

REFLECTIONS

Total Fears

Daniela S. Hristova

No, this is not just the title of one of my favorite books by Hrabal, about which a friend, to whom I recently recommended it, replied that it was too esoteric. Lacking knowledge either of Czech culture or German philosophy, it was hard for him to grasp all the tumult of free associations Hrabal has employed so masterfully and thus fully understand the beauty of the book. In a similar way, I am afraid my reflections here may sound just as confusing to the majority of current and former graduate students in Slavic linguistics, to whom they are directed. Of course, like previous contributions to this column, mine will also reflect a personal perspective on Slavic linguistics, this time through the eyes of a graduate student soon to go on the job market.

Unavoidably, my position will reflect the fact that I am a native Bulgarian and a newcomer to this country, and I am also a woman, a mother and a wife, in short, an “international returning woman student”. All of this no doubt makes my view on the American graduate student experience even more personal and idiosyncratic. Nonetheless, the fact that for the last ten years Slavic linguistics has been the essence of my (dare I call it) professional life, and one of the things I care very deeply about, makes me as qualified to write about the issue as any other, more traditional graduate student. The reader cannot expect from my “Reflections” the richness of experience, observations, and wisdom previous contributors to this series have had to offer. However, no one should fault me for lack of energy, ideas, or willingness to do everything possible to keep the field of Slavic linguistics vibrant. Maybe it was this eternal optimism that motivated me to contribute a “Reflections” column to *JSL*. I believe that the field needs also to hear the voices of the upcoming generation of Slavic linguists, and I am grateful for this opportunity to become one of those voices.

“Total fears” is the phrase I have been using for the last few years to describe my uncertainty over whether I was doing the right things to best prepare myself for the academic job market. This is surely something that every graduate student experiences. Am I taking the right classes? Should

I cover more Slavic languages or instead concentrate in depth on just one or two of them? Should I do Bulgarian or, since it is my native language, will people take it for granted that I know it linguistically (or even worse, will they assume that I don't, for precisely the same reason!)? How much theoretical linguistics should I do? Which one of my papers and research projects is worth publishing, and where? How should I go about approaching publishers? Is it more important to go to AATSEEL or AAASS? In addition to wondering about these questions which are more or less common to all graduate students, I had my own "female" and more personal questions. Would my colleagues take me seriously if I tell them that I very much enjoy cooking and entertaining, fast cars and good wine, and even—heaven forbid—shopping in malls and dressing to the nines? Are these appropriate diversions for women in American academia? How should I channel my energy and my constant drive to help so that I am not falsely perceived as an aggressive and obnoxious person? Finally, I have asked myself questions about my "Bulgarian connection": How much might my background, and my irrepressible accent, prevent me from getting some teaching position I would otherwise be qualified for? Will the fact that I bring with me all the positives and negatives of not one but two alien educational systems through which I have passed, Bulgarian and Czech, be helpful or harmful?

Here I would like to divulge something which will probably not come as a surprise to anyone who has ever committed to an esoteric scholarly pursuit: the state of fear and constant questioning of everything I was doing at the University of Chicago reached such an unbearable state that I was seriously considering abandoning the Slavic field. I had been made an extremely lucrative corporate offer (yes, we *can* do other things for a living, we just do not want to), which was very hard for me to refuse. Yes, you understood me correctly: I did refuse the offer because in some miraculous way it dawned on me that, not only did I bask in the luxury of being able to spend my time studying Slavic linguistics, but I was doing all the right things to succeed. Despite the dire predictions, I realized I do have a chance. The corporate world will always be there, but I owed it to myself to pursue what I loved pursuing. A few weeks after this realization my decision hit home. During the recent summer institute organized by the Slavic and East European Language Resource Center at Duke and UNC, in answer to my signature question "What should I do to improve my chances on the academic job market?" Edna Andrews simply replied "Nothing more than what you have been doing so far." With this, Edna reaffirmed my newly acquired and more upbeat attitude. Part of my pur-

pose in writing this "Reflections" piece is to try to convey it to my fellow graduate students.

So, what are the things a Slavic linguistics student could and should do (and I wish I still had the time to do) not only to survive in the field and land an academic job, but also to make her work relevant outside the boundaries of Slavic linguistics? Of course, this is not a recipe (after all I myself have not had a chance to experiment with it yet) and I cannot stand behind it the way I guarantee the delicious outcome of the recipes concocted in my kitchen.

