

Andrew R. Durkin

Associate Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures

In 1975 Andy Durkin took a position as visiting assistant professor at Indiana University's Slavic department; one year later, the department, to its credit, hired him as a tenure-track assistant professor; and 33 years later, the department, to its dismay, is bidding a fond retirement to a long-standing and much-valued colleague, friend, and mentor.

Born in Connecticut, where he maintains close ties to this day, Andy earned his bachelor's degree at Boston College, then began his gentle drift Midwest-ward, earning a master's from Columbia University in 1970, followed by a Ph.D., with distinction, from Columbia in 1975. On his way to the Ph.D., he served as visiting assistant professor at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania in 1973–1974—another step in Indiana's direction. During the summer of 1975, Andy made a feint back eastward, serving as visiting assistant professor at his alma mater. And that's when IU drew him away for good.

At IU Andy has played a central role in the Slavic department's Russian literature program, at both the graduate and the undergraduate levels, and has established himself as a significant figure in the study of nineteenth-century Russian realism. In 1983 Andy published a landmark work on one of the earliest of Russia's realist prose-writers, Sergei Aksakov. This book, *Sergei Aksakov and Russian Pastoral* (Rutgers University Press), was not only the first monograph-length study of Aksakov in any Western language, but was also, as reviewers unanimously noted at the time, a work of first-rank critical insights. The central thesis is that the key to understanding Aksakov lies in grasping the pastoral tradition in which his works, which are usually described (or dismissed) as thinly veiled autobiography, were steeped. Andy sensed with startling penetration that Aksakov transposed "the pattern of the hunt itself into the structure and style of the text," and pursued this line of analysis to its broadest conclusions: that hunting, by dint of its reliance on observation and keen experience, is a kind of art itself; and that the literary art of Aksakov resides precisely in his negotiation of artifice and immediacy, myth and experience, apparent transparency and actual complexity. All the reviewers—major figures in the field in their own right—hailed Andy's attentiveness to detail, his penetrating acumen, his ability to ferret meaning out of nuance. One reviewer clearly sensed that this book "should be the standard work" on Aksakov, and, indeed, all serious studies on Aksakov since 1983 are peppered with the phrases "as Durkin shows," "in Durkin's words," "see Durkin for a perceptive reading of . . ." Twenty-five years later we have further proof of the durability of Andy's work: a chapter from this book ("The Strategy of the Hunter") has been reprinted in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, Volume 181 (Gale: 2007).

Yet Andy's expertise quickly grew to include the whole of nineteenth-century realism. His articles range over the works and authors of this period, frequently with a comparativist bent, visible in his earliest published works and carrying over into later publications and presentations: Laclos and Tolstoy, Henry James and Alexander Pushkin, Stephen Crane and Chekhov. Especially Chekhov. If, early in his career, Andy could be called a major figure in the study of a relatively minor author (Aksakov), he soon also established himself as a major figure in the study of a major author, publishing numerous articles in leading Slavic journals on Chekhov's prose and plays, giving talks at national and international conferences, serving repeatedly as manuscript referee and panel chairperson on Russia's most famous doctor and writer.

Back at IU Andy graced his students with course offerings that converted his wealth of knowledge into his students' riches. His courses on Chekhov, Russian drama, Russian literature in a European context, and, especially, his courses on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, including one devoted to the formidable pair of *War and Peace* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, brought his proven skills of exegesis together with his instinct for clear presentation, and made these courses much sought after. Graduate students of Andy's have gone on to make their own mark in the field of Russian realist studies, with notable works on Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky, and, of course, Chekhov.

As a colleague, Andy brought an unflagging geniality, and what Joseph Brodsky called "generosity of spirit," to the fifth floor of Ballantine Hall. Somehow talking to Andy about courses or department business always made work seem less like "work." And you could talk to Andy about almost anything, since he had a quiet way of seeming to know something about every topic under the sun. "I think," he might remark, unassumingly, "that that metaphor of death as a thief comes from somewhere in the New Testament." And sure enough, you find it there in Revelation and add a grateful footnote to your article. What kind of a bird is Pushkin talking about here, you wonder. And it just so happens that Andy is a lifelong bird-watcher. Whale migration? Andy makes an annual pilgrimage to San Diego over winter break to watch them stream southward for the winter—and is always happy to describe it to you. He didn't wear all this knowledge on his sleeve, but it was there if you asked. Andy even managed to combine two of his long-standing interests—in Japanese language and culture, and in birds—with his professional work in Slavic studies, publishing on Akira Kurosawa's transposition of Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot* into film, and writing "a guide to the guides" on birds in nineteenth-century Russia.

No doubt Andy will continue to pursue his many interests in retirement; his gain of free time is our loss. All of us in the Slavic Department—faculty, staff, and students—will miss him terribly, and we wish him all the best.

~Aaron Beaver