

Adult Life

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (December 2020)



Girl with a Cat, Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1905

My entire adult life has been a flight from my childhood—a successful flight, insofar as it now rarely comes to mind. Dwelling on it has caused me only sorrow and sometimes bitterness, and most of the time I have therefore prohibited its entrance to the forefront of my consciousness: which is not quite the same as claiming that it had no influence upon me.

As I was subsequently to learn, many people have had far worse childhoods than mine. The trouble is that a child has not the knowledge or the means to compare his suffering with that of others, besides which the fact that others are worse off than oneself is rarely enough by itself to bring one happiness. I knew that my friends seemed more fortunate than I, and that was all.

I was looked after physically, mechanically one might say, so that I never went hungry or without clothes, and so forth, and that is already quite a lot; but I do not recall in my younger years one word of tenderness, one word of encouragement. This may be a trick of memory, the screening out of recollections in the service of a kind of auto-mythology, but I find it difficult to believe that this is the explanation. I look at a portrait photograph of my brother and I taken with my mother when I was about seven, and it sends a shiver down my spine, the emotional coldness of it is so obvious. I think it would appal me even if I had not been one of the people in it.

My parents were far too engaged on a war of silence between them to bother very much with me. They spent no time with me; I was brought up (so it appeared to me when I first looked back on it) by neglect tempered by chastisement. They took neither interest nor pleasure in my activities. This gave me a certain freedom, but not necessarily a freedom that I

wanted or was capable of utilising constructively. I used to wonder why I had been born since my existence was so unimportant except as an occasional irritant.

Our household had the emotional atmosphere not just of a refrigerator, but of cold-storage. I do not recall that my parents ever spoke a single word to one another, with one exception, until they separated when I was eighteen, and I remember when I was about nine or ten being distinctly puzzled by the fact that adults in my friends' homes spoke to one another. How bizarre! Such noise!

The one exception to the silence between them occurred when I woke one night and heard my mother scream at my father, 'You are a wicked man!' This was an exaggeration: he had his faults, as we all do, but he would have appeared rather low on the scale of human wrongdoing.

But my parents had not had easy lives themselves, in fact in many ways greatly more difficult than mine. My mother, for example, had been a refugee from Nazi Germany in 1939, at the age of 19, and had never seen her parents again. (They managed at the last moment to escape to China, where they died.) After her death, I found a bundle of letters in her affairs that were tied up with a faded red silk ribbon. They were the love letters from her first fiancé, a fighter pilot, who was killed over Malta. One of them was written on the very eve of his death and was folded next to the telegram from the War Office informing her that he had gone missing in action and was presumed dead. There was also a letter from his commanding officer, telling her how he had died: gallantly, of course. There was one too from the lady who would have become her mother-in-law.

My mother was 22 at the time. Though she never spoke of the loss, the fact that she had kept the letters suggested to me that remained painful for the rest of her life. By the age of 22, she had in effect lost her parents and then her

first fiancé. She was courted by my father while, unbeknownst to her, his first wife was dying of cancer. (Many years later, after both their deaths, I received a request from a lawyer out of the blue that my brother and I cede the freehold to the burial plot of my father's first wife to her sister, who was now dying and wanted to be buried next to her. Until then, I had not known that we were, by right of inheritance, the owner. Of course we agreed; it gave us the opportunity for a little painless benevolence.)

Unfortunately, the marriage proved a disaster, at least as far as the provision of happiness or satisfaction for them both was concerned. When I discovered the letters from my mother's first fiancé, I fantasised for a short time about how much better life would have been for me if he had not been killed. Of course, this was absurd: I would not have been I, but someone entirely different, with no knowledge of what would have happened if things had been different. But the human mind is not a perfectly rational calculating machine.

I think that all these experiences must have led my mother into a kind emotional defensiveness. Affection had brought her only loss and unhappiness; best do without it, at least outwardly. But I did not understand this at the time, only later, when it was too late. It had its effect on me too: for long I found it far easier to express a liking for dogs than for humans. In fact (secretly) I still do.

The letters of two great writers who had unhappy childhoods have struck me very forcefully. Their triumph over their childhoods was, I need hardly add, far greater than mine. They were Charles Dickens and Anton Chekhov.

