



Robert L. Belknap. Photo courtesy of  
Columbia University Archives.

# TEACHING CONTEXTS

## ROBERT L. BELKNAP

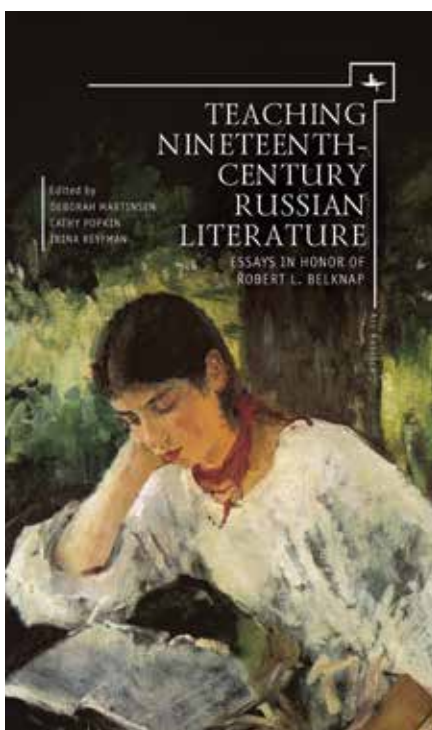
### INTRODUCTION

BY DEBORAH A. MARTINSEN

Bob Belknap was a great scholar who asked questions about narrative, structure, plot, and memory that anticipated entire contemporary disciplines; an internationally renowned and beloved Dostoevsky scholar, whose two books on *The Brothers Karamazov* are universally cited classics of Dostoevsky scholarship; a true University man, who crossed boundaries and brought people together; a wonderful person, who radiated intelligence, generosity, and kindness; and a legendary teacher. It is for his teaching that the Slavic Department honored him in 2010 with a conference on teaching nineteenth-century Russian literature, and it is for the conference volume that Bob wrote the piece published here. Whereas the other essays in the volume—*Teaching Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature: Essays in Honor of Robert L. Belknap*—pay tribute to Bob by outlining strategies for teaching, Bob's essay pays tribute to his education as an educator and to the most memorable course he ever taught.

Robert Lamont Belknap came to Columbia in 1952, after a year studying Russian at the University of Paris. The prior four years he had spent at Princeton University, majoring in English and Latin in the Special Program in the Humanities, and writing a senior thesis under the supervision of New Critic R. P. Blackmur on "The Noble Lie in Plato, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky." At Columbia, he fulfilled most of the requirements for his M.A. before spending a few years in the Army. At Bob Belknap's retirement dinner, Bob Maguire said that when he himself arrived at Columbia as an entering graduate student, he was awed by Bob Belknap. Both Bobs left Columbia for the Army at the same time. Maguire finished

his master's essay before leaving. Belknap didn't. Maguire noted that while he and his group concentrated their full energies on surviving boot camp, rumor had it that Belknap had completed his master's essay there. Bob Belknap blushed and admitted it was true.



Bob Belknap returned to Columbia in 1956 as an instructor, teaching Literature Humanities and two other courses each semester and finishing his dissertation on *The Structure of "The Brothers Karamazov"* in 1960. During the next fifty-four years, Bob served as acting dean of Columbia College, as associate dean of students, and thrice as chair of Literature Humanities (1963, 1967–70 with one-year break, and 1988–90). He chaired the Columbia Slavic Department in the 1970s and again in the 1990s; he also served as director of the Russian (now Harriman) Institute from 1977 to 1981. After retiring from the Slavic Department in 2000, Bob spent another decade directing the University Seminars, the home of eighty-five interdisciplinary and interinstitutional seminars that gather scholars and practitioners dedicated to a particular line of investigation into a forum that encourages what Bob called "good talk." During his decade at the University Seminars, Bob was also a moving force in

EPIC—Emeritus Professors in Columbia—where he continued the good talk until his death.

