

Robert Lamont Belknap (1929-2014)

Robert Lamont Belknap, Professor Emeritus of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Columbia University, died at the age of 84 on March 17 after a month of fighting idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. Fortunately, he experienced no pain or discomfort, so he retained his signature smile, genial personality, and brilliant mind to the end.

A native New Yorker, Bob Belknap was born on 23 December 1929. He was educated at the Buckley School, Philips Exeter Academy, and Princeton University, from which he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1951. At Princeton, he wrote a senior thesis on “The Noble Lie” in Plato, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky with the New Critic R.P. Blackmur. After serving in the U.S. Army, he completed his doctorate at Columbia in 1960. He also studied at the University of Paris and Leningrad State University.

Belknap was universally known for his intellectual brilliance, groundbreaking scholarship, great teaching, university service, personal generosity, and luminous presence. His books *The Structure of “The Brothers Karamazov”* and *The Genesis of “The Brothers Karamazov”* are universally cited classics of Dostoevsky scholarship. His forthcoming book on *Literary Plots* will not only demonstrate his capacity to synthesize and find the universals in the particulars but will also prove that one statement Bob made about Shakespeare and Dostoevsky holds true for him: he kept coming back to and reworking certain themes. We can thus find the seeds of his book on plots in *The Structure of “The Brothers Karamazov”* where we find the lapidary observation: “With two exceptions, every passage in the novel both precedes and follows another passage. If it resembles one of these, a cumulative effect may be discovered. If it resembles both, a transition; if neither, an interruption, or even a contrast. In no case can an author escape using one of the arsenal of devices which has been developed

over the centuries by the predecessors of the novelists, the historians and the epic poets.”¹

In *The Genesis of The Brothers Karamazov*, Bob claims, “[T]his book rests on the sense that major literature is rarely if ever invented out of nothing. Rather, its authors discover its elements in the existing writing and other materials they copy, imitate, quote, use, parody, or react to in other ways. In this sense, Dostoevsky’s novels are not the work of one mysterious genius but his collaboration with hundreds of writers, some living, some long dead, some great, some deservedly forgotten, in a common enterprise of which their work and his are inseparable parts. Although all literature is participatory in some way, the results need not be uniform. Even if Dostoevsky had read exactly the same things as Boborykin, he would have processed these materials so differently that his works would remain distinctively Dostoevskian.”² Similarly, we can say of Bob: few have read as deeply and widely, and no one formulated a question, summarized a plot, identified the essentials, or compressed an argument like he did. Like Dostoevsky, Bob read enormously in books and periodicals, old and new, Russian, European and Asian, good and bad, literary and nonliterary. Moreover, what Bob said of Dostoevsky – “One can almost argue that the burden of proof rests heavier on a scholar who hypothesizes that Dostoevsky had not read a given text than on one who claims he had”³ – one of his undergraduate students said about Bob: “Professor Belknap seems to have read every book ever written.”

Bob’s scholarship is pithy. In a brilliant article entitled “The Unrepentant Confession,” Bob observes that a repentant confession, like St. Augustine’s, takes the form “I did (or do, or am) this, and it is wrong.” An apologia, like Rousseau’s, takes the form “I did (or do, or am) this, and it is right.” An unrepentant confession, like the underground man’s, takes the form, “I did it, and it’s wrong, but that’s the way I am.” The unrepentant confession thus violates generic norms. Bob explains: “The genre of the confession presupposes that the person confessed to has some sort of authority over the one confessing. In literary confession, the reader assumes this authority, and these unrepentant confessions ... withdraw this authority from the reader in a dramatically provocative way. The power of

¹ Robert L. Belknap, *The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967): 57.

² *Genesis*, p.1.

³ *Genesis*, p.19.

these passages comes from the breaking of social and moral taboos, but most powerfully from breaking these literary rules which govern our reading of all more normal confessions.”⁴ Bob was provocative in a different way – always approaching issues from new angles, stimulating our neurons, encouraging us to make all kinds of connections.

Bob Belknap was a phenomenal teacher who asked probing questions, guiding and inspiring students to make discoveries for themselves. He made all students, even the most insecure, feel that they had something to say, that they were fellow travelers in the academic enterprise. Under his guidance, class went further, wider, and deeper than students expected. Columbia College undergraduates acknowledged his teaching greatness in 1980 by choosing him to receive the Mark Van Doren Award for Teaching in recognition of his “humanity, devotion to truth and inspiring leadership.” In 2010, three decades later, the Society of Graduates chose him as the recipient of their Great Teacher Award.

Bob was also a great humanist whose entire Columbia career attested to his belief that one must use one’s talents for the greater good. His ideas and actions affected the larger community. After chairing the Committee on Educational Policy in 1970, for instance, Bob and Richard Kuhns co-authored *Tradition and Innovation: General Education and the Re-integration of the University*, whose epigraph from Kant perfectly describes the goals of a Core education: “Let education be conceived on right lines, let natural gifts be developed as they should, let character be formed on moral principles, and in time the effects of this will reach even to the seat of government.” Though written in the 1970s, the book was widely consulted by Russians in the 1990s as professors liberated from Marxism-Leninism during the *glasnost*’ period were formulating liberal education programs for the post-Soviet era, and today it is being used throughout China, where universities are adding general education courses to their curricula.

Bob’s legacy – which ranged far beyond the classroom to the College, the University, and the world – derived from the generosity that characterized Bob’s core. In his fifty plus years at Columbia, Bob served as Acting Dean of Columbia College, Associate Dean of Students, Chair of the Slavic Department more times than anyone can count, Director of the Russian Institute, and thrice Chair of Literature Humanities. After retiring from the Slavic Department, Bob spent another decade directing the

⁴ Robert L. Belknap, “The Unrepentant Confession,” in Robert L. Belknap, ed., *Russianness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1990): 122.

University Seminars, the home of eighty-five interdisciplinary and inter-institutional seminars which gather scholars and practitioners dedicated to a particular line of investigation into a forum that encourages what Bob called “good talk.” Bob was also a founder and moving force in EPIC – Emeritus Professors in Columbia – where he continued the good talk.

The North American and International Dostoevsky Societies particularly benefited from Bob’s generosity and far-sightedness. As a member and then President of the Whiting Foundation Board, he encouraged support for dissertation writing in Russia and pledged his discretionary funds to be used as travel support for IDS Symposia, the digitization of the *Dostoevsky Studies* bibliography, and the development of the NADS and IDS websites. As an organizer of the Xth International Dostoevsky Symposium (1998), Bob raised enough funds to bring twenty six Russian scholars to New York for ten days. At dinner with those Russian colleagues, our dearly departed colleague Vladimir Svitelskii toasted Bob as follows: “I conclude my speech with this proposition: If Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky had known that Bob Belknap would be alive in the twentieth century, he would not have attributed the remarkable quality of universal responsiveness only to a Russian, only to Pushkin. I propose a toast to the universal responsiveness of our dear host and remarkable colleague, Professor Robert L. Belknap!”

Bob’s generosity also expressed itself in his hospitality, a virtue he shared with Cynthia Hyla Whittaker, his wife, intellectual interlocutor, travel partner, and shining sun for over twenty years. His survivors also include his sisters Louise and Barbara, his daughters Lydia, Ellen, and Abigail, his stepchildren Erica and Andrew, and all of their respective spouses and children.

Bob Belknap’s personal, institutional, and intellectual legacy remain with us along with happy memories of his luminous presence. Bob was, to use one of his own favorite words, a “splendid” man.

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