

Tribute to a Caterfly

Brian J. Boeck

This tribute honors Don Ostrowski as a scholar, a skeptic, and a role model. In an age of restrictively narrow specialization, he has glided across the boundaries that divide periods, methods, and disciplinary perspectives. In a time of increasing demands for policy-relevant research and diminishing opportunities for graduate training in early Russian and Eurasian history, he has mentored a number of young scholars and encouraged numerous successful forays into fertile, pre-1800 pastures avoided by the herd. Whether exposing textological machinations or confronting tautological meta-narratives, Don has displayed an unbridled curiosity blended with source-critical rigor and healthy skepticism.

I first met Don in the mid-1990s when I was starting my graduate study at Harvard. I don't recall the topics of our first conversations, but I vividly remember that during those conversations he asked seemingly innocent questions which prodded me subsequently to undertake multiple trips to the stacks of Widener library in search of answers. Don had already blazed many of the trails that beckoned me, but he always treated my queries as those of a colleague.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s I was fortunate to become a casual member of Don's *salon*. Although my presence in Cambridge was intermittent, due to moves, grants, and extended periods of archival research in Russia, the Early Slavic lunches—later seminars—that Don organized at the Davis Center provided me with a second education. Don made sure that graduate students were most welcome to join visiting luminaries and Cambridge notables in discussing and debating fascinating aspects of the pre-modern past of Eurasia. The casual atmosphere of encouragement and constructive criticism that Don fostered advanced scholarly dialogue in a way that no conference setting could ever match.

Don remained on my mind long after I left Cambridge in 2002. At some point in the 1990s he had suggested to me that world history is a burgeoning field that deserves the attention of scholars of Russia. On a number of occasions he dropped not-so-subtle hints about the value of global approaches. They would not only enhance the teaching resumes of newly minted Ph.D.s, but would also point to new directions for research that insular and nation-centered scholars would never notice. He suggested books, shared his syllabi,

Dubitando: Studies in History and Culture in Honor of Donald Ostrowski. Brian J. Boeck, Russell E. Martin, and Daniel Rowland, eds. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2012, 9-10.

and demonstrated the value of the comparative approach in numerous publications.

Don's own articles and book reviews contain a plethora of insights that historians of the pre-modern world would do well to constantly keep in mind. Scholarly narratives are often no more than "a tangled web of assumptions, bald statements, and misidentifications."¹ Before we can speculate about "what really happened" we must first deal with fontology, which Don defines as "both internal and external analysis of sources with the aim of establishing authorship, date, provenance, and authenticity."² Before we can seriously interpret a historical text, we must know its publication history, its manuscript history, the principles used for editing the text and reproducing variant readings, and the patterns of variation in all extant versions of it. Finally, when sending our own studies out into the world we must strive to present the crucial evidence in a manner that would permit the results of our work with the sources to be confirmed or at least scrutinized by a skeptic like Don.

Above all Don taught me that a true historian knows no boundaries. While his subspecialization is very dear to him, he is equally conversant in the philosophy of history, Hayden White's approaches to historical narratives, textual scholarship, Kuhnian paradigm shifts, silk roads, and world systems. Don co-authored a response to one of the most important 20th-century typologies of history, Ihor Ševčenko's "Two Varieties of Historical Writing." Ševčenko divided historical practitioners into the categories of technical historians and vivid historians, comparing the former to caterpillars focused on cabbage leaves (sources and small-scale insights) and the latter to butterflies which flutter across vast expanses of the garden (to grasp the big picture and display colorful flourishes that speak to contemporaries).³ Don endorsed the notion that the ideal historian "would be able to operate with equal facility on many different levels of historical investigation, from the fontological to the fictional."⁴ This "caterfly" would change shapes, shift back and forth between forms, and break free of all paradigmatic constraints. Three decades after helping to coin the term, Don himself exemplifies this rarest of all historical

¹ Donald Ostrowski, review of *Maksim Grek v Rossii*, by N. V. Sinitsyna, *Kritika* 15, no. 1 (1979): 19.

² Donald Ostrowski, "A 'Fontological' Investigation of the Muscovite Church Council of 1503" (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1977), vi.

³ Ihor Ševčenko, "Two Varieties of Historical Writing," *History and Theory* 8 (1969): 332–45.

⁴ Ellen Hurwitz and Donald Ostrowski, "The Many Varieties of Historical Writing: Caterpillars and Butterflies Reexamined," in *Okeanos: Essays Presented to Ihor Ševčenko on His Sixtieth Birthday by His Colleagues and Students*, ed. Cyril Mango, Omeljan Pritsak, and Uliana M. Pasicznyk, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1983), 306.

creatures. Long live the caterfly and woe unto those butterpillars whose studies do not live up to his high standards!