

poetry, I have always wondered whether “the pen is mightier than the sword.” The poets who have been persecuted and prosecuted in South Africa are those who are activists as well.

There are, of course, some fine poets. For example, a *Guardian* reviewer commented on Dennis Brutus’s *Letters to Martha*: “. . . he has a grace and penetration unmatched even by Alexander Solzhenitsyn.” And Oswald Mtshali still packs, for me, a sizzling style and cornucopia of fresh, strong images. I specify “for me” because Mtshali has been rejected by black poets and intellectuals in South Africa. This seems puzzling since he is so vitriolically against *apartheid* and white dominance. He is certainly no Uncle Tom. The objection is that Mtshali is held to write in a tone, content, and imagery that appeal to white, not black, consciousness. He conforms to the *passé* white liberal mode of satirising the humiliations and institutions of *apartheid* at a time when black radical opinion is eyeing the reins of power.

WHAT, THEN, about life after *apartheid* for the poet writing in English? Such conjecture sparks off the old debate between

“art” and “relevance”—more explicitly, the gap between those poets who sedulously avoid *apartheid* and those who are totally absorbed by it. The poets of “art” comfort themselves that they are writing to eternal literary standards which will reassert themselves when *apartheid* has been swept away. The “relevance” poets hold that literature concerns itself with today’s human issues and ceases to be valid literature if it does not.

However, the reader and critic of the 21st century, whether black or white, could find much of *apartheid* poetry grown stale, monotonous, and irrelevant. Perhaps the “relevance” poets are not disappointed with this scenario of the future. After all, they do not claim that poetry should do anything more than be applied to contemporary socio-political issues. The poets of “art” would certainly be dismayed and hope that their poetry escapes the time-warp—hankering, as they do, after “immortality” and such romantic notions of the poet’s status. The problem is that *they* might be seen as being selective and not seeing the whole steadily. The ivory tower, arguably, is eternally irrelevant. It seems that no one escapes the bleak scenario. Will *apartheid*, distorted and destructive to the end, consume the poets of its era with itself?

## The Stenography of Love

*A Russian Diary—By RÜDIGER GÖRNER*



ON 14 APRIL 1867, at five o’clock in the afternoon of a “beautifully clear” day, a young couple left St Petersburg Central Station for a belated honeymoon in Germany. The circumstances of the journey were less romantic. The family of the well-reputed but impoverished husband, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, treated his young wife with suspicion and contempt; he had enormous debts caused by the collapse of two literary magazines (*Wremja* and *Epocha*) which he had founded with his brother Michail; and in addition he felt morally obliged to support his brother’s family and his stepson Paul (the son of his first wife, Maria Isayeva, who had died almost exactly two years before from tuberculosis).

The twenty-year-old Anna Grigorjewna had enjoyed a modern and open-minded education for a girl of her time. The daughter of a Civil Servant of the higher ranks and a lady of Swedish extraction, she had been encouraged to learn as much as possible and was sent to the first *Gymnasium* for girls in St Petersburg. Both parents knew that only education could provide independence for their daughter, and Anna was eager to apply whatever she had learnt and to extend her knowledge. This inclination had encouraged her, at the

beginning of 1866, to attend a course in stenography given by Professor Olkhin.

While Anna Grigorjewna was studying Olkhin’s method of shorthand and, immensely excited by the discovery of this new world of stenographic signs and symbols, was making rapid progress, something more dramatic happened in Petersburg to her future husband, Fyodor Dostoevsky. His name had been familiar to her since childhood—he was her father’s “favourite author”, and she was to confess in her *Reminiscences* decades later that she had been “enraptured with his works and had wept over *Notes from the House of the Dead*.” Now she was reading *Crime and Punishment*, not knowing that she would in the near future see the original of the protagonist’s lodgings, Dostoevsky’s present flat: Apartment No 13, Stolyarny Lane, on the corner of Little Meshchanskaya Street. There the great writer was trapped into accepting humiliating terms for a publisher’s advance: if a new novel were not delivered by 1 November 1866, the firm would have the right to publish all his works for the next nine years without paying him a thing.

