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## **The End of Crocodile Tears, or Child Literature as Emotional Self-Regulation**

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*This article begins by revisiting an old dispute between the children's writer Chukovsky and the child psychologist Vygotsky on whether and how child literature should mediate development. It then considers child language lessons in South Korea for clues about how such mediation might happen, and finds the development of rote language, the creation of concrete roles, and the formulation of abstract rules. The real aim of child literature in the classroom is not story sharing per se, but rather sharing-for-development, specifically development away from other-regulation and towards self-regulation, particularly emotional self-regulation, through role play and rule play. Chukovsky's work, rich in sonorous rhyming language suited to rote learning, is a good example of children's literature, but not a good example of child literature serving the emotional self-regulation of older children through the formation of roles and rules. Child literature is that which can be mastered by children as producers rather than passive consumers.*

### **Introduction: *Crocodile's Tears***

With its arrant nonsense and artful wordplay, Kornei Chukovsky's *Crocodile* (1999) was, and is, wildly popular with Russian children. It opens with the eponymous monster devouring a dog and a policeman. Thrills follow relentlessly, with African animals kidnapping Little Lollie and attempting a prisoner exchange for all animals held in zoos. When the zoo animals are freed, Chukovsky concludes with a happy if unlikely reconciliation of children and beasts (translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own, with parenthetical insertions to eke out the rhyme):

Вон, погляди, по Неве по реке  
Волк и Ягнёнок плывут в челноке.  
Счастливы люди, и звери, и гады,  
Рады верблюды, и буйволы рады.

Look! By the Neva, Wolfie and Lamb  
Going by gondola, (pushing a pram)  
Mammal and reptile, both man and brute  
Camels and buffaloes are happy (to boot)!

Alas, the talking animals and improbable happy endings were much less popular with the authorities, including the great child psychologist Lev Vygotsky. In a footnote to the chapter devoted to esthetic education in his early work *Educational Psychology*, Vygotsky writes scathingly:

So fashionable and, now, so popular a work as Chukovsky's *Crocodile*, like all of Chukovsky's stories for children, is one of the better examples of (the) perversion of children's poetry with nonsense and gibberish. Chukovsky seems to proceed from the assumption that the sillier something is, the more understandable and the more entertaining it is for the child, and the more likely that it will be within the child's grasp. It is not hard to instill the taste for such dull literature in children, though there can be little doubt that it has a negative impact on the educational process, particularly in those immoderately large doses to which children are now subjected. All thought of style is thrown out, and in his babbling verse Chukovsky piles up nonsense on top of gibberish. Such literature only fosters silliness and foolishness in children (1997, p. 270).

It fostered a considerable amount of silliness and foolishness in adults too. Chukovsky had to fight long and hard against Lenin's wife, Krupskaya (who was Vygotsky's immediate superior), to get *Crocodile* republished in the twenties, and despite the intervention of Maxim Gorky his effort was ultimately unsuccessful. Chukovsky's diary is loaded with complaints against the "ultra-leftist" psychologists who had criticized his works in the twenties (2005, p. 215). Some of his complaints, it must be said, have a distinctly unsavory anti-Semitic character<sup>1</sup>. His manual for writers of children's stories, *From Two to Five*, places Chukovsky on the side of the Stalinist repression of "pedologists from Kharkov," where many of Vygotsky's followers had gathered. He singles out for particular scorn a certain "Rappoport" (a Jewish name) from Gomel (Vygotsky's hometown).

Anti-Semitic or not, the repression put an end to the Vygotsky school in the USSR for the next twenty years, and almost succeeded in destroying Vygotsky's work forever. But Vygotsky's work is now resurgent, in part thanks to the rediscovery by educationists in the post-Soviet world of his educational work on concept development (1987). So now it is worth revisiting this old quarrel and then considering what it might portend for children's literature in general and child literature, literature that can be linked to educational work on the child's emotional development, in particular. First, I argue that the misunderstanding between Chukovsky and Vygotsky is at bottom a disagreement about the meaning of the word "child." Almost everything that Chukovsky has to say about children refers to infants and toddlers while Vygotsky is more interested in children of preschool and school age who are fully capable of a more active and creative response to literature. Secondly, I want to show how this process of going from a passive to an active response actually happens, in the context of literacy work in one of the most successfully literate countries on earth, namely South Korea. In conclusion, I wish to revisit Vygotsky's work on how the *realistically oriented* processes of preschool (e.g. perception, nonvoluntary memory, nonvolitional attention and practical intelligence) are transformed into their higher level conscious, volitional, and verbal counterparts through the

mediation of word meanings (specifically conceptual word meanings). I'll then suggest that he envisioned a similar transition from lower level *affectively oriented* processes associated with the child's biomechanical experience (e.g. hunger, anger, fear) to higher level, socioculturally mediated ones (e.g. taste, justice, respect) associated at least initially with literary works.

### **Children's Literature Is Not Child Literature**

Children's literature has the highly dubious distinction among literary genres of being named, not after its producers, but rather for its audience. It is, however, often oriented at least equally towards the parents and teachers who are its proximal (and paying) consumers. Of course, this dual orientation, towards the child and simultaneously towards the adult, is not necessarily contradictory. There is no obvious reason why the reading parent and the listening child cannot enjoy the same book for different reasons, nor any clear obstacle to a teacher and a classroom of children doing so. Much of Bruner's work (1986, p. 254), on mothers scaffolding the reading of their children, deals with the developmental benefits of precisely this unequal division of the labor of literacy and its rewards.

