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Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy began his career as a writer at the age of twenty-four, when the September issue of *The Contemporary* for 1852 published his *Childhood* under the cryptic initials L.N. It was a promising, if somewhat apprehensive, beginning by a young man whose early life had been relatively undistinguished. His many biographers have told in detail the story of his aristocratic family background, his happy childhood years at Yasnaya Polyana, the early loss of his mother, the move to Moscow when Tolstoy was eight, the death of his father, and the new move to Kazan. They have recorded his unspectacular years as a student first of oriental languages and then of law at Kazan University, his withdrawal from the university on inheriting the estate of Yasnaya Polyana in 1847, his dissipated life in Petersburg and Moscow relieved by sober periods as a country landlord, his growing gambling debts, and his eventual escape to the Caucasus where, after seeing action as a volunteer, he enlisted in the regular army in 1852.

Tolstoy was not an exceptionally avid reader from an early age, nor a precocious literary prodigy with a facile pen. Reading and writing were not an obsession with him, for he was the product of a class which valued physical and social accomplishments as highly as literary and intellectual distinction. In one of his earliest recorded diary entries he wrote: ‘One-sidedness is the main cause of man’s unhappiness’;¹ and Tolstoy was nothing if not versatile. Hunting, shooting, music, gymnastics, cards, women and the cultivation of social savoir faire occupied much of his time as a young man, and perhaps many an industrious and book-loving schoolboy or student today would read more widely and write more fluently than he did at a comparable age. Although he had travelled to the Caucasus and taken part in fighting, there have been many young men, especially in the twentieth century, with more

¹ J.E. xvi, 7.
experience of travel and warfare and a wider acquaintance with the different classes of society than he had. His literary education and his knowledge of life, then, need to be kept in their proper perspective, and not only when viewed against writers of today but even in comparison with some of his own contemporaries.

How wide was Tolstoy’s early reading and what were the most important books he read? This question is often answered by referring to the list he compiled in 1891 for a Petersburg bookseller, who had asked him to write down the books which had made the deepest impression on him at different periods of his life. Obviously this list is neither exhaustive nor accurate, drawn up as it was when Tolstoy was sixty-three, and inevitably subject to later prejudices and the quirks of memory. But it remains a valuable and interesting document.¹ For the first period of his life, to the age of fourteen, Tolstoy singled out above all the folktales of Russia, the better-known Russian bylins—popular narrative poems of ancient Russian heroes—and the story of Joseph from the Bible as having made an ‘enormous’ impression on him in his most impressionable years. Under the heading ‘very great’ impression, the only entry is The Little Black Hen, a fairy-tale written in 1829 by Pogorelsky, illustrating the moral, dear to Tolstoy’s heart, that once your sins get the upper hand there is no escaping from them. Finally, the word ‘great’ describes the impression left by the Arabian Nights, and one poem in particular by Pushkin—Napoleon. Pushkin wrote this poem in 1821 on hearing the news of the Emperor’s death on St Helena. In essence it is a conventional tribute to a great man, an autocrat, a proud tyrant, contemptuous of the people and overtaken in the end by Nemesis, but a man whose fate was inextricably bound up with the fate of Russia and who alone made possible her finest hour. ‘Praise him!’ the peroration reads. ‘He showed the Russian people the way to their lofty destiny, and from the darkness of banishment bequeathed to the world eternal freedom.’ There is no hint here, of course, of that

¹ J.E. lxvi, 67.
iconoclastic attitude to the Emperor or the disparaging assessment of his achievements which were to be Tolstoy's distinctive contribution to the Russian literary treatment of the Napoleonic legend.

For the second period of his life, from the age of fourteen to twenty, Tolstoy's list is longer and branches out to include French and English literature. The works which created an 'enormous' impression at this age are headed by the Sermon on the Mount. Somewhat surprisingly, Gogol's Viia—a highly romantic, blood-curdling Ukrainian fantasy of witches and gnomes, coffins, churches and devils, which belongs unmistakably to the literature of the uncanny—is the only work of Russian fiction to be put in the same category, while French literature provides Rousseau's Confessions and Émile, and English literature David Copperfield (although in fact this was probably read a few years later, in a Russian translation). In his next category in descending order of importance, Russian literature figures prominently with Pushkin's Evgenii Onegin, Gogol's Dead Souls, Turgenev's A Sportsman's Sketches, Lermontov's A Hero of our Time and two lesser-known works, Grigorovich's Anton the Hapless and Druzhinin's Polinka Sachs. All were completed in Tolstoy's own lifetime, and all except the last two are established Russian classics. Grigorovich, who once shared a flat with Dostoevsky and did much to launch him on his literary career, was the pioneer of the humanitarian story of social protest with its grim but sentimental depiction of peasant life, the misery and oppression of the defenceless serf. Druzhinin's novel, following George Sand, was concerned with marriage and women's rights. Both Grigorovich and Druzhinin became close friends of Tolstoy, and while his opinions of their literary merits fluctuated, his attraction to the subject matter of their early stories is significant. With the exception of Evgenii Onegin, itself a novel in verse, all the works of Russian literature which made a 'very great' impression on Tolstoy in his late teens were prose works. They were nearly all written in the 1840s, and for their content they drew heavily on contemporary Russian life. At this stage the lyric poetry of
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Pushkin and Lermontov and the early stories of Dostoevsky did not apparently leave the same indelible mark on him, nor is any mention made of Griboedov’s comedy, *The Misfortune of Being Clever*, before 1855. To the same order of importance Tolstoy ascribes Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse*, Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* and Schiller’s *Die Räuber*, a play of exceptional interest for Dostoevsky also, and one which his brother translated into Russian. Shakespeare, French classical comedy, Greek tragedy and Hoffmann and the German romantics stand out conspicuously by their absence from the works of European literature cited; but at a lower level, Tolstoy selected Gogol’s *Government Inspector*, *The Tale of the Two Ivans* and *Nevsky Prospect*, and, from foreign literature, Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico*, as books which had made a ‘great’ impression on him before he was twenty.

In the first draft of his list Tolstoy originally included *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* and *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, which we know that he read avidly at an early age, although the enthusiasm soon wore off. Also included at first in the final draft, but later deleted, were the novels of the now almost forgotten Russian writers Marlinsky and Begichev. Marlinsky (the pseudonym of Bestuzhev who was involved in the Decembrist uprising of 1825) enjoyed a tremendous vogue in the 1830s and occupied in prose a position comparable to that held by Pushkin in poetry. He was a major figure in the short-lived Russian romantic movement, with his extravagant rhetorical novels on exotic themes, passionate heroes and stirring battles, and his no less popular *haut monde* love stories: epistolary, epigrammatic, and abounding in balls and banquets. The English reader may catch the flavour of the latter from Dostoevsky’s clever parody of Marlinsky (disguised as the author of *Italian Passions*) in his first novel *Poor Folk*. Begichev is remembered today, if at all, for *The Kholmsky Family*, a sentimental, moralising novel of the domestic life of the Russian gentry in the 1830s.

Tolstoy’s second list spans the years 1848–63 and is very brief, being confined to Goethe’s *Hermann und Dorothea*, Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*, the poetry of the Russians Fet, Koltsov and
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Tyutchev, and translations of the Iliad, the Odyssey, and Plato’s Phaedo and the Symposium. Most of these works were read after Childhood had been published, and have little or no bearing on Tolstoy’s first formative years. In order to fill out the picture of his early reading we may turn to his diaries and letters, which at least have the authentic ring of contemporaneity, but are of limited value in the sense that the diaries contain large gaps, while relatively few letters written before 1852 have survived. Scattered references and fragmentary diary entries testify to his wide reading of contemporary fiction, especially the novels of George Sand, Dumas and Eugène Sue, and of major works of Russian, French and English history: Mikhailovsky-Danilevsky, so important a source for the military campaigns in War and Peace, Hume’s History of England and Dumas’ Louis XIV et son siècle. It is clear that Tolstoy was well read in the literature of the eighteenth century, and his general education was inevitably grounded on Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Goethe (Die Leiden des jungen Werthers is singled out in particular) as well as on the histories and sentimental stories of Karamzin. It would be a mistake, however, to give too much stress to the antiquated nature of his literary interests, for all his addiction to Rousseau, or to label him ‘a militant archaist, upholding in the middle of the nineteenth century the principles and traditions of the vanishing and partly vanished culture of the eighteenth century’.

It is more true to say that he is ‘one of those rare figures who represent a cultural span far greater than that of their age. Like Goethe, whom Friedrich Schlegel defined as both the Shakespeare and the Voltaire of his own nation and time, Tolstoy was a child of both the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century.’ Tolstoy was a regular reader of the major contemporary journals which published every month much of the best new writing in Russian and European literature—The Contemporary and The Notes of the Fatherland.

1 B. M. Eykhenbaum, Lew Tolstoi, kniga pervaya, 50-e gody (Leningrad 1928), p. 11.
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The former was probably the best literary periodical in Russia in Tolstoy’s youth. Founded by Pushkin in 1836, it had been transformed by its new editors, Nekrasov and Panaev, in 1846, and a decade or more later was to become the centre for radical literary criticism of a markedly sociological flavour. In the 1840s and early 1850s Turgenev, Herzen, Goncharov, Druzhinin and Grigorovich were all publishing their early writings there. It printed translations of Goethe and Schiller, George Sand and de Musset, Shakespeare, Fielding (Tom Jones), and Dickens (including David Copperfield), as well as numerous reviews, articles on English and French life and surveys of foreign literature, science and the arts. It was to The Contemporary, naturally enough, that Tolstoy sent his own first literary contributions.

Although Childhood was Tolstoy’s first published work, a study of his archives has brought to light some juvenilia and several essays and trials of the pen. The few surviving schoolboy essays and recapitulations of stories and fables written when Tolstoy was ten or eleven tell us only that he was adept at the art of simple and lucid résumé and that his spelling and punctuation left much to be desired. Of the few unfinished articles and essays dating from his late teens and early twenties, Some Philosophical Observations on a Discourse of J. J. Rousseau is a critical rejoinder to Rousseau’s essay on the theme ‘Has the restoration of the arts and sciences had a purifying effect upon morals?’, which won the prize of the Academy of Dijon in 1750. Rousseau started from the thesis that ‘the mind, as well as the body, has its needs: those of the body are the basis of society, those of the mind its ornaments’. The arts, literature and the sciences, he argues, stifle in men their sense of liberty, cause them to love their slavery and make of them what is called a civilised people. History has shown by the example of Egypt, Athens and Rome, that the progress of science leads to dissoluteness, effete ness and degeneration, to conquest and slavery. By contrast, the Persians, the Germans and the Scythians—simple, innocent and virtuous—were victorious in battle. Sparta is praised at the expense of Athens. Socrates is
quoted for his adverse criticism of poets, sophists, orators and artists. The arts and sciences, Rousseau continues, were born of vices. They are cherished by luxury. Contrast their state with the pristine innocence of primitive men. Contrast the enervating nature of sedentary occupations with the rigour of warfare and the cultivation of military virtues. But, he goes on, ‘if the cultivation of the sciences is prejudicial to military qualities, it is still more prejudicial to moral ones... On every side we see huge institutions where our youth are educated at great expense, and instructed in everything but their duty... The question is no longer whether a man is honest, but whether he is clever. We do not ask whether a book is useful, but whether it is well written.’ Inveighing against education, Rousseau directs his invective equally against philosophy and its practitioners, and what he regards as their contradictory teachings. To crown it all, there is the art of printing, thanks to which ‘the pernicious reflections of Hobbes and Spinoza will last for ever’.

These dogmatic and juvenile assertions were the target for one of Tolstoy’s earliest literary assaults, confined to the pages of his exercise books. His main contention was that the more free a man is, the more he is able to do good or evil, and that people who have burst the bonds of ignorance are able to do more good (or more evil) than those whose ignorance fetters their freedom of action. Tolstoy’s objections to Rousseau’s belief that lack of knowledge is not a fetter and that the ignorant cannot be enslaved and must therefore be free are not entirely to the point and, not surprisingly, lack the intellectual power of the mature thinker. Nevertheless the unfinished essay in which they are advanced contains some interesting observations when viewed in the light of his later thought—not least his proposition that the shortcoming of philosophers is that they try to solve philosophical problems historically (i.e. by reference to the so-called facts of history), while for him ‘history is one of the most backward sciences—it is studied for itself, and not for the sake of a philosophy, which is the only reason why it should be studied’. ‘History’, he writes, ‘will not
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reveal to us what the relation was at different times between the arts and sciences and good manners, between good and evil, between religion and the civilised state, but it will tell us—and that incorrectly—where the Huns came from, where they lived and who founded their empire etc.¹ In his polemic against Rousseau, Tolstoy argues that history should be studied for the philosophy of living it can provide and not for the facts, dubious and irrelevant as they can be in the historian’s hands. And yet Rousseau himself was trying to do precisely that—to use historical example to provide himself with a way of life—if only to the extent of selling his watch on the ground that in the simple life he aspired to lead, he would not need to know the time.

Philosophy as a guide to regulating one’s life is the subject of another of Tolstoy’s youthful fragments—On the Purpose of Philosophy. Philosophy, he contends, is the science of life. Life is the striving for happiness and well-being. To satisfy this striving, man must not seek happiness in the world outside him, but in the education of himself. The purpose of philosophy is to show how man should educate himself and—since he lives in society—what his relations with other people should be:

If everyone were to strive after his own good, seeking to find it outside himself, the interests of private individuals would clash and the result would be confusion. But if everyone would strive for his own self-improvement, there could be no breach of order. For everybody would do for everybody else what he would wish them to do for him.²

But how is one to practise philosophy? The answer is to train the will, study psychology and the laws of nature, develop the mental faculties, analyse all the problems which crop up in one’s private life, strictly observe the rules of morality and obey the laws of nature. Psychology, mathematics, physics, self-discipline and moral conduct will produce the good life. But in effect enlightened self-interest is the ultimate ethical sanction.

¹ J.E. 1, 222. ² J.E. 1, 229.
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The pursuit of happiness and virtue and a utilitarian morality dominate another brief speculative fragment of the same period, short enough to quote two of its three paragraphs in full, since it has not to my knowledge been previously translated into English:

Why do people write? Some to acquire money, some fame, and some both. But there are people who say in order to teach virtue. Why do people read, why do they bestow money and fame on books? People want to be happy; that is the common cause of all actions. The only path to happiness is virtue, consequently it makes sense to read only those books which teach virtue. What are these books? Dogmatic books, based on the principles of reason, and theoretical books—common sense admits of no others.

But surely those books are beneficial which, by portraying virtue in a refined manner, exert an influence by example? Almost everybody agrees that virtue means the subordination of the passions to reason. But instead of inclining people to reasonable behaviour by developing their reason, poets and novelists, historians and natural scientists incline them to unreasonable actions by developing their passions. People will say that the natural sciences are necessary for the comforts of private life. But do the comforts of private life further the development of virtue? Far from it. On the contrary, they subordinate us still more to the passions.¹

How to subordinate the passions and harness them to useful activity is the problem which is central to Tolstoy's search for a philosophy of life and ultimately a system of aesthetics. That the solution to the problem is related to some form of religious belief, or at least that the consequences of unbelief are morally injurious and degrading, is hinted at in another fragmentary essay, On Prayer, which may originally have been intended as a chapter in Childhood. Here Tolstoy, with his characteristic love of classification and categorisation, divides unbelievers into three groups—those who think too much, those who are vain and those who are weak. 'To the second category', he writes, 'belong those who, infatuated by philosophical theories (which novels have made accessible to all²), have exchanged

¹ J.E. 1, 246.
² My italics.
their Christian beliefs imbibed in childhood for pantheistic ideas or the complicated hypotheses of witty writers or of their own invention. Each of them makes up his own religion, lacking in foundation or consistency, but adapted to his particular passions and weaknesses. They believe what pleases them and reject what is burdensome; they sacrifice their previous beliefs in order to gratify their petty vanity.\textsuperscript{1} Tolstoy is critical of the thinkers and of the weak-willed too, but it is the egoists who bear the brunt of his irony.

In all these discarded juvenilia the hand of Tolstoy is unmistakable, spelling out the harmful potential of literature, the blinkered vision of the professional historian, the emptiness of philosophy divorced from life, the interdependence of moral behaviour and religious belief. Unmistakable, too, are the blunt and brusque asseverations, the neat groupings, the confident generalisations and the rather graceless and ponderous style which nearly always characterised Tolstoy the thinker, and which was a source of considerable worry to him as a young man. It was partly this concern to improve his style, and partly an enthusiastic admiration for the unorthodox and humorous Sterne, which led Tolstoy to translate \textit{A Sentimental Journey} into Russian. It is interesting that both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky chose translation as a literary exercise in style and expression before committing themselves to original writing—although Dostoevsky’s choice of \textit{Eugénie Grandet} presented fewer problems than those posed by the erudite and eccentric Englishman. Tolstoy completed about a third of the novel, working in all probability from a French translation as well as the English original. Some of his renderings show a very imperfect knowledge and understanding of the text. It is not an accurate translation, nor does it read well. But its very choice illustrates its author’s youthful addiction to the literature of sentimentalism, in his own country to Karamzin, and further afield not only to \textit{A Sentimental Journey}, but also to \textit{Paul et Virginie} and \textit{Die Leiden des jungen Werthers}, all of which he read in the space of a few months in 1851. What attracted Tolstoy,

\textsuperscript{1} J.E. 1, 248.