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## Two fictional journeys in the life of Dostoevsky: Tyspkin's *Summer in Baden–Baden* and Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores two literary works based on the life of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky between the years 1867 and 1869: *Лето в Бадене* (*Summer in Baden–Baden*, 1982) by Leonid Tsyppkin and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) by J. M. Coetzee. Both novels endeavor to understand Dostoevsky. Their approaches are characteristic of late twentieth-century writing: the novelized life and travelogue, in which reality and fiction are interwoven. Both books recreate the life of Dostoevsky and the process by which he wrote *The Gambler*, *The Possessed* and *The Idiot*, based on Dostoevsky's works and biographical sources. Each novel is framed by a question: Where does Dostoevsky's writing come from? (Coetzee) and, What can account for this fascination with Dostoevsky? (Tsyppkin). The comparative analysis offered here addresses the ways in which such fascination with the life and literary work of Dostoevsky is shaped, and examines the issue of Dostoevsky's influence on these writers in line with Harold Bloom's theory in *The Anxiety of Influence*.

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## Introduction

This article explores two works of fiction based on the life of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky between 1867 and 1869: Leonid Tsyppkin's *Лето в Бадене* (*Summer in Baden–Baden*, 1982) and J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* (1994). Both books re-tell the life of Dostoevsky and the writing of *The Possessed* and *The Idiot*, based on Dostoevsky's own works and other biographical sources: Tsyppkin relied above all on the diary of Anna Grigoryevna Dostoevskaya, Dostoevsky's second wife, as well as on Leonid P. Grossmann's studies of Dostoevsky; Coetzee also drew on Joseph Frank's biography of the writer. Critics have referred to both novels as 'variations on Dostoevskian motifs' (Frank 1995, 2002). Similar questions may be posed in relation to both works – Where did Dostoevsky's writing spring from? What can account for

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such fascination with Dostoevsky and his work? – and both endeavor to address these questions in the novel, rather than essay, form.

This analysis is structured in four parts. The purpose of the first section is to offer some reasons for such fascination with Dostoevsky in the twentieth century and the search for the author in the novel and its meta-discursive domain (Dostoevsky the writer as a character in a novel). The second and third sections read the works of Tsyppkin and Coetzee, respectively, as fictional accounts that share the aim of Dostoevsky's biographers, but that frame the objective in a different which – that is, by introducing the reader to the secrets bound up in his writing. The influence of Dostoevsky on the work of both Tsyppkin and Coetzee is also discussed in light of Harold Bloom's theory of influence in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Finally, the concluding section examines the similarities and differences between Tsyppkin and Coetzee's novels with respect to Dostoevsky's influence, in an attempt to disclose the consciousness of the author and reflect on the limits of story-telling itself.

### ***Fascination with the life and work of Dostoevsky in the twentieth century***

There are artists who have become so bewitched by Dostoevsky that they respond in creative terms to the challenges posed by his life and work. In novels, films, painting and poetry, they have endeavored to offer readings of Dostoevsky's work that go beyond cultural history, literary theory and criticism. The list of writers, filmmakers and artists fascinated with Dostoevsky and his work is long: from the Russian symbolists Merezhkovsky, Bulgakov and Ivanov to Franz Kafka, Joseph Conrad, Albert Camus, Cioran and Victor Pelevin; and in cinema, Kurosawa, Andrew Bajda, Robert Bresson, Luciano Visconti, Martin Scorsese and Alfred Hitchcock. Such fascination may be explained in part by the distinctive way in which Dostoevsky's writing brings his readers face to face with the mystery of human nature.

Dostoevsky became an icon in the twentieth century. Robert L. Jackson (1996, 3) adds that, in certain respects, he became a cliché, and argued that given the nature of Dostoevsky's personality and work, the reader should approach him with an attitude of dialogue:

Dialogue with Dostoevsky is at the center of the most important encounters with him; it is a mark not merely of the timelessly topical nature of Dostoevsky's work, but of the singularly provocative character of his vision of man and the world. (Jackson 1996, 3)

