Convinced by Fiction, Convinced by History: Three Novels (2008)

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Rereading J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) because I don't quite trust my memory and its inventions, I find myself on the track of what I mean when I say that history in fiction must convince me, finding in a Haymarket rooming house, a police station, children in the street, or a "madness ... running through the artery of his right arm down to the fingertips and the pen," many Dostoevskys here settled in a familiar one who "on the heels of remorse" has a "voluptuous urge to confess." Only somewhat like the Dostoevsky in another book I've recently read for the first glorious time, Leonid Tsypkin's *Summer at Baden-Baden* (1981), indeed with such a difference that I wonder if I do have a key to this particular convincingness I'd like to pin down, that I seek and find in both books, as indeed I write in the shadow of my *bête noir* of making things more complicated, a dream I've just woken from at daybreak on a Sunday.

It must convince me. But convince me of what -- this novel that visits and invents another time we already know about? Though nowadays the past is often not so much slipping out of memory as for most American citizens never having much been there in the first place. So readers are glad of a good read and our shared past and a tale that builds, like *Cold Mountain*. Facts set moving with made-up talk and behaviors either of persons nowhere to be actually found in the chronicles establishing the era and events the novel recalls, or of persons who actually existed -- for me I confess an uncomfortable liability, too easy to do -- like the famous in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* Polo Grounds -- and with an effect on the authority of the narrative I must question, remembering at random Thomas Bernhard's imaginary Glen Gould in *The Loser*.

I recall pleading an imaginative centrality of science in conversation with John Barth thirty years ago, who retorted, "What about history!" Indeed. Yet the particular kind of fiction I have in mind here is quietly to one side of Barth's transporting work of parody, *The Sot Weed Factor,* or Thomas Pynchon's poignant contemplation, *Mason and Dixon,* often droll-ly anachronistic. Perhaps it's our era (a history we can't help being *in*) that says history is whatever we say it is -- a fiction without limit -- but for the willing reader too (and all to the good that we still read). I have to say the Rosenbergs' Times Square execution never got to me in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, notwithstanding the epidemic truth at large through that collossal explosion of political psycho-fantasy. Historical figures in a made-up setting, it's probably not history in fiction Coover is writing so much as satire, which granted becomes part of the "history" of American writing.

Quicksand beckons me trying to find a corner of imagination for a novel whose ground is a history intersection, its mind not brio of invention but, on the one hand, contained inside a factual spirit while, on the other, acknowledging how it got there. To be convinced by the turn of both these aspects upon each other.

This kind recommends itself in three books I've recently, almost by accident, read or reread for quite other reasons -- only now to lump together as if an authority more august than what our brains do casually all the time had deemed these a threefold demonstration of the limits and chances for imagination in the novel's more modest slant into or embrace of history: the two Dostoevsky books, and yet another writer's book out of my apparently random reading and arbitrary choosing, Ford Madox Ford's 1905 novel about Katherine Howard, *The Fifth Queen*, and, through her, most curiously about Henry VIII.

Coetzee and Tsypkin hand us Dostoevsky in transit, driven, weighed down, combative, manipulative, pious, sleazy, unstable, guilty, at risk, a living experiment, a character ingeniously persistent, perhaps plausibly a genius, palpably a man, needing women (but for what?). Summoned back to Russia from Germany on the occasion of his step-son's suspicious suicide, and traveling necessarily incognito, Coetzee's Dostoevsky unfolds unexpected step by step Pavel's life, stepping into that life and the cloaked circumstances of his death. Thus to unfold the seeker in his grief and tough self-interest who "[refuses] to accept limits to what he is permitted to know," Coetzee sometimes as heavy-handedly as his arbitrary ventures into his protagonist's mind waking and asleep, parallels with this partly invented life moments from the novelist's fiction, which, as actual text, happens to be a fact of literary history.

A perilous climax affords Coetzee what may have been in part a pretext for writing the book: a chance to stage a debate and showdown between the notorious and masterful anarchist S.G. Nechaev (1847-82) and our former revolutionary now (as Coetzee puts it in an essay) a "great Christian philosopher" who, having "lived through the debates of his day with the intensity of an intelligentsia held down under censorship, ... [had] [a] capacity to push ... to its limits [the] ... analysis of ... self [and] soul ... greater than in a purely secular thinker like Freud." Coetzee's sober, thrifty prose can't quite touch the Russian sensibility except point to it. This helps him, however, to seem to document the clandestine, but not implausible errand of 1869 together with a number of other fabrications.

Coetzee might even be said to compound the use of "history" invented in the substantial gap of our knowledge of Dostoevsky's time in Germany. For it is *The Possessed* that his Dostoevsky sits down to write when he returns to Dresden: that is to say, out of the overwhelming experience in Petersburg which, like Pavel's rescued diary, is made up by Coetzee, but which we are asked to accept in detail as the material inspiration for Dostoevsky's actual novel. Adroit, of course; and yet to

be reckoned with, as I grope further to grasp what it is that might convince me in this kind of novel. The verifiable historical situation, let us say, into which imagination folds or plants a potential like the human potential the actual situation itself possessed. Maybe this means no more than intelligent, dynamic characters – "of more than ordinary worth and interest," in James's phrase more blunt than we give him credit for. But no, I mean an original exchange between impersonal forces, even in Nietzsche's sense, brought to bear upon a chaotic mystery of choices personally constituting at its most interesting everyday life *itself* as experimental.