When I entered the graduate program in Slavic linguistics at the University of Chicago five years ago, I already thought of myself as a Slavic linguist. Besides my ignorance and the childish excitement of my first scholarly publication in *Južnoslovenski filolog* that same year, now I see no other reasonable explanation for the high linguistic self-esteem in which I held myself then. I had graduated from the University of Sofia as a specialist in Slavic languages and literatures (at least, this is what my university diploma says). The course of university studies in Bulgaria, as well as in Russia and the rest of the East European countries, lasts about five years and finishes with a degree which is equated in some cases to the master's degree in the USA. The training of a "Slavic specialist" in these Slavic departments is generally aimed at producing a philologist with a near-native command of one Slavic language (in addition to Russian) and some reading knowledge of one additional Slavic language. I had my portion of Introduction to Slavic Philology, Slavic Folklore and Slavic Ethnography, Old Church Slavonic, numerous courses on history and structure of Serbo-Croatian, and of course plenty of courses on Bulgarian, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian literature (I was specializing in Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian at the time). All of this and the knowledge of my native Bulgarian culture could potentially prove beneficial if Olga Yokoyama is right in suggesting in *JSL* 2(2) that "it seems worthwhile for graduate students in Slavic linguistics to consider acquiring some expertise in Slavic culture as well." (1994: 194). However, even if she is right, I would rather have spent long nights struggling over articles on Slavic linguistics, instead of reading, for instance, Branko Ćopić's *Prolom* or August Šenoa's *Seljačka buna*.

For some peculiar and, to me, incomprehensible reason, the future holder of a degree in Slavic Languages and Literatures from the University of Sofia was not offered courses in History of Russian or Structure of Russian. Being accepted to the department of Slavic Languages and Literatures meant, moreover, that all the students had suc

cessfully passed the competitive entrance examinations, of which the real hurdle was practical Russian. No more Russian, in any form, was taught or required afterwards. This is probably why many of my fellow students found it so insurmountable and flunked the then-infamous examination in Comparative Grammar of Slavic Languages. For me, however, that was the course that finally made me decide that there is nothing more “cool” than diachronic linguistics. And I felt that the fact that I passed the examination with a high grade was reason enough to proclaim myself a Slavic linguist in my own right.

This newly acquired linguistic attitude was immediately acted upon by my professor of Structure of Serbo-Croatian, my future mentor and friend Lili Lashkova. She was the person who, right after I graduated, asked me to be her assistant in teaching Comparative Grammar of Slavic Languages and convinced me that one can apply for *aspirantura* in Prague without actually knowing Czech. Here I shall digress and say a few words about the importance of mentoring for a graduate student. My observations are surely not specific to students of Slavic linguistics; I dare say I voice the feelings of numerous friends in different fields. As a student, I came with no illusions that I would say something excitingly new or invent something that did not exist before. Many of our professors know perfectly well that they mold us not only with their views on the accent of the imperfect in South Slavic, or the admirative in Arumanian, or the structure of DP in Bulgarian, but also by involving us in their research projects. One of the most gratifying experiences for a student is to write a joint paper with a faculty mentor. This enterprise at best teaches us the subtleties of the craft, and at worst simply helps to make us more comfortable in constantly asking questions and interacting on a professional level. This is what I expect to cherish the most from my time as a graduate student. I still remember my first meeting with Laura Janda, when a few years ago she gave a talk at the University of Chicago. Afterwards she was graciously sharing with a few graduate students how one day “Charlie” (Townsend) suggested to her that they should study Czech together and how supportive he was in this endeavor. Seeing her again this past July at the summer institute (about which a bit more below), and especially envying the involvement of her graduate students in their joint work with her, reconfirmed my belief that dedicated mentoring is what transforms a budding Slavic linguist caterpillar into a full-fledged adult moth. But seriously, I myself have been extremely lucky to have as mentors Howard Aronson, Bill Darden, and Victor Friedman at the University of Chicago and Michael Flier at Harvard University (during my year there as an

Exchange Scholar). These scholars have had to deal almost on a weekly basis with a “very interesting” question of mine and sometimes also with my sincerely impolite “I am not sure I like that answer”.