Dostoevsky, in a panic about this traumatic situation, desperately needed secretarial assistance in order to meet the deadline. Friends recommended that he contact Professor Olkhin; and Olkhin suggested that Dostoevsky employ his best student, Anna Grigorjewna, as a temporary secretary. Three weeks later he finished dictating *The Gambler* to

Anna, and on 15 February 1867 they were married in Izmailovsky Cathedral. With Anna's vigorous assistance, Dostoevsky succeeded in capturing the haunting experiences of gambling he had lived through himself in several spas in Germany in 1863. At the time Anna could not possibly have imagined that she was quite soon to experience what the most admired and then beloved master had dictated to her.

Through dealing literarily with the subject of gambling, Dostoevsky seemed to have intensified his passion for tempting fortune once more. The novel did not provide the means for self-purification. His vice was soon to threaten him again—and his young wife. However, we find in Anna's diary, *Die Reise in den Westen* (*The Journey to the West*),<sup>1</sup> frequent references to *The Gambler*, which she loved regardless of its fateful motif. Undoubtedly she much preferred the story about the work on that novel to the reality of gambling. Her husband's weakness caused her suffering and despair. She was tormented by the dark prospect of permanent poverty, and increasingly exhausted by her endless trips to the pawnbroker. Yet she felt overwhelmed and privileged as well because Dostoevsky loved her, and the pages of her diary reflect her gratitude.

IN THOSE HARD TIMES, Anna never tired of keeping a regular diary. For that she gave several reasons in her memoirs:

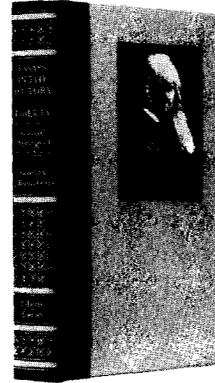
"Amid the welter of new impressions, I was afraid of forgetting details; moreover, the daily practice was a reliable way of keeping up my shorthand and perhaps even improving it. But the main reason was a different one. My husband was such an interesting and enigmatic person to me that I felt it would be easier to get to know and unriddle him if I wrote down his ideas and observations. On top of that, I was quite alone abroad; there was no one for me to share my observations with, let alone the doubts that sometimes arose, and my diary was a friend to whom I confided all my thoughts, hopes and fears."

Indeed, the linguistic signs of Anna's "friend" were illegible to Dostoevsky, and his young wife knew how to keep her secrets. But Dostoevsky did not mind this; apparently he never mistrusted Anna. She, however, did from time to time question her husband's faithfulness—although he was, in this respect, blameless. According to her, Dostoevsky confessed to her on his deathbed: "Remember this, Anya, I always loved you passionately and was never unfaithful to you even in my thoughts."

Reading through Anna's diary, one gains the impression of a (splendidly deciphered) "stenography of love." Her shorthand had improved technically during 1867, as she expected it would; so had her endurance. She needed this will-power if she was not to succumb to the perilous vice of her husband, or be demoralised by his frequent epileptic attacks, which required—often night after night, even during her first pregnancy—her understanding care.

<sup>1</sup> *Tagebücher: Die Reise in den Westen*. By ANNA GRIGORJEVNA DOSTOJEVSKAYA. Edited and translated by BARBARA CONRAD. Athenäum Verlag Königstein.

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AT FIRST, Anna expected from her journey excitement and stimulating “cultural” experiences. But she could not help feeling bored and annoyed by a society which consisted, in her eyes, of dull and petty-minded people who regarded the Dostoevskys as odd representatives of a rather alien species, wearing the wrong clothes and carrying funny umbrellas. As she wrote on 16 June 1867:

“What a country—some of its people have a bent back, some are paralysed, others are blind or deaf—it is strange with these fellows here.”

Berlin did not impress her greatly. She sensed instinctively that the capital of Prussia and of the newly founded “North German Federation” represented nothing but an assembly of *nouveaux riches*. She had expected a city full of culture and traditional meaning, and the Dostoevskys were to find it in Dresden, “Florence on the Elbe”, as it was called for centuries. Anna enjoyed walking on the Brühl terrace high above the Elbe, going to the Royal Theatre, and, of course, visiting the famous galleries of the Zwinger.

