though drawn to the frenchified world of his father, Nikolai can never wholeheartedly embrace its social contracts.⁹ Vestiges of another mode of being, determined by his maternal language(s), linger in his soul.

The macaronic linguistic life in the Irtenev household (and beyond in other parts of the trilogy) suggests that no single language is sufficient to convey the full complexity of human experience. Evidently, no single language can perfectly narrate “the dialectics of the soul.” Frustration, disorientation, and confusion result from attempts at verbal intercourse. Tolstoy creates an aura of metaphysical despair about the inadequacy of language and the resultant human isolation.

Later in the trilogy, Tolstoy introduces his notion of “family language,” an idea to which he will return both in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Vinogradov has seen this phenomenon, the associative “family” discourse, as crucial to the development of Tolstoy’s inner monologue.¹⁰ The concept that members of a family or a group living together establish a specific parlance or family argot intelligible only to its members can be seen as an application of Rousseau’s insistence that speakers of a given language enter into a kind of contract through their adherence to certain conventions.¹¹ As a more primitive and “natural” social unit, the family may develop a more direct language, capable of communicating in a more spontaneous and less “organized” form. In Tolstoy’s “family language,” words “acquire special meanings understood only by the initiated,” who are in close emotional and psychological contact (Vygotsky 248). “Family language” is akin to inner monologue, which, by ripping off “the

coverings imposed on the soul since Aristotle,” presents the soul in dishabille.¹²

Tolstoy distinguishes between written and spoken language. In the trilogy, written language consistently takes on negative and even sinister connotations, especially for the children. It is associated with the rote mastery of conventions that appear to the children to have no intrinsic meaning (and little to do with the dialectics of their childish souls). The written schoolwork required of them produces anxiety that persists through entry into the university. Here again Tolstoy recalls Rousseau, who rabidly argues about the primacy and vitality of spoken language and regards written language as arbitrary and empty convention.¹³

Written language is a medium whereby the chastened and often frustrated children seek adult approval. In a letter to her husband in Moscow, *maman* informs *papa* that Liubochka (Nikolai’s sister) wrote him but ripped the letter up because she knew that her father would have ridiculed her for any mistakes it contained. Nikolenka uses his writing skill to gain favour with the adult authorities in Moscow, his grandmother and father. He composes a poem in honour of his grandmother’s birthday and is lauded by the grown-ups as a “new Derzhavin” for his mastery of poetic conventions.

Nikolenka and the reader feel ashamed of his poem, since in the very process of composing it, Nikolenka had betrayed people dear to him, his mother and his tutor Karl Ivanych. His poem plagiarizes a poem by the tutor Karl Ivanych. By claiming in the last line of the poem to love his grandmother “как родную мать” (like his birth mother), he has, in written word, betrayed his mother’s love. He had fixed on the last line because it made the rhyme and meter come out right. This episode thus dramatically confirms the Rousseauian notion that falsity results from attempts to adhere to arbitrary literary, poetic, and linguistic conventions.

One could say that, as he makes this transition from spontaneous oral language to conventionalized and systematized written language, Nikolenka not only becomes a plagiarizer and a liar but at least a symbolical matricide. Nikolenka’s mother

soon dies in an eerie case of life imitating Nikolenka's poem. Now, indeed, his grandmother will replace his mother. In treating the death of his mother in this crucial way (and in relating it to the hero's emergence as an "author"), Tolstoy could be said to share in "the dependence of androcentric culture on the mother's absence."¹⁴ Nikolai's emergence as an author who narrates his childhood, boyhood, and youth fits very well the pattern whereby "the creative writer... is impelled by the 'desire to re-discover the mother of the early days, whom [he] has lost actually or in [his] feelings.' The work of art itself stands for the mother's body, destroyed repeatedly in fantasy but restored or 'repaired' in the act of creation."¹⁵

The features of the trilogy, which connect Nikolai's emergence as a "creative writer" to the death of his mother, and which, in turn, seem to fit neatly with twentieth-century theories informed by psychoanalysis, also follow patterns established by Rousseau. In Rousseau's understanding of mother-son relations, her murder, or "déplacement" [displacement] (to use the Rousseauian euphemism), figures prominently. As the reader of the *Confessions* will recall, for Rousseau the concept of a *maman* was fraught with anxiety. For starters, his birth was his "first misfortune": it killed his birth mother. This loss led him to seek what he refers to repeatedly as "suppléments" [supplements] in the form of Mme. de Warens (a.k.a. "maman") and then Thérèse as a *supplément* of a *supplément*—at a third or fourth remove from the true idea and/or body of mother.¹⁶ Commentators have noted that whatever psychological effects resulted from the loss of his mother influenced Rousseau's philosophy. And Derrida's statement in regard to Rousseau that "the origin of society and languages is certainly to be found in the displacement of the relation to the mother, to nature, to being as the basic signified" also applies to the "displacement" of the hero's mother in Tolstoy's trilogy.

