

Remembering "Ulbandus Review"

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## Remembering *Ulbodus Review*

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy

The idea for *Ulbodus Review* was conceived in a Mexican restaurant called Pancho Villa. The windows of the restaurant looked out onto Columbus Avenue and the back of the Natural History Museum, and the food was mediocre. I'm not sure I ever ate there again, but until it went out of business only a year or so ago, I used to experience a twinge of nostalgia every time I passed. And since, in the way of New York City, another Mexican restaurant now occupies the same space, I can't help but think of *Ulbodus* when I pass.

So one day, probably in 1976, Michael ("Misha") Naydan (who went on to put his *Ulbodus* experience to good use as editor of *The Slavic and East European Journal*) and I, both of us graduate students in the Columbia Slavic Department at the time, were venting our dissatisfaction with our lot in life, as graduate students are wont to do. Why didn't the faculty understand and value us? Why didn't our fellow graduate students get along better and share their work? As we munched on our tacos and burritos, lamenting the lack of community and intellectual interchange, we hit on the idea of producing a mimeographed (such was the level of technology available to us!) newsletter in which to circulate our work within the department. Perhaps it's only in retrospect that I think of us in terms of one of those old movies in which Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, still in their teens, get caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment: "Hey kids, let's put on a show!" We certainly were just as optimistic—and just as naive about what we were getting ourselves into.

Our enthusiasm survived the meal and we began to spread the idea among our friends in the department. One who was quick to jump onto the bandwagon with us was Peter Scotto (now teaching at Mt. Holyoke). Peter and I were doing an independent study on Soviet literature with Rufus Mathewson that semester, and he was then chair of the Slavic Department, so Peter and I went to him with the idea. It's hard to believe that Professor Mathewson (as a junior graduate student, it was never my privilege to be on "Rufus" terms with him) has been gone for twenty-four years now. Barely a year before the cancer that was to kill him

was diagnosed, he was still very much alive and always a bit disheveled, ever with a lit cigarette in his hand, in class and out. At that time the Slavic Department (which was to move to the seventh floor of Hamilton Hall a year or two later) still shared the twelfth floor of the International Affairs Building with what was then the Russian Institute—and is now the Harriman Institute. The door to Professor Mathewson's always smoky office was ever open to students dropping by to discuss ideas. When we went as a delegation to broach the subject to him, he was immediately all for the idea, saying he'd long wanted the students to found a journal, but had felt that the idea had to come from the students themselves. His only reservation about the proposal was that he didn't like the title we originally chose, *Anchar*, because it denoted a poisonous tree.

In the wake of that conversation, it was Misha and Peter who proposed the title *Ulbundus Review*, inspired by something they had learned in a class taught by another Columbia "great" of the time, the linguist Georgy Shevelov, who only recently passed away. I reproduce here the gloss on the title printed in the first issue of the journal:

Centuries ago the Old Slavs encountered their neighbors, the Old Goths, who introduced them to the word *ulbandus* (derived originally from the Latin *elephantus*). The Old Goths defined the *ulbandus* as a big exotic wandering animal. The Slavs had never seen such an animal, but they appropriated the word, adapting it to their own tongues. Thus, the folk-etymologized Slavic version of *ulbandus* was born—with one minor complicating factor. It seems that the first big exotic wandering animal that the Old Slavs encountered was a camel. So the Gothic elephant became a Slavic camel.

With this issue of *Ulbundus Review* a new exotic animal is born.

Thus it was that the vagaries and perils of translation between cultures became the signal idea of the project. I should add in this connection that, while the subjects of all of the covers of *Ulbundus Review* issues were chosen for their appropriateness to the journal's "line," the first issue was and remains exemplary of the way those of us who produced the journal thought of ourselves and our project. We styled ourselves, of course, the black sheep in the herd of white ones depicted in a wood block by the

famous and then still living Ukrainian artist Jacques Hnizdovsky. (I think that it particularly appealed to us as well that only a relatively few of the prints existed, since the artist had gone on to cut the original wood block after printing a limited run, making the one black sheep into a conventional white one.)

Rufus Mathewson's support of the nascent publication was not limited to caveats and encouraging words, however. He also convinced the faculty committee overseeing the Bakhmetieff Endowment at Columbia to grant us \$1,000 to publish *Uibandus*. It seemed a fortune to us at the time. Suddenly *Uibandus* was not just a mimeographed intra-departmental sheet, but a full-fledged journal. All we had to do was gather the material, edit it, and publish it. Little did we know what that entailed.

It's hard to remember now the exact order and chronology of the development of the journal, but the evolution of *Uibandus*, including the shape the journal finally took, was certainly influenced by the context of the state of the field and the concerns, interests, and ambitions of the graduate students of the time. The topics of the articles published in the journal, for instance, give an idea of the subjects that interested Columbia graduate students in those days. Although virtually from the beginning *Uibandus* solicited and received submissions not only from a broad Columbia community including faculty and alumni, but from the general field as well, most of the writing that went into the journal was by current graduate students, and the editors and staff conceived it as part of the journal's mission to help get our peers into print, which often included extensive editing suggestions. (In general, we took our task as editors very seriously; indeed, some of our authors and even staff suggested that we had a tendency to be overzealous in our rewriting and slavish devotion to MLA footnote format! And while the majority of our contributors were good sports about our editorial enthusiasm, there were those who took it amiss, such as one author who resisted repeated attempts to get him to remove the parenthetical expression "small men in any case" from an article on Chekhov.) Excerpts of quite a number of MA essays and dissertations were worked into articles for the journal. As far as the format of *Uibandus Review* was concerned, what came to be known simply as "the journal article"—an article devoted to the history of Russian journalism in every issue—stemmed directly from the journal section of the written Ph.D.

exam. Frustrated by the difficulty of finding good materials from which to study and inspired by Robert Maguire's pioneering efforts in the area, the journal's staff was happy to promote scholarship in that area. In the late 1980s, when publication of *Ulbandus* itself was in abeyance, the editors decided to go ahead with a longstanding plan to collect the journal articles into a book volume and solicited supplementary articles on the history of Russian journalism. The result of this effort, *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia*, was edited by Deborah Martinsen and published by Cambridge University Press in 2000. On the other hand, the journal's encouragement of review articles on works of contemporary Soviet literature was designed to fill a gap in the offerings of the department and the field at the time, just as its translation section filled a niche not filled by other publications in the field.

Yet if the material we were ultimately able to collect, edit, and publish was the most gratifying aspect of work on the journal, what I would broadly term technical issues proved far more daunting. We began to produce *Ulbandus Review*, after all, in the days before the personal computer and computer typesetting, not to mention faxes, email, and internet research resources. Even express mail remained more or less in its infancy at the time. Even for those of us who were there, it is hard to imagine now the amount of sheer manual labor in terms of typing and retyping, running to the library, and cutting and pasting it took to produce an issue. Our original ambitious plans to put out four issues a year very soon dwindled to one issue every one or two years. Having a journal typeset on the then state of the art IBM compositor, moreover, meant finding and dealing with typesetters, which also turned out to be more bothersome than we expected. The first issue provided us with particularly sobering experience in that area. Ever in search of relatively inexpensive options, we gave the manuscript of the first issue to the firm of a well-known émigré Soviet dissident. Not only did the proofs come back to us literally riddled with typos since apparently the typesetters were only experienced in setting Russian, but we received a hefty bill for the correction of the typesetter's mistakes! And then, several issues down the line, there was the Indian typesetter who, it seemed, knew neither English nor Russian...

But then cost over runs became a way of life for *Ulbandus Review*. What had seemed to us the princely sum of a thousand

dollars turned out to be a mere drop in the bucket. Oil prices were at their peak and therefore so were printing costs. The continual need to raise money turned out to be the most time-consuming, frustrating, and yet, paradoxically, congenial part of running the journal. One of our most instructive tactics was to appeal to the alumni of the Columbia Slavic Department for financial support. Not only did we always enjoy a generous return on our fundraising efforts, but I remember the surge of pride I felt for the department the first time I saw the list of graduates and realized what an important contribution Columbia had made to the field over the decades of its existence. Sometimes, though, we resorted to more colorful and less conventional means of raising money. I remember, for instance, the time we printed T-shirts sporting the covers of the first and second issues (in the colors of the issues). We all bought them ourselves as well as peddling them to our friends and relatives. Then one day the remaining stock of shirts was stolen out of 709 Hamilton Hall, where they were being kept. For months afterward wherever I was in New York I kept my eyes peeled for runaway shirts. We also tried to capitalize on the perks of our profession. Any time one of us traveled to the USSR, we would bring back rolls of the bright, predominantly red, propaganda posters that could still be purchased for ten or fifteen kopecks in Moscow or Leningrad at the time. Sales of posters, usually during the first week of school when students were just moving in and decorating their dorm rooms, were particularly profitable. By far our most successful, unrelenting, time-consuming, but fun money raising activity, however, was the bake sale. I don't remember how often we actually held them, but looking back now it seems as if I spent most of the *Ulbodus* years mass-producing brownies, chocolate chip cookies, and banana bread into the wee hours of the night. And I was certainly not alone. Carol Ueland's quiche remains legendary to this day. Then, after staying up most of the night baking, we would spell one another all day long peddling our wares out in front of Hamilton Hall (along with Sam Schulman, the eccentric elderly man who was a fixture at Columbia for decades, selling candy bars and the whimsical, abstract bookmarks and posters of people and beasts he penned himself on cardboard in magic marker for students on their way to classes).<sup>1</sup> The faculty deserves considerable credit for their

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Misha Naydan for supplying me with Sam's last name, which I don't think I—or most other Columbia students—ever knew.

support of this particular activity, I might add.

Of course, despite some initial skepticism about *Ulbodus*, all of the Slavic Department faculty eventually became firm supporters, helping out as advisors and contributors and generally good sports, willing to be edited by their own students (a daunting but rewarding exercise for the students as well). Bob Belknap, though, probably wins the prize for faculty self-sacrifice for *Ulbodus*. He spent one Christmas Eve with then editor Carol Ueland xeroxing hundreds of pages of an NEH grant proposal for *Ulbodus* on the Dean's office machine in Hamilton Hall—and then picked up the cost himself. (Sadly, the proposal, submitted on the eve of Ronald Reagan's inauguration as President, went down to defeat, apparently a casualty of the new administration's funding cuts to the grant agency.)

Roughly speaking, *Ulbodus Review* occupied a large part of five years of my own life and similar chunks of the lives of other Columbia graduate students who took an active part in the journal. The other editors certainly must be listed in first place in terms of time expended. In fact, far from occupying an exalted position of authority above the "riff raff," the editors were where the buck truly stopped, that is, they ended up having to do pretty much everything no one else wanted to do, from baking to running to the library to check footnotes to dickering with typesetters. Nonetheless, the editors-in-chief were largely spared dealing with one of the most time-consuming and demanding tasks—that is, keeping track of subscriptions and finances. Special recognition for this must go to Natalia ("Natasha") Lusin (now working for the Modern Language Association), who, as managing editor, pretty much singlehandedly took care of this crucial aspect of the journal's operation for most of its original run. Yet, as a quick perusal of back issues of the journals shows, virtually all graduate students of the time took part in *Ulbodus* in one way or another—as did the faculty. In fact, it was precisely the opportunity work on the journal afforded for students from different cohorts, some of whom never even took classes together, to get to know one another and for the older students to help the younger ones, in the words of one *Ulbodus* stalwart, "navigate the dangerous waters of the department." So I think we can say, looking back at the reasons for the original founding of *Ulbodus*, that the journal met and even "overfulfilled its quota." I know that I remain proud of the

quality of the journal we produced, which, we felt at the time, came to rival any journal in the field. I also believe that we did a service to ourselves and our peers in terms of learning to edit and transform the raw material of our graduate work into publishable articles. Most important, though, was what is now popularly termed networking. In that context, I have to admit that what I continue to value most from my “*Ulbandus* years” are the friends I made—whether fellow graduate students, faculty, Columbia alumni, or peers and colleagues from other schools who were somehow drawn into the *Ulbandus* web. If what we truly set out to do in founding *Ulbandus Review* the first time around was to build an intellectual community, I believe that we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.

So let me echo the words of Rufus Mathewson a quarter of a century ago: I’m delighted that *Ulbandus Review* is coming back in a new form conceived and shaped by a new generation of Columbia graduate students. I wish them the best of success. And most of all I wish that the new *Ulbandus Review* will bring them friendships and intellectual dialogues to last them a lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Richard Borden, Lisa Bornstein, Judith Kornblatt, Marcus Leviitt, Natasha Lusin, Deborah Martinson, Misha Nайдan, and Carol Ueland for once again pitching in to edit on short notice and supplying valuable comments.