ANNA’S DIARY OF 1867, now published in this German translation, is on the whole more descriptive than reflective, but it is by no means “naive.” Considering her age, Anna surprises us by the way she treated Dostoevsky’s inner tension and his increasingly painful irritation about almost everything. The couple suffered again and again from “unnecessary” arguments, usually sparked off by trivialities. Anna knew that Dostoevsky too felt isolated in their new surroundings; depressed by their financial situation, he was desperate to change it through gambling. Her comment on the eve of his departure for a gambling spa reads as follows:

“If I am glad that he is leaving it is not because of the prospect that he might win (quite honestly I cannot imagine his winning), but because I can see that he is gradually growing stale here, and more and more irritated.”

In the autumn of that year, in Baden-Baden, she is even more precise about her husband’s inability to win:

“His success might have been complete—but only on condition that this system be applied by some coolheaded Englishman or German and not by such a nervous and impulsive person as my husband, who went to the uttermost limits in everything.”

A letter written by Dostoevsky to his wife on 22 May 1867 confirmed her theory:

“I had altogether *twenty* gulden left in my pocket (just in case), and I took a chance on *ten* gulden. I used almost supernatural efforts to remain calm and calculating *for a whole hour*, and wound up winning 300 gulden. I was so overjoyed, and had such a terrible, almost *mad* desire to finish off everything right there, that *very day*, to win perhaps twice that amount and then leave immediately,

that I threw myself at the roulette table. Without giving myself a chance to rest and collect my thoughts, I took to betting gold pieces, and lost *everything, everything*, to the last kopeck, i.e. all I had left was two gulden for tobacco.”

Although Anna in her *Reminiscences* makes us believe that she never reproached her husband for his losses and never quarrelled with him about them, we get a different impression from her diary. It is true that she realised eventually how important it was to him to go even to the utmost extremes in gambling and risking everything—in order to cure him in the long run. But she recorded arguments on the subject, and her annoyance at the fact that he expected every support for his vice, and even took it for granted that his mother-in-law would send money as often as possible (which she did).

Anna never argued with Dostoevsky in a condescending manner; she tried to share his experience, and decided one day to go to the tables herself so as to understand better what was going on in these glamorously illuminated salons behind the thick velvet curtains. There she found, as she afterwards confessed to her diary, how easy it was to be captivated by the sheer lust for gambling. “At first I was still able to consider where I placed my stake . . . but then I lost this ability completely.”

In Dresden Anna used to comfort herself, in all her “loving sorrow” (her expression), by going to the art gallery and looking at her favourite painting—Murillo’s *Madonna and Child*—almost certainly projecting on to it her deep religious feeling and her wish for a child. Her compensation in Baden-Baden consisted of literature—and the hope that life in Paris or Geneva might be better. She hated artificiality, and in particular the contrast between Baden-Baden’s provinciality and its pretended wealth. She once noted: “I hate the struggle between daylight and the light of lamps.”

AND LITERATURE? She was very fond of Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* and even more of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. It is quite touching to read in her diary, days after the Dostoevskys had acquired *Madame Bovary*, the following lines:

“Fedja is wrong if he thinks that I am dependent on him and that I have to do what he wants! It is high time that he dropped this stupid assumption.”

Yet Anna is not the ideal heroine of Women’s Liberation. It took only one remark from her husband to soften her.

“Today he told me that I had given him so many new emotions and thoughts, which will help him to become a better person. This made me very happy.”

But, she adds, he was angry because she was lying on his bed—not yet undressed. Anna tended to write more about her husband’s passion for gambling than about his passion for her: but she alluded to it in images of almost artistic subtlety.

Dostoevsky was not only Anna’s passionate husband and never-boring partner: whenever possible, he cared for her. Especially during her pregnancy, when he started work on *The Idiot*. On 1 October 1867, Anna wrote that Fjodor had drafted a new novel. The notebook he used was the one that contained the notes for *Crime and Punishment*. One cannot

suppress a smile when reading the following after this dry, almost bibliographical fact:

"After lunch, when Fedja is not at home, I usually read what he has written before; but this I never tell him; otherwise he would be very angry with me. And why should I make him angry? I certainly don't want him to hide his notebooks; it does not matter if he thinks that I haven't the faintest idea what he is doing."

