

## The Assistant and Co-Author of Fyodor Dostoevsky\*

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(Received: 11 June 2016; accepted: 25 August 2016)

**Abstract:** The paper presents the results of a comprehensive study on Anna Dostoevskaja's role in the creative process of Fyodor Dostoevsky. She was not only the wife of the great writer but a professional shorthand writer and a copyist as well. At the time of writing his novel *The Gambler*, Dostoevsky and his assistant worked out a model of creativity in which priority was given to stenographic writing that could trace and fix the writer's exciting ideas. During the subsequent work on his literary writings including e.g. *The Great Pentateuch*, this model of the creative process remained unaltered. Dostoevsky's wife was his Muse, co-thinker, interlocutor, the first listener and the first critic of his creations, and the co-author of burlesque verses. Her impressions, stories, and their private conversations were used by Dostoevsky in his literary works. Several years of joint creative work with the brilliant writer developed in his assistant literary skills thanks to which she wrote masterful memoirs that obtained worldwide recognition. Dostoevsky appreciated his wife's contribution to his literary activity thereby dedicating his greatest novel *The Brothers Karamazov* to her.

**Keywords:** Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anna Dostoevskaja, literary activity, shorthand writing, co-authorship

During the history of Russian literature, several writers' and poets' wives used to animate their husbands and contribute to the success of their literary activity, e.g. Natalia Pushkina, Sophia Tolstaja, Elena Bulgakova, Ljubov Blok, Vera Nabokova, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Natalia Solzhenitsyna. Anna Dostoevskaja has a special place among them. This great woman dedicated her entire life to Fyodor Dostoevsky and to remembrance work.

Nowadays, her merits to Russian and world culture are not limited to wide-scale archival, museum, publishing, and bibliographic activities as well as charity work. She was the custodian of Fyodor Dostoevsky's literary heritage as well as his publisher, bookseller, archivist, biographer, editor, textual critic, the author of memoirs, the founder and curator of the parochial school after Fyodor Dostoevsky. To the same extent, the contribution of Anna Dostoevskaja to her husband's creative activity is inestimable. She was not only a professional shorthand writer and a copyist but also the Muse, the co-thinker, interlocutor, the first listener and critic of her husband's literary works, the co-author of his mock verses, in other words, a partner in her husband's literary activity.

\* This research was supported by a grant from the Russian Ministry of Education and Science under the program *Новые источниковедческие и текстологические исследования русской словесности XIX–XX веков* [Innovative research on textual studies in 19th–20th centuries], № 34.1126.

Anna Dostoevskaja (Snitkina in girlhood) belonged to the first generation of Russian women of the 1860s who defended their equality with men regarding the right to work and education. Anna's father Grigory Snitkin was a clerk from Saint Petersburg who was keen on theatre and literature and whose dream was to enable his daughter to get a good education. For a girl of that time, Anna was indeed well-educated. She finished St. Anne's Lutheran school with German as the language of instruction and then the Mariinsky female gymnasium (with the award of an honourable silver medal). Then she attended a one-year pedagogical course of the Department of Physics and Mathematics at the same Mariinsky gymnasium but she had to quit it because it failed to coincide with her aptitudes and she also had to take care of her ill father.

In the spring of 1866, she was admitted to the first Russian course in stenography under the guidance of Professor Pavel Olkhin. Later, it played a key role in Anna's destiny.

A judicial reform implemented in Russia in the mid-1860s introduced the institution of defence attorneys, the jury, and public hearings. In Saint Petersburg newspapers, summaries of court sessions were published. Pavel Olkhin was one of the first persons who realized an urgent need for the participation of shorthand writers in an updated judicial process who could fix a court hearing quickly and accurately. He adapted to Russian Gabelsberger's system of shorthand created in Germany in 1834. According to this system, stenography is divided into three parts: the graphic representation of words (or letter combinations), acronyms and apocopes containing the rules of the combination of basic marks, and the contracted notation of familiar parts of words and hyphaeresis or apocopes, respectively.

Olkhin was certain that shorthand training formed and developed patience, determination, and attention in people, and also accustomed them to apply these qualities in all life situations. Anna Snitkina became Olkhin's best student and the brightest embodiment of these qualities. She intended to make a living as a stenographer.

In October 1866, soon after her father's death, unwilling to depend on her mother, she followed Olkhin's advice to work for Fyodor Dostoevsky who was urgently looking for a shorthand writer. So, in the life of a single and rootless man, a former convict, and a debt-ridden writer there appeared an assistant.

It was the novel *The Gambler* that became the first joint work of the writer and his stenographer. They accomplished a feat: never before in the world literature had anyone created a complete novel in just 26 days, the period during which *The Gambler* was written. Thus, Dostoevsky managed to avoid penalties and the forfeiture of his author's rights he would have incurred under the contract with the publisher Fyodor Stellovsky<sup>1</sup> if the novel had not been handed in by 1 November 1866. In the words of the writer, "shorthand almost halves the time required for

<sup>1</sup> Stellovsky's publishing activities were contradictory. On the one hand, Stellovsky did use to publish the works of Russian composers and writers but, on the other hand, he used to release those works under unfavourable terms choosing the moment when the authors experienced difficulties and were ready to accept any conditions.

writing. So and in no other way I was able to finish 10 printer's sheets for Stellovsky in a month's time; otherwise, I could have hardly written five" (DOSTOEVSKIJ 2005: 144).

"It is an impossible task to write down everything you are thinking about and every writer encounters this problem". One of the ways to overcome this obstacle is "to write as quickly as possible using shorthand, acronyms, symbols, and trying to follow the train of thought" (BARSHT 1994: 125). This is what Dostoevsky attempted to do. Having decided to work with a stenographer, he made some kind of experiment: shorthand used in court proceedings to fix the course of session was an innovatory and uncommon thing in the profession of a writer. Much later, in the years 1907–1909, Leo Tolstoy also engaged a shorthand writer and copyist, Nikolai Gusev. But then shorthand got applied not for doing literary work but to dictate the answers to numerous letters addressed to the writer.

The author of *The Gambler* and his assistant elaborated an empirically-based model of creative activity wherein shorthand played a key role. At nights, he used to write, draw up a plan and draft successive pages of the novel. In the afternoon, he dictated the results to the stenographer. In the evening, she decoded shorthand notes and, in the morning, the writer used to correct the given pages. During the last step of this creative process, Anna was supposed to rewrite the corrected text in accurate calligraphy, almost copperplate handwriting. Thanks to stenography, they could reach high velocity in creation of literary works and, moreover, fix the author's train of thought more precisely. Afterwards, while writing other books, this model of creative activity hardly ever changed. Its alterations concerned particular things. For instance, over the last years of their creative cooperation, the writer made marginal notes addressed to his assistant straight in the text of the manuscript: "Anna, I ask you not to rewrite more than it is marked with this line", "Anna! Have a look at this page!" (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1876: 35).

Later, in 1881, the author's assistant remarked some more specific traits of Dostoevsky's creative predilections: "He preferred absolutely black ink and good heavy paper"; "There was nothing more difficult for him than to start writing"; "When he dictated, he used to say 'in the following line', 'colloquial', 'non-colloquial'. He liked interrogation and exclamation marks to be put as close to a word as possible, strongly next to the word... and he always insisted on doing like that"; "He liked being listened to carefully while reading his manuscript and he got angry if people were doing something else simultaneously. The faintest gesture irritated and disturbed him" (BELOV 1988: 168–176).

With the participation of the stenographer, the creative process of Dostoevsky became "interlocutory": she was his interlocutor, he addressed his words to her, and verified his doubts and decisions by her reaction. He could not work alone any more, without his wife and actually without his family. It was "an unnatural state for him and it made him suffer" (VOLGIN 1986: 327). "Working with Fyodor Mikhailovich", as his spouse recalled, "was always a pleasure for me, and I was extremely proud of rendering assistance to him and of being the first reader who could hear the writings straight from the author" (DOSTOEVSKAJA 2015: 322).

“To Anna in memory of how we have been composing the works and what we have ended up with”, such a comic inscription was made by Dostoevsky on the title page of the third volume of his *Complete works* (1865) (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1866: 1). They ended up with getting married on 15 February 1867. Two months after their wedding, the Dostoevskys left Russia for more than four years (until July 1871).

As their daughter Ljubov Fyodorovna pointed out in her memoirs, “Dostoevsky would not have written so many novels if his wife had not come up with the bright idea to study stenography” (DOSTOEVSKAJA 1922: 82). During the time of their marriage (from 1866 to 1881), the writer’s artistic talent reached its peak and the major part of his literary heritage was established, such as the novel *The Gambler* (1866), Chapter VI and Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment* (November and December 1866), the novels *The Idiot* (1868), *The Possessed* (1871–1872), *The Raw Youth* (1875), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–1880), and the publication of *A Writer’s Diary* in a periodical (1873, 1876, 1877, 1880, 1881).

One of the leisure activities of the couple was writing mock verses. It is well-known that Dostoevsky wrote poems but his poetry, particularly in comparison with his prose, was unremarkable. It was also noted by Mikhail Dostoevsky, the writer’s elder brother: “I have read your poems and found them very bad. Poetry is not your art” (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1856: 22). Fyodor Mikhailovich made another attempt in poetry in the 1850s that resulted in writing poems in the genre of the ode: *On European Events in 1854*, *On 1 July 1855* [*On the Coronation and Conclusion of Peace*]. In Zakharov’s opinion, these political odes pursued dual purposes. On the one hand, Dostoevsky hoped to get a generous permission for having his name published in the press, on the other hand, he wanted to declare new political commitments: “The image of Russia as the supporter and hope of Orthodoxy” (ZAKHAROV 2013: 167). In the 1860s and 1870s, Dostoevsky took an interest in writing comic improvisations in poetry such as caricatures, epigrams, and satirical articles of literary or domestic character whose drafts can be found in his notebooks. Here the author acts as a good caricaturist, satirist, and polemist. It is this sort of a laboratory where, afterwards, the mock verses took origin from, among them the verses in the novel *The Idiot*, the grotesque and ironic “absurd” verses of Captain Lebjadkin in *The Possessed*, and a ludicrous epigram of the gymnasium students in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The verses of Captain Lebjadkin written by Dostoevsky in the novel *The Possessed* are considered the first experience of absurdity in Russian literature. The character strives to sound as elegant as possible but he is aesthetically deaf that results in the absurd. Russian poets of the 20th century such as Alexander Blok, Anna Akhmatova, and Nikolay Oleynikov showed a keen interest in the creative work of the retired Captain Lebjadkin. His ludicrous verses are very important for understanding the aesthetic principles of “Association for Real Art” (OBERIU).<sup>2</sup> Daniil Kharmis, Nikolay Zabolotsky, Alexander Vvedensky, Juri Vladimirov, and others asserted the refusal of the traditional forms of art, the renovation of poetic

<sup>2</sup> See the following articles: SERMAN 1981, ULANOVSKAJA 1993, CASSEDY 1984.

language, the destruction of the ordinary logic, and the collision of meanings. They used grotesque, alogism, absurdity, and made ambitious stylistic experiments.

Poetry experiments as the result of the joint creative work of the Dostoevskys represent a meaningful biographical source for giving a description of family life in the 1870s. On the one hand, it was family entertainment: "Later, when Fedja came to say goodbye, I was continuously reciting verses, ridiculous and mock ones, but all the same verses so, we laughed a lot"; "One night when I thought he was already asleep and he thought I was asleep too, I suddenly told him that I had just written one more verse and just as I said it he recited another one to me. We burst out laughing because instead of sleeping we were occupied with composing stupid verses" (DOSTOEVSKAJA 1993: 205, 293). On the other hand, it was a sort of literary school where the famous writer gradually shaped the literary taste of his young spouse.

In Anna Dostoevsky's diary, there are six poetry jokes written together with her husband. The first one is a comic poem *Abracadabra* (autumn 1867), wherein they laughed at philistine morality that consists in encouraging a groom to make a proposal of marriage by provoking his interest in the bride's virginity instead of her dowry. Then there was the apologue "Smoke and an Earth-ball" (12 July 1868), the purpose of which was to contrast the proud Smoke working at the factory with the modest Earth-ball that remains intact on a peasant's land at all times and keeps engendering new life. Diary entries culminated in poetry improvisations on general topics in which the Dostoevsky couple made a joke about the husband's financial failures and his passion for gambling games as well as about the forgetfulness of his young hostess wife.

Among the mock verses written by Dostoevsky after his return to Russia we are familiar with two. The addressee of one of them is the young wife of the writer. It dates back to 1876–1877 (as well as the notebook wherein it is written) when the family expanded as far as the Dostoevskys had children and as the result their financial difficulties increased: "Having children is indeed expensive, / both Anna Grigorievna and Lilja and the boys – / That is our sorrow!" (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1876–1877: 280).

The other improvisation *Stop larking about, Fedul* (1879) is dedicated to playful children Fedja and Ljuba and it belongs to the genre of baby misery rhymes ("Fedul, why do you look so sad? – Well, because I've burnt my caftan. – Well, you can mend it. – But I haven't got a needle. – Is the hole too big? – Only a collar is left indeed").

A sense of humour, self-irony, and the ability to see things and to face the difficulties of life with joy helped the young Dostoevsky family to overcome the tribulations of everyday life and to come through critical situations in which they found themselves time after time while living in Europe from 1867 to 1871 and, later, in Russia.

After Fyodor Dostoevsky's death, Anna went on writing extempore poems. This is evidenced by a poem that we find in her notebook of 1899–1901. In the poem, she brings up a topic of marriage for a bride's dowry not for love.

According to the recollections of her contemporaries, Anna Dostoevskaja was an outstanding narrator who had “a gift for a picturesque representation of everything she saw and observed in external life” (STOJUNINA 1924: 579). She was “so eloquent at describing the most insignificant deeds and events that she enabled a listener to ‘see’ as well” (KOVRIGINA 1924: 588). At times, she inspired her husband’s creative imagination. For instance, at the heart of Dostoevsky’s narrative *The Centenarian* (1876), there is an event happening to the writer’s wife: “Upon returning from the printing office, I told Fyodor Mikhailovich about my meeting with an old woman, and Fyodor Mikhailovich wrote a tale on the subject” (GROSSMAN 1922: 64). Studying the notes to *A Writer’s Diary*, V. Borisova remarked that Dostoevsky had been reflecting on the event happening to her wife during the first half of March 1876 and he proceeded with writing a piece of fiction in the second half of March (BORISOVA 2011: 111). As a result, a short tale appeared with a great depth of meaning in it.

The plot of *The Centenarian* is simple: a smiling 104-year old woman is going to see her grandchildren. While moving forward, she makes frequent stops for rest and meets a lady that gives her a five-kopeck coin. Upon coming home, she tells her relatives about a kind lady, she smiles... and she suddenly dies. Nobody cries. Everybody feels deeply touched. So does the narrator: “This is how millions of people go aloft: they die without being noticed, in the same manner as they have been living. But the very moment of death of those centenarians contains something heart-piercing and calm even something important and pacific” (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1981: 79). Dostoevsky here managed to turn a real life situation (the old woman’s death) into a pictorial demonstration of the idea, he represented a Christian ideal of solidarity in life and death cherished by “ordinary and kind people”. According to the writer’s wife, this tale was one of the most essential literary works for him (GROSSMAN 1935: 315).