Tolstoy's trilogy thus chronicles Nikolai Irtenev's simultaneous distancing from his mother and his acquisition of representational language, an acquisition that culminates in his becoming the narrator of his own childhood, boyhood, and

youth.¹⁷ Nikolai's first creative verbal act in the trilogy amounts to a fictional "murder" of his mother: in the opening scene of *Childhood*, when asked by Karl Ivanych why he is crying, Nikolenka lies and says that he has dreamt that his mother died. Later that very day, Nikolenka learns that he and his brother and father will depart the next day for Moscow and leave his mother and sister behind. In his mind, Nikolenka immediately connects the imminent separation from his mother to his fabricated dream: "'So this is what my dream portended!' I thought to myself. 'God grant that nothing worse should come.'" Thus, the process of separation from his mother begins on this very day and becomes progressively more irrevocable. His separation from his mother culminates in her death and that of Natalya Savishna. (Natalya Savishna is a "supplement" of Nikolenka's *maman*, Natalya Nikolaevna. Significantly, the two mother figures share a first name, one etymologically linked to the idea of birth.) His fib comes back to haunt him. And the poem he composes, like the dream he makes up, "displaces" his mother, by suggesting that she is replaceable and expendable. When Nikolai is summoned home to his dying mother, what he had prophesied in various forms comes true. Nikolai uses language to narrate—and compensate for—the loss of his beloved mother.

This process of "displacing" his mother continues even beyond her death. Her ultimate symbolic displacement and betrayal occurs when Nikolai acquires a tawdry new stepmother, another *supplément* of the beloved Natalya Nikolaevna. Nikolai jocularly refers to his stepmother as мамаша (a colloquial diminutive of the word for mother), in an odd echo of his poetic equation of his grandmother and his birth mother.¹⁸ Here, when Nikolai uses a form of the word mother ironically, he demonstrates not only that he has displaced his mother but that he now wields language and performs acts of displacement on language itself.

While *Childhood-Boyhood-Youth* narrates its male narrator's growth into manhood, a process largely of conforming to the image of his father, his matrilineal heritage plays a critical role in this

process. (Nikolai has inherited his first name from his mother's father, a fact which marks him as a bearer of his matrilineal legacy.) Although he jokes about his new мамаша, Nikolai shows strong signs of having been influenced emotionally and spiritually by his lost mother. In fact, insofar as Nikolai's soul engages in "dialectics," they involve the boy's attempts to reconcile the two very different world views of his mother and of his father. The trilogy chronicles his struggle, which continues even after his mother's death.

If Nikolai's father embodies the secular world of *comme il faut*, then his mother, for all the social prominence of her family, represents an other-worldly spiritual realm, the presence of which is felt overtly and covertly in her son's narrative of his life. The holy fool Grisha is the other main representative of this realm. He arrives unexpectedly on the first day of the narrative of *Childhood* and, despite the objections of Nikolenka's father, Grisha is received, fed, and lodged, because Nikolai's mother reveres holy fools. She does so because a holy fool had once correctly prophesied the death of her father. When Grisha makes enigmatic pronouncements about "doves flying away," he would seem to be warning of her death. This death does not take place until some months later, but the narrative of *Childhood* is constructed in a way that suggests that all signs from this day on point to it. Even before Grisha arrives, Nikolai had prophesied her death in his fabricated dream. Eventually, at the end of *Childhood* he moves from foreseeing death to narrating the actual event. (The story of his childhood includes his descriptions of his mother's death agony, of people's reactions to her corpse, and so forth; in *Boyhood*, he describes his vision of her as an angel.)