There may be no obvious obstacles to this kind of asymmetrical enjoyment, but there are hidden pitfalls nonetheless. From the notoriously hypocritical Victorian era to our own day, it is easy to find children's authors who apparently held their young audiences in contempt, telling jokes over their heads and behind their backs. For example, Charles Dickens, in the supposed "children's tale" of *Oliver Twist* smirkingly refers to Charles Bates as "Master Bates" (Sutherland, 1999, p. 139) and the "Magic Roundabout" children's programme boasted a character named "Seaman Staynes." Swaggerty records the "think aloud" emotional responses of eight fourth graders to "post-modern" picture books, and discovered that on the whole the children find the books much less entertaining than their producers apparently did: negative, confused, or indifferent responses were more common than positive ones (2009, p. 15). But the better children's writers have always known how to share; better children's writers have always been child writers, producing child literature which could have been written by children and which is read by everybody else too in much the same way that Russians produce Russian literature written by Russians for the whole world.

Chukovsky was all these things: a Russian child writer of the very best sort, writing for the whole world. But many of Chukovsky's stories (e.g. 1932, 2003) date from a time of great personal sorrow: the death of his beloved grand-daughter (and it was during her illness he visited the child in a sanatorium run by pedologists and became acquainted with the group around Vygotsky if not with the work of Vygotsky himself). This is not so unusual; many great children's writers (e.g. Elizabeth Gaskell, Rudyard Kipling, and Mark Twain) turned to literature first in an attempt to amuse their children and then in an attempt to bury the unnatural grief of having to bury them. It is surely testimony to the power of literature to mediate the most powerful emotions that writing can help writer-parents to overcome painful memories of this magnitude. But a parent's bereavement is, perhaps, not as good a motive for writing as amusement: it is something one can never share with the child concerned.

Paradoxically, the same does not hold for the child's bereavement: children may easily share the apprehension of parents about losing their parents. So many of our very best children's stories (from *Alice in Wonderland* to *Harry Potter*) deal with the absence of parents in some way or another. While Freud and other writers have interpreted this tendency as repressed parricide, it seems at least possible that the stories offer a way for children to consider in a relatively safe

(because fictitious) manner what life without parental guidance may hold. These two different forms of mediation, the author's mediation of his or her unshareable sorrow at losing a child and the audience's mediation of unbearable anxiety at losing their parents, are sharply counterposed, much like telling jokes behind children's backs and sharing them with kids. This represents, then, one of the hidden pitfalls of writing a Janus-faced literature which is oriented towards two different audiences.

### Rote Play and Unrequited Creativity

This dual purpose of children's literature suggests why, but not exactly how books like *Crocodile* can be good literature without being good child literature. A great deal of Chukovsky's language play appears to be chiefly motivated by rhyme. Needless to say, this rhyme is rather difficult for non-Russophones to fully appreciate, and my over-literal translation (padded out with parenthetical rhymes of my own) does not do it justice.

Жил да был  
Крокодил.  
Он по улицам ходил,  
Папиросы курил.  
По-турецки говорил,-  
Крокодил, Крокодил Крокодилович!

Once, yes, once, lived Crocodile.  
Along the street he strolled in style.  
Upon a fag he puffed (awhile)  
And talked in Turkish (with a smile)  
C. Crocodilovich Crocodile!

Here are two professional translations for comparison. Their striking divergence certainly does give a sense of how incidental the plot of the story is to this form of rote word play.

Once a haughty crocodile  
Left his home upon the Nile  
To go strolling off in style  
On the Ave-e-nue!

Once there was a crocodile  
Croc! Croc! Crocodile!  
A crocodile of taste and style  
And elegant attire

He could smoke and he could speak  
Turkish in a perfect streak  
And he did it once a week  
This most haughty, green and warty  
Very sporty  
Crocodile!  
(Babette Deutsch)

He strolled down Piccadilly  
Singing carols in Swahili  
Wearing spats he'd bought in Chile  
And a-puffing at a briar!  
Crocodile! Crocodile! Croc! Croc! Croc!  
Alexander Crocodile, Esquire!  
(Richard Coe)

For classroom use, both translations (but particularly the second) present something of a contradiction: the cognitive level of the content (a fantasy about talking animals) appears rather

out of sync with the vocabulary level (which abounds in infrequent words such as “haughty,” “attire,” “spats,” and “briar”). It may be extremely difficult for children to take a productive role in this kind of language play.

In fact, to the extent that children do take an active role, Vygotsky predicts trouble.

It is still essential to keep in mind the most serious of all dangers, the risk that an artificiality might be introduced into life which, in children, is something that easily turns into affectation and pretension. There is nothing in worst taste than this “acting cute” [krasivost’], those mannerisms some children introduce into games, into their way of walking, and so on (1997, p. 261).

Much of the irrepressible appeal of *Crocodile* is manneristic in just this way. The story begins, as I’ve just seen, with a cutesy walk down the avenue, and continues with a dance by the animals of Africa around a Christmas tree whose motivation is, to say the least, not altogether clear.

Vygotsky also predicts:

An adult who tries to affect children’s psychology will, under the impression that real feelings are too difficult for children, present sugarcoated version of events and heroes that are clumsily and unskillfully made up; feelings are replaced with sensitivity and emotions by sentiment (1997, p. 242).

Sure enough, *Crocodile* sugar-coats the apparent death of a policeman. Babette Deutsch describes “slipping like sugared fruits into that enormous maw,” but my own translation (again eked out with parenthetic rhymes) is rather closer to the original:

Подбежал городской:  
- Что за шум? Что за вой?  
Как ты смеешь тут ходить,  
По-турецки говорить?  
Крокодилам тут гулять воспрещается.  
Усмехнулся Крокодил  
И беднягу проглотил,  
Проглотил с сапогами и шашкою.

Now comes a copper on his beat  
“What’s the noise? Why the heat?  
Is that Turkish? (It sounds awful!)  
Crocodile walks are here unlawful!”  
And with a smile the crocodile  
Swallows boots first, (without a stretch)  
Follows the gun, the cartridges, and the poor wretch!

And sure enough, the policeman is rescued whole and unchewed by an unskillfully made up hero, Little Lollie’s big brother Vanya.

Все от страха дрожат.  
Все от страха визжат.  
Лишь один  
Гражданин  
Не визжал,

Не дрожал -  
Это доблестный Ваня Васильчиков.  
Он боец,  
Молодец,  
Он герой  
Удалой:  
Он без няни гуляет по улицам.

Babette Deutsch's almost literal translation captures perfectly the rather quirky and even awkward stretching for rhyme and the more casual attitude towards sense:

Everybody quaked and quivered  
Everybody shook and shivered  
Only One didn't quake  
Only One didn't shake  
Ready to fell any foe at a stroke  
VANYA VASILLIKOFF stood like an oak  
He's a fellow you can't spank—he  
Holds a sword and not a hanky  
Yea, the hero of my verse  
Walks abroad without a nurse!

Here the adult reader will doubtless feel that Chukovsky is purveying irony rather than raw sentimentality. Perhaps Chukovsky is criticizing the sugar-coating of events and the fabrication of heroes even more subtly and surely than Vygotsky himself?

Like Dickens's dirty jokes, the satire is probably a good deal more subtle than it is sure. Vygotsky, using a wide variety of examples, demonstrates that children understand even apparently straightforward tales quite differently from adults: American children learn nostalgia for slavery from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and from Aesop, via Krylov, Russian children learn to admire the cunning of the fox in the "The Fox and the Raven" and to yearn for the carefree life of the Grasshopper (in Krylov's version, a dragonfly) in "The Ant and the Grasshopper" (Vygotsky 1971: 84; 1997: 243). Even the child who is told not to smoke because smoking killed the child's uncle will learn to associate smoking with the smell of the beloved uncle. The same child, told a rather outlandish chain of apparently unrelated events, recounting how a tsarevitch of old had smoked and died of consumption and then rebels sacked the capital so that now neither bells nor birds can be heard in the garden, may be moved to give up smoking (1997, p. 254). In other words, the child's responses appear more concerned with the emotional tone rather than the rational tenor of the story, more preoccupied with immediate affect than with mediated effect. If it is difficult to reliably predict the response of children to fairly straightforward didactic tales, how much more difficult it is to second-guess the way they will respond to irony and satire!

### **What Is Good Child Literature Good For?**

Readers familiar with Vygotsky's style of lecturing from the numerous lectures made

available in his collected works or from Bruner’s prologue, where he describes them as being “full of suspense” (1987, p. 8), will recognize his characteristic rhetorical pattern. Vygotsky sets a problem, namely the inability of esthetic education to formulate truly esthetic goals for itself and hence be able to derive a workable curriculum. Vygotsky then surveys a number of extant and opposing solutions to this problem, and demonstrates them one by one to be unworkable: art does not appear to consistently help children acquire moral sensibility, nor does it serve the required cognitive goals nearly as well as the direct study of history or science. In truth, very like Chukovsky and the contemporary critic Bakhtin (1990, pp. 26, 51), Vygotsky is arguing that the purposes of esthetic education must not become merely a means to cognitive, affective or even moral education, no matter how closely these non-esthetic ends may be bound up with its content. Having built up considerable suspense already, Vygotsky then offers a solution, esthetic education for purely esthetic goals, that is, for the sheer pleasure children can derive from art. This solution seems, for a moment, inevitable.

A master of suspense, Vygotsky gives one more turn of the screw. Mercilessly, he rejects purely *esthetic* goals as the goal of esthetic education too:

It reduces esthetics to the sense of the percipient, to the appreciation of works of art, and sees in it an end in itself, in other words, where it reduces the entire meaning of esthetic experience to the unmediated sense of pleasure and joy which it arouses in children. Once again, the work of art is interpreted as a tool for arousing pleasurable reactions and is, practically speaking, placed in the same category as other analogous reactions and sensations that are utterly real. . . . The special feature of childhood consists precisely in the fact that the immediate force of a real and concrete experience for a child is far greater than the force of an imagined emotion (1997, p. 246).

Now arousing pleasurable reactions is precisely the goal towards which Chukovsky bends his considerable talents, and he is not above literal sugar-coating in doing it. For example, when Vanya vanquishes the cop-gobbling crocodile, he receives in reward:

Сто фунтов винограду,  
Сто фунтов мармеладу,  
Сто фунтов шоколаду  
И тысячу порций мороженого!

A hundred pounds of grapes (in bunches)  
A hundred pounds of jelly (beams)  
A hundred pounds of chocolate (crunches)  
A thousand servings of ice creams

It is easy to see why pedologists like Vygotsky (not to mention dentists) would be appalled. This child’s wish list teaches no arithmetic beyond the notion of “a whole lot of.” Like traditional lessons in moral education, it teaches moral behavior through blandishments and threats that cannot reliably lead the child to un-blandished and unthreatened self-regulation. Vygotsky would even go one step further and say this cannot be justified in esthetic terms, or at least not by the purely hedonistic pleasure given the child (1987, p. 63). However mellifluously they rhyme with “bunches,” no child can be expected to prefer Chukovsky’s chocolate crunches to the real thing!

