First Recollections

Leo Tolstoy

1923

Here are my first recollections (which I cannot reduce to order, not knowing what came first, what afterward, while of some I know not whether they were dreams or reality). But here they are.

I am tied down; I want to raise my arms, but I cannot do it, and I wail and weep and my cry is disagreeable to myself; but I cannot stop. It must be that some one stands bending over me, but I don't remember who. And all this takes place in a semi-darkness. But I remember that there are two. My crying has an effect on them, they are alarmed at my cry, but they do not unloose me as I wish, and I cry louder than ever. It seems to them necessary (that is, that I be tied down), while I know that it is not necessary, and I want to prove it to them, and I burst out into a cry disgusting to myself but unrestrainable.

I am conscious of the injustice and cruelty, not of people, because they pity me, but of fate, and feel pity for myself. I do not know and never shall learn what this was: whether they swaddled me when I was a suckling and I pulled out my hands; or whether they swaddled me when I was more than a year old so that I might not scratch the tetter; or whether I have gathered many impressions into one as happens in dreams, — but apparently this was my first and most powerful impression of life. And it was not my crying or my suffering that I retain in my recollections, but the complication, the contradiction, of the impression. I wanted freedom; it would not disturb any one, and I who needed the strength was weak while they were strong.

The second impression was pleasurable. I am sitting in a tub, and I am surrounded by a new and disagreeable odor of some object by which my small body is galled. Apparently this was bran, and apparently in the water and in the trough, but the novelty of the impression made by the bran awakened me, and I for the first time noticed and observed my little body, with the ribs plainly outlined, and the smooth, dark tub, and the nurse with her arms tucked up, and the dark, warm, threatening water, and the swash of it, and especially the feeling of smoothness of the wet edges of the tub when I put my little hands on it. Strange and terrible to think that from my birth up to my third year, all the time while I was nursing, while I was weaned, when I was beginning to creep, to walk, to speak, however I rack my memory, I can find no impression except these two.

When did I begin? When did I begin to live? And why is it pleasant to imagine myself as I was then, but it used to be terrible to me, as now it is terrible to many, to imagine myself as I shall be when I again enter into that condition of death from which there will be no recollections

expressible in words? Was I not alive when I was learning to look, to hear, to understand, to talk, when I slept, when I pressed my lips to my mother's breast, and laughed and rejoiced my mother? I was alive and blissfully alive. Did I not then get all that whereby I live now, and get in such abundance, and so rapidly, that in all the rest of my life I have not got a hundredth part so much?

Form a five-year-old child tome is only a step. From the new-born baby to the five-year-old child there is a terrible gap. From the embryo to the new-born baby there is an abyss. And from non-existence to the embryo there is not an abyss, but incomprehensibility. Moreover space and time and cause are forms of thought and the existence of life outside of these forms, but all our life is a continually increasing subjection to these forms and then again emancipation from them.

The following recollections of mine refer to my fourth and fifth years, but even of these there are very few, and not one of these refers to life outside the walls of my home.

Nature upt to the age of five does not exist for me. All that I remember refers to bed and chamber. No grass, no leaves, no sky, no sun exist for me. It cannot be that they did not let me play with the flowers and leaves, or see the grass, that they did not protect me from the sun, but up to five years, up to six years, there is not one recollection of what we call Nature. Apparently it is necessary to go away from her in order to see her, and I was Nature!

The recollection that comes after that of the tub is that of Yeremeyevna. "Yeremeyevna" was a word with which they used to frighten us children. And apparently they began early to frighten us with it, but my recollection of it is as follows: —

I am in my little bed and feeling good and happy as always, and I should not remember this but suddenly my nurse, or some one of those that constituted my life, says something in a voice entirely new to me, and goes out, and I begin to feel a sensation of terror besides that of gaiety. And I remember that I am not alone, but some one is there with me very much the same as I.

This must have been my sister Mashenka, a year younger than I, for our beds stood in one room together.

And I remember that there is a canopy over my bed, and my sister and I used to share our pleasures and terrors — whatever unexpected thing happened to us — and I used to hide in the pillow, and I would hide and peek out to look at the door from which I expected anything new and gay. And we used to laugh and hide and be full of expectations. And here comes some one in a gown and head-dress such as I had never seen before, but I know that it is the person who is always with me — a nurse or auntie, I don't know which, and this some one speaks in a deep voice which I recognize, and says something terrible about naughty children, and about Yeremeyevna! I squeal with terror and delight, and I am terrified, and at the same time delighted because I am terrified, and I wish that the one who frightened me did not know that I know her! We become silent, but soon again we begin to whisper on purpose to bring back Yeremeyevna.

Similar to the recollection of Yeremeyevna is another, apparently later in time because it is more distinct, but it always remains incomprehensible to me. In this remembrance the chief rôle is played by a German, Feodor Ivanovitch, our teacher; but I know assuredly that I was not as yet under his supervision, consequently this must have taken place before I was five. And this is my first impression of Feodor Ivanovitch. And it happens so early that I do not remember any one — my brothers, nor my father, nor any one. If I have an idea of any person whatever besides, it is only of my sister, and solely because she and I were associated in terror of Yeremeyevna.

With this recollection is connected also my first conception that our house had an upper story. How I got there, whether I went there by myself or who took me there, I do not remember at all;

I only remember that there were several of us, we all took hold of hands in a khorovod; among those holding one another by the hand were several strange women, — because I recollect that these were the laundry girls, — and we all began to turn and spring, and Feodor Ivanovitch capered about, lifting his legs very high and making a terrible noise and thumping, and I had a consciousness that this was not the right thing to do, that it was bad, and I noticed him and I seemed to burst out crying, and it all came to an end.

This is all I remember up to my fifth year. I remember nothing of my nurses, my aunties, by brothers, my sisters, or of my father, or my rooms, or my toys — nothing at all. My recollections grow more definite from the time when I was taken down to Feodor Ivanovitch and to the older boys.

When I was taken down to Feodor Ivanovitch and the other boys, I experienced for the first time, and therefore more strongly than ever again, the feeling called the sense of duty, called the sense of the cross, which every man is called upon to wear. I felt sorry to leave what I had grown accustomed to — accustomed to from eternity! — I felt melancholy, poetically melancholy to leave, not so much the people, my sister, my nurse, my aunt, as the bed, the canopy, the pillows; and the new life into which I had entered was terrible to me. I tried to find something cheerful in the new life which was before me; I tried to credit the flattering speeches with which Feodor Ivanovitch allured me to himself. I tried not to see the scorn with which the boys received me, their younger brother; I tried to think that it was disgraceful for a big boy to live with girls, and that there was nothing good in the up-stair life with the nurse; but in the depths of my soul I was terribly homesick, and I knew that I had irrevocably lost my innocence and joy, and only a feeling of personal dignity, a consciousness that I was doing my duty, sustained me.

Many times since in life it has been my fortune to undergo such moments at the dividing of the ways, where new paths opened out before me. I experienced a gentle grief at the irrevocableness of what was lost. And still I did not believe that it would be. Though they told me that I was to be taken down to the boys, I remember that my khalat with its belt, sewed to the back, which they put on me, seemed to separate me forever from the upper rooms, and I now, for the first time, noticed others besides those with whom I had lived up-stairs, but the chief personage was the one at whose house I was living and whom I do not remember before. This was my Aunt T—A—[1], I remember her as short, stout, with black hair, kind, affectionate, gentle. She put on me my khalat, tightened the belt and fastened it, kissed me, and I saw that she was experiencing the same feelings as I was, that she was sorry, awfully sorry, but it had to be.

For the first time I realized that life is not play, but hard work. Not otherwise shall I feel when I come to die; I shall discover that death or the future life is not play, but hard work.

[1] A likely reference to his aunt, Tatyana Aleksandreyevna Eyelskaya

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