From 1956 to 2010, Bob taught Literature Humanities or, twice, the colloquium of which he writes in the article published here, almost every non-sabbatical year, even after retiring from the Slavic Department. In fall 1988, as he returned to chair Lit Hum for the third time, Bob wrote to the incoming teaching

staff, “For a member of our small department, the course, like St. Petersburg, is a window on Europe.” Next Bob outlined his teaching philosophy: “In preparing for the course, bear in mind that students rarely remember anything we tell them, but often remember what they say themselves.” He asked us to “coax intelligent formulations” from our students, reminding us that “astonishingly often the facts about a Greek or Roman or Biblical text come from that text itself. When they do, your students can discover them if you direct attention to the appropriate passage.” And he urged us to consider staff meetings as a “sacred” hour in our schedules, by observing that “within our course we all are working at the edges of our central expertise, using our wits and one another in an enterprise as exciting and as valuable as the education of our students: the education of the faculty at a great university.”

In the classroom, Bob asked probing questions, guiding and inspiring students to make discoveries for themselves. Under his guidance, class went further, wider, and deeper than students expected. Columbia College undergraduates recognized his extraordinary teaching in 1980 by awarding him the Mark Van Doren Prize. Three decades later, the Society of Columbia Graduates chose him as the recipient of their Great Teacher Award. Students in his last group of lucky Lit Hum students believed that Professor Belknap “seems to have read every book ever written, ... knows the *Aeneid* almost by heart in Latin, ... and ... can act Shakespeare better than any actor.” In the fall of 2013, four months before he died, the family of Julia and Jay Lindsey (CC ’75) established the Robert L. Belknap Core Faculty Fellowship, a fitting gift for a great educator.

In accepting the Society of Graduates Great Teacher Award in 2010, Bob said: “Columbia is great in many ways, but it exceeds all other universities in the way it goes on educating its own professors. Most universities leave that job to the departments, which do it pretty well. But Columbia has the Core Curriculum, and the Regional Studies Institutes, both invented here, and uses them to educate us all in areas between our specialties, where many times the real excitement lies.” Although Bob did most of his teaching in the Slavic Department and the Core Curriculum, in the essay that follows he describes a course he team taught in the early eighties. Reflecting on that course almost forty years later, Bob observed: “My test of any course I teach is what I learn from it. That spring I learned a lot.”

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Robert L. Belknap’s essay “Teaching Contexts” is reprinted from *Teaching Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature: Essays in Honor of Robert L. Belknap*, edited by Deborah Martinsen, Cathy Popkin, and Irina Reyfman, with the kind permission of the publisher, Academic Studies Press.

## TEACHING CONTEXTS

BY ROBERT L. BELKNAP

Let me begin with the warmest thanks for this volume, and for the conference that generated it, one of the high points of my life. I loved it not only because so many students, friends, and colleagues came together, with me and with one another, but also because it was a concentrated moment of something I have rejoiced in all my life: learning from my students and my interlocutors. My six decades of studying and teaching nineteenth-century Russian literature and other matters at Columbia have shown me a variety of structures for this kind of learning that deserve discussion.

In American academia, teaching competes with scholarship for our time. European systems sometimes place their good scholars at the universities, and their great scholars in the Academy of Science for pure research. But even the Academy sometimes insists on teaching students too, just as the Rockefeller Institute felt it had to turn into Rockefeller University. The students were cheap labor, of course, but these most rarified scholars also recognized them as a pretext for encounters beyond one’s specialty. Rigor demands specialization, but students demand context, and even the purest virologist, econometrician, or Slavist cannot stand alone, apart from intersecting fields.

We should always investigate and always teach everything in its context, biographical, psychological, historical, political, economic, literary, linguistic, religious, etc., in our Russian literature, and, equally, in other subjects. And yet life is too short for any of us to know most of these contexts with scholarly expertise. Marc Raeff used to say that we could have a monographic control of one or maybe two fields, and only a textbook knowledge of anything else. Our scholarly

or pedagogical use of context is therefore either amateurish or dependent on the expertise of others. Universities exist to enable scholars to use each other's brains, but often they do not make it easy.

In the field of literature, context threatens rigor in a special way. A text is a fearsome thing, emotionally and intellectually. Like the most benighted savages in some colonial accounts, when shot at it shoots back, and any serious literary scholar has had formulations pierced by literary fact. In self-defense we may therefore prefer to discuss more obedient matters, like the Marxism we absorbed as freshmen, or the Freudian doctrine we picked up from our shrinks, or other fields made simple by our lack of mature study. Context can shield us from the text.

The New Critics responded to this risk in times when literary criticism often took the form of "The Life and Works of ..." or "... in My Life." They wrote manifestos demanding concentration on

a text and ignoring the author's biography, the reader's reaction, the background, and such, but when they wrote practical criticism, as opposed to *Practical Criticism*, they often divulged the breadth of their curiosity and waded into deep waters from the safe ground of their technical task. In the same way, the Russian Formalists had positivistic dreams of studying not literature but *literaturnost'*, in all its purity, but their later careers displayed them as broadly learned philologists.

In my own Proseminar for beginning Columbia graduate students, I usually stole a pedagogical trick from I. A. Richards to minimize context at the start. I picked a fairly obscure short story and asked the students to write a Freudian or Marxian or Feminist or Semiotic or other kind of paper on it, without knowing the author or even the title of the story. One author blew his cover when a careful student found that the story's title was cited as the dictionary's example of a rare

word. Nowadays computer searches make anonymity harder. One time an angry Soviet émigré refused to write the first paper without knowing the author's name. I didn't know her yet and secretly suspected that I was making plagiarism too difficult, or terrifying someone who had never expressed an opinion not ratified by an encyclopedia, but I had to admit that she was right to be angry. Even an American could understand that books are social, economic, and political products. But this course was not real life. It was like training a boxer with one hand tied behind his back. She had to learn tough ways to bob and weave and prepare for an uppercut, but half-way through the course would be allowed to meet the onslaught of a text with a fuller sense of its context.

The amateurishness inherent in context and the narrowness that rigor demands of finite humans temper each other in three great academic inventions made at Columbia in the first half of the nine-

***“Professor Belknap ‘seems to have read every book ever written, ... knows the Aeneid by heart in Latin, ... and ... can act Shakespeare better than any actor.’”***



From left to right: Robert Belknap was known for the expressive use of his hands when making a point, as the first two photographs capture some decades apart. The color photos were taken at the conference in Belknap's honor held at Columbia University in 2010. Middle photo courtesy of Hilde Hoogenboom.

teenth century: the Core Curriculum, the Regional Studies Institute, and the University Seminars. The first two serve the students directly, but all three serve them indirectly, by educating their professors. I learned a great deal in college and graduate school, but far more through my teaching at Columbia. Dostoevsky lives in many contexts, but for most Columbia undergraduates, *Crime and Punishment* exists not in the company of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov, but in that of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Virgil, Genesis, Matthew, St. Augustine, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Cervantes, Goethe, Austen, Woolf, and the other figures all Columbia College students read and discuss in the required Humanities course. A thousand students read each one of these books the same week every year in the residence halls. As their fifty teachers moved through this same list of readings, some of us treated it as a course in Plato and his footnoters, others as Homer and his imitators, others as Goethe and his sources. For Slavists it can become a course on the two thousand years' work it took to produce Dostoevsky.

But first-year college students rarely care about *quellenforschung*. More tellingly, the family structures in the *Oresteia*, *Oedipus*, *The Bacchae*, or *Don Quixote* gave them fresh ways to see the presence and the absence of families in *Crime and Punishment*, the step-by-step

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extermination of the married couples, the Svidrigailovs, the Marmeladovs, and the Raskolnikov parents, leaving only the explosive lieutenant whom Raskolnikov inexplicably selects for his final, proper confession, after rehearsals with the single people, Zametov, Porfiry, Razumikhin, and Sonia. The readings in Plato, Augustine, Dante, and the Bible enable the Humanities staff to show how that confession was the means to, not the result of, Raskolnikov's repentance, and how his secular pilgrimage moves in steps, like the mystical experiences encountered in the course. I know most of the people who have taught this course since 1956, but even if I did not, it is easy to recognize the scholarship of anyone who has had to discuss this list of books for several hours each with a roomful of disrespectful Columbia students. The intimacy and unforeseeability of reference is different, and *Crime and Punishment* is different for them.

Columbia invented this kind of course for social studies almost a century ago, and expanded it to include the humanities in the thirties, the arts in the fifties, and the natural sciences very recently.

St. John's College expanded the model to include most of its curriculum, and Chicago, Harvard, and many other universities tried out versions of it, though most made students select among a variety of more specialized courses, sacrificing the dormitory discussions to faculty fears of overwork or lack of rigor. For students, such programs can be valuable, but they let professors wall themselves inside their specialties in ways that may advance careers while delaying the advancement of knowledge that often occurs in the fields between established specialties.

The Russian Institute was the first of its kind, and still very young when I became a graduate student in 1952. For a certificate, I had to get an M.A. in Slavic for rigor, but also take courses in politics, international affairs, economics, and history, for context. The courses were not amateurish. John Hazard taught Soviet law and politics with the practicality of an American lawyer who had graduated from a Soviet law school in the 1930s. Abe Bergson was one of the inventors of matrix economics. He used the fact that each car required a knowable amount of steel, and that this amount of steel, in turn, required a knowable amount of coal, and so on, to figure out from incomplete, inaccurate, and sometimes falsified data what was actually going on in the Soviet economy. I had never taken an economics course before; it is weird and wonderful to jump into a field at the graduate level. My basic ignorance was spectacular and my learning curve high; the experience prepared me to teach an economist or a law school student in the Russian Institute that a Soviet farce about having to share a room with one's ex-

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spouse was part of a tradition going back beyond Menander, as well as a reflection on Soviet property rights and on the political allocation of economic resources. The Institute kept me doing that all my life. I ran it while Marshall Shulman was serving in Washington, and still profit from my encounters with colleagues and visitors doing all sorts of things involving Russia and its empire.

Columbia's third great contextualizing invention is the University Seminars, for professors and other experts from Columbia or elsewhere. The eighty groups meet every month either to solve some problem that falls outside any one department or to listen politely to a speaker who claims to have solved it, but may or may not be able to answer the Seminar's questioning. Academic departments should try to hire masters of the latest intellectual approaches and subjects. Ideally, departments should also be thinking of the next way of thinking, but

that is unknowable, and hiring a brilliant young scholar exploring a dead end may cost a department millions of dollars over a lifetime. University Seminars pay no salaries and can take intellectual risks that departments should avoid.

I first learned about the Seminars at a weekly luncheon of the Humanities staff at which Susan Sontag and Walter Sokel happened to discuss an argument at the Hermeneutics Seminar the night before between Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas, a wonderful philosopher at the New School, who earlier had been a lieutenant general in the Israeli army. They invited me to attend, and I continued to educate myself there until the Seminar split in two: one on religion and one on literary theory. Both interested me, but I spent more time in the latter, and also in the Seminar on Slavic History and Culture. These Seminars changed with the times, but they offered the chance to interact with experts of all sorts who wanted to

exploit the intellectual riches of New York. The Russian Formalists had ideas that could only be systematized by the French Structuralists, and the Seminar on Literary Theory brought us together. When Edward Said chaired it, I began to see the Soviet handling of Ukrainian language and literature, or translations of central Asian literatures, in the light of imperialism and orientalism, though some members of the Seminar rejected those terms when applied to the Great Socialist Experiment.

The first two of these Columbia inventions have spread around the country, modified to match the needs, resources, and cultures of many universities, for in the academic world, at least, practices thrive only if they are invented or reinvented by the faculty that will use them. The University Seminars remain unique, partly because Frank Tannenbaum endowed them, and no one has made similar endowments elsewhere,

Portrait of Fyodor Dostoevsky  
by Vasily Perov (1872).





and partly because New York is probably the only area in which there are three thousand people who want that kind of interdepartmental excitement.

But I want to talk about a fourth academic adventure at Columbia, one that never spread or even continued, but was the finest teaching experience I ever had, the most contextual and among the most rigorous. I sat down with Michael Rengstorf, a semiotician in the French Department, and David Robertson, a major expert on Victorian literature and art, to invent a course that would use the often wasted final college semester to continue the general education most Columbia students interrupt to concentrate on their major. By the end of senior year, they relax; they feel informed about their field, and at the time this experiment was performed they were usually already placed in a graduate school or a job. We conceived a twelve-point course on European prose of the 1860s. This would be considered a full program for a Columbia senior, though one more course might be allowed.

We decided to spend all day on Tuesdays and Thursdays with the students. One of us would lecture from 9:00 to 11:00 on that week's book, with the other two attending and learning. Then we would split the students into three groups of ten to discuss it. Around 1:00, we would move to a different room for lunch, and ask a colleague to give a lecture on a topic beyond our expertise (none

refused, unless they were absent from the city), and in the afternoon, we would break up again into groups of ten, but this time according to our specialty: the French-speakers with Rengstorf, the English majors with Robertson, and the couple of Russian majors, together with the historians, mathematicians, and the others, with me. Each afternoon session had its own additional assignments and oral reports from the students, culminating in a week with no lectures during which each student wrote a thirty-page paper emerging from the reports. The English, French, Russian, and History Departments accepted the course as satisfying their major requirements for a seminar and one additional course. We put together a fat book with a chronology, a list identifying political, religious, scholarly, and literary figures in our three countries who would appear in our texts, a table of currency values, a bibliography, and the texts of assignments that were out of print.