### **A Child Literature That Develops**

But perhaps the alternative before the child is not real chocolate vs. rhyming chocolate, or even a literature that appeals to appetites vs. one that develops the whole child. The disagreement in focus here is really a choice between a literature which orients itself to the parent and child dyad of the preschool past and the classroom child of the future. As the very title of *From Two to Five*, Chukovsky's manual for writers of children's literature suggests, Chukovsky addresses, indiscriminately, a single age group including both infants and toddlers. Now, in Vygotsky's unfinished manuscript on "Child Development," which is found in Volume Five of his Collected Works, this is not one period but three.

First, there is early childhood, which extends from the "Crisis at One" to the "Crisis at Three." During this period the child's social situation of development, the fundamental dilemma which drives the child's growth, is characterized by the fact that the sense of "self" is based on what Vygotsky calls an "affectively colored perception," and consequently his or her speech, the child's main means of communicating with adults who largely determine and satisfy the child's needs, is not fully formed and is often particularly poorly adapted to talking about needs and wants that are distal in time or space. On the other hand, the child is particularly prone to what Vygotsky calls "quasi-play," that is, actions repeated in a rote fashion which appear to be play to others but are not play for the child him or herself (1998, p. 268). Instead, they are serious attempts to master objects and the body itself and even to create idealized forms of particular actions. During this process, the child's language is largely indicative or nominative; it serves as a way of pointing to and naming concrete objects. At three, however, the child seizes control of a single word which does not refer to any object near or far but which nevertheless exercises a decisive influence over the child's fate: the word "No!"

The Crisis at Three is one of several critical periods in which the child adventurously attempts to substitute a particular new form of mental life (in this case negativism) for the process of development itself. Vygotsky notes that even the child's use of "no" at this age has an automatic rather than an autonomous quality: the child will often say "no" when asked to do things that the child actually wants to do simply because the child is asked to do them (1998, p. 283). In other words, the child has substituted other-regulated willfulness for a self-regulated will. The adventure of nay-saying is bound to fail, at least in achieving self-regulation, but in its ruin may be discerned the beginnings of the new mental formations of the preschooler, in this case role play and the imaginary situation.

By school age, role play itself has exhausted much of its cutting-edge developmental potential, though of course it still plays an important role (no pun intended) in the child's everyday activities. But just as rote repetition contains, implicitly, the idea of an idealized form of a concrete action, every role play contains, implicitly, a set of rules, which can be seen easily if the imaginary situation is viewed abstractly. With school age, soccer, for example, becomes a rule-bound form of cooperation rather than an imitation of (Korean) soccer star Pak Jiseong or a repetitious running after the ball.

Vygotsky's objection to Chukovsky's *Crocodile* was never the simple rejection of talking animals that Chukovsky complains about in his diary. Although Vygotsky does rule out the use of fables as factual material, he has no objection whatsoever to their presentation to children as fictions, and indeed argues quite eloquently for the lyrical and poetical qualities of fables (and against their interpretation as prose) in *The Psychology of Art* (1971, p. 91). Vygotsky's real criticism is that this literature is not a developing literature. First of all, it looks back to the preschooler's infant past rather than forward to the school age future. Secondly, it does not help

the child with the difficult transition from other-regulation (being read aloud to) to self-regulation (reading, and eventually writing, alone). Vygotsky believed not in the nineteenth century realist credo of infusing art with everyday life, but in the twentieth century slogan raised by Russian Futurism, that of infusing everyday life with art. For Vygotsky and the Futurists, this did not mean the esthetization of morals, scientific knowledge, or even esthetic forms of everyday life. It meant instead a developing literature; that is, a literature which develops the artist and the audience alike. Specifically, it means a child literature, that is, literature that is child-created, and which children themselves can use to mediate their own feelings.

### **Error as Involuntary Creativity**

It is now easy to see why Vygotsky is unimpressed by texts which merely demonstrate the verbal dexterity of adults for the admiration of small infants. In Vygotsky's book length essay, "Imagination and creativity in childhood" (2004), he cautions that creativity in children is quite different from that of adults and cannot be compared with it, not least because it lacks the raw material of adult experience to work with. Precisely because of this lack of raw material, Vygotsky denies the contention of Rousseau, Tolstoy, and above all Ribot that child creativity stands above adult creativity. Ribot tries to answer the question of how creative expertise can be developed in children, but his answer is hardly original or even logical. Imitation, he says, must come first, anyhow, and only then can this be followed, somehow, by more creative forms (1908, p. 7).

Ribot's work affects Vygotsky rather the way that a grain of sand provokes a pearl from an oyster trying to expel it (or perhaps, more to the point, it affects Vygotsky like an error which a child is becoming conscious of in the process of trying to correct it). Sometimes this effort is not entirely conscious on Vygotsky's part. Even where Vygotsky attempts to copy the diagram Ribot draws to illustrate this process, he somehow manages to omit from his diagram the crucial point at which creativity and rational thought confront each other as rival forces in "most people." And even where Vygotsky attempts to copy Ribot's text *verbatim*, he ends up speaking of the two forces fusing and transforming each other rather than dragging each other down. Finally (perhaps becoming conscious of his error?), Vygotsky relabels Ribot's gloomy quick march from cradle to grave as a mediated progression from an unselfconscious creative childhood to a more self-critical but equally creative adolescence (Ribot, 1908: 141; compare with Vygotsky, 2004, p. 35).