In this depiction of a holy fool (one of the very few of its kind in Tolstoy's oeuvre),¹⁹ this figure emerges as someone who combines other-worldly knowledge of death denied to ordinary mortals with a metaphysical attitude toward language. As an extension of the association between holy fools and speaking in tongues (or at least in some "new" language that is unintelligible to most), Tolstoy presents Grisha as a challenge to

what, from de Saussure on, is popularly known as the "system" of language.²⁰ As a fool for Christ's sake, Grisha, by definition or, rather, by conviction, rejects all earthly institutions and conventions, including linguistic ones, and thus embodies the antithesis (or spews forth the antithesis) of all the *comme il faut* that Nikolenka's father and his father's representatives attempt to inflict on Nikolenka.²¹

Grisha's special way of expressing himself is heard when he joins the family in their dining room but not at their table. During meals, the children are used to being chided by their French governess Mimi ("Parlez donc français," she tells them, but this only makes them want to "chatter in Russian"). But on this momentous day they are exposed to a mode of expression that radically subverts the conventions and paradigms of the system of language. Grisha is engaged in an idiosyncratic monologue. Grisha is conversing as if with himself: "изредка вздыхал, делал страшные гримасы и говорил, как будто сам с собою: «Жалко!.. улетела... улетит голубь в небо... ох, на могиле камень!..» и т. п." [he sighed from time to time, made terrifying faces and spoke as if with himself: "A pity! . . . she flew away. . . the dove will fly off into the sky. . . oh, there is a stone on the grave!" and so forth]. Grisha's speech bears many of the markers of "inner language" made audible or of a kind of private thinking aloud. As understood by Lev Vygotsky, in this inner language, words and thought have a much more dynamic relationship than they do in "normal" external language. Words used in this type of more idiosyncratic inner speech depend less on their stable, conventional meaning than on context and on what Vygotsky calls an "influx of sense" whereby "the senses of different words flow into one another—literally 'influence' one another—so that the earlier ones are contained in, and modify, the later ones."²² Thus, for example, when Grisha speaks of a dove/pigeon flying away, each of these words has a host of meanings, some of which are private and accessible, of course, only to Grisha. Still, Tolstoy sees to it that some message (about death and the spirit) can be gleaned from this statement.

Of Grisha's speech, the narrator notes: "речь бессмысленна и несвязна (он никогда не употреблял местоимений)" [his speech was nonsensical and incoherent (he never used pronouns)]. Vygotsky explains that a main feature of inner speech is its "peculiar syntax. Compared with external speech, inner speech appears disconnected and incomplete" (235). More specifically, this type of speech has the tendency to "omit the subject of a sentence and all words connected with it, while preserving the predicate." Grisha's avoidance of pronouns fits this pattern of inner speech. In the condensation characteristic of inner speech, the action of the predicate, being the "news" or "message" of this utterance, is articulated, whereas the identity of the subject is left out, because the speaker already knows whom he is talking about. Grisha's articulated "inner speech" provides Tolstoy a model for the inner monologues he would later incorporate into his fiction. Inner monologue, according to commentators, expresses thoughts in their most intimate and immediate format, "anterior to all logical organization" and by means of phrases "reduced to a syntactic minimum."²³

Of the effect of this seemingly incomprehensible monologue, the narrator says: "listening to him, one could not refrain from some kind of mixed feeling of pity, fear and sadness." Pity and fear are two emotions which, according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, a tragedy on stage will evoke in its audience. As he witnesses Grisha's soul-felt monologue, Nikolenka undergoes a kind of Aristotelian catharsis, whereby a sympathy for Grisha is combined with a new awareness of his own vulnerability.

Nikolai's father, however, is not moved by the holy fool. Nikolai's father finds the fool's idiosyncratic parlance incomprehensible and asks, in annoyance: "What is he saying? I can't understand a thing." To this, Nikolai's mother replies: "Well, I understand what he's saying." *Papa* fails to comprehend the unsystematic, even antisystematic, speech of the holy fool. Indeed, every time he utters a thought, the holy fool radically challenges the whole order—of proper grammar and written language, of earthly power, of secular *comme-il-*

faut—that *papa* strives to uphold. *Maman*, however, understands the holy fool. Those who understand Grisha's language (*maman*, the children) form one community from which those who are unable to understand it (*papa*, the French governess) are excluded. Similarly, French serves to create a society that includes only those who are *comme il faut*.

The children are more intimately exposed to Grisha's mode of expression when they witness his prayers. In the evening, they decide to hide in a storage space (*чулан*) adjacent to the attic room where he will be sleeping and spy on him. They want especially to see his chains (*вериги*). These chains, worn by ascetics as a reminder of the mortality of the flesh, recall the chains worn by the apostle Peter during his imprisonment (from which, according to Russian Orthodox belief, he was freed by an angel)²⁴ and possibly the general image of a convict's chains. On a broader level, Grisha's chains evoke St. Paul's identification of the holy fool with a man condemned to death: "For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we are in disrepute" (I Cor 4:9-10). The convict and the holy fool live in humble awareness of mortality, whereas those "held in honour" by society delude themselves into forgetting their mortality. As a holy fool, Grisha embodies the principles outlined in the *Philokalia*, where Symeon the New Theologian is quoted as saying (Precept #64) that a man of God will appear "to the eyes of the world like a convict in bound chains."²⁵ Grisha's chains, then, are an external sign of the fact that he lives in perpetual awareness of death: his experience resembles that of a man condemned to death.²⁶

