
Male and Female Sense of Self in Tolstoy's Trilogy
and Anastasia Tsvetaeva's Memoirs

Pamela Chester, Wellesley College

In the autobiographical texts about childhood left to us by A.I. Tsvetaeva and L.N. Tolstoy, the categories of gender and genre collide, creating very different narrative structures. An examination of the male and female autobiographer's sense of self raises complex questions about the nature of literary art and about our definition of the literary canon.

Anastasia Tsvetaeva's memoirs, unlike the fictionalized autobiography of Lev Tolstoy, have never been read as literature. Yet they are tantalizingly, even disturbingly, close to the borderline between non-fiction and art. To examine the areas of commonality and of difference in these two childhoods is to increase our understanding of that gray area between literary text and historical document, and to suggest possible patterns of difference between female and male self-representations.

Some passages of Tsvetaeva's memoirs effectively carry the reader back into the hot, close world of her childhood. She writes:

Our heads bump, pushing hard at each other, each trying to gain control of the eyepiece, through which you can swim into the stereopticon, as you enter a house by crossing the threshold. But Musya's head is harder and her fist hits me in the side, quietly (so Mama won't see), and in spite of all the heat of my opposition my defeat screams with all its might, and my protracted, at once triumphant and frightened EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE is drowned in Mama's angry defense: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Musya? You're older..." —and in Musya's whispered "You're going to get it later..." (54)

The little girls in this scene, Musya and Asya, are the sisters Marina and Anastasia Tsvetaeva. The passage is drawn from the first part of Anastasia's "Vospominania"; this section is titled "Detstvo" and the next "Otrochestvo i iunost'," making the comparison to Tolstoy difficult to avoid.

In fact, in Chapter 8 of his "Detstvo," entitled "Games," Tolstoy describes an analogous scene: The hero Nikolen'ka's older brother Volodya teases and bullies the younger children, trying to puncture the make-believe of their game of "Swiss Family Robinson":

When we sat down on the ground and, pretending that we were going fishing, began to row with all our might,

Volodya sat with arms folded; in a pose which bore no likeness to the pose of a fisherman. I pointed this out to him, but he answered that by waving our arms more or less we wouldn't gain anything, and that in any case we wouldn't go far. Against my will I agreed with him (29).

The similarities between the two excerpts are clear: the author's child-self moves in the atmosphere of a magical vanished world, which now exists only in the narrator's memory. But these scenes also point up important differences between the texts.

One way of understanding these differences is to look at genre features, an approach which in fact sheds some light on the problem. Both are autobiographical texts, both deal with childhood, but Anastasia has explicitly labelled her work as "memoirs."

Richard Coe, in his book When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood, distinguishes memoirs from what he calls the Childhood (capital C), or true autobiography of childhood, by saying that "[in a memoir] the writer is, as a character, essentially negative, or at best neutral. It is not he himself (sic), considered as a unique and autonomous identity, who is important; it is...the other people—frequently greater or more conspicuous than himself—whom he meets, with whom he has dealings" (14). The author of the "true autobiography," by contrast, must possess "a dose of vanity so strong that never for one instant can [he] doubt that his own existence, in all its intimate and unmomentous detail, is supremely meaningful to the world at large" (15). Clearly this is an excellent description of Tolstoy's attitude to his "Detstvo"; in fact he went even further, writing an angry letter of complaint to his first editor, Nekrasov, who had titled the young writer's contribution to "Sovremennik" "Istoriia moego detstva." Tolstoy argues that this was by no means the story of his childhood but rather a valid depiction of human development. Coe's normative Childhood is essentially a description of Tolstoy's text. Yet he concludes after examining 600 such texts that there are no "revealing differences between men and women" authors (276).

By genre criteria like these, Tsvetaeva's memoirs have been excluded from consideration as a literary text. Yet as even this excerpt shows, Asya is far from being a neutral, detached and dispassionate observer of the family's life. Neither is she the central and entire psychological focus, as Tolstoy's male hero is. The critical tradition which has canonized Tolstoy's work as one of the "'great' Childhoods" (Coe xiv) has privileged genre over gender in reading these texts, when in fact these texts are also marked by a difference between the male and the female sense of self. These two "Childhoods" demand a gender-sensitive reading if we are to gain insight into the "Girlhood" as well as a better understanding of the "Boyhood."

These genre features which Coe describes strongly emphasize the

centrality of the narrator's self, particularly the autonomy of the developing child. But Sidonie Smith contends in A Poetics of Women's Autobiography that "the ideology of the individuality may, as Nancy Chodorow's revisionist psychoanalytic theory would suggest, derive from a decidedly male resolution of the tension between individuation and dependency." Chodorow links the development of male and female identity to the resolution of the Oedipal conflict, which may not be the most useful notion in dealing with literary texts. More importantly, she goes on to say that the young girl's "experience of self is characterized by 'more flexible and permeable ego boundaries.' ...And so the 'basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense is separate'" (qtd. in Smith 12).