Vygotsky's discussion of drawing (2004, pp. 75-88) shows that development follows exactly the opposite course from that predicted by Ribot: children initially, attempting to copy their memories, merely succeed in entirely reconstructing the object they wish to draw. Even in attempting to copy exactly, the best that older children can achieve is an imperfect imitation. I could, in a Hegelian vein, call this variation-in-itself, and compare it to the random gestures of the infant or, better, the random scribbling of the preschooler (or Vygotsky's own clumsy attempt to copy Ribot's clumsy diagram!). In an *objective* sense, then, variation actually precedes exact imitation, for it is always easier to vary an action (even your own action) than to repeat it precisely.<sup>2</sup> When this kind of initially involuntary variation itself is recognized as a variation on a theme, I call it variation-for-others and compare it to the interpretation of a grasping gesture as a pointing gesture by a mother or the moment where a child who scribbles and then decides that the scribble is a plume of smoke (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 56, 113). Finally, when this variation-for-

others moves from the output of the action to its input, from being a result to being a motive, I call it variation-for-itself; that is, true, will-governed creativity.

### Learning Self-Regulation in South Korea

But what does the development of will-governed creativity really look like in practice? To answer this question, I would like to take some very humdrum, everyday classroom vignettes from literacy lessons in a first and a second language in a country which may with some justice claim to be the world's last remaining primary education superpower, namely South Korea. Despite a much larger population and a much lower per capita expenditure on education than dozens of rivals in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), South Korea has consistently scored in the top three in key subjects such as literacy and mathematics in every report of the Project for International Student Assessment. Contrary to the usual stereotype of purely reproductive tradition-bound Confucian education, when the Project introduced a "problem solving" section designed to tap the ability to come up with entirely novel solutions to tasks, South Korea also took the top place. The literacy rate is virtually 100%, and the average Korean IQ is 106, the highest in the world except for Hong Kong. This has invariably led to speculation about genetic differences, since South Korea is one of the most racially homogeneous nations on earth. A better place to look, however, might be South Korea's literacy system, and of course its classrooms.

I present three classrooms: first, second, and third grade. I want to use these three classroom visits to illustrate a particular developmental sequence I call "rote, role, rule." In doing this I don't wish to suggest that the developmental stages are in a one to one correspondence to grade levels, or even empirically discrete. I wish to suggest a sequence in which each successful strategy creates problems of its own to be solved by successful application of the next strategy. For example, the child's use of rote learning to master the formal register of Korean in first grade does not help the child with figurative language and imaginary situations he or she encounters in second grade. The strategy for coping with this new set of problems cannot be mindlessly copied; like the "Crisis at One" and the "Crisis at Three," it emerges in a stormy manner, by the child's attempt to substitute a whole form of mental activity (e.g. babble based on rote play for speech, or negativism for will-governed negation, or affectation and "acting out" for self-regulated affect) followed by a gradual synthesis in which the new forms are at first subordinated to the old ones and only much later are the old ones subordinated to the new. In this way, the stages necessarily overlap.

#### First Grade: From Rote to Role

These first graders are learning a lesson called "Where do my things belong?"

T: 따라해 봐요, '필통'. ("Repeat after me, please: 'Pencil box'.")

Ss: 필통 ("Pencil box")

T: 필통 ("Pencil box")

Ss: 필통 ("Pencil box")

T: 책가방 ("Book bag")

Ss: 책가방 ("Book bag")

T: 책가방 ("Book bag")

Ss: 책가방 ("Book bag")

T: 이것은 우리 아직 없는데... 누가 떠드니? 누구야 (informal)~ ("Here's something we haven't had yet.... Who's making noise?")

T: 1학년 ("First graders")

Ss: (다같이) 6반!! (Class Six!)

T: 떠들지 마세요 (formal). ("Don't make noise, please!") 악기야 악기. ("Instruments, ya...instruments!") (pointing to the picture) 따라해 봐 '캐스터네츠'. ("Repeat after me, 'Castanets'")

Ss: 캐스터네츠 ("Castanets")

The teacher is not just using rote repetition. She also uses an embedded exchange in informal Korean to remind them of who they are and what role they are expected to play ("Who's making noise?" "First graders..." "Class Six!") and then generalizes using the formal register ("Don't make noise, please!"). But prevention is better than cure. The teacher skillfully judges that the disruption is due to too much rote repetition, and then escalates the level of difficulty, by including concept words that are not object oriented ("musical instruments") and even a foreign word ("castanets"). This lays the foundation for the formation of imaginary situations, the strategic problem that the kids have to solve next.

### Second Grade: Rote or Role?

The following extract shows children coming to grips with figurative language in their language arts class. They have just read a text called "A Phone Call from the First Buds of Spring," in which a child fantasizes about receiving a telephone invitation to come out and play from the first buds of spring.

T: '새싹의 전화'를 읽고 나서 어떤 생각이 들었나요? ("When you read the text 'A Phone Call from the First Buds of Spring' what do you think about?") 주인공 준미처럼 나무나 풀, 길가에 핀 예쁜 꽃과 대화해 본 경험이 있었나요? ("Have you ever had an experience like that of the main character Junmi, where you talk to trees, or grass, or the pretty flowers by the roadside?")

Ss: .... (No answer.)

S1: 하하.. 나무가 말을 한다고? ("Ha ha! You mean trees talk?")

S2: 선생님, 꽃이 어떻게 말을 해요? ("[Respected]Teacher! How can flowers talk?")

T: 예를 들면 등교길에 길가에 핀 꽃을 보았을 때, 가족들과 들이나 산으로 놀러간 적이 있죠. ("For example, when you go to school and you see fresh flowers by the roadside. You have sometimes gone with your family to the fields or to the mountains to have fun, haven't you?") 주변에 아름답게 펼쳐진 자연이 여러분을 [Formal second person pronoun] 반겨주며 말을 거는 것 같다고 느낀 적이 있었나요? ("Haven't you [formal] ever had the feeling that the beautifully blossoming natural scenery around you is joyfully greeting you?")

