

Title: The Birth of Memory and the Memory of Birth: Daniil Kharms and Leo Tolstoy on Infantile Amnesia

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In the prose fragment called “Incubation Period” (*“Inkubatornyi period”*) (1935), the absurdist writer Daniil Kharms makes the ludicrous claim that he remembers the view he saw as a premature infant confined to an incubator for the first four months of his life. This patently absurd account of preternatural memory and precocious self-awareness counters the widely documented psychological phenomenon of infantile amnesia, whereby the onset of memory occurs several years after birth and remains sparse throughout early childhood. Kharms instead endows his premature infant self with frighteningly clear awareness, thought, and memory. As a result, he evokes an image of a self-aware homunculus held captive in an incubator, or an adult mind in an infant body. In this sense it has an uncanny resemblance to certain autobiographical fragments by Leo Tolstoy, which also expose a deep interest in the birth of memory and the phenomenon of infantile amnesia. In this paper I argue that Tolstoy and Kharms share a deep philosophical interest in the symbolic potential of the infantile subject that is manifest in their creative explorations of the birth of memory and the memory of birth. Under the guise of autobiographical “memory,” which proves more mimetic than actual, both writers push beyond the boundaries of the possible to give voice to the inchoate subjectivity of the infant – at the transitional moments to existence, consciousness, and selfhood. Yet, the infancy they depict – from within – remains a fictional construction employed for symbolic purposes and inseparable from their own ideological aims.