

Professor Stanley Mitchell, 1932-2011

The death of Stanley Mitchell on October 16th is a great loss to the world of intellect and poetry, most especially to English-speakers' understanding of Russian literature. It is also a sad event in the history of Essex University, in whose early development Stanley was so creative a participant.

In October 1965 Stanley Mitchell became the first lecturer in Russian literature at the new University of Essex, where Russian studies were being established as one of the University's central projects. Its Department of Literature (founded and chaired by the poet and critic Donald Davie) opened with an exceptionally inspiring scheme of studies: each student studied not only English literature but also, with strong emphasis on comparison, the literature of Russia or Latin America or North America. All this made for vigorous continuing debate. Stanley was well attuned to the spirit of innovation and debate, the re-thinking and replacing of old structures, which characterised the School of Comparative Studies. The interest in comparing one literature with another – in seeking, for example, analogues to Pushkin or Dostoevsky among English writers – was strongly his own interest, too, as indeed was our other main question of that time: what *is* the 'literary'; what makes us call something 'poetry'?

Stanley was a dedicated and enthusiastic teacher. Joining the Department in 1966 and working alongside him until his resignation in 1975, I saw how constantly he encouraged students to appreciate beauty, and to think, inquire, judge. At his death last month, I phoned, out of the blue, someone who had been a student of ours in 1967/8, Mervyn Barker (now a retired English literature teacher), and asked what he remembered of Stanley. Mervyn recalled presenting a seminar paper on Sholokhov, to which Stanley had responded by actually clapping his hands in delight at its provocative argument; from that response the young student had gained a self-confidence which lasted throughout his career.

Innovation was of the essence of the University in those years and Stanley was particularly active in devising and teaching new schemes of study, both in the Department and in the School. He was a major contributor to the all-important first-year course on the Enlightenment (one of Essex's particular successes); as well as to the establishing of two M.A. schemes – the 'M.A. in Sociology of Literature', which attracted many celebrated

writers as guest lecturers, and the 'M.A. in Literary Translation', which ran, highly productively, for some thirty years: both these graduate schemes enhanced the Department's fame. Stanley was very much a founding father of the Department of Literature.

As well as a remarkable scholar, Stanley was a convivial companion and a great friend, even if sometimes uncomfortably challenging. His wit could take thespian forms, as when once, under 'AOB' at a department gathering, he offered to play us a rare recording he had had the great luck to acquire – the voice of a now aged Russian futurist speaking in broken English about his revolutionary ideas of half a century ago. We listened to it, gripped by the typically Russian-poetic voice of the futurist: deep and gruff, impassioned by ideas, indescribably melancholy. Only later did Stanley confess that it was a recording he himself had made, of his own voice.

Stanley Mitchell's main love in Russian literature had always been for the prose and poetry of Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837). Above all, he wanted to produce a translation of Pushkin's greatest oeuvre, the 'novel-in-verse', *Evgeny Onegin* – a translation which would be far better than any of those yet published. In 1966, he and Donald Davie started a series of seminars devoted to translating *Onegin*: the faults of the existing translations were thoroughly identified, while Pushkin's verse patterns, his varying style, intonations – everything that made his achievement unique – were examined and described. When the seminars ceased, the rest of us moved away into other research preoccupations, but Stanley kept the *Onegin* project alive, until – in 2008 (after many travels and career promotions elsewhere) – he published, in Penguin Classics, his completed translation: *Eugene Onegin*, all of Pushkin's nine-plus-one chapters, the nearly 6,000 lines of strictly regulated, endlessly vibrant, poetry, at last in wonderfully Pushkinian English. A year ago he came back to Essex and gave an inspiring talk about the difficulty and the exhilaration of translating Pushkin, and up to the day he died he was engaged in translating another great work of Pushkin's, *The Bronze Horseman*. That must remain a loss to us, but his *Onegin* has met with widespread acclaim and is praised by critics as indeed the best translation of that work. Thus Stanley Mitchell fulfilled the ambition born in the first years of the life of Essex University.

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