Ss:.... (No answer.)

Like our first grade teacher, the second grade teacher first responds to difficulties by

switching to the intimate register of Korean. She also uses what Koreans call *혼잣말*, that is self-directed speech which is really designed to be overheard, like an aside in a play, to try to dub, or voice over, the thoughts the children should be thinking.

T: 소리를 내어 직접 말을 나눈 적은 없지만 (손짓하는 모습을 보여주며) 나뭇잎이 흔들리는 모습을 보고 “아! 나뭇잎이 나에게 [*self-directed speech pronoun*] 손짓하는구나. [*intimate verb ending*],” 또는 나무가 나에게 [*self-directed speech pronoun*] 말을 건다고 느꼈던 적이 있나요? (“Although there isn’t a direct voice addressing you [teacher waves her hands for emphasis] the tree leaves are waving, and you think ‘Oh, the tree leaves are waving at me’. Haven’t you had the feeling that the trees were trying to say something to me?”)

S1: 네, 제가 (*honorific pronoun*) 가족들과 바닷가에 놀러갔을 때 파도가 심했는데 꼭 용처럼 생겼다고 생각했어요. (“Yes, once when I went to have fun by the seaside with my family the waves were really big and I thought they were like dragons, that's what I thought.”) 그 모습을 보고 있으니까 용처럼 생긴 파도가 저더러 “상모야, 이리와.” 라고 말하는 것 같았어요. (“When I saw it was like dragons the waves seemed to be saying something like “Sangmo ya, come here!”)

T: 또 다른 사람이 발표해 볼까요? (“Does anyone else want to have a try at speaking?”)

Sangmo’s response has a slightly sinister undertone which doesn’t entirely satisfy the teacher; it is really too creative to fit the sentimental tone being explicated. So she invites another speaker.

S2: 저도 (*humilific pronoun*) 우리 동네에 핀 예쁜 꽃이 저에게 손을 흔들며 반갑게 인사한다고 느낀 적이 있어요. (Me too, I once had the feeling that the pretty flowers in our neighborhood were waving their hands to gladly greet me! ”)

S2 takes the hint a little too well, sticking a little too closely to the script. So S3 has a try.

S3: 저도 (*humilific pronoun*) 상모처럼 바닷가에 놀러 간 적이 있었는데 거기서 갈매기 울음소리를 들었는데 꼭 저한테 ‘안녕!’하고 인사하는 것처럼 들렸어요. (“Me too, just like Sangmo, I went to the seaside to have fun and there were these sea gulls crying and it seemed like they were saying “Hi!” and greeting me.”)

It will be seen that S3’s response is not wholly original; it is an attempt to take the setting from Sangmo’s story and incorporate the language from S2’s story. The classroom conversation now digresses to stories about non-articulate animals, e.g. how cute S4’s puppy is, and the fact that S5 has a puppy and S6 has a kitten, none of which talk to the children even figuratively. Of course, it would be quite untrue to say that there is no copying involved in Sangmo’s story about the dragons of the sea; he begins his narrative in exactly the terms offered by the teacher to the children, namely a trip to have fun with his family, stopping only to vary “mountains or fields” to “sea”. For this reason it is rather misleading to refer to mutually exclusive stages or even levels; each chapter of development, whether it is a critical moment or a gradual transition, presents a complex but working *gestalt* in which

both vestiges of the past and seeds of the future vie for supremacy.

The teacher later expressed some dissatisfaction with the way the discussion had gone. It appeared that only S1, Sangmo, had fully grasped the central rule of personification and could offer a reasonable example from experience; the other contributions were she felt, either suspiciously close to the models offered by the teacher or by Sangmo or else quite distant from the text's implicit rule, that is, the idea of nature which is figuratively capable of articulate speech. In order to grasp the rule of personification and figurative language, the children must imitate not the speech but the thinking, and in order to do this a new form of mental activity in which the child's speech is decisively subordinated to thought has to be brought into being.

### **Third Grade: From Roles to Rules**

Third grade in South Korea brings this conflict between rote repetition on the one hand and conscious reflection and mastery on the other to a crisis: the introduction of a foreign language, namely English. In this class, the teacher divides the class into teams (usually girls against boys). Each team chooses a role. They begin with the teaching point of the day (e.g. "Put on your...") and the other team replies. The teacher writes these utterances on the board. Then the first team replies to the reply. The game continues, like a game of verbal volleyball, until the dialogue reaches the bottom of the whiteboard. Children and teacher then read over the dialogue that they've created, and the teacher gives points to each team for appropriate utterances and takes away points for incorrect ones. The teacher then takes a digital photograph of the white board to use for data analysis and erases it.

Here is one team of third graders inventing utterances for the imaginary textbook character Mina, and the other team creating utterances for Mina's little brother Minsu.

Minsu: Can you fly?

Mina: No, I can't.

Minsu: Can you skate?

Mina: No, I can't.

Minsu: What time is it?

Mina: It's eleven twenty five.

Minsu: How many cow?

Mina: Two cow.

Minsu: How old are you?

Mina: I'm ten.

Minsu: What day is it?

Mina: Tuesday.

Minsu: Can you ski?

Mina: Yes, I can.

In fact, what the children are doing is reciting the titles and kernel dialogues of almost all of their previous lessons and some of the upcoming ones: "How many cows?," "How old are you?," "What time is it?," and the lesson of the week, which is "Can you swim?"

The pointlessness of this imitation is particularly striking when compared to the following dialogue, recorded just one week later. Here the children are confined to a single

language exponent (“Put on your [article of clothing]”) but they have been given more discretion in determining the roles. They have decided that Minsu is an older brother rather than a younger one, and that Mina, the little sister, is attracted to a boy in her class and wants to show off how slim she is. Minsu would rather that she cover up.