Having dealt with the mentoring issue as an important component in the making of a Slavic linguist, let us consider the definition of a “Slavic linguist.” One such definition has already been offered on these pages by Steven Franks in his “Reflections” piece from *JSL* 4(1), i.e., “Slavic linguistics means being a linguist who concentrates in Slavic languages” (1998: 3). Another more traditional definition is that of a Slavist who specializes in the linguistic description and analysis of Slavic (in addition to other) languages. The fact that the Slavic linguistics professors at the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago, Howard Aronson, Bill Darden, and Victor Friedman, have joint appointments in the Department of Linguistics confirms my conviction that both definitions are valid. All graduate students in Slavic linguistics at this institution are highly encouraged to take their basic linguistics courses from the Linguistics department and many of them complete a joint degree (a path blazed by Howard Aronson and Victor Friedman as mentor and student). Regretfully, the length of training required for a joint degree proves unacceptable for some students, especially those such as myself who have already taken plenty of time to satisfy their curiosity studying most of the Slavic languages.

At this point I want to suggest something that may be of interest to students for whom a joint program (i.e., a dual degree, meeting two partially complementary sets of requirements) is not the best solution. I have in mind an interdepartmental program (i.e., a degree offering an enhanced intersection rather than simple union) between the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures on the one hand and the Linguistics Department on the other. Such an idea, in another form, was already suggested by Catherine Chvany in her “Reflections” from *JSL* 2(1): “We must rediscover ways of working across departmental and doctrinal boundaries.” Fortunately, the University of Chicago offers a variety of degree options, including one very much like this. Acknowledging the fact that studying Slavic languages and their history and structure outside a modern theoretical context may for some be pointless, we have to admit at the same time that taking obligatory courses in Russian (or other Slavic) literature could be meaningless for those souls who would hardly ever consider teaching a literature course. Instead of literature or area studies courses, these students could take more courses in general linguistics and thus be plagued with such viruses as optimality theory phonology or minimalist

syntax. Such an interdepartmental program will also have the effect of narrowing the gap between the linguists in the two kinds of departments and certainly would prevent future Slavic linguists from falling into isolation. As Steven Franks has urged, "we need to build bridges to our colleagues working on other languages and on language in general if we are to survive and prosper in the academic community of the 21st century" (*JSL* 4(1): 4–5, 1996). While I concur that this is the sort of graduate student opportunity needed to train future Slavic linguists, I must stress that I neither expect nor desire it to replace the more traditional type of program. Rather, it is an essential alternative, albeit one that raises its own set of questions, such as how deficiencies in culture and literature are to be rectified.

There is one more thing a Slavic linguist and especially a graduate student in Slavic linguistics should do not only for the mere purpose of getting a job but also to stay viable in today's world. This is the absolute imperative of keeping up with modern techniques and technologies, both for language teaching and for conducting research. No matter how strongly future Slavic linguists desire to teach only "pure" linguistics classes, all graduate students are perfectly aware that wherever they go they will be expected first and foremost to teach Russian and, if truly lucky, some second Slavic language. The students in these classes have been, are, and will be mainly college undergraduates. Every one of us who ever taught a foreign language completely agrees with Olga Yokoyama that most first-year students "have little or no knowledge about most linguistics concepts" (*JSL* 2(2): 195, 1994). However, we also have to acknowledge that the very same students far supersede many of us in their abilities to use computers in a classroom environment, and if we want to keep them in our classes, we must make use of the "toy" they most like to play with.

Of course, we all use computers, surf the Internet, think of ourselves as more or less enlightened in the use of multi-media and web-based programs in our language teaching. But there is so much more to be done, as I discovered recently while taking part in the Summer Institute in "Slavic and East European Languages: Acquisition, Techniques, and Technologies," organized by the Slavic and East European Language Resource Center at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Wait until you see, for example, the technological prowess of Jim Noblitt from UNC-Chapel Hill, as he creates interactive presentations for his students of Romance languages, or the abilities of George Mitrevski from Auburn University, Alabama, to design Russian web-based exer

cises. I am sure I speak for all the fortunate participants of this institute when I say we were in awe over how much more we can give our students if we work at it. The best part of all was that the participants in this workshop learned how to do these “tricks” and left the institute ready to exploit the innovative methods and technologies. Such comprehensive programs for teachers of Slavic languages are not easy to come by (at least that was the first one I had encountered in the last few years), and this is why such hands-on training is all the more necessary. Graduate students (and even faculty!) in Slavