
NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

CARL RAY PROFFER, 1938–1984

Just inside the front doorway to Carl Proffer's rambling home in Ann Arbor, and not far from the handsome study in which he usually worked until 4 a.m., stands a bookcase seven feet tall and six feet wide. This case, with considerable overflow, holds the more than 350 titles (about half in Russian, half in English) which Carl and his wife Ellendea published in their Ardis Publishers from its beginnings in 1971 until Carl's death in September 1984. In the basement of this same large house, Ardis continues to hum and thrive under Ellendea's direction. The Proffers built well.

The outlines of Carl's academic career are simple. He completed his B.A. (1960), M.A. (1961), and Ph.D. (1963)—all in Russian literature—at the University of Michigan. He taught Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at Reed College from 1963 to 1966, at Indiana University from 1966 to 1970, and at Michigan from 1970 until his death. He did research in Moscow for two six-month periods (1962 and 1969) and one three-month period (1972). All in all, he made ten trips to the Soviet Union. Within this ordinary framework and relatively short span of time, however, there was extraordinary accomplishment.

I first met Carl when he was a nineteen-year-old sophomore who had just decided to abandon varsity basketball—lanky, soft-spoken, and somewhat cherubic in countenance. Although his manner was quiet, he was by no means diffident. Even then there was ample self-assurance behind his wry smile and impish, sometimes sardonic humor. He turned out to be the best student I have ever known. His memory was amazing. He was enormously efficient, energetic, and imaginative, and he wrote beautifully. He sailed through graduate school in record time.

Carl had scarcely finished his graduate work when the articles began coming out—first on Zamiatin and then on Gogol', Pushkin, and others. In 1967 and 1968, three of his books appeared: his translated edition of *The Letters of Nikolai Gogol*, his revised dissertation *The Simile and Gogol's Dead Souls*, and the first fruits of his enduring fascination with Vladimir Nabokov, *Keys to Lolita*. From 1970 through 1972, five translated editions were published—the anthology of short stories *From Karamzin to Bunin*, *The Critical Prose of Alexander Pushkin*, two collections of the works of Mikhail Bulgakov (both in collaboration with Ellendea Proffer), and *Soviet Criticism of American Literature in the Sixties*.

By then, the Proffers had moved to Ann Arbor and had launched *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, a large and colorful journal designed to bring to light, in translation, the very numerous Russian works of prose, poetry, and criticism that had hitherto been unavailable in English. In addition to translations, *RLT* has provided overview articles on various neglected topics, periods, and movements in Russian literature, as well as bibliographies, articles, and criticism on smaller subjects. A special feature of the journal has been its prominent archival section, which prints, in both the original Russian and in translation, and often in facsimile, important but heretofore unpublished literary documents, such as letters, memoirs, and manuscript fragments. Carl and Ellendea especially wanted their journal to appear “different”—unacademic. To this end, they spent much time and money on design, photographs, and illustrations, and as a result *RLT* is without question the most original and striking periodical in its field.

Because it is intrinsically so expensive to produce, *RLT* would probably not have survived its first few issues had it not been for three special factors: (1) the Proffers were willing to go deeply into debt to support their project, (2) the Proffers at first did virtually all their own typesetting and proofreading and continued to do a substantial amount of

it, and (3) it turned out that Ann Arbor was a center of relatively economical printing. The latter two circumstances encouraged the Proffers to venture into book publishing, shortly after the birth of their journal. Their first title in Russian was a reprint of Osip Mandel'shtam's first volume of poetry, *Kamen'*, and their first in English was a translation of Andrei Belyi's *Kotik Letaeu*.

These first two titles are typical of the Ardis list. Both are works written since 1900 (nearly all of the Ardis publications in Russian are from the twentieth century) and both were suppressed in the USSR. The Proffers' orientation has always been humanistic, not political, but the cultural policies of the Soviet Union have made it necessary for someone in the West to provide a forum for the multitude of gifted writers, living and dead, whom these policies shun. Ardis has been the leader in providing that forum. The Ardis list of books in English is much broader in scope than that in Russian. It includes many of the same suppressed writers, but it also contains numerous works of literary history and criticism, as well as translations of pre-twentieth-century literature, the choice of which was dictated by an astute and sophisticated scholarly awareness of the need for such books. The impact of Carl's efforts on American scholarship in the field is suggested by the fact that seventeen percent of all books on Russian literature reviewed in *Slavic Review*, *Slavic and East European Journal*, and *Russian Review* in the past five years were published by Ardis.

On their first trip together to the Soviet Union in 1969, Carl and Ellendea began collecting snapshots, portraits, and group photographs from the Russian literary world. Realizing the importance of pictures as records of literary life, they created at Ardis an unmatched photographic archive that has become an invaluable source in the history of twentieth-century Russian literature. Their ability to assemble such an archive was based on the same devoted network of acquaintances in the Soviet Union who provided them with suggestions for publication and, not infrequently, manuscripts. Many of these acquaintances eventually became members of the "third wave" of emigration from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and dozens of these have visited the Proffers in Ann Arbor in recent years. It is ironic that numerous Soviet writers on tour of the United States have done the same.

Carl was an indefatigable and excellent translator. Not only did he personally translate eight varied volumes of Russian writing; the seventeen thick volumes of *RLT* contain numerous translations in which Carl, as coeditor, had a hand. He was also a sensitive, perceptive critic and an engaging writer. In my own courses I, like dozens of American teachers of Russian literature, have regularly used three of his anthologies as textbooks. The translations are reliable and authoritative, but even more valuable are the critical commentaries that Carl wrote to accompany them. My favorite, a volume for which many thousands of American readers must be grateful, is the anthology *From Karamzin to Bunin*. In addition to over 400 pages of translated classic Russian short stories, this volume contains 50 pages which Carl called, rather pedantically, I fear, "Practical Criticism for Students" pertaining to these stories. Only the title of these 50 pages could be considered pedantic, for they are in fact gems of original, lively criticism and scholarship of the very highest order.

Carl was an excellent teacher, a distinguished publisher, a fine scholar and critic and, as he carried on an active two-year battle against the cancer which finally took him, an inspiring man.

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