You are in mourning for yourself, Anna Sergeyeva diagnoses Coetzee's Dostoevsky returned from Russia. Leave it to her to say it all, when given the chance. Though the young wife Anna of Tsypkin's *Summer in Baden-Baden* between dictating sessions and the perpetual carryings-on of her impossible husband must understand him in another atmosphere entirely. Tsypkin's novel, itself a docu-miracle rescued out of the late Stalin period, turns even more complexly upon what is and is not made up. Indeed, what is imagined only partly out of Anna's actual published memoir by the narrative presence Tsypkin's astonishing style and devotion to his subject and the novels conjures from inside and outside with his own first person and the slippery immersion of it in a third-person history of fourteen years of the Dostoevskys abroad, a post-modern reciprocity of multiple loci.

Baden-Baden, though, for the gambling; for the endless humiliations, pawnings, money-worries; for the boarding house world, the social nuances and snobberies, Dostoevsky's envy of other writers -- the who's best debate, his anti-semitism puzzled over by the narrator, himself not alone among Jews who have loved Dostoevsky's work; the sometimes absurd helter-skelter comedy of eccentric habits in museums and restaurants and on the street, somehow so much more intimate than Coetzee's grim limiting of what even his contradictory and dynamic Dostoevsky can choose to be. Is it how I would like to write (or do write), this rapid mass (mass transiting) of brimming impressions never quite off track or out of focus? -- merging with the person-in-progress and his often violent work like the answer to every pedestrian literary biography I ever read. Even to, like Nabokov in many of his passages about the imagination finding its exact, luminous shadow somewhere between the large and the small, frank hints of how Dostoevsky looking at a painting absorbs an image for future use – "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" (which reminds me that this deprived and very part-time novelist Tsypkin, his health and so much else at stake, untimely dead, who never saw a word of his published nor expected to, was a full-time medical researcher). The imagination and even science of knowing somehow build a whole

person who finds himself.

The abiding gamble of the life, the temperament -- to persist in your own being or gift embracing the impulse you are seized by -- brings elements organically together as if you committed your power to forces beyond your control in order that they might take you where you can go. The history is social, the names we know (Goncharov, Turgenev, et al) venally passing in the many turns, accelerations, and locomotions of the prose, the opinions, the breath and precarious life undeniably of this master hardly giving a thought to the death ahead soon to be enacted with the extended agony and authority for which Tsypkin finds room in all his resources, no less a lightness, not least this accurate tourist's later visit to a deserted Petersburg museum, once (or still) the house where Dostoevsky died typically, we learn, at that moment full of people.

Three books, I said, three writer's books. Where writing is rendering to the reader what is the reader's, and is thinking, and thought not only life's slave (Hotspur) or a waiting sickness (Hamlet), but in its evolution what History ultimately *means* (R.G. Collingwood), i.e., History is the history of thought. But wait. I said "three"? How's *The Fifth Queen* a writer's book?

Only listen to King Henry the rhetorician readying in his head a speech with which on his return home to greet his clever, beautiful Kat. Proud of his style, like an American novelist, and of her for her mind, her unmatched classical learning (but beware her Plutarch), her written or spoken words – "'I have had better converse with thee,'" says he, "'than with man or child this several years. Thinkest thou I will let thee go?'" Indeed, *yes*, she does -- foresees it early on, and will say so, this passionate Roman Catholic woman who would gladly retreat to a convent and who may lose her way in the treacheries around her but knows herself not slenderly like the king; for, court wit and love aside, in this minefield of spies and ecclesiastical politics -- from a relenting royal letter written but not yet sent to the Pope, to Privy Seal's little Tom Delay book of political debts, to messages that may turn treasonable -- words seem everywhere a dark liability as well as a pleasure, and Henry's illegitimate daughter Mary angrily closeted writing her commentary on Plautus will witheringly call "every woman's part" what we see everywhere yet ultimately at a crux of history the new Queen in a final speech to her husband refuse: i.e. "to gloss over crimes of their men folk." For Katherine is "too proud to fight the world with the world's weapons," use her power to save her skin with words written and spoken. She makes her choice, again with words in a long and matchless speech which is to force Henry to act out the meaning of his slippery, feckless, temporizing, and unstable positions and do away with her.

The riveting story I leave to the reader, the structure of scenes and play of comedy against the hard, breathtaking intricacy of the drama. Ford's language is convincingly early sixteenth century-Edwardian, as unfussed with as rich. The production a virtual theater everywhere in the depiction of rooms, hallways, exits, entrances, roles; a mention of *Menechmi*, but pivotally an Italian Interlude written by the contemporary classical scholar-teacher, Nicholas Udall, an important and sleazy player in the machinations of the romance and the author of the first English comedy; Shakespeare echoing often in Mousetrap and turns of phrase and plot from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, more. All the prose so fully sensed, thought, true, acute as a "banner ...all red and white against a blue sky" where "in a gust it cracked like a huge whip" that the shifting portrait of the king might seem only one more coup to relish. Set twenty-five years before the birth of Shakespeare, Ford's novel seems to have made good a Shakespeare (or Shakespeare-and-Fletcher) late-period failure with its own Henry VIII, his stagey, charming, vain failure and presence in conjunction with his steadfast queen as fully exposed as perhaps only the later form could manage in the modernist hand of Ford's own invisible presence nonetheless opening to the winds of interpretation, as Jameson says, among other things that history is "what hurts."

Distant I do not deny from that undoubted and sometimes clumsy comi-tragic dramatist Dostoevsky, but in its tensions making congruent a literary means (and culture) with a painful, unavoidable history. As everything at stake in Tsypkin holds us inside an elapsing time that presses passion, intelligence, risk, and the experiment of our lives upon us. For the surely overstressed etymology of "peril" in "experimental" -- by now a virtually meaningless literary term -- may at least remind us, as Coetzee and Tsypkin and Ford do, of what is truly in the balance. Yes, one might write about a writer, if we see our lives as an infinitely divided narrative of choices haunting us to make the most interesting ones: in which case a writer ideally might be close to that action, living it, recording it, making it up out of what we know.