Minsu: Put on your coat.

Mina: No.

Minsu: Outside, cold! (i.e. “It’s cold outside.”)

Mina: No!

Minsu: What!

Mina: I’m sorry.

Minsu: Put on your glove.

Mina: Yes.

Minsu: Put on your cap.

Mina: Too big.

Minsu: Put on your sweater.

Mina: Too small.

Minsu (holding up a beautiful scarf): Put on your scarf.

Mina: Yes, please!

Minsu: Put on your pants.

Mina: No, I’m skirt. (i.e. “I want to wear a skirt.”)

Minsu: You, inside, play! (i.e. “You must stay inside and play and cannot go out.”)

Mina: No!

The incoherence has disappeared. Every utterance now appears well motivated and contributes to the developing imaginary situation: at each point it is clear who is saying what to whom and why. I do not attribute this to a miraculous one week increase in English proficiency, because a lot of the grammatical well-formedness has disappeared along with the pointlessness. In place of grammatical accuracy (“It’s eleven twenty-five”) is discourse appropriateness (“Outside, cold!”).

Where once there was clausal elaboration (“How old are you?”), now there is purely predicative speech (“Too small!”). Negation plays a less prominent grammatical but a more prominent pragmatic role (“No!” in lieu of “No, I can’t”). It seems logical to explain it as a reorganization of the relationship between existing functions, that is, to qualitative development rather than merely quantitative word and grammar learning. In particular, it seems logical to explain it as the reorganization of rote repetition into a role play.

Role play is still, however, a pre-school occupation for Korean children; by the time they arrive in school, the realistic socio-dramatic role plays of “House,” “Hospital” or “School” have largely been discarded and replaced by explicitly rule-based activities, including on-line multi-player role playing games (many of which do, however, have a large but generally non-realist, role playing component). Just as role play reconstrued the rote-based routines by allowing utterances to vary and utterers to be retained, rule based games allow the roles themselves to vary (for example, in turn-taking), as long as certain generalized relationships are conserved. These generalized relationships, in which the imaginary situation is abstracted away, are the child’s first rules, but of course conserving the rules is, for now, the job of the teacher.

One way to look at the transition that the children have made, from rote repetition to rule-

based play, is simply to say that they have gone from repeating the action and repeating the actor (rote) to varying the action and repeating the actor (role) to varying both action and actor (rule). But this obscures the fact that in order to do this the actor must be transformed: the actor must be able to repeat and then to vary him or herself. It's in this sense that the first three years of Korean primary school constitute not merely learning, but development.

### **Conclusion: The Ends of Crocodile Tears**

The “Crocodile” problem which divided Chukovsky and Vygotsky thus turns out to be unexpectedly tractable: I imagine a kind of sliding scale of activities, from rote-based chants, to role based improvisations, to rule-based games along the lines of our verbal volleyball, based on this or another literary artwork but requiring very different levels of active response. But while I have provided very considerable prehistory and post-history to the conflict between Vygotsky and Chukovsky, and even gone into Vygotsky's unfinished scheme of child development in some detail, illustrating with empirical data, two problems remain. First of all, there isn't anything here which is specific to child literature, or even children's literature, or to imaginative literature in general; there is no obvious reason why this choppy, crisis-ridden transition from rote play to role play to rule play has to be used with fiction rather than, say, science materials, math problems or activities associated with other parts of the elementary curriculum. Secondly, I still haven't really solved the key problem of what this developing child's literature is developing for. If anything, I have made it worse, because I now require a clear goal and an aim that is common to both rote activities, role-based ones, and rule-based games.

In response to the first problem, I first note that what distinguishes imaginative literature as an art form is not really aesthetic pleasure, both because this can be found in many art forms and even outside art (e.g. in nature, as Sangmo and his friends point out), and because reducing imaginative literature to a purely pleasurable experience reduces art to another kind of appetite and its appreciation to what Adorno refers to as a purely “culinary” attitude (1997). What distinguishes imaginative literature is its *fictitiousness*.

That is why Chukovsky vigorously defends the type of “topsy-turvy” thinking observed in:

“I harnessed the horse  
But the horse did not budge.  
I harnessed the gnat.

And the gnat sped away to the barn. (1966: 92)”

Chukovsky comments that “children make every effort to substitute for the horse any kind of nonsensical alternate, and the more palpable the nonsense the more enthusiastically does the children's rhyme cultivate it.”

At first glance this completely confirms Vygotsky's most devastating accusations in the *Crocodile* footnote, to the effect that Chukovsky holds that the more nonsensical an assertion is, the easier it is for children to understand and the more amusing they will find it. Yet it is precisely here that I find the gap between Chukovsky and Vygotsky narrowing. Chukovsky also points out that “simultaneously with this extreme rejection of the normal, the child is keenly aware of the normal” (1966, p. 92), and looks to a rather surprising quarter for support:

“An eminent Soviet educator, Professor A. V. Zaporozhets, has expressed with obvious agreement the basic ideas developed by me in this chapter. He worded his agreement in the following incontrovertible way: ‘Children become so convinced of reality that they begin to

enjoy all kinds of topsy-turvies [*pereviortyski*]. Laughing at them, the child reveals and deepens his correct conceptions of surrounding reality. (1966, p. 106)”

Professor Zaporozhets was, once upon a time, a Vygotsky disciple, and one of the dreaded pedologists from Kharkov who so harried Chukovsky. Moreover, I find that Vygotsky too puts forward this idea on the penultimate page of *Psychology and Art*, and his source is even more surprising: Chukovsky himself! (1972, p. 258) So in response to the first problem, the problem of why fiction in particular should serve to mediate emotion, both Chukovsky and his nemesis Vygotsky would say that it is the *non-reality* of literature which serves the child in confronting negative feelings and mastering them. True, the esthetic principle according to which flouting a rule or a role or a fact about the world merely confirms the reality in the child’s mind will only work for children who can simultaneously hold in their minds the objective truth and the subjective falsehood about it. How old must a child be for this to happen? Here Chukovsky and Vygotsky do part company, but their disagreement is really a disagreement about the precise meaning of the word “child.” For Vygotsky, the child is a schoolchild, while for the bereaved Chukovsky, the child to whom his books are directed will never go to school at all.

In response to the second problem, the problem of why fiction should be particularly well suited to *emotional* development, I would like to linger once more over Chukovsky’s personal loss and the way he himself used the writing of literature to control and to re-channel his feelings. Perhaps what children’s literature does best is precisely the mediation of emotions, the control of feelings, and their transformation into higher and more creative mental functions. But it often happens that literature performs this function better for the producer than for the consumer. As Goethe discovered when he wrote *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and inadvertently triggered an epidemic of suicide across Europe, when a man turns life into art, his audience may, sadly, turn his art back into life or even death (1962, p. 149). So perhaps children’s literature can only help children develop affective self-control if it becomes child literature in the same sense that Russian literature is Russian, a literature which is at least potentially by children and not simply for them.

Immediately after Vygotsky’s work on esthetic education and *The Psychology of Art*, he embarked on the most productive phase of his short life which culminated in *Thinking and Speech*, a monograph in which he expounded a fairly well worked out theory of intellectual development. First, he rejected the contention by Freud and Piaget that child thinking and child speech was “egocentric” and even autistic, given to the “hallucinatory” satisfaction of desires. With Bleuler, he snorted that no child prefers an imaginary apple to a real one (1987, p. 63). Next, he showed how higher psychological functions (deliberate, volitional control of memory, attention and reasoning which is culturally handed down and socially formed through word meanings) are formed through the reconstruction of lower cognitive processes, such as involuntary perception, automatic attention, and practical intelligence-in-action shared with animals (1987, pp. 121-241).

There is, potentially, a virtual sequel to this work, a long and apparently unfinished manuscript, “The Teaching about Emotions” (1999, pp. 71-235). Overall, this work suggests that Vygotsky might have had in mind a theory of how higher emotions (love, fairness, respect) might be formed in an analogous way, through the transformation of lower affective processes (sexual desire, anger, fear) by works of art in a manner parallel to the development of higher psychological functions. “The Teaching about Emotions” begins, characteristically, with a very long section in which the problem is posed and various solutions are probed and rejected. One of these rejected solutions is the James-Lange theory of emotions, according to which emotions are

to be understood as mental responses to bodily states, once defended by Ribot (1905, p. 255) and very recently resurrected by Damasio (1994, 2003). Immordino-Yang and Damasio accept that these mental responses (which Damasio has called “feelings” in order to distinguish them from the “emotions” created by sensing bodily states) may be triggered by the social environment of learning and even by memories as well as by actual bodily states (2007, p. 9). They do not, however, discuss how they may be deliberately triggered—that is, mediated in much the same way as a child mediates higher intellectual processes—by the use of verbal artworks. Lindqvist gives a striking example of this when her children, re-enacting one of Tove Jansson’s Moomin stories, transform fear into a just anger (1995, p. 106).

Like Damasio, Vygotsky includes an extensive discussion of Spinoza’s crucial idea that a powerful but detrimental passion can only be consciously overcome by invoking a more powerful and less detrimental one (Spinoza, 1992, p. 158). In other words, an involuntary emotion, even one triggered by perception, can be overcome by the conscious use of a voluntary one, even one triggered by memory, in much the same way that the child at play can use an imaginary situation to banish a real one (Vygotsky, 1972, pp. 248-249). Of course, other-regulation passively submitted to or copied in a rote manner is not affective self-regulation at all. There can be no real self-sufficiency, no mature literacy, or independent reading at all until the knot of other-regulation and self-regulation is well and truly unpicked and the child’s own active response to an artwork is unraveled from that of the writing producer and the reading adult. So it appears that the true purpose of children’s literature, at least in the classroom, really is a literature named after its producers and not just its consumers. In the same way that painting helps to mediate a higher emotional response to perception, such a developing literature might be able to mediate higher emotional responses to the great human biomechanical tragedies: pain, illness, hunger, and death. While no child prefers an imaginary apple to a real one, every child will prefer an imaginary hunger or an imaginary death.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Chukovsky’s descriptions of prominent Jews such as Shklovsky and Zinoviev, his physical repugnance for Trotsky, and his co-authorship of an article with the Zionist extremist Jabotinsky which advocated the exclusion of Jews from Russian literature (Chukovsky, 1966; p. 128, and 2005, p. 215). Yet the picture is not as simple as this. The illegitimate son of a Ukrainian peasant, Chukovsky apparently suspected that he himself might have a Jewish father. Later, his daughter Lydia married the well known Jewish astrophysicist Matvei Bronstein, who was shot, and following this he became very outspoken against Stalinist anti-Semitic purges, likening them to Czarist “Black Hundred” pogroms.

<sup>2</sup>This is completely consistent with Vygotsky’s observation that children become aware of difference before they consciously master sameness, because sameness involves an ideal hierarchy, a recognition that two things are instantiations of an unseen idealized third (1987; pp. 71, 185). The child first notices the difference between the ideal and the real and only later considers their similarity.

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