

Raffaella Vassena, *Dostoevskij post-mortem. L'eredità dostoevskiana tra editoria, stato e società 1881-1910* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2020)

In her preface to the Italian edition of Anna Grigor'evna Snitkina's memoirs, Donatella Borghesi regrets that a sharp, pragmatic and profound woman like the widow of Dostoevsky had entirely "sacrificed" her talent to please the brilliant but curmudgeonly husband: "The clearest image resulting from the reading of these pages aged by nearly a hundred years of struggle for the liberation of women is the exemplary image of a female intelligence sacrificed to the male genius. It will be said that Dostoevsky is the genius in this case. It is true, but Anna Grigor'evna's life remains a wasted life, and the weight of the sacrifice is no less than the extent of the guilt. The pages of these memoirs remain to us as a modest yet lucid 'negative example'".¹ Borghesi also underlines how Anna Grigor'evna's memoirs end with the death of her husband "as if her life no longer counted for being told".²

The new monograph by Raffaella Vassena, associate professor at the State University of Milan, author of *Reawakening National Identity: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and its Impact on Russian Society* (Peter Lang, 2007), fills this gap by strengthening, in a certain sense, Borghesi's impressions: the existence of Anna Grigor'evna even after Dostoevsky's death continues to be consecrated to her husband's genius. Indeed, *Dostoevskij post mortem. L'eredità dostoevskiana tra editoria, stato e società 1881-1910* shows how Dostoevskaya's qualities have been fully expressed in her commitment to protect the literary legacy of the great writer from any mystification and to spread it even among categories of less typical readers, such as children and adolescents from less well-off social classes.

Vassena divides her reflections into four chapters covering a period of about thirty years, from 1881 to 1910, that is to say from the writer's death to his wife's transfer of the publishing rights: a long and troubled period in which we witness the gradual maturation of Anna Grigor'evna as editor and as guardian of the spiritual testament of the author of *Crime and Punishment*.

The first chapter is dedicated to the attempted exclusive appropriation by the Tsarist authorities of the figure of Dostoevsky after his death and the effects that this operation had on the publishing market, which also influenced the first business decisions of Anna Grigor'evna, left alone to manage the editorial legacy of her late husband.

1 Donatella BORGHESI, *Anna G. Dostoevskaja: il tempo, la società*, in Anna G. DOSTOEVSKAJA, *Dostoevskij mio marito* (Milano: Bompiani, 2006), pp. XIII-XIV.

2 *Ibid.*, p. IX.

The second chapter explores the controversial reactions with which censors and specific literary critics have welcomed Dostoevskaya's editorial initiatives over the years.

The third chapter analyzes Anna Grigorevna's efforts to expand the range of typologies of the Dostoevsky reader, focusing, in particular, on the child and adolescent audience.

In the fourth and final chapter, Vassena illustrates Dostoevskaya's later initiatives: the opening of the "Muzej pamjati F.M. Dostoevskogo" (1906) and the contextual drafting of a bibliographic repertoire, in which Anna Grigor'evna recorded and described all 4,232 materials that she had managed to collect and which covered a chronological span of sixty years, between 1846 and 1906.

It also explains the reasons that led Dostoevsky's widow to give up the publishing rights in 1910, effectively concluding her work.

Without omitting Dostoevskaya's inevitable stumbling blocks and naiveté, Vassena recounts the vicissitudes of a publisher struggling with a society that is rapidly and radically transforming, of a woman who fights to preserve the purity of the original message of her husband's works in the course of an ineluctable process of secular "canonization" that is in many ways misleading. The author analyzes this struggle in the context of the complex interactions between the different social movements that tried to make their reading of Dostoevsky's work prevail, emphasizing in turn different aspects of his oeuvre. Through her editions, Anna Grigor'evna intended to promote the moral and educational significance of Dostoevsky's work, aspiring, first of all, to legitimacy in the eyes of literary and pedagogical critics, who, however, welcomed her efforts in a heterogeneous way. Similarly, even school censorship bodies only partially recognized the educational potential of Dostoevsky's work, not without falling into apparent contradictions, which in some cases led them to authorize and then deny entry into the official repertoires.

No less complex was the relationship with the Russian public, which claimed the right to read and to seek in Dostoevsky's work an echo to questions to which in Nicholas II's Russia it was difficult to find answers. The same troubled search for editors for the various editions reflects the difficulty of the undertaking, as few knew how to get in tune with Anna Grigor'evna. In the absence of the author, the works become the patrimony of readers: anyone felt free to interpret according to their sensitivity, as did D. S. Merezhkovsky by calling Dostoevsky "a forerunner of the Revolution" and going so far as to provocatively affirm, to the great dismay of the widow, that the author of *Devils* invited his readers "to have faith in the Antichrist".

Vassena's monograph is carefully edited and contains an exhaustive set of notes and a rich and well-organized bibliography.

The numerous images, together with the detailed index of the various editions of the *Complete Works* and the catalogue of the "Muzej pamjati", make the most of the fundamental stages of what was a real mission.

Ultimately, *Dostoevskij post mortem. L'eredità dostoevskiana tra editoria, stato e società 1881-1910* is a work that tells of Dostoevsky "beyond" (or, perhaps, it would be appropriate to say "after") Dostoevsky in an accessible but extremely accurate way, undoubtedly useful not only for Dostoevsky's scholars but also for those who want to deepen their understanding of the social and cultural transformations of Russia at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.