Originally appeared in The Quarterly Conversation: Issue 32

Leonard Tsypkin's short and frenetic *Summer in Baden-Baden* is a meditation on the morphic and self-defining nature of memory. Tsypkin portrays the sometimes charming but mostly distressing European travels of Fyodor (Fedya) Dostoyevsky and his second wife, Anna Grigor'yevna, and their descent into a woeful situation brought about by the famous author's gambling habit. Dostoyevsky's deep-seated insecurities and epileptic seizures are the specters that haunt him throughout the book. In a parallel portion of the story Tsypkin also recounts his own travels to Leningrad to visit the former locations, real and fictional, inhabited by the literary giant.

On first glance, the reader notices a steady block of text punctuated throughout with an unconventional number of dashes: these link the many fragments and clauses that allow Tsypkin to begin submerging his reader into a steady pace and tone right from the beginning. After telling you he is on a train heading to Leningrad, Tsypkin eschews a contextual setup reminiscent of traditional historical narratives, and instead surrounds the reader with a stream of words and vivid imagery:

—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—each snow-veiled suburban platform with its fleeting row of lamps melting into one fiery ribbon—the dull drone of a station rushing past, as if the train were roaring over a bridge—the sound muffled by the double-glazed windows with frames not quite hermetically sealed into fogged-up, half-frozen panes of glass—

He continues to describe the sensations of sitting on a train car in winter, fused with things that *flash* and *burn*, *pierce, dissipate*, *etch*; the car violently sways, darkness and *hazy whiteness*, and already in the first half of his introductory paragraph, the reader is engaged not only in the formal structure of the text itself but a movement and imagery that will become the very material of his characters' vivid and sometimes, in the case of his main character, unhinged mental landscapes. His long sentences stretch out, often the length of a paragraph; snatches of dialogue, memories (both the author's and his characters'), and descriptions blend into the flow of narrative. This visible intimidation of form, as Susan Sontag points out in the book's introduction, may not be foreign to readers of Thomas Bernhard and Jose Saramago, though in fact Tsypkin would not have been aware of their work.

And indeed Tsypkin too is writing out of a Russian/European postwar era of oppression and misfired ideals. He chooses to illustrate this perspective in his conversations with a family friend, affectionately called Gilya, an elderly woman he has known since childhood, in which she shares her experiences of the Leningrad Blockade and also the governmental arrests of several friends. This space in the story serves to establish a historical thread, from the 19th century travails of the Dostoyevskys, to the horrors of the 20th century, and, as we are informed by the introduction, to the bureaucratic nightmare suffered by the Tsypkin family. By including this larger history, Tsypkin draws parallels in humility and suffering. One wonders if he

is subversively commenting on governments that grind up their own people, and, furthermore, what stands to be the consequences of those actions—specifically the shame Fedya feels and reacts to projected onto a whole culture.

This cause and effect is the motion that propels the story along. Fedya's treatment of his wife, fellow authors, and people with whom he has contact are the unfortunate consequences. An encounter with a discourteous waiter ("villains—the embodiment of the basest features of human nature") who chooses to serve a late-arriving military officer first at a restaurant in Dresden brings out the temper and easily wounded pride of Fedya, a moment that reveals to us a painful memory of imprisonment and humiliation. In a classic response of the insecure, Fedya then projects by insulting his supportive wife on the way home, showing his capacity to irrationally lash out, which then leads to guilt and his later attempts to regain control:

-because she was his and within his power was her happiness or misery—his awareness of total power of this ingénue, playing with her at will, was probably like the feeling which I have towards sleek young dogs who, at the sight of a hand stretched out for a stroke, wag their tails in a nervous, pleading way, flatten themselves against the ground and begin to tremble—

Fedya does not seem to be so much motivated or willfully acting as prodded and pushed along by the need to overcome deeply entrenched humiliation, caused in one instance at the hands of a prison commandant. This memory inappropriately surfaces during love-making, or as Tsypkin refers to it, swimming, in the form of a birch-rod beating, "as if someone tightened a red-hot wire across his muscles and bones." The commandant's face appears later in Fedya's viewing of a painting in the museum, then in the military officer at the restaurant, and yet again in a window at the museum, smiling "contemptuously, and his fat, fleshy hand rakishly smoothed his moustache in a gesture of victory." A final time the face appears in the painting, when Dostoyevsky attempts to define and control his feelings by defiantly standing upon a museum chair a second time, and he is able to visualize himself as conqueror over his tormentor. His wounded pride at the hands of the many personalities and egos found in the writing profession make room for a degree of empathy to enter, despite his erratic behavior and prejudice (his dislike for Germans is made clear on several occasions, and his anti-Semitism becomes a personal point of contention for the author later in the text). In this way, Tsypkin examines an author he holds in esteem.

Tsypkin's telling of the story relies on the historical record; his years of meticulous research into the life of Dostoyevsky and the use of Anne Grigor'yevna's journal (which makes an appearance in the novel) lends him the platform from which to project his speculations. Because of this grounding, the dream-like and surreal aspects of the novel seem to overlap reality, often appearing to be the natural, albeit claustrophobic, space of the world we are participating in. His recounting of his own travels through the Russia of the time, with its repetitious rows of street lamps and squeaking trams, frosty mist, the blue sports-bags with hockey-sticks belonging to the Moscow "Dynamo," serves as more than a straightforward report of the cityscape: when some of these elements are repeated multiple times, they take on a hazy duality, as if loaded symbols hovering simultaneously in a parallel dimension. He also includes

details that match our Western perspective of the Cold War Russia—in describing his approach to Gilya's building: "I went in the familiar, dilapidated entrance where there was always a smell of cats and the stone floor was strewn with broken glass from bottles finished off by a 'troika' of drinkers . . . " and further, " . . . began climbing to the second floor up a steep, stone staircase with worn and broken steps, dimly lit by one or two electric lightbulbs . . . " It is a believable space, but has an ominous and grey atmosphere, like certain memories or dreams that we usually want to forget.

The book concludes with Tsypkin's visit to the museum that was the final home of Dostoyevsky. In these last twenty pages he makes use of the objects in the museum to move from the present where "churchlike silence" is sporadically interrupted by the familiar noises of visitors and docents, to the somewhat hectic and sad end of the author's life. Tsypkin mentions an old umbrella and hat, then photos, which he uses to fill us in on the two children Fedya and Anna Grigor'yevna conceived. He walks through rooms and past desks, and finally the bookcase that may have caused the ultimate harm. The final scenes between the couple are true to form as prescribed by their relationship: spurts of intensity, his ability to become angry during a bit of work, her hoping it is all just another "episode" that he will recover from, holding and kissing of hands. As he has throughout, Tsypkin stays away from being sentimental but simply shows his characters as they have always been, forces in each other's gravitational pull. Ho contrasts the outwardness of Dostoyevsky's mortality with his internal perception of sinking and climbing, floating on "invisible wings" and perhaps religious revelation. Tsypkin brings the ultimate question to the table: Why? This question raises Summer *in Baden-Baden* up out of the realm of fiction and into philosophy. He is asking a question about art and admiration versus politics and religion, when for many they are one and the same:

—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)?—

As he wonders about the guilt he feels in approaching his subject, we can only speculate at his answer. It is a private question and it is admirable of the author for asking himself openly in the form of this book. He has written a novel that portrays personal and national tragedy quietly and intimately. The strength of this small book is derived from that intimacy, those connections and threads of the interior world we each inhabit, and often jealously guard.