Smith extends this model to literary texts, saying, "Since the boy comes to speak with the authority of the father and all fathers before him, those figures of public power who control the discourse and its economy of selfhood, the male experience is identified as the normative human paradigm. From this ideological perspective the girl comes to speak tentatively from outside the prevailing framework of individuality: She brings a different kind of voice to her narrative" (12).

Nancy K. Miller had proposed the terms "arachnology" for the "theory of female textuality" (qtd. in Smith 18). In the Greek myth, the mortal woman Arachne offends the goddess Pallas Athena by her pride in her woven tapestries and as punishment is turned into a spider, doomed to spin her webs forever. The term connotes female skill at the craft of weaving separate strands of story into a close web, a tapestry which builds up a story for the reader. It is a story built on connection, not on individual separateness or strength. Yet the myth's themes also include the crippling of one female artisan by a jealous and more powerful rival. The term is doubly apt for Anastasia: the bonds which link her to her family at once support and confine her.

Tsvetaeva's text clearly reveals a lack of separation from the people around her, especially from the female members of her family. The opening lines of the book provide a telling example. Instead of reaching back into memory for her own first conscious recollection, a standard beginning in a reminiscence of childhood, she gropes for a first memory of Marina. More than that, she concludes that she has no such distinct first visual memory. She was surrounded instead by a sense of her sister's presence, a feeling she describes as "old as I am, plural, like breathing: our 'the-two-of-us,' full of her, Musya's, seniority, self-will, superiority, scorn for my babyhood, ignorance, and jealousy of our mother. Our 'together,' the three of us, full of our mother's pride in her first-born, strong in spirit, body and temperament, full of caresses and pity for the younger, who was often sick...in this hot stream," she concludes, "our childhood floated" (4). Autonomy is not a prominent characteristic of Anastasia's narrator, at any rate.

Nikolen'ka first appears in Tolstoy's "Detstvo," by contrast, not as a dependent infant, but after his tenth birthday, a fact the narrator brings out in the first line of the book. He is already physically independent of the women in his world; he awakens in the nursery, attended not by his mother, who is far away in another part of the house, but by his male tutor. Karl Ivanych, however, is a gentle, loving man, slightly ridiculous to the adult eye, and that very evening Nikolen'ka's father announces his intention to separate the boys not only from their mother, from their female playmates and servants, but also from Karl Ivanych. This whole first segment of Tolstoy's trilogy reads like an escalating scale of distance from the safe, pure, rural, female-dominated world of childhood: the boys must travel with their father to Moscow, and they return to the estate only when their mother is at the point of death. Soon afterward, their last tie to that earlier world is irrevocably broken by the death of the old servant Natal'ya Savishna, which brings "Detstvo" to a close, both in the literal sense and in the narrative structure.

The scenes quoted above describe the struggle for control waged by a younger child against an older, stronger, more subtle sibling, a struggle which has a very different outcome for Tolstoy than for Tsvetaeva. Although Nikolen'ka is wounded at the time, and swayed by Volodya's cool "adult" common sense, his mature self, the narrator, turns upon his adversary and carries the argument to new ground. He affirms his power to overcome his brother's ridicule with his own tools: "If you are to judge by reality, then there won't be any game. And if there isn't any game, then what is left?" (30). In hindsight, at least, he successfully establishes his autonomy from the older male.

Asya's fight with Musya moves in exactly the opposite direction. In fact she yields up her own point of view within the narration, speaking with Marina's voice and referring to herself in the third person: "Venice was already entirely hers, no Asya was fussing or interfering"; and a few lines later, "Asya's hateful head is pushing into the eyepiece again! With a sigh, shoving me covertly, Musya relinquishes her place to me" (55). The younger has won out for the moment, but only at the cost of her independence: she has invoked adult authority to get her way when her own strength and cunning are not enough. Her tactics serve to tighten the bonds of intimacy with their mother, that "hot stream" which she describes on the opening page of her book.

Into this female world, the father comes as an alien, intrusive figure. The Tsvetaevas, mother and daughters, had developed an afternoon ritual, a nap under the fur coverlet of their mother's bed shared also with the family cat, whose purring suggested the very Tsvetaevan neologism "delat' kurlyk" (roughly translated, 'to take a cat nap'). This cozy scene was "broken up, destroyed" Tsvetaeva says, by her father's daily return from work (34).

Tolstoy's father also stands at a considerable distance from both

his children and his wife. Nikolen'ka sees his mother as angelically pure, while he includes in a generally flattering list of his father's qualities the statement that "his two chief passions [were] cards and women" (Ch. IX; 31). Into this ambiguous and morally compromised world the young boy must travel, leaving his mother behind in the country and moving into his father's urban world. Although clearly still a child, even on the eve of his departure from the estate, his awakening sensuality leads him to twice kiss Katya's arms and shoulders (Ch. IX, Ch. XII); in Moscow he falls in love on an absolutely equal footing first with his playmate Serezha and then with the lovely Sonechka (Ch. XIX, Ch. XXIV).

