
In Memoriam

At Chuck Isenberg's funeral the Rabbi read a letter from his uncle recalling that Chuck's room in childhood was always full of books, and that Chuck could usually be found there reading. Chuck was a reader all his life. He kept reading current novels and journals up to the end, even when he seemed to be straining beyond the limits of his physical strength just to hold the book in his hands and keep his eyes focused on the page.

Chuck enjoyed the pleasures of the artistic text itself. He enjoyed interpreting the dense poetic prose of Mandelstam (subject of his first book, *Substantial Proofs of Being*) as well as the complex narratives discussed in his second book, *Telling Silence: Russian Frame Narratives of Renunciation*. More importantly for him, he read to learn how to navigate his mind and body beyond the text and the reading room into new territories of intellect and of Nature. He passionately loved sailing and the sea. In addition to the elemental pleasure of being out on the water, he enjoyed strengthening his skills as a sailor in the interplay between knowledge learned from books and new, unprecedented conditions of water, wind, and waves. His thrill in sailing was expressed by his poet Mandelstam in the opening lines of "The Horseshoe Finder." Quoting from Clarence Brown's translation:

We look at a forest and say
here is a forest of ship timber, masts,
the reddish pines
are free of their shaggy burden clear to the top
they should creak in the storm
like lone pines
in the infuriate, unforested air;
the plumbline will hold, fastened to the dancing
deck,
under the wind's salt heel.

And the seafarer
in his unbridled thirst for space
dragging through the water furrows a geometer's

fragile equipment
collates the ragged surface of the seas
with the tug of the earth's bosom.

While he was a graduate student at Harvard acquiring the philological "geometries" which enabled him to become such a good interpreter of Mandelstam, Chuck was also teaching himself a number of other skills and applying them to a wide array of other arts and crafts. He became an active member of a Cambridge-based group which bought farmland in New Hampshire and experimented with communal living; he taught himself carpentry and built a dwelling on the commune's land; he taught himself to cook and explored the world of ethnic food; he took up the bass fiddle and joined a band; he moved beyond the bounds of Slavic literary theory and became adept in applying models from other academic disciplines—particularly anthropology, psychology, and sociology—to the study of literature.

I got to know Chuck in the late 1970s when he came to Wesleyan for his first teaching job. Forming collegial ties with young faculty from other departments, he reworked his own research and writing. Of all my youthful colleagues engaged in integrating literary theory with other theoretical disciplines in that period, Chuck seemed to me to be the best-informed and the brightest. His article on the rhetoric of Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs successfully integrates theoretical notions which had evolved in diverse fields: 20th century Slavic narrative theory, classical notions of rhetoric (which Chuck learned in consultation with Wesleyan classicists), and socially based notions of authority just then being developed in feminist theory. His 1993 book on frame narratives evolved from the integrative theoretical thinking he did in the 1980s. It is an exemplary blend of the best of Slavic and Western theories of narrative.

While pursuing his career as a Slavist Chuck continued to cultivate a number of passionate, non-academic interests. He embarked on his

marriage with Rhea Paul; together they raised three wonderful children (Will, Marty, and Aviva) and created a family life the strength of which would sustain him in his final, mortal bout with cancer. He pursued his love of sailing; he took up windsurfing, cross-country skiing, and hiking. When he moved out to Oregon to teach at Reed, he looked forward to the challenge of windsurfing on the waves of the Columbia River Gorge. But for summer vacations in the East he bought a little sailboat he named "Time and Chance" in which he plied the waters of Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard with his sons Willy and Marty and his friend, Gary Clevidence.

During the period from 1986 to 1997 when he taught in the Russian Department at Reed, Chuck became a brilliant teacher. Most impressive was the way he would clarify his terms of discourse at the beginning of a course and then encourage his students to use these terms to think on their own. When I visited him in Portland a year ago (December, 1996) I sat in on the last class of his seminar on Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and philosophers of history (Isaiah Berlin, Hayden White, and others). I heard two students present rough drafts of their final papers for the course. Teaching a similar course myself, I was familiar with the sorts of ideas Chuck would have presented to his students, but I was amazed at how well they had applied what they had learned to their own papers.

During that same visit to Portland I also observed Chuck at work on his final issue of the *Tolstoy Studies Journal*. As editor of *TSJ* he combined the strengths he had already developed as a scholar and teacher. His sophistication and maturity as a theoretician enabled him to open the journal to diverse approaches to Tolstoy while maintaining high scholarly standards and encour-

aging dialogue between approaches. The round table discussion of Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's psychoanalytic study of Pierre Bezukhov is just one example of the open spirit which Chuck encouraged in *TSJ*. His editing of the issue on *Anna Karenina* was inspired by the same spirit of openness. In fact, he so enjoyed the evolving dialogue of the final *Anna Karenina* issue he found it difficult to bring it to closure.

Obviously it was not easy for Chuck Isenberg to go through the experience of dying while still in the prime of his life. He endured the combined ravages of chemotherapy and cancer with extraordinary courage and dignity. Perhaps he was helped by favorite writers like Mandelstam and Tolstoy. I have two vivid memories of how he remained engaged with Russian literature in the final months. I recall him on his bed at Yale-New Haven Hospital, looking out at a beautiful fall sunset over New Haven harbor. He was looking radiant, having surfaced the night before from some days of near-death and disorientation in intensive care. During the night of his recovery he had been blessed with a nurse who was an avid reader of Dostoevsky. They had spent much of the night talking Dostoevsky together. The second recollection is of him perched on his chair at his computer for the last time in his life. He was checking for *TSJ*-related E-mail that should be sent on to Donna Orwin. To the last he enjoyed his Russian literature; and to the last he lived by his vision of scholarship as a collective enterprise.

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