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THE BELIEFS OF WRITERS

What follows is the lecture delivered at the Hopwood Awards ceremonies at the University of Michigan, April 1985, as revised by the author for publication.

All writers relish stories from the lives of the masters. We hold them in our minds as a kind of trade lore. We hope the biography of the great writer yields secrets of his achievement. As many writers as Hemingway inspired to write he probably inspired to hunt or to box. I imagine many of them crouching this very moment in their duck blinds. Writers always want to learn how to live as a means of bringing out the best they have in themselves.

The master's life I've been thinking about lately is Tolstoy's, in particular his crisis of conscience at the age of fifty. Always at the mercy either of his passions or his ethics, Tolstoy lived in a kind of alternating current of tormented resolution. The practice of fiction left him elated and terribly let down. It's said that he had to be prevented from throwing the finished manuscript of *Anna Karenina* into the fire. In any event, at the age of fifty he decided that his life lacked justification, that he was no better than a pander to people who had nothing better to do with their time than to read. And he gave up writing novels.

Of course, his resolve did not seem to cover the shorter form and over the years he lapsed into the composition of a few modest pieces—"The Kreutzer Sonata," "The Death of Ivan Ilyich"—but for the most part he employed his position and his talents to militate against some of the overwhelming misery of life under the Czar. He indulged a prophetic voice. He preached his doctrine of Christian non-violence. He wrote primers designed to teach the children of peasants to read.

Now theoretically, at least, there is for every writer a point at which he or she might come to the same conclusion as Tolstoy, a