A Tribute to Professor Robert Louis Jackson

Robert Louis Jackson confessed to being drawn to Russian literature because, as he wrote, “the intense ethical and social concerns of the great Russian novelists and poets never seemed to involve any compromise with their artistry or artistic truth.”

His groundbreaking books on Fyodor Dostoevsky rendered the deep meaning of the writer’s art with Jackson’s trademark intensity. “Dostoevsky’s Quest for Form: A Study of His Philosophy of Art” (1966) is judged by many to be an unsurpassed study of Dostoevsky’s aesthetics. “The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes” (1981) elucidated the writer’s neglected middle period, capturing in its evocative subtitle the distinctive feel of Dostoevsky’s fictional universe. In “Dialogues with Dostoevsky: The Overwhelming Questions” (1993), Jackson illuminates the writer’s driving concerns in the context of classic European literature.

Minutely attentive to linguistic texture and aesthetic form, these masterful studies delve deeply into the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Dostoevsky’s art. With passion and insight, they explore the questions of freedom and responsibility, fate and free will, chance and design, about which Jackson cared as deeply as his favorite Russian authors did. Though skeptical of the pretensions of literary and critical theory, he was nonetheless attuned to the philosophical, ethical, and formal questions such theories often sought to answer. The spellbinding power of his critical work is due in no small measure to a distinctly personal, expressive, even idiosyncratic voice. He used this voice to give form to the deepest, most chaotic, and most radiant realities of Russian art.

Insight, elegance, and analytic rigor also distinguish Jackson’s studies of other major Russian writers – from Pushkin and Gogol to Vyacheslav Ivanov and Gorky. Later in his career, he turned from the big Russian novel to the short story form, producing luminous readings of the fiction of Anton Chekhov, whose quiet humanism was close to Jackson’s own. Jackson’s posthumous book, “Essays on Anton P. Chekhov: Close Readings by Robert Louis Jackson” (ed. Cathy Popkin, intro. Robin Feuer Miller), which follows several brilliant articles and two edited volumes on Chekhov, including “Reading Chekhov’s Texts” (1993), will be published soon by Academic Studies Press. This collection will close six decades of prodigious research and writing – spanning six monographs, seven edited volumes, and over a hundred articles – that left an indelible mark on the Slavic field.

Jackson did much to make Yale a vibrant international center of research in Russian literature. The conferences he organized brought together ever-broadening circles of American and European scholars, junior and senior, and typically concluded in the convivial atmosphere of the Guilford home of Jackson and his wife, the artist Leslie Jackson. Grateful guests recall this home as an unforgettable oasis of art, culture, and intellectual sociability. On the so-called “Russian Wall” in that home, Jackson displayed photos of famous Slavic writers and scholars, such as Renato Poggioli, Viktor Shklovsky, Andrei Siniavsky, Czeslaw Milosz, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. Included on this Wall is also the photograph of Mikhail
Bakhtin, taken by Jackson himself in 1975, when he traveled to Moscow to offer Bakhtin an honorary Yale degree (Bakhtin was by then on his deathbed, so the degree was never conferred).

In the 1970s-80s, Jackson connected international communities of Slavists among whom few bridges then existed by becoming founder and president of the International Dostoevsky Society and International Chekhov Society. He also served as president of the North American chapters of these societies.

As remembered by a fellow member one of these societies, Jackson “would wade into semi-political debates in that complex, passionate, international organization and wade out again, victorious, but somehow miraculously having made no enemies. His gift of creating consensus was extraordinary because it was not born of a hesitancy to disagree and a resort to blandness but rather from an ability to listen deeply and to hear, and then to incorporate that other point of view into his own.” This manner, which struck his colleagues and collaborators as Bakhtinian (or perhaps Dostoevskian), was innate to his own personality.

To this day, Jackson’s students recall his teaching as a mesmerizing experience. His courses on Dostoevsky, which were known to bring some in the audience to tears, proved an intellectual revelation to generations of future scholars. Equally memorable was Jackson’s advice from his 1991 seminar on Chekhov, in which he declared that Chekhov should be read like poetry, where every word, every comma, matters. Jackson’s lectures excelled in capturing the excitement of discovery; they communicated viscerally the joy of reading and pleasures of the text.

As a mentor, he was unfailingly kind and helpful, generous with praise and reticent about the shortcomings. He advised students to follow their unique gifts, cultivate their imagination, and take bold risks. He was a living example of authenticity, personal integrity, intellectual sociability, and unfailing critical vocation. He also showed kindly interest in the ideas of junior scholars with whom he had no institutional connection, some of whom received – and to this day treasure – pages of comments in the characteristic bold, slanting Jackson script.

Through his publications, Jackson has left an enduring legacy. But his personal impact on his students, colleagues, and admirers around the world will also live on, together with warm memories of his distinguished scholarship, his lively style of teaching and scholarly debate, and his encouragement of and interest in their own work.

His formidable scholarly achievements and service to the field were recognized by the Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung Fellowship, and the Distinguished Scholarly Career Award from the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages, which also awarded him a book prize for “Dialogues with Dostoevsky.” Jackson also received honorary doctorates from Moscow State University and the Petrozavodsk State University, Russia.

Born in 1923 in New York City to parents who had immigrated from Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Jackson found his passion for Russian culture during World War II, eventually earning degrees from Cornell (B.A.) and Columbia (M.A.) Universities, and the University of California, Berkeley (Ph.D.). He was brought to Yale by Renée Wellek in 1954.
and remained on the faculty until his retirement in 2002. A mesmerizing teacher, a devoted mentor, and a supportive colleague, Jackson is revered and fondly remembered by those he inspired with his love for Russian literature, genuine intellectual generosity, and profound humanity.