The children continue to spy on Grisha while he prays. First he repeats a variant of the hesychast pilgrim's "Jesus prayer" by heart, with great animation and with "stress" in different places. This Tolstoyan holy fool has a certain Rousseauian resonance: Grisha's practice of adding "stress" in different places, while probably an authentic feature of the prayer of a holy fool,

implies naturalness, according to Rousseau's theories on language. In his "Essay" Rousseau notes that as languages become more "civilized" (read, debased), language loses both stress and sincerity (249). As Grisha's prayers continue, he moves from his inspired and stressed invocation of familiar prayers to "improvising prayers." He prays "in his own words" and, significantly, in Church Slavonic. This choice of a sacred language instead of Russian suggests that Grisha needs a more transcendental and spiritual language than that used for things of this world.

Grisha's capacity for engaging in this intimate personal monologue addressed to God seems to place him among those described by John of the Ladder: "Men, whose mind has truly learned to pray, indeed converse with the Lord face to face, as those who have the ear of the king (that is, his most close and trusted servants)" (238). As he spies on the holy fool, Nikolai is also exposed to a new mode of discourse. This discourse is capable of embodying metaphysical truths and of communicating in an immediate, personal way with God. This narrative is, of course, very unlike the correct and systematic prose taught to the children by their tutors and governesses so that the children will earn their father's approval.

Grisha's inspired but unintelligible words, which pour from his mouth "of their own accord" and which are not "verified by reason," bear some of the markers that would come to be associated with inner monologue and inner language. And here again, the Tolstoyan linkage between mortality and a new mode of "interior" prose is operative. Were Grisha not, metaphorically and actually, wearing convict's chains to remind himself of his human condition of mortality, he might communicate differently.

The children find Grisha's words largely "incoherent" or unintelligible, and yet Nikolai is profoundly moved by Grisha's prayer. And, eventually, *all* words and all languages fail Grisha. Having suddenly shouted out "Let thy will be done!" Grisha prostrates himself (with his forehead to the ground) in tears. He weeps "like a child"—Tolstoy uses this simile to signal a link between the holy fool and the child, which is a

key to *Childhood*.

Although the narrative, at this point, leaves Grisha behind, as the children emerge from their hiding place and return to their other childhood concerns and moods, Nikolai declares that "the impression" made by Grisha and the "feeling" evoked by him "will never die in his memory." He continues:

O great Christian Grisha! Your faith was so strong that you felt the nearness of God, your love was so great that the words flowed of their own accord from your lips—you did not use reason to verify them. . . . And what lofty praise you raised to the Almighty when, not finding words, you collapsed to the ground in tears.

What makes Grisha a great Christian *and* an important childhood influence on Nikolai is his spontaneous, death-inspired, non-rational, and childlike use of words—and tears—to express himself.

Traces of the holy fool can be discerned in the way in which Tolstoy's prose functions, specifically in its consistent questioning of the efficacy of language (especially conventionalized language) and in its challenging of ordinary modes of human understanding. The figure of the holy fool Grisha may also be one of the sources of the facet or "device" of Tolstoyan prose that, after Shklovsky, has been known as *ostranenie* (defamiliarization or, more literally, "making it strange"). Shklovsky understood *ostranenie* to be a transfer of what is being described to "a sphere of new perception" (quoted in Erlich, 177), and hence, as Erlich comments, the device can serve as a "vehicle of social criticism, of the typical Tolstoyan debunking of civilization on behalf of 'nature'" (*ibid.*) In effect, *ostranenie* is a convenient means of purveying Rousseauian ideology. But perhaps *ostranenie* is used by Tolstoy not just for social criticism but also to convey some more spiritual truth. Is Grisha not, to some degree, an embodiment of the "device" of *ostranenie*?²⁷

Someone like Grisha who goes through this life in chains because he wants constantly to bear death in mind will look at things of this life very differently and very strangely. As John Climacus

puts it in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, “a man who has heard himself sentenced to death will not worry about the way the theaters are run” (143-44). John Climacus’s servant of God will naturally transfer all things of this earth to what Shklovsky would call “a sphere of new perception.” Such is Grisha, the holy fool in the trilogy. While Nikolai Irtenev, the hero and narrator of *Childhood-Boyhood-Youth*, does not show Grisha’s mystical faith, and while he clearly feels the attraction of the *comme il faut*, Nikolai still has assimilated some of the metaphysical attitudes and devices of the holy fool, who inhabits “a sphere of new perception.” Consequently, he remains something of a *stranger* to his environment.²⁸