Our reading list scared even us. We admitted students after vetting their records and interviewing them, so that we could warn them to read *War and Peace* over Christmas vacation, since they would

Left: Portrait of Leo Tolstoy by Ilya Repin (1901).

***Our reading list scared even us. We admitted students after vetting their records and interviewing them, so that we could warn them to read War and Peace over Christmas vacation, since they would have to discuss it in a group of ten for four hours in the first week of the course.***

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have to discuss it in a group of ten for four hours in the first week of the course. That week, Istvan Deak lectured at lunch on the Crimean War, and Elizabeth Valkenier on the collision between the *Peredvizhniki* and the more academic Russian art establishment. The English group concentrated on the historical background, and the French group on the doctrines of realism, while the Russian group had an additional assignment, Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Stories* (for us, the 1860s actually began in the 1850s). For me, these texts offered a sense of the continuities and the evolution in Tolstoy's attitude toward war, and his capacity to see the slogging soldier in his international context. I have taught *Anna Karenina* and many other Tolstoy works quite often, but this was my only chance to teach *War and Peace*. My teaching of Borodino had to prepare the students for Victor Hugo's "Waterloo," which they would read about during their next vacation. Most of us have done comparisons of battle scenes in class, but this time I had to do half of a comparison, and it was an entrancing exercise. With this first reading, I also had to mark the picture of political life for comparison with that of Trollope, whom Tolstoy admired so highly, and map the seductions to prepare the students for Flaubert. For the students, Tolstoy also offered a historical context for the rest of the course, in the Napoleonic period and the Crimean War.

The next week, we jumped to England and read *Our Mutual Friend*, with a separate assignment for the Russian group, Aksakov's *Family Chronicle*. The Russian authors had adored Dickens, but in this course the undergraduates were more

interested in comparing the plotting of family structures and relationships, or the handling of suspense, than in the actual literary influences. That week at lunch, Karl-Ludwig Selig, a German expert on the Spanish Renaissance, talked about the novella as it was developed all over Europe, in a tradition going back to his beloved Boccaccio. Robert Paxton, whose specialty is twentieth-century French history, discussed the 1860s in France.

We pressed on into France with *Madame Bovary*, and back to Russia the next week with Goncharov's *Oblomov*. The Russian afternoon group read Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, a novel with a very different take on marriage and society than Flaubert's, and the critique of *Oblomov* by Dobrolyubov, another radical. The juxtaposition was wild, and the Russian adultery novel came to life far better than it ever had for me when I had taught it in the immediate glare of Dostoevsky's attack in the *Notes from Underground*. A lunchtime lecture on opera by Hubert Doris gave us a context for both novels, as did one by Leopold Haimson on the emergence of a Russian working class among the peasants laboring winters in the Petersburg textile mills. Both lectures were brilliant set pieces from which the three professors learned as much as the students did. Haimson's talk was bracketed intellectually by that of Edward Malefakis, a colleague of his in the History Department, on the European peasantry, and that of the sociologist, Allan Silver, on social classes.

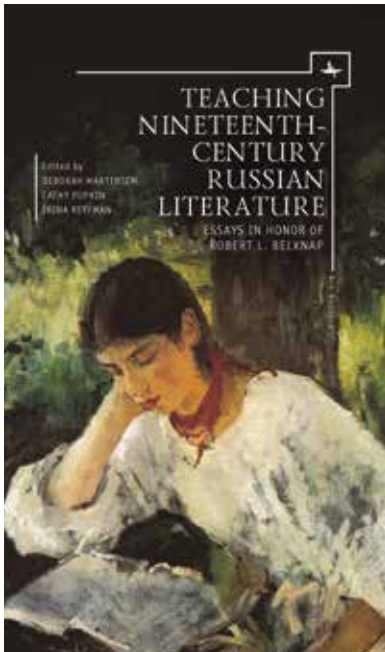
For the next two weeks, we read intellectual history for our morning sessions—John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and some Huxley essays on Darwin the first week,

