Book review

SUMMER IN BADEN-BADEN
LEONID TSYPKIN
TRANSLATED BY
ROGER AND ANGELA KEYS
Hamish Hamilton, 2005
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The enchanted strip of Europe from the Upper Rhine to Switzerland is haunted by literary ghosts. Some of them have Russian accents. Waiting for the bus in Geneva a while ago, I was startled to find Dostoevsky's name on a plaque discreetly affixed, just above eye level, to the wall of an apartment near the Anglican Church. The Old Gallery in Basel still has the remarkable painting by Holbein of the battered body of Christ in the sepulchre which spurred the Russian novelist into one of his most tremendous passages in *The Idiot*. Further down the Rhine, at Baden-Baden, are the spas and gaming tables where, in the summer of 1867, Dostoevsky famously met his rival Turgenev and nearly ruined himself, cadging and pawning his wife Anna's valuables so that he could go back to the scene of brief triumph and longer humiliations at the gaming tables and lose even more money. Dostoevsky ('Fedya') was most truly addicted to the exquisite pleasures of losing — 'that exhilarating sensation of falling which made him feel superior to the surrounding world and even somewhat pitying towards his fellow men.'

Dostoevsky is a writer who obsesses his readers, but few of them have been as obsessed with every aspect of his life and work as Leonid Tsypkin. Tsypkin was a distinguished immunopathologist and researcher at the Institute of Poliomyelitis and Viral Encephalitis in Moscow who published more than a hundred papers in the Soviet Union and abroad. The first instalment of *Summer in Baden-Baden*, his only major publication, first appeared in an émigré newspaper in New York a week before its author's death, on his 56th birthday, in March 1982. Having only barely survived the invading Germans in the war, and Stalin's anti-Semitic purges thereafter, Tsypkin, it seems, had decided to live in total literary obscurity. Censorship and political intimidations, however, are only part of the story. As Susan Sontag writes in her introduction, Tsypkin 'remained — out of pride, intractable gloom, unwillingness to risk being rejected by the unofficial literary establishment — wholly outside the independent or underground literary circles that flourished in Moscow in the 1960s and 1970s, the era when he was writing 'for the drawer.' While Tsypkin, a Soviet Jew, was writing this novel of adoration he was also applying for an exit visa to leave the Soviet Union.

Tsypkin's book, then, is about literature (specifically Russian literature) as a paradise, and the snakes that wind through the undergrowth of all paradises. It is perhaps less a novel, than an act of intense identification and empathy: this is Dostoevsky from the inside-out. Tsypkin's painstaking, sinuous, paragraph-long sentences use punctuation more as breath pauses than for strictly grammatical reasons. Tsypkin may be a littérateur, condemned to write about the already written, but he does it with the same punctilio as the late WG Sebald: his act of homage is really a romance, in a specifically critical sense. Tsypkin dovetails the contemporary and the biographical: the narrator, a Russian intellectual travelling to Leningrad on a train in the 1960s, begins to read the reminiscences of Anna Grigor'yevna, Dostoevsky's second wife and stenographer, on their life together at the beginning of the period of his great writings, in 1867 — what his biographer Joseph Frank has called 'The Miraculous Years'. The diary has been borrowed from a relative, a copy rebound from tattered remnants that he has 'no intention of returning'. It soon emerges that he has read it so often he knows it by heart. The reader of Dostoevsky, the writer of this fantasia, is also Anna, his lover and wife.

Not that Fedya was an easy or even attractive man to live with. His debauches in the gambling halls allowed him to abase himself at his wife's feet, 'more often than not falling down on his knees before her, calling her an angel, begging her to forgive him for making her unhappy'. Anna invariably forgives him, but does think it 'odd that such a serious and clever man as her husband could cry'. She clings to his genius as to a 'mast', a nicely nautical image which rears above the repeated imagery of their love-making, which has them mystically swimming away together into the 'unknown, deep blue distance'. Memories of his period in the prison camps and his humiliation at the hands of the Saint-Petersburg literary crowd come back to torment him, as he ascends in his fantasy to a mental Crystal Palace. Like Anna, the author can forgive Fedya everything except one thing, the great wrong which blights Dostoevsky's moral life. 'It struck me as being strange to the point of implausibility', writes Tsypkin, 'that a man so sensitive in his novels to the suffering of others, this jealous defender of the insulted and the injured who fervently and even frenetically preached the right to exist of every earthly creature and sang a passionate hymn to each little leaf and every blade of grass — that this man should have not come up with a single word in defence or justification of a people persecuted over several thousands of years—could he have been so blind? Or was he blinded by hatred?' Tsypkin's act of adoration is also a reproach, for he himself was living through a totalitarian system that still promised to overcome the market system that had, in his time, so appalled and fascinated Dostoevsky. Which suggests Tsypkin wasn't just writing for the drawer. He was going one further in the paradoxes of imitated uniqueness than his hero. His was a form of suffering unfamiliar even to Dostoevsky: anonymity.

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