When Nikolai leaves for Moscow, he leaves behind the world of his childhood. The end of his childhood (and of *Childhood*) is dramatically marked by the deaths of the two Natalyas, his mother and her nanny. Of the loss of these two, the narrator asks, in the final line of *Childhood*, “Can it really be that Providence brought me together with those two beings simply to make me mourn for them forever?” He suggests that these two now-deceased “mothers” continued to play a role in his development. Likewise, Grisha the holy fool is not an actual presence in the “boyhood” and “youth” of Nikolai. But his spiritual presence manifests itself in various mysterious ways.

In *Boyhood*, Nikolai does poorly on an exam, strikes his French tutor, Saint-Jérôme, and ends up locked in a storage room as he awaits further punishment. There he has a vicarious experience of the realm of the dead, reminiscent of what he went through in *Childhood* while, in another closet, he spied on Grisha as he prayed.²⁹ When he observed Grisha, Nikolai learned of an other-worldly and mystical realm that could be accessed from this earth. On this occasion, the imprisoned Nikolai creates his own vision of death and undergoes, in mild adolescent form, the spiritual agony experienced by Victor Hugo’s condemned man while he was locked in his *cachot* (cell) and waiting to be executed.

At first Nikolai fantasizes about righting the wrongs that have been done to him. He imagines that he distinguishes himself in the military,

whereupon the Tsar, to reward him for his exploits, offers to grant him his heart’s desire: all he wants is Saint-Jérôme’s head. Nikolai culminates his *cachot* fantasies by dreaming or hallucinating about his own death and a reunion with his mother in heaven. Pleased to see her, but uncertain, he demands that she come closer and let him hug her, to which she replies with a Rousseauian “Noli me tangere.” Nikolai must reconcile himself to the fact that there’s no hugging, tickling, or kissing in her present state. He contents himself with flying “higher and higher” with his mother; at this point the fantasy ends. While locked up, Nikolai—in imitation—visits the realm of the dead. He peeks beyond the limits of life, before returning to his earthly life and concerns.

It is also significant what *form* his thoughts take when he is locked in his “prison.” These thoughts are characterized by a greater intensity and formal disarray than his ordinary ones. Of his mental processes he remarks: “Thoughts and concepts passed through my upset mind with an intensified speed, but the memory of the misfortune that had occurred to me constantly interrupted their fantastic chain, and I once again entered the exitless labyrinth of ignorance about the fate awaiting me, of despair and of fear.” Tolstoy uses two images—that of a “chain” (ЦЕПЬ) and that of a labyrinth with no exit. Tolstoy would later combine these same two images in an attempt to characterize the nature of his literary art.³⁰ In this later passage from an 1876 letter to Strakhov during the publication of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy writes of how he found the direct representation of an idea impossible and thus resorted to a series of “linkages” or “linkings” (ЦЕПЛЕНИЯ) interconnected in a labyrinth. He explains how he understands his art:

In everything, almost everything, that I have written, I was guided by the need to gather together interrelated thoughts in order to express myself; but every thought expressed separately by words loses its meaning and is terribly degraded by being taken out by itself from that linking in which it is found...

We need people who would show the senselessness of seeking out separate ideas in a work of

art and would continually guide readers in that *endless labyrinth of linkings* which the essence of art consists of, and to the laws which serve as basis for that linking. [my emphasis]³¹

Tolstoy's understanding of his art is somewhat mystical. He implies that his art uses words to embody thought and feeling in a way that makes this art hard to decipher or atomize ("every thought expressed separately by words loses its meaning and is terribly degraded by being taken out by itself from that linking in which it is found...").

