

**WN:** People always questioned whether Tolstoy had begun to practice and preach celibacy only because he had grown old, so to bring in the relationship of Bulgakov with Masha is a nice counter-balance. Your Bulgakov understands Tolstoy better than most of the other people around him.

**JP:** Certainly from reading the diary of Bulgakov I felt that he did have a kind of intuitive grasp of the issues in Tolstoy's life and a deep sympathy for both sides in the marriage, which makes him an ideal narrator. I think of him as the main figure not only in my novel, but also in the film. He's the centering presence in the film.

**WN:** He's sent to the household by Chertkov, but he doesn't really like this commission. He feels as if he is being asked to be a spy for Chertkov. His diaries are more objective, more centered, than a lot of the others.

**JP:** I knew that I had a novel when I figured out

that Bulgakov was at the center of all of this. It really gave me a narrative center.

**WN:** You've written other historical novels. Did you find anything different when working on this one? You do "red-letter" Tolstoy's words—you say in the afterword that you don't modify anything that he says.

**JP:** Yes, anytime Tolstoy speaks in the novel it is something that was recorded somewhere, so I'm not making up dialogue for Tolstoy. I didn't dare write in Tolstoy's voice. I didn't do him as one of my narrators. So when Tolstoy steps in, as in the excerpts from his essays and fiction, he steps in as himself. You can see why I wouldn't want to make up Tolstoy. It would be ridiculous. I didn't hesitate so much when I did, say, Walter Benjamin. I felt that he's not the sort of figure where it would be holy writ, so I didn't worry about it.

**WN:** Is there something particular about Tolstoy's

## **DREAM of Two Dark-Complected DAMES**

by Daniil Kharms

(best read with a Philadelphia accent)

So there're these two dizzy dames snoozing.  
 Actually no, they're not snoozing.  
 Actually no, they are snoozing, and they have a dream,  
 Like this: Ivan walks in the door  
 And right behind him the super too  
 Holding a volume of Tolstoy,  
*War and Peace* Part 2...  
 Actually no, that's not it at all  
 It's Tolstoy who walks in and takes off his coat  
 Takes off his galoshes takes off his boots  
 And shouts: Yo Vanka! Help!  
 Then Vanka grabs an ax  
 And whacks Tolstoy real good on the head.  
 Tolstoy drops like a load. Jesus!  
 There goes all of Russian literature right down the toilet!

August 19, 1936

(Translated by Tom Newlin)