Joseph Frank's biography is one of the most outstanding published in the latter half of the twentieth century. Frank first encountered Dostoevsky in the 1950s when he was invited to give a series of lectures by the Christian Gauss Seminar at Princeton University. At the time, in the postwar period, as Frank himself notes (1979, xi), he was interested in existentialist literature, and he chose the topic of existentialist themes in modern literature, beginning with an analysis of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. His fascination with Dostoevsky grew to such an extent that he set aside the idea of writing up his lectures and decided instead to learn Russian and to write a book on Dostoevsky. From 1970 to 2010, he devoted his efforts to writing a five-volume, 3000-page biography in which he explores the life, times and work of Dostoevsky. Frank reads Dostoevsky's novels as a process taking

place in the sociocultural context of the times he lived in; he studies how the early works foreshadowed the later, greater novels. Frank's purpose was to show how the novels emerged from the personal and sociocultural world in which Dostoevsky wrote, a focus that became a touchstone for his analysis of the 1865–1871 period in Dostoevsky's life when three of the most important novels were written – *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Possessed* – along with two novellas, *The Eternal Husband* and *The Gambler*. The title of the fourth volume of Frank's biography is *Dostoevsky. The Miraculous Years 1865–1871* (1995). Frank saw these years as miraculous because, following the death of his wife and his brother, Mikhail, the debts he inherited from the latter, his own gambling addiction and other financial problems, Dostoevsky experienced a period of extraordinary creativity. A number of other writers and artists have likewise been drawn to this period in Dostoevsky's life, including Leonid Tsyppkin and J. M. Coetzee. Frank, the biographer, makes Dostoevsky and his novels more accessible to readers through a thorough use of sources and an exhaustive reconstruction of his life and times based on personal testimonies, letters, notes and diaries. The biographer reconstructs, arranges and interprets facts and opinions. The novelist has a freer hand in his interpretation of such facts and perceptions. This article focuses on two literary works that speculate about the life of Dostoevsky. They are not historical novels; rather, they are fictions framed by the biographical facts of Dostoevsky's life. Coetzee's novel recreates the period of time in which Dostoevsky was working on *The Possessed*. Coetzee began to make notes for *The Master of Petersburg* in 1991; his preparatory work includes notes based on his reading of Frank's biography (Attwell, 2013, 26). A dialogue sprang up between novelist and biographer: Coetzee reviewed the fourth volume of Frank's biography, *Dostoevsky. The Miraculous Years 1865–1871* (Coetzee 2001) for *The New York Review of Books*; and Frank would later review *The Master of Petersburg*. David Foster Wallace also provided a useful and intelligent reading of Frank's biography (2005). Tsyppkin, as he himself explained, based his book on the biography and literary studies of Leonid Grossmann, published from the 1920s (in English since 1965) onwards in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as on the diary kept by Dostoevsky's second wife, Anna Grigoryevna. He re-tells the story of the Dostoevskys' journey to Baden-Baden, Dresden, and through Switzerland, which is interwoven with the account of Tsyppkin's own journey to Leningrad and his visits to the places that feature in Dostoevsky's work and life. Coetzee's novel is a work of imagination; and Tsyppkin's book aims to satisfy its author's fascination with the Russian writer, whom he pursues through the information presented in the biographies, Grigoryevna's *Memoirs*, and his own trip to Leningrad and the F. M. Dostoevsky Literary Memorial Museum. Both books speculate on the life, times and work of Dostoevsky. In their analysis of Frank's biography Rebón and Mateo hold that 'the only way to move beyond the conjectures of the inner world of the biographer's subject is, in Carlos Pujol's words, by donning the disguise of literature' (2014, 2). At the end of the twentieth century, Coetzee and Tsyppkin take a fictional approach to the enigmas of Dostoevsky's life and work, but there are some precedents for their endeavor. These creative responses that can be calificated as transprotations are, as Caryl Emerson pointed out, 'the most vigorous commentary possible on another world of art' (1986, 8).

Robert L. Jackson's study, *Dialogue with Dostoevsky* (1996), is an outstanding analysis of the reception of Dostoevsky's work among other Russian writers: his ideas and writing are compared with the work of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov and Gorky. In *Retelling Dostoevsky*, Gary Adelman explores literary responses to Dostoevsky in the twentieth century; he holds that some writers (Nabokov and Conrad, for instance) invent their own Dostoevsky (2001, 89–93), but that all the writers have Dostoevsky present at the forefront of their imaginations. The approach Adelman takes enables a different understanding of the creative process (2001, 11–20). He compares the two novels of this article, for him, 'Coetzee, like Tsympkin, introduces a fictional Dostoevsky. His aim is in part like Tsympkin's, to reveal the creative personality of the writer (2003, 169).' Kaye's (1999) research on Dostoevsky's shadow is focused on by English writers (D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett and Joseph Conrad). Recently, a doctoral dissertation entitled *My Dostoevsky, Myself: The Self-Reflective Impulse in Dostoevsky's Readers* (Gabrielle Cavagnaro, University of Chicago, 2009) examines how Dostoevsky's themes, poetics and creative principles have been assimilated in the work of four Russian writers (Rozanov, Mandelstam, Nabokov and Tsympkin), and how the act of writing may respond to the act of reading Dostoevsky's novels. For biographers, critics and writers, Dostoevsky's personality is part of the mystery they reflect on so as to better understand his work. In *Dostoevsky*, Stefan Zweig writes that 'there is only one way to approach him: with enthusiasm, a humble enthusiasm that knows its limits in the face of the loving respect he fosters in drawing closer to the mystery of man' (2009, 6). One sign of Zweig's enthusiasm is the book cited above, which he began writing in 1914, as well as one of his *Twelve Miniatures in Decisive Moments in History* (1999, 143), which also focuses on Dostoevsky: 'Heroic Moment, Dostoevsky, St Petersburg, Semenovskiy Square, 22 December 1849' takes the form of a long poem, as though a chronicle or narrative could not capture the light of the heroic moment with the same power as an image.

Dostoevsky revolutionized the Russian novel in the nineteenth century, and his work remains an outstanding model of achievement. His innovative approach involved setting aside the normal form of the classic novel so as to express the ideas and meaning he intended. His peers claimed he did not know how to write because his books are open-ended and their plots unravel as they unfold. Not until a century later, first in Europe, then in Russia, did his work enter the classical canon.

There is a world and atmosphere that every reader recognizes as 'Dostoevskian', wherein lies much of his genius: his vision of the world, the way in which he expresses that vision in his novels, and the discourse of the person; as Bakhtin argued, the voices of the novel sound polyphonic (Bakhtin 1984, 181–269). The voices are not arranged; some do not drown out others. Dostoevsky does not set up a hierarchy of voices; he does not need a hierarchy because his aim is to discover the truth about man and the world. The choral sound of his novels, the echoes of the consciousness of his characters, is the right music for that search. Meaning emerges from the work of art as a whole, and lasts for a fleeting moment, a miracle instant of fusion and mutual understanding between different voices. The fascination with Dostoevsky's work is often driven by his characters (Frank 1995, 99) and entails a singular vision of human being. Writers may also feel a sense of identification with Dostoevsky himself, the writer facing the dichotomy between his life and work, which Coetzee

addresses in his novel. Simon Karlinsky describes readers who look to the psycho-literary under-layer as Dostoyevskan people:

Russian dictionaries list a common noun, derived from the writer's name, *dostoevshchina*, which is a derogatory term describing an undesirable mode of behavior. A person guilty of *dostoevshchina* is being deliberately difficult, hysterical, or perverse. Another possible meaning of this word is excessive and morbid preoccupation with one's own psychological process. The word is a part of the normal Russian vocabulary, incidentally (Karlinsky 1971, 17).

The purpose of Frank and other biographers is to paint a clearer picture of Dostoevsky by returning to the sources, to offer an exhaustive account of who he was by reading his letters, etc.; and the fictions of Tsyppkin and Coetzee share a similar aim: to give readers an insight into the enigmas encompassed by Dostoevsky's work.

### **Leonid Tsyppkin, *Лето в Бадене* (Summer in Baden–Baden, 1982)**

*Лето в Бадене* (*Summer in Baden–Baden*, 1982) by Leonid Tsyppkin is a book that encompasses a range of different genres. The book is a kind of travelogue, the diary of a journey from Moscow to Leningrad in the 1970s, as well as the reconstruction of the Dostoevskys' honeymoon in Baden-Baden and Geneva. As the narrator progresses on his train journey, he reads through the *Memoirs* of Anna Grigorievna, edited in 1928 by Leonid Grossman, one of the first experts in Dostoevsky's work. Beneath this surface structure, however, the book frames its author's thoughts and questions around an imaginative re-telling of Dostoevsky's life. The 'novel', if the book may be described as a novel, is the story of a journey in which Tsyppkin re-lives the Dostoevskys' honeymoon, the birth of their first daughter and her death.

Leonid Tsyppkin was not a literary writer and *Summer in Baden–Baden* was his first novel. Tsyppkin (Minsk, 1926–1982) was born into a Jewish family, the son of doctors, and was a researcher specializing in pathology who worked from 1957 onwards at the Institute of Poliomyelitis and Viral Encephalitis in Moscow. In 1977, when his only son emigrated to the United States, he was demoted at the Institute; his salary was cut and he was no longer able to do research. He and his wife applied for an exit visa from the USSR and were turned down. From youth, Tsyppkin had been fascinated with Dostoevsky, both his work and his personality.

*Summer in Baden–Baden* was written between 1977 and 1980. Tsyppkin had started to write poetry in the 1960s, and from childhood had shown strong interest in literature and the cinema. Details of his life are glossed in Susan Sontag's introduction to the English-language edition of the novel (Sontag 2007, 21–36) and in the recollections of his son, Mikhail Tsyppkin, in the introduction to the Russian edition (2005, 5–21). The novel was published in installments in the Russian émigré magazine in New York, *Novaya Gazeta* (13–19 March to 1–7 May 1982). The novel was smuggled to the United States where it was published in *Novaya gazeta*, a Russian émigré weekly. One of his first reader was Joseph Brodsky. The novel was subsequently published in translation in Germany and in England, but received little critical notice until in the early 1990s Sontag found the novel in a second hand bookshops and wrote about it in *The New Yorker* in 2001. It has been translated into more than a dozen languages, and was finally first published in Russia in 2003.



The novel opens on a narrative voice setting out on a journey, but thereafter the reader finds himself somewhere between the thoughts of the narrating voice and the external account of the journey:

I was on a train, traveling by day, but it was winter-time – late December, the very depths – and to add to it the train was heading north – to Leningrad – so it was quickly darkening on the other side of the windows – bright lights of Moscow stations flashing into view and vanishing again behind me like the scattering of some invisible hand (Tsyppkin 2013, 3).

The traveler, Tsyppkin's *alter ego*, talks about his deep-seated fascination with Dostoevsky and tells the story of the book in his hands, the diary kept by Dostoevsky's wife in 1867, a book that he himself had had bound:

The photograph pasted into the *Diary* shows Anna Grigor'yevna still quite young at the time, her glowering face both possessed and pious, but Fedya, already getting on in years, not very tall and with such short legs (...) – he had the face of a man of the common people, (...) – so why had I rushed around Moscow shaking with emotion (I am not ashamed to admit it) with the *Diary* in my hands until I found someone to bind it? – Why, in public on a tram, had I avidly leafed through its flimsy pages, looking for places which I seemed to have glimpsed before, and then why, after seeing it bound, had I carefully placed the book, which had now become heavy, on my desk like the Bible, keeping it there day and night? Why was I now on my way to Petersburg – yes, not to Leningrad, but precisely to *Petersburg* whose streets had been walked by his short-legged, rather small individual (no more so, probably, than most other inhabitants of the nineteenth century) with the face of a church-warden or a retired soldier? – Why was I reading this book *now* (...) ? (Tsyppkin 2013, 7–8)

Thus begins this chronicle or imaginary account of these years in the lives of the Dostoevskys: a portrait that is, at the same time, a self-portrait, a 'rhapsody on Dostoevskian themes, or a series of variations on Dostoevskian motifs', to use Frank's words (2002, 74). What may be said of Tsyppkin's prose? First, his writing dissolves the dimensions of space and time, calling into question which moment or place may be real, a shift that yields imagined scenes that are superimposed on the present tense of the narrative. Second, the question or interrogative form as a mode of dialogue or monologue articulates the limits of the introspection framed by a reading of the novel.

In the story Tsyppkin tells, events from the lives of Dostoevsky and his wife are interwoven with scenes from the novels, and with the train journey he himself is taking, his arrival and wandering around Leningrad. The book recalls Janet Malcolm's *Reading Chekhov* in this regard. In both books, a journey to places associated with the writers is intertwined with the narrator's reading of their fictions. The imagined is accorded the same status as what is seen on the pilgrimage to a place linked to Dostoevsky (or Chekhov, in Malcolm's case). Susan Sontag pointed out that:

The originality of Tsyppkin's novel lies in the way it moves, from the autobiographical narrative of the never-to-be-named narrator, embarked on his journey through the bleak contemporary Soviet landscapes, to the life of the peripatetic Dostoevskys. In the cultural ruin that is the present, the feverish past shines through. Tsyppkin is traveling into Fedya's and Anna's souls and bodies, as he travels to Leningrad. There are prodigious, uncanny acts of empathy (Sontag 2013, xxiv).

Tsyppkin's book reads as the uninterrupted transcription of an imagination in full flow; it is not divided up into sections or chapters, and the shifts from past to present

(and back again) transpire in the associations his imagination makes between two spaces. Fanger point out how these two narratives advance toward no resolution (2008, 1) As in a film, transitions in space and time fade in and out, the links between the two planes go unremarked. The past of the book comprises a reconstruction of the Dostoevskys' life in Baden-Baden; its present tells of the narrator's journey to St. Petersburg/Leningrad, where he visits the places associated with Dostoevsky, taking photographs. Journey and time blur into one another: Is the journey structured in time? The chronological time of Anna's diary, of Dostoevsky's years outside Russia, until his death? The narrative time of a train journey in 1975 from Moscow to Leningrad, arriving in a St Petersburg re-imagined and rebuilt in fictional terms? Are past and present, the read and the lived, linked in space? The 'real' facts of the story, the documents and the visit to the place, set the scene for a vision of what is, in the last analysis, the mind of Dostoevsky himself:

The visions and images of his trampled pride never left his side. Outside the window which was covered by a dirty greyish crust of snow, the neon-sign 'Izhory Works' twisted by like a tiny glowing red snake – *Izhory* – practically Leningrad already, its outskirts, its dachas, its suburbs, inhabited by fairhaired Finns with their pale, passive faces – or at least that it what I preferred to think – 'As I was driving up to Izhory...' – I could not help remembering the line from Pushkin which for some reason always comes into my mind as I pass this spot, a tribute to conditioned thinking, as it is quite involuntary (Tsyppkin 2013, 170–172).

The effect of this 'tribute to conditioned thinking' is to thread together past and present, what has been read with what has been lived. Thus the story shifts from one space to another, from one time to another, from the knowledge provided by the senses to a memory of an imagined place. Tsyppkin's book presents images of Dostoevsky as he foreshadows some of the characters and scenes that were to feature in his novels; but such links are very difficult to trace, and Tsyppkin uses crystallization, a form of literary transfiguration, to represent this purpose. On his arrival in Geneva, Dostoevsky visits the museum where Holbein's 'Body of the Dead Christ' is on display, an image that appears later in *The Idiot*, and Tsyppkin writes:

But for some reason this picture was a clear and complete detail – the first crystal to form in a supersaturated solution – and the remainder, perhaps still hidden by a thick mist, would have to come by itself. (Tsyppkin 2013, 206)

The interrogative form or questions are used to draw closer to Dostoevsky. The novel switches back and forth from dialogue to monologue, and the lack of certainty calls into question the how far the book may journey into the heart of Dostoevsky. The narrator engages with Dostoevsky's wife through the pages of her diary, with Dostoevsky's characters in his novels, with Leonid Grossman (Dostoevsky's Jewish biographer); and with Gilya, an old medical colleague of his own parents, with whom he stays on his visits to Leningrad throughout his life, and who stands as a literary double for Clara Rozental, to whom *Summer in Baden-Baden* is dedicated. The monologue is the self-portrait the narrator outlines on the train, in his wandering around Leningrad/St. Petersburg and his fascination with Dostoevsky. The questions he puts to himself are intended to get to the core of Dostoevsky and his own fascination with the Russian writer, and seem throughout to be shadowed by a single



underlying concern which he finally articulates near the end of the novel: how can he, Tsyppkin, a Jew, have such high regard for a notorious anti-Semite like Dostoevsky?

Why was I so strangely attracted and enticed by the life of this man who despised me and my kind (and deliberately so or with his eyes wide open, as he liked to put it)? Why had I come here under cover of darkness, walking along these empty and godforsaken streets like a thief? – why, when visiting his museum near the Kuznechny Market or other places connected with him, had I kept somehow to the side or trailed behind, as if I had turned up there by accident and none of it really interested me? – and were not my recent visions at Gilya's, in which, at the end, he turned into Isaiah Fomich, only the pathetic attempt of my subconscious mind to 'legitimize' my passion? (Tsyppkin 2013, 280).

At the end of the novel, Tsyppkin articulates in explicit terms what had been implicit from the beginning of his journey to St Petersburg/Leningrad in the footsteps of Dostoevsky. The writer aims to legitimize his passion. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom does not explain the fascination of one writer with another; he studies how a precursor or precursors may influence a poet and his work. The reader may discern something of the relationship between Dostoevsky and Tsyppkin in the language and purpose of the latter's prose in *Summer in Baden-Baden*. Bloom set out six stages in the poetic influence of precursors on a poet's voice: *clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonization*, *askesis* and *apophrades*.

Tsyppkin appears to come between the phases of *askesis* and *apophrades* in relation to Dostoevsky: 'For *clinamen* and *tessera* strive to correct or complete the dead, and *kenosis* and *daemonization* work to repress memory of the dead, but *askesis* is the contest proper, the match-to-the-death with the dead' (Bloom 1997, 122). Tsyppkin moves from the solitary search and the fight-to-the-death into a more complex relationship with Dostoevsky, donning the sophisticated mask of the *apophrades*, to whom the dead return and speak in our voice, which comes from the greater persistence of the living than the dead. Such persistence is also reflected in Tsyppkin's prose: long looping sentences, a text that is not broken into sections, where every nuance is noted; the writing evinces a fascination in search of a suitable form that it never seems to find, a search – for the soul of Dostoevsky – that never comes to an end. Mikhail Tsyppkin, the author's son, wrote about his father as follows:

My father craved every opportunity to write, but writing was difficult, painful. He agonized over each word, and endlessly corrected his handwritten manuscripts. Once finished with editing, he typed his prose on an ancient, shiny German typewriter, an Erika – Second World War loot that an uncle gave him in 1949. And in that form his writings remained. He did not send his manuscripts to publishers, and did not want to circulate his prose in *samizdat* because he was afraid of problems with the KGB and of losing his job. (2013, xvi–xvii).

Versions of these manuscripts, with revisions, his working library (biographies and studies of Dostoevsky's work) with handwritten notes by Tsyppkin, photographs, maps, postcards, catalogues and leaflets from the Dostoevsky Museum between 1959 and 1975, each with careful notes taken on the back: all of these materials are available in the Manuscripts Division at Stanford University. These documents disclose the way Tsyppkin worked, and show how his fascination with Dostoevsky turned into an obsession, how the experimental laboratory method of the pathologist was applied in the

literary research required for writing a novel. Tsyarkin's attention to detail is evident in both areas of work.

Tsyarkin began writing the novel in 1977. He had just defended his second thesis in pathology, and had been demoted at work because his son and daughter-in-law had gone into exile in the United States. Tsyarkin had travelled to Leningrad in 1975, which is when he took the photographs of the places associated with Dostoevsky and the setting of his novels, Sennaya Square (the Hay Market) and surroundings. These photographs framed the lecture Tsyarkin gave at the Dostoevsky Museum in November 1979, entitled 'Po mestam Dostoevskogo v Petersbruge/Dostoevsky in Petersburg'. In this regard, a number of critics have compared Tsyarkin to W. G. Sebald: story-telling as a wandering visit including photographs of the places visited imbue fiction with a kind of truth, the truth of the visible. Photographs taken to enable the imagination to re-create the place show how the mind may travel in time from Leningrad to St. Petersburg, from the Soviet world back into the century before.

The photographs may ground the story in the truth. To Susan Sontag, *Summer in Baden-Baden* is not, like J. M. Coetzee's wonderful *The Master of Petersburg*, a Dostoevsky fantasy. Neither is it a docu-novel, although it was a matter of honor for Tsyarkin that everything of a factual nature in *Summer in Baden-Baden* be true to the story and circumstances of the real lives it evokes. Tsyarkin may have imagined that if *Summer in Baden-Baden* were published as a book it should include some of the photographs he had taken, thereby anticipating the signature effect of the work of W. G. Sebald, who, by seeding his books with photographs, infuses the plainest idea of verisimilitude with enigma and pathos (Sontag 2013, xvii–xviii).

Nonetheless, Tsyarkin is not Sebald; the photographs do not grant his novel greater verisimilitude: they are like his readings and his wandering, clues in his pursuit of Dostoevsky.

Tsyarkin found the truth of the facts and events, the meetings and scenes he retells in the biographies of Dostoevsky; the truth of his fascination with Dostoevsky is in his pursuit of the author, in his fiction, which the photographs in the book, like the notes he wrote in his library sources, are further traces.

### **J. M. Coetzee, the Master of Petersburg, 1994**

The Coetzee interest on Dostoevsky started early. In 1988, he published an essay, 'Confession and Double Thoughts, comparing Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Years later he recognized the importance of this essay in his thinking:

In the terms brought into prominence in the essay, the debate is between cynism and grace. Cynism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness. The debate is staged by Dostoevsky [in *Devils*]; the interlocutors are called Stavrogin and Tikhon. (Coetzee 1992, 391).

In *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee delves into the dialogue with Stavrogin, Tikhon and Dostoevsky when the Russian writer wrote *The Possessed* (Adelman 1999–2000). The novel retells the writing of an originally censored chapter of the *Possessed*, 'At Tikhon's' or 'Stavrogin's Confession' in which Stavrogin confesses that he has raped a child and failed to intervene in her suicide. Coetzee, like Tsyarkin, introduces a

fictional Dostoevsky, but Coetzee's approach to Dostoevsky is different to Tsyarkin's: Dostoevsky is a character in Coetzee's novel, the master in the title. The novel starts out from a fictional event: Dostoevsky's return to St Petersburg in October 1869 to bury his stepson (Pavel), while his new wife remains behind in Dresden; Dostoevsky has begun work on *The Possessed*. The novel is built around people and places, a plot and twists that may recall Dostoevsky but its intersexuality is a pretext for confronting the writer with moral dilemmas, occasions for reflection on the relationship between life and writing, and especially the debate between grace and cynicism.

The novel comprises twenty chapters, and the opening section evokes the beginning of *The Idiot*. An omniscient narrator recounts the return of a middle-aged man to St Petersburg:

Petersburg, 1869. A droshky passes slowly down a Street in the Haymarket district of St. Petersburg. Before a tall tenement building the driver reins in his horse.

His passenger regards the building dubiously. 'Are you sure this is the place?' He asks.

'Sixty-three Svechnoi Street, that's what you said'.

The passenger steps out. He is a man in late middle age, bearded and stooped, with a high forehead and heavy eyebrows that lend him an air of sober self-absorption. He wears a dark suit of somewhat *démodé* cut (Coetzee 1997, 1).

The character's name is not given, but the title and the description suggest he may be Dostoevsky. From the very beginning, Coetzee is Dostoyevskan in his approach. Here are the opening lines to *Crime and Punishment*:

On an exceptionally hot evening early in July a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. Place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. bridge (Dostoevsky 1865–1866, 13).

And the first paragraph of *The Idiot*:

Towards the end of November, during a thaw, at nine o'clock one morning, a train on the Warsaw and Petersburg railway was approaching the latter city at full speed. The morning was so damp and misty that it was only with great difficulty that the day succeeded in breaking; and it was impossible to distinguish anything more than a few yards away from the carriage windows. (Dostoevsky 1868, 11)

The city, St. Petersburg, becomes a main player in the story, as it is in *Crime and Punishment* and *White Nights*. The character in *The Master of Petersburg* is making his way to the house where his stepson had lived. The house belongs to a young widow, Anna Sergeyevna, who lives there with her daughter, Matryona. Both go with him to the cemetery where the young man is buried. Coetzee then presents the young widow as a temptation to whom Dostoevsky will succumb, and brings the character face to face with his own image of himself, which gradually crumbles:

I am behaving like a character in a book, he thinks. But even jeering at himself does not help. His shoulders heave. Soundlessly he begins to cry.

In a book, the woman would respond to his grief with a surge of pity. This woman does not. She sits at the table in the flickering light, her head averted, her sewing in her lap. It is late, there is no one to see them, the child is sleeping.

Damn the heart, he tells himself! Damn this emotionalism. The touchstone is not the heart and how the heart feels, but death and how the dead boy feels!

At this moment the clearest vision comes to him (1997, 27–28).

For Lawlan (1998, 139–141), the novel has an intertext in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground Man*. This intertext, as she analyzed, is linked with the idea of the novel as a secular confession. For Kossew, *The Possessed* is the central novel in which Coetzee was inspired (Kossew, 1996, 79). *The Master of Petersburg* contains Dostoevsky's confession, but according to Lawlan it is 'a novel about the guilt and the desire of grace –confession, absolution, and an end to guilt. This sense of guilt is not limited to Fyodor, but extends to Coetzee himself' (1998, 149). The character in the novel, like the historical Dostoevsky depicted in biographies, lives between his life and writing. *The Master of Petersburg* is set at the time when Dostoevsky was beginning work on *The Possessed*. Joseph Frank points out that any distinction between the external facts of Dostoevsky's life at that time and his writing would be artificial:

Here we shall follow the course of Dostoevsky's life, both the external events and the inner accumulation of impressions, up to and slightly beyond the time at which the composition of the novel was begun. Such a separation, though, is quite artificial, and we can constantly observe the interweaving of his specifically creative labors with the routine events of his day-to-day existence (1995, 241).

Coetzee's character is on the horns of a dilemma, torn between the morality and immorality of his thoughts and actions. In Coetzee's view, Dostoevsky's writing is determined by his moral concerns. In his review of the fourth volume of Frank's biography, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*, Coetzee notes:

But implicit in Frank's account is what Bakhtin leaves out: that to the degree that Dostoevskian dialogism grows out of Dostoevsky's own moral character, out of his ideas, and out of his being as a writer, it is only distantly imitable (2001, 125).

Insofar as *The Master of Petersburg* is intended to imitate Dostoevsky on his own terms the novel is a polyphonic narrative in which the narrator does not have the last word, he is not a judge. The moral dimension of character is at the heart of the psychological portrait Coetzee paints and, in part, the narrative structure of the novel. He depicts a character whose amorality the reader, like the writer himself, gradually discovers. Only writing forces Dostoevsky the writer to reveal his perversion, to see himself as he really is. *The Master of Petersburg* presents the man as a writer, although the character does not write anything until the last chapter of the novel, 'Stavrogin', which contains a section that Dostoevsky later had to omit from *The Possessed*:

It takes him no more than ten minutes to write the scene, with not a word blotted. In a final version it would have to be fuller, but for present purpose this is enough. He gets up, leaving the two pages open on the table.

It is an assault upon the innocence of a child. It is an act for which he can expect no forgiveness. With it he has crossed the threshold. Now God must speak, now God dare no longer remain silent. (...) The device he has made arches and springs shut like a trap, a trap to catch God.

He knows what he is doing. At the same time, in his contest of cunning between himself and God, he is outside of himself, perhaps outside his soul. (...). And time stands still and watches too. Time is suspended, everything is suspended before the fall.

*I have lost my place in my soul*, he thinks.

Coetzee frames the limits of writing and confession in those terms. In Dostoevsky's work, innocent, pure beings are a touchstone in the face of perversion. Here, the fictional Dostoevsky encounters his own fiction, but above all his life and writing and Coetzee own encounters too. The novel 'is a case of one artist confiding in another, enclosing his creativity in the creativity of another (Attwell 2013, 31)'. Critics have read this novel as the Coetzee's author's justification of his stance in relation to the dichotomy of acting or remaining silent in revolutionary times (Frank 2010, 203) or the Coetzee's deconstruction of Dostoevsky's reception in English modernism (Reichmann 2016, 139); but the heart of Coetzee's project is closed to the sense of guilt and the desire for grace (Lawlan 1998, 149), for Attwell an uncommanded grief is in the origin and in the center of the novel (Attwell 2013, 41) and for Attridge the novel 'doesn't speak to us of South Africa, but it speaks the role of literature, of art' (2004, 133). Dostoevsky's story brings up to Coetzee the possibility of transformed life (grief too) in art. Coetzee knows that Dostoevsky is amenable to only pale imitation; he knows, like the writer he depicts in this novel, that one must give up one's soul in order to write. At the end, the novel is about confession or the possibility of redemption through art.

### ***Conclusion: The shadow of Dostoevsky in Tsyppkin and Coetzee, similarities and dissimilarities***

Bloom draws a distinction between writers who invent their precursors, such as Borges with Kafka and Browning, and those he refers to as positive *apophrades*, where influences goes beyond imitation; it is so strong that the dead return and speak through the living: 'the mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own' (1997, 14). If we see Dostoevsky's influence as driving the writing of the books by Coetzee and Tsyppkin, both present a Dostoevsky who speaks through their fascination or obsession. Coetzee traces the enigma of Dostoevsky, his life and writing. Dostoevsky is a precursor for both Coetzee and Tsyppkin, perhaps the precursor who has had greatest influence on them. Their relationship with Dostoevsky encompasses mythification, the stages of influence or rejection or defense which Bloom uses to define 'strong poets'. Coetzee and Tsyppkin are *apophrades*; Dostoevsky is given his own voice in both books; and both writers look at one of the darkest moments in his life, when he still persevered in his work.

Both books endeavor to depict Dostoevsky's character, the myth of his tormented soul, the epilepsy that shadowed his auras of lucidity, the revelation of his own personality, the writer at the mercy of his passions made in Dostoevsky's image and likeness, articulated in dialogic terms where the voice of the narrator makes itself heard so as to show the reader the character's consciousness (in Coetzee's novel) or the evolution of his consciousness (in Tsyppkin's book). The form and prose of Tsyppkin's book evince how a fascination with Dostoevsky is to circle an enigma. Writing, the means by which he tries to account for this fascination, becomes a journey into uncertainty, rather than towards greater certainty.

Reality and fiction become entangled in one another in both books, a characteristic feature of novels written at the end of the twentieth century, and of what is

commonly referred to as postmodernism. Biographical facts are turned into fiction, and fiction takes on the status of truth. Both books show how Dostoevsky's imagination could go on writing new novels through times of trouble and crises of conscience, as well as the forms he looked to in doing so. Coetzee and Tsygkin move beyond the myth to re-imagine Dostoevsky's life and writing as reflected in biographies about him: they move from the work and the sources to his life and the practice of writing, in *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*. To reduce a character to his consciousness may be a kind of psychologism; and sources of inspiration may not be so important as the finished work. The books by Coetzee and Tsygkin are not historical novels; they provide a strong fictionalization of an historical author.

Both books may be described as Dostoyevskan in the second sense outlined by Karlinsky, insofar as they are concerned with psychological processes: in this case, the process of writing. Both writers create a sense of themselves based on Dostoevsky's novels, where writing (rather than life) is the space in which they may develop their vision of the world and human nature.

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