In describing his "endless labyrinth of linkings" to Strakhov, Tolstoy evokes many of the same issues about the relationship of thought and language which are so crucial to the trilogy. As many critics have noted, Tolstoy thought deeply about how thought and language were related (see, notably, Vygotsky). Tolstoy's pondering of this question no doubt contributed to the new kind of prose he developed (a prose considered to be more "psychological" and "interior") and to his penchant for including—as subject matter in his prose—philosophical inquiry into the relationship between thought and language.³²

In the commentary about the relationship between thought and language in *Childhood-Boyhood-Youth*, Tolstoy develops some of Rousseau's ideas about language and, perhaps not unrelatedly, intimates a link between authorship and the death of the mother. But Tolstoy's meditations on the relationship of thought and language reach beyond Rousseau to more metaphysical (and perhaps Christian) questions at certain points, especially when Grisha the holy fool is present or when Nikolai himself communes with the spirit of his dead mother, while he is locked in a *cachot*-like space.³³ The presence of death, Tolstoy seems to speculate, alters the relationship of the mind and language. In the presence of death, the conventionalized system used to harness words to thought becomes meaningless and inadequate. Having internalized an awareness of death, Grisha understands the *ultimate* limits of language (and he often simply resorts to wordless tears), but he nevertheless also uses words to utter what is going on in his mind, albeit in a very unsystematic,

mysterious way, and without the use of pronouns! Although hard to interpret, the holy fool's utterances embody otherworldly mysteries (and a "labyrinth of linkings"), which apparently are not accessible to the convention-bound, system-ruled mind and not expressible in the rational discourse such a mind produces (where each word uttered means what the dictionary says it means and nothing more). In his representation of the death-inspired language of Grisha the holy fool—and in the commentary on this language embedded in the trilogy—Tolstoy directly sets forth the questions about the nature of language and thought which are hidden beneath the surface of the rest of the trilogy, and the rest of his prose.

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at a panel on "Tolstoy and Rousseau" at the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (October 1995, Washington, DC) and elaborated in a seminar I taught on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and the French (Fall, 1995). I have benefited from the comments and contributions of the other participants of the "Tolstoy and Rousseau" panel (Hugh McLean, Robin Feuer Miller, Donna Orwin) and discussion with my students. Gina Kovarsky's PhD dissertation (Kovarsky 1998) explores some related themes in Tolstoy. In *Tolstoy's Aesthetics and His Art* (27-28), Rimvydas Silbajoris suggests that the ideas Tolstoy embodies in the figure of Grisha the holy fool and the view of art expressed in *Childhood* were to be developed throughout Tolstoy's works. I am grateful to editor Donna Orwin and anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

1. For discussion of death and language and their role in Tolstoy's poetics, see Knapp.
2. See Ginzburg on Tolstoy's "psychological prose," Vinogradov on interior monologue in Tolstoy, and Vygotsky on inner language in Tolstoy.
3. On Rousseau and Tolstoy, see Markovitch, Barran, Orwin, and McLean 1997. On Rousseau and *Childhood*, see Wachtel and Williams.
4. On this issue, see Carden.

5. Thus, in speaking of primitive man, Rousseau writes (272): “there were families, but there were no Nations; there were domestic languages, but there were no popular languages; there were marriages, but there was no love. Each family was self-sufficient and propagated itself from its own stock alone: children of the same parents grew up together and gradually found ways to make themselves intelligible to one another; the distinction between the sexes appeared with age, natural inclinations sufficed to unite them, instinct served in lieu of passion, habit in lieu of predilection, people became man and wife without having ceased to be brother. None of this was sufficiently lively to untie tongues, none of it such as to draw forth the accents of the ardent passions sufficiently frequently to establish them as institutions.”

6. See Wachtel on various aspects and Hruska on the gothic aspects of this childhood.

7. As Vinogradov’s study shows, the concern with the insincerity of language in its various manifestations (a concern which is present in the trilogy and, for that matter, in “A History of Yesterday”) remains a key feature throughout Tolstoy’s oeuvre.

8. Gary Saul Morson (especially 46-49 and 253-64) offers many insights into Tolstoy’s use of French and into his treatment of language in *War and Peace*.

9. On “comme il faut,” see Anne Hruska’s forthcoming dissertation.

10. See also Ginzburg (278-79).

11. Many of Tolstoy’s intimations about the nature of language both in the trilogy and elsewhere may well sound proto-Saussurian or even perfect copy for the early Derrida (1967a), in part because Tolstoy (like de Saussure and Derrida) drew heavily on Rousseau’s theories about language. Derrida (1967b) points out ways in which Rousseau has influenced modern linguistics.

12. I borrow from some of descriptions of inner monologue from Dujardin.

13. Rousseau writes: “Languages were made to be spoken, writing serves merely as a supplement to speech . . . Writing is but a representation of speech.” (*Fragment sur la Prononciation*, quoted in Derrida

1967b, 457).