Dickens was one of the greatest of all writers on childhood and the vividness of his recollections of great unhappiness was surely one of the motive forces of his writing. As a result of his father's imprisonment for debt, and the need of his family for an income, Dickens was sent at

the age of 12 to work in a blacking factory, pasting labels on to pots of blacking. This was humiliating enough, but when the situation of the Dickens family improved somewhat, his mother was opposed to sending the young Charles back to school and argued that he should remain working in the factory.

Many years later, Dickens wrote to his friend, John Forster, a letter of piercing intensity which was unmistakable in the sincerity of the suffering that it describes, and which in a sense scarred him for life:

I do not write resentfully or angrily, for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am, but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back.

These are impressive words, both in their force and their maturity. Dickens implicitly recognises in them that our experiences, good and bad, go to forge our character, and that for a writer such as he the very unhappy experiences that he had as a child may have furnished him with material necessary for his greatness. (He knew, incidentally, that he was great, and once wrote that he held his gift in trust for humanity.) But unhappiness does not cease to be unhappiness merely because it has served some useful function or has made us what we are. When Dickens says that he never has forgotten, never would or could forget, his mother's betrayal of him as child, he does not mean that he had it constantly in the forefront of his mind, that he thought of nothing else, that he rehearsed it mentally over and over again, as some therapists would have had him do the better to keep him in a state of dependence on them. He meant, rather, that it gave him, permanently, an awareness of causal cruelty, thoughtlessness and suffering, an awareness of which he could not have rid himself even if he had wanted to do so, and which he used as constructively as any suffering has ever been used. The fact that he alchemically transmuted his suffering as a child into literary

gold does not go to justify the infliction of suffering (not all suffering is inflicted, of course), but ought to inspire us to try to distance ourselves a little from our own suffering.

Chekhov also had a difficult childhood, perhaps with no experiences as searing for him as had been Dickens' in the blacking factory. But his father, too, was improvident, and was simultaneously religiously censorious, drunken and careless of his business, a combination which led to family impoverishment. Like Dickens, Chekhov had from an early age to support his family economically; and though, unlike Dickens, he managed to complete his education, becoming a doctor, it was under unfavourable conditions of a kind that only students in the most impoverished countries now have to face.

At the age of 29, Chekhov wrote to his friend and patron, the publisher A.S. Suvorin, a letter in which he said:

Write a story of how a young man, the son of a serf, who has served in a shop, sung in a choir, been at a high school and a university, who has been brought up to respect everyone of higher rank and position, to kiss priests' hands, to reverence other people's ideas, to be thankful for every morsel of bread, who has been many times whipped, who has trudged from one pupil to another without goloshes, who has been used to fighting, and tormenting animals, who has liked dining with his rich relations, and been hypocritical before God and men from the mere consciousness of his own insignificance—write how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself, drop by drop, and how waking one beautiful morning he feels that he has no longer a slave's blood in his veins but a real man's . . .

In other words, Chekhov came gradually to the realisation that he was neither the slave of or to his past, but that he was endowed (as are all humans, if they did but realise it) with the power to transcend it. This power of

transcendence does not eliminate or cancel out the past: as yet, no man has the ability to do that, though the remembrance or public record of the past is only too easy to change, usually for nefarious purposes. But, by taking thought, everyone can either use the past to his advantage or at least decide not to dwell upon it. As Psalm 84 has it:

Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee: in whose heart are thy ways.

Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well: and the pools are filled with water.

They will go from strength to strength . . .

Thee, of course, is God, in whose existence personally I do not believe: and yet there is wisdom (is there not?) in the Psalm. If you can't believe in the God of the Bible, it is sometimes best to act as if you did, for the faith that one's suffering has some value or meaning beyond itself is the best way to transcend it, even if there are no indubitable metaphysical grounds for holding such a faith.

No doubt I might be accused of overvaluing the uses to which Dickens and Chekhov were able to put their childhood suffering. It is the overvaluation of a bookish man, and we as a society are becoming ever less bookish. Therefore, Dickens and Chekhov cannot in practice serve as models for others, or at least for many others, for whom their lives and works mean nothing. But even if they inspire just one other person, they will have done more than most of the monstrous regiment of psychotherapists, and certainly less harm.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd*](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)<