Anna's diary not only records her love for her husband; it is also the diary of a Russian patriot, who shared with Fedja an unconditional love for their country. Both agreed to reject their fellow-countryman, Ivan Turgenev, for his anti-Russian attitudes. They longed for news from Russia: even more, they longed to be there when their daughter Sonya died suddenly, at the age of three months. Dostoevsky blamed the tragedy

on the bad weather in Geneva. "It could not have happened in Russia", was his comment.

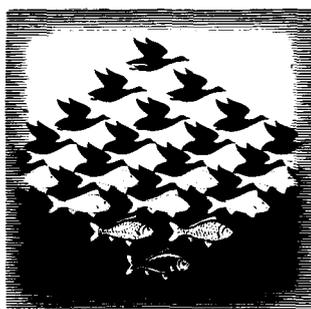
It seems that Anna sensed, after their move from Baden-Baden to Geneva, how indispensable she had become. In the third part of her diary she sounds much more self-assured, though there is poignancy in a minute detail of her frequent recollections of the day she met Dostoevsky for the first time.

"Between the windows stood a large mirror in a black wooden frame. Since the space was considerably larger than the mirror, the latter, for convenience, had been moved to the right-hand window, which produced a very unattractive and unsymmetrical effect. I found that very strange, for I am used to symmetry."

Dostoevsky's state of mind at the time was very unbalanced. Anna's role was to give him that solid symmetry.

## Stepping Eastward

*Recent Novels—By NEIL BERRY*



AMONG THE MOST POPULAR films shown in London in 1985 was *Letter to Brezhnev*, an amateur production by a group of out-of-work Liverpoolians. The film offered the opinion that life on once-flourishing Merseyside had become so grimly impoverished and constricted that many of its inhabitants could

hardly be worse off in the Soviet Union. Coincidentally, around the time of the film's release, a London political columnist was to be found observing that under its present leadership Britain is materially, and perhaps in other respects as well, nearer to an East European State than at any time since the end of the Attlee Government in 1951. He went on to cite, among other things, the Government's insistence that all will come right in the end—even as large numbers of depressed Britons shuffle along the pavements, idle but not enjoying their leisure, and distracting themselves with strong drinks.

The novelist Beryl Bainbridge will have clear memories of the Attlee years. She grew up (in Liverpool as it happens) in the 1940s and '50s, the so-called Age of Austerity. And if her fiction typically seems soaked in the grey, ration-book atmosphere of the period, that does nothing to lessen its topicality in our new Age of Austerity, which is not discontinuous with the last one. Bainbridge's characters are a luckless, sometimes brutish lot. "Bread and Butter Smith",

a story in her recent collection of short fiction,<sup>1</sup> set in post-War Liverpool and evocative of its grin-and-bear-it spirit, concerns a non-communicating couple who used to spend Christmas in a Liverpool hotel. The husband/narrator recalls how Smith, a fellow guest, would join them for Christmas dinner, always eating his regular four slices of bread and butter along with a few cuts of breast. Growing exasperated with the attention Smith pays to his wife, the husband fabricates for her a murky private life. The point, we gather, is that Smith is a prude who confines his romantic aspirations to sedate dances with respectable married ladies. With chilling imperceptiveness, the husband mentions that Smith killed himself and that his wife ended up in a mental hospital. Smith, apparently, had been an annual ray of light in her otherwise dim existence.

Smith's isn't the only suicide in these stories. The concluding tale, "Helpful O'Malley", deals with a seedy rent-collector who inveigles lonely girl tenants into gassing themselves. But Beryl Bainbridge isn't always so gruesome, though her forte is black comedy sustained by unflinching irony. The funniest moments in her fiction stem from the embarrassments incurred by extra-marital sex. In "The Worst Policy", neurotic, self-conscious Sarah has contrived at last to meet her fancy man by borrowing a friend's house for the afternoon. As they begin to grapple with one another, the friend's son, for whom Sarah reserves a long-standing loathing, suddenly clambers in through the window.

The world of Beryl Bainbridge, full of shabbiness and struggle, offers little scope for personal happiness or for social harmony. In dingy, cluttered rooms her knobbly, demoralised, utterly unheroic characters blunder from one humiliation to the next. Inadequates to the last man and woman, they appear victims of a crippling limited culture.

<sup>1</sup> *Mum and Mr Armitage: Selected Stories*. By BERYL BAINBRIDGE. Duckworth, £7.95.