The events of Anna’s life were reflected in the writer’s novels. The spouses’ emotions regarding the birth of their first daughter Sonia were embodied in the Shatovs’ childbirth scene in *The Possessed*: “From the room came no longer groans but awful animal cries, unendurable, incredible. He tried to stop up his ears but could not, and he fell in his knees, repeating unconsciously: ‘Marie! Marie!’ Then suddenly he heard a cry, a new cry, which made Shatov start and jump up from his knees, the cry of a baby, a weak discordant cry. He crossed himself and rushed into the room...” (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1974: 451). “A black and rather expensive shawl” and “a nacre porte monnaie” presented by Dostoevsky to his wife belong to Varvara Petrovna Stavrogina in the novel *The Possessed*. Anna Dostoevskaja’s words and thoughts caused by her son’s death were communicated by the writer in the chapter “Peasant Women Who Have Faith” of *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which a woman having lost her child shares her deep sorrow with Father Zossima: “It’s my little son I’m grieving for, Father, he was three years old – three years all but three months. For my little boy, Father, I’m in anguish, for my little boy... He seems always standing before me. He never leaves me. He has withered my heart” (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1976: 45).

Dostoevsky believed in the artistic flair of his wife and always took into consideration her opinion: “Let me read it to you, and he proceeded to read the beginning of *A Writer’s Diary*. Is it boring, is there a duplication? I said that it was not boring at all but that it evidently contained a lot of things asserted before and that it could not have been otherwise as far as he was bringing up his idea about the Russian people and Orthodoxy... He was extremely content” (BELOV 1988: 174), he observed her reaction: “While Fyodor Mikhailovich was dictating the scene of Iljusha’s death, I was crying. He came running up to me, grasped my hands and suddenly screamed out: You’re crying! So, it’s all right. I was thinking of changing it – now I’ll keep it the way it is” (KOVRIGINA 1924: 583). Dostoevsky’s daughter recalls that her mother “used to keep her critical comments to herself” but “sometimes she made light objections” (DOSTOEVSKAJA 1922: 82–83). However, the experience of their joint literary activity let the wife give some advice to her husband: “I ask you not to be in a hurry to start work, you’d better let some time pass, the plan will appear by itself; hastiness will be no other than an obstacle. I remember how it was with *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*. You had been worrying about the plan of the novel, and when it was finally made up, the working process turned to be very fast. [...] Otherwise, in haste, you can mess a business: and you will have to modify the plan that will interfere with the artistic merit” (DOSTOEVSKIJ–DOSTOEVSKAJA 1979: 110–111).

The years of co-authorship with Dostoevsky became a sort of school of literature for the writer’s assistant that enabled her later – from 1911 until 1918 – to write worldly-known memoirs about her husband.

These are, for instance, contemporary comments of Russian readers from the 21st century: “It is one of those rare books you close with regret”; “The book is read in one sitting”, “I’m very glad to have got familiar with this magnificent book; it has revolutionized my ideas about Fyodor Dostoevsky”; “Having finished reading the book, I put it aside calmly and only now when I am set to write a review I understand that it has affected me far more than it seemed to me before”.<sup>3</sup>

In a letter to his friend, the poet Apollon Maykov, Dostoevsky called Anna Grigorievna his “true helper and comforter” (DOSTOEVSKIJ 1985: 243). In consideration of her help in literary activity, he dedicated his last and greatest novel *The Brothers Karamazov* to his wife.

A friend of Anna Dostoevskaja’s remembers the latter to confess shortly before her death: “I nurtured *The Brothers Karamazov*, it was my favourite brain-child” (KOVRIGINA 1924: 583). The writer’s wife, being a co-author of Dostoevsky, shared not only family life with him but creative destination as well.

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