Or: “Writing, which might be expected to fix [or to stabilize] language, is precisely what alters it; it changes not its words but its genius; it substitutes precision for expressiveness. One conveys one’s sentiments in speaking, and one’s ideas in writing. In writing one is compelled to use every word in conformity with common usage; but a speaker alters meanings by his tone of voice, determining them as he wishes; since he is less constrained to be clear, he stresses forcefulness more; and a language that is written cannot possibly retain for long the liveliness of one that is spoken. What gets written down are words [*voix*] not sounds; yet in an accented language it is the sounds, the accents, the inflections of every sort, that constitute the greatest part of the vigor of the language, and it is because of them that in a given sentence an otherwise common expression proves to be the only proper one. The means employed to compensate for this [feature of spoken language] enlarge [and] stretch written language, and as they pass from books into discourse, they enervate speech itself. When we say everything as it would get written, all we do is to read as we speak” (Rousseau, 253-54).

14. Homans refers to this (2) as a “central myth of our culture’s dependence on the mother’s absence.” “We could locate in virtually all of the founding texts of our culture a version of the myth Woolf mocks: that the death or absence of the mother sorrowfully but fortunately makes possible the construction of language and of culture.”

The myth “that the murder of the mother is necessary for the founding of patriarchal culture” has been developed by Luce Irigaray and others, in harmony with Lacan’s theory that a child’s acquisition of representational language and entry into the “Law of the Father” (or symbolic order) are related to the child’s separation from the mother and desire to find substitutes not prohibited by the “Law of the Father.” Terry Eagleton describes this process in the following terms: “All desire springs from a lack. . . . Human language works by such lack: the absence of the real objects which signs designate. . . . We are severed from the mother’s body. . . . We will spend all of our lives hunting for it” (*Literary Theory: An Introduction* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983], 167-68, quoted by Homans 8).

15. This passage, quoted by Homans (291-92), comes from Susan Suleiman’s exposition of Melanie Klein’s theory of artistic creation; see Klein, 334).

Relevant to the Klein/Suleiman theory is the scene in which Nikolai, locked in the closet, is visited by his dead mother: Nikolai wants to embrace her (to return to his former state of preverbal union with her), but she explains that, given her present bodiless state, he must do without physical contact with her body. Nikolai must content himself with words as substitute for her body.

16. See Starobinski and Derrida (1967a) on "suppléments"; for Rousseau, written language was but a "supplément" of spoken language.

17. The process resembles that described in Wordsworth's *Prelude* as interpreted by Homans (2-5). The description in *The Prelude* of how while "a Babe, by intercourse of touch / I held mute dialogues with my Mother's heart" coincides with Nikolenka's descriptions of his early "mute dialogues" (or German endearments) exchanged with *maman*. As Homans explains, acquisition of language was linked to the death of Wordsworth's mother, which occurred when he was eight. "This is not to suggest that Wordsworth learned language only after his mother's death, but rather that he connects learning representational language (and discovering some of its implications) with a loss that is equivalent to his mother's death, some loss of her prior to her actual death. This loss feels like the mother's death, and it is, paradoxically, both caused by and the cause of the acquisition of representational language" (3-4). Nikolai Irtenev undergoes the same process whereby the mother's death *causes* and *is caused by* Nikolai's acquisition of representational language and his emergence as a young author. These fantasies about his mother's death seem to prophesy and "cause" her death.

18. The importance of the absence of the Tolstoyan mother has been explored by McLean 1994.

19. Williams comments on the fact that Tolstoy based this description on holy fools who used to visit his aunt during his own childhood. Williams also notes that, aside from the "God's folk" who visit Princess Marya in *War and Peace*, Grisha may be the only holy fool to appear in Tolstoy's canon.

20. Grisha is significant in the trilogy (and all of Tolstoy's oeuvre) because he provides a model of an understanding of language that is radically opposed to that of "that complex of signifying systems and laws

that make up Western culture" (Homans 7). As Homans explains, language, according to Lacan, becomes associated with the "nom" [name] and "non" [no] of the father. Grisha's language subverts the language founded on the "nom" and "non" of the father.

21. And in this respect Grisha represents an alternative to the systematic language associated with the (generalized) father and his prohibitions. The particular father in Tolstoy's trilogy behaves in accordance with post-Saussurian notions of how fathers act.

22. Vygotsky (246-47): "Actually, any attempt to impose multifaceted sense on one word results in the creation of an original idiom. In inner speech, one word stands for a number of thoughts and feelings, and sometimes substitutes for a long and profound discourse. And naturally this unique inner sense of the chosen word cannot be translated into ordinary external speech. Inner sense turns out to be incommensurable with the external meaning of the same word."

