

Robert Louis Jackson

Robert Louis Jackson, B. E. Bensinger Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Emeritus, an internationally renowned scholar of the Russian novel and short story of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and one of the five founders of the Yale's Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, passed away at Yale New Haven Hospital on May 3, 2022. He was 98.

Jackson was 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.” He is most famous for his groundbreaking books on Feodor Dostoevskii. *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form: A Study of His Philosophy of Art* (1966) is judged by many to be an unsurpassed study of Dostoevskii'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 Dostoevskii'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. 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 Aleksandr Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol' to Viacheslav Ivanov and Maksim Gor'kii. 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, 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 enduring legacy in the Slavic field.

Yet his personal impact on his students, colleagues, and admirers around the world will also live on, together with warm memories of his lively style of teaching and scholarly debate, and his encouragement of and interest in their own work. To this day, Jackson's students recall his teaching, especially on Dostoevskii, as a mesmerizing experience and an intellectual revelation. Equally memorable was Jackson's advice in his seminar on Chekhov, whom he recommended to read like poetry, paying attention to every word and every comma. 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 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.

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.

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 emigrated from Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Jackson found his passion for Russian culture during World War II, eventually earning degrees from Cornell and Columbia Universities, and the University of California, Berkeley. He was brought to Yale by René 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.

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