In Nikolen'ka's household, his mother has a gift for music so great that the composer Field is named as "her teacher" (Ch. XI; 33). Yet she is entirely content to play for the family in the drawing room in the evenings. Her husband, for his part, has no career and no vocation other than his own pleasure.

The Tsvetaev parents, by contrast, are both devoted to their own work. It is important to the little girls that their mother has a writing desk, although she uses it largely for correspondence about her husband's museum, and also a piano, her own passion. Maria Aleksandrova's own ambition had by this time been largely stifled, however, and she channeled her energy and ambition into her two daughters instead. Both girls were made clearly aware of this, and both knew that their mother had in fact expected a son during each pregnancy, and had reconciled herself to their arrival with considerable difficulty (30). Marina seems to have drawn a bitter kind of strength from this half-hearted welcome, developing her artistic calling as a compensation for her mother's disappointment with their gender. She excelled (under protest) as a pianist as long as her mother was alive, and immediately after her mother's death transferred all her energy to the development of her greater poetic gift.

Anastasia too felt an early fascination with language, publishing her first prose works at the age of 20. Yet even now, at the age of 94, she remains bound exclusively to factive narrative. In January 1989, I interviewed her in Moscow, and in the course of listing several novels she had written during the 1920s and 1930s (all lost when she was arrested in 1937), she remarked that she never wrote anything non-autobiographical. Even if we grant with James Olney that "autobiography is not so much a mode of literature as literature is a mode of autobiography" (qtd. in Smith 3), this surely a remarkable statement of her bondedness, her willingness to abrogate autonomy and limit herself to the factual, to a form of family chronicle, even as she continues to pursue her vocation as a writer.

At the other extreme, Tolstoy has asserted his freedom to manipulate the material facts of his own life to achieve a general statement about human development, a poetic reality which is more real than the data of his biography. The death of Nikolen'ka's mother provides a dramatic example of this reconstructing of history to mirror psychological truths. He chooses to kill her off when his narrator is

between ten and eleven years old, just before the young boy would naturally separate from his mother upon entering puberty. In reality Tolstoy's mother died before he was two, and he had no conscious memory of her at all. It was his father who died when Lev Nikolaevich was between nine and ten years of age, but this fact does not square well with the young boy's psychological movement from dependence to autonomy. He puts his mother in his father's coffin, as it were, to achieve the deeper reality of his developing sense of self.

Similarly, the death of Tsvetaeva's mother during Anastasia's twelfth summer clearly put a full stop to the girls' childhood. However, unlike the ideal mother of Tolstoy's making, who dies murdering, "The children! the children!" (Ch. XXVI), Tsvetaeva's all too real and imperfect mother says coolly, "I shall miss only sunshine and music" (216), and later, "Children, live by the truth!" (217). From the village of Tarusa the family brings the dead Maria Aleksandrovna to Moscow for burial, and the girls' adolescence takes place in this urban setting, cut adrift by their mother's death, yet largely unable to connect with their vague and often distracted father's world of university and museum. Anastasia remains on the margins, finding her place by her ties to Marina.

This question of vocation, a central issue for each of the adults in these narratives, resolves itself smoothly, almost effortlessly, for the men. Nikolen'ka, like his father before him, pursues his own ends and finds satisfaction and self-fulfillment with relatively little conflict. Anastasia, like Marina, their mother, and Nikolen'ka's mother, pays dearly for whatever prominence she attains in her art: she is never free from ambivalence and from destructive rivalry with those closest to her.

Marina's turbulent career, on the other hand, may be read partly as her attempt to claim her patrimony, her poetic vocation. This struggle required of her a high degree of androgyny as she played out, in effect, the son's role in this quest, mustering power to wrest a symbolic writing desk from the jumbled detritus of her woman's life.

To examine such texts without reference to the writer's gender is to overlook a rich source of potential differences. The male sense of self which governs and structures Lev Nikolaevich's "Detstvo" is like a lighthouse. From a fixed center it projects a powerful beam which brilliantly illuminates whatever narrow slice of its surroundings it turns towards. Anastasia Ivanovna's text is also organized, but the parts connect in a very different way. The female sense of self exemplified here is like a web, in which all the strands are linked, center to periphery: what affects one sector of the web can be felt by all.

As we engage in examining and stretching the boundaries of the canon, we cannot afford to ignore potential differences between the

male and female sense of self, with its attendant consequences in literary texts. If we include gender-sensitive readings in our arsenal of approaches to literature we stand to both enrich the canon and to deepen our insight into the works like Tolstoy's trilogy which already form part of the body of world literature.

Postscript: This is the revised and expanded version of a talk given at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, April 28, 1989. I am continuing this study of Anastasia Tsvetaeva's narrative of childhood with a comparison of Marina's and Anastasia's accounts of their childhoods. My trip to Moscow in January 1989 also yielded the typescript of unpublished memoirs by Valeria Tsvetaeva, Marina and Anastasia's older half-sister; I will present a comparison of Valeria and Anastasia's descriptions of Maria Aleksandrovna at the AAASSS Convention in Chicago in November 1989.

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