and religious writers the second week: George Eliot's translation of Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (for one afternoon group in the original), a Jowett essay, and Cardinal Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. Our lunchtime lecturers included Samuel Devons discussing physics in the 1860s and Maxwell's achievements, and Donald Ritchie discussing Darwin. For a lunch considering the closely-related religious controversies and anxieties of the period, Canon Edward West invited us to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and explained how unthreatening some of Darwin teachings were to a congregation that loved to sing "A thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone," while others seemed to threaten their faith. Allan Silver used his background as a sociologist for a lecture on the European social classes, and David Robertson, whose expertise included alpinism and who had climbed and trekked a good deal in the Himalayas, spoke on the Great Game, discussing Britain and Russia in Central Asia.

The last week before spring vacation, we all read Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and the section of Herzen's *Past and Thoughts* dealing with his life in Europe in the 1850s and 1860s. We had neither the expertise nor the time to deal with many literatures, but that week Gertrud Sakrawa outlined the chief events in the German literatures of the period, and Olga Ragusa did the same for the Italian. The Russian section in these weeks concentrated on the literature reflecting this period, which produced institutional changes that may have been greater and more rapid than those of any others from Peter the Great to Gorbachev: Pisarev's "Destruction of Aesthetics" and short stories by Sleptsov, Levitov, Naumov, Uspensky, and Reshetnikov.

The next week, most students left Columbia, but not those taking this course. They all read *Les Misérables*, partly in French, for one group, and the Russian group read Pisemsky's *A Thousand Souls*, too. That week, our lunchtime





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lectures dealt with French too: Michael Riffaterre discussed Lautréamont, and LeRoy Breunig Baudelaire. We followed this huge immersion with a week on each of our central literatures, Trollope's *Phineas Finn*, Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The Russian group read Pavlova's *A Double Life*, a selection from Saltykov-Shchedrin's *Fables*, and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. In those weeks, Anne Prescott spoke on Lewis Carroll, Allen Staley on English painting, Joan Rosasco on French painting, and Richard Kuhns on the aesthetic doctrines of the time.

In our final three weeks, our lunchtime talks continued to consider the arts, with Mary McLeod treating Haussmann's architectural activities in Paris, Richard Taruskin Russian music, and Theodore Reff French painting. In addition, Paula Hyman discussed the Jews in Europe, and Fritz Stern the subject of his major study, Bismarck. In two of those weeks, our readings returned to intellectual history and literary criticism, considering Matthew Arnold, Ruskin, Mill, Sainte-Beuve, the Goncourts, Baudelaire, Taine, Dmitry Pisarev, and Apollon Grigoriev. Few scholars had ever encountered the Russians in this company, who seemed as intelligent as the European masters, but far less universal in their concerns. Our Russian group read Leskov's *Enigmatic Man*, which, like the Dostoevsky readings in this course, attacked and ridiculed the social upheaval that inspired Pisarev and the "Men of the Sixties." These deliberations over what we had been surveying throughout much of Europe helped to organize the wild array of half-processed experiences we were still reeling from.

The penultimate week of the course did this job better than any reading could. We had no lectures or class meetings, though we stayed available in our offices while the students worked day and night on the thirty-page papers that grew out of the reports they had given in their afternoon sessions. These were undergraduate papers, not research scholarship

but thirty serious tunnelings into one or another corner of the texts we had read, illuminated by the intense experience of all the other texts and the way they reached out to one another and beyond.

Those students are scattered now, doctors, lawyers, merchants—maybe a thief or two!—and when they stop me on the street or in a theatre (as still happens), they have forgotten most of our lectures and much of their readings but clearly remember what they said in their papers. More important, we all go on exploring things that seized our minds in those three months during which the thirty-three of us drenched ourselves in one embayment of a mighty ocean.

We only taught this course twice. It needed imitators to attract enough students from other courses that could then be closed, and thus liberate their professors for such an adventure. Some universities concentrate their energies on a single topic every term, but for Columbia the last semester seemed best. It may never happen here again. The pressure for stellar careers has led the Columbia faculty to yield the governance of the university to administrators with other priorities. However, maybe this account will provoke other teaching experiments that also teach professors to maintain their rigor in the huge complexity of the world. □