23. These qualities of "inner monologue" are taken from Dujardin's definitions.

24. The Russian Orthodox Church venerates the chains of the apostle Peter, from which he was miraculously freed, on January 16.

25. *Dobrotoliubie* (5: 20, #65). The broader context is: "Whosoever has planted in the depth of his heart fear of the judgment will appear to the eyes of the world like a convict bound in chains. For he is overcome with fear, as if he had been seized by a merciless executioner and led to the place of execution, not thinking of anything else other than the sufferings and tortures he will endure in the eternal fire. This fear brought on and keeps the sense of torment ineradicably planted in his heart, and prevents him from caring about any human concern, for he constantly feels as if he were hanging on the cross and felt all the ills and sufferings of death on the cross—and this prevents him from paying attention to man's appearance, or thinking of human honor or dishonor."

26. The holy fool embodies many of the ideas and images associated with the French figure of the *condamné à mort* (man condemned to death), which is featured prominently in the writings of Hugo (whose *Last Day of a Condemned Man* gives a blow-by-blow account of the mental agony experienced by a convict

as he faces the guillotine) and Pascal (in whose *Thoughts* [#199] mortal men are likened to convicts in chains who, watching others be slaughtered, await their own death). Although it appears that Tolstoy may not himself have read Pascal until 1876 (Orwin 146), it is possible that he was already acquainted with Hugo's condemned man when he wrote *Childhood*. He may also have already had some second-hand awareness of Pascal's well-known equations of the human condition with condemnation to death and of the universe with a *cachot* (cell) in which condemned men await their execution.

27 Silbajoris (99) has noted a connection between "estrangement" and death in *War and Peace*, where Tolstoy writes that Andrei before his death shows "an estrangement from everything of this world, terrible in one who is alive." Silbajoris comments: "In purely literary terms, this is also another use of Tolstoy's famous device of 'estrangement.' The rules of the living are no longer relevant to the man who has understood himself to exist in the realm of the dead."

28. In using the word "stranger" here, I invoke two uses of this term. The first is that of Tolstoy as stranger developed by Gustafson.

The second "stranger" that may be relevant here is that of Camus. *L'Étranger*—which begins with the famous line "Aujourd'hui maman est morte, ou peut-être c'était hier" and ends with Meursault in a *cachot* and condemned to death—contains many of the Tolstoyan themes discussed in this essay. Although French literature provided Camus with the models of Hugo's condemned man and Rousseau's noble savage (critics have suggested that Meursault may be seen as a "noble savage" brought to life in twentieth-century French Algeria), Russian writers may also have inspired him. The influence of Dostoevsky on Camus and on the development of French existentialism has often been mentioned. But the influence of Tolstoy is also important. As Wasiolek noted, the portrait of Tolstoy hung in Camus's room. Also, Camus's stranger in some ways could be seen as a living embodiment of the Tolstoyan device of "estrangement."

Much has been made of what twentieth-century French writers got from Dostoevsky; the case of Tolstoy may be more complicated still. Aspects of Tolstoy's poetics that were themselves Tolstoy's adaptations of French models, to which he added his own, in turn were reappropriated by twentieth-century French writers. French existentialism, thus, may bear traces of the Russian apophaticism that Tolstoy and

Dostoevsky borrow from theology and apply to poetics.

29. My thanks to Anne Hruska for drawing my attention to the fact that the word "чулан" appears as the locale both times.

30. In Irtenev's case, the "fantastic chain" of thoughts and impressions was constantly being interrupted or interfered with by his awareness of his desperate state (resulting from his being locked up). He would enter into an "endless labyrinth" of not knowing about his fate, of despair and fear. Thus the fantastic chain (a more directed train of thought or chain of associations) and the labyrinth (more of an abyss) are separate in this early passage, although Tolstoy suggests some cyclical relationship whereby his thoughts would race ahead, then despair would take hold, and so forth. In the later letter about the "labyrinth of linkages," Tolstoy seems to suggest that his *artistic prose*, to some degree, is the combination of these two processes Nikolai experienced in sequence.

31. *PSS* 62:268-70, cited here in George Gibian's translation (814).

32. I am echoing a point made about Tolstoy's use of "inner language" by Aucouturier (11), who notes that Tolstoy uses "interior language" not simply as "a *method*" "for depicting the 'dialectics of the soul'" but also (or often primarily) as "a *subject* to which Tolstoy's artistic vision is applied."

33. Although Tolstoy's Grisha in some ways is reminiscent of Rousseau's hero (the noble savage), Grisha's mystical awareness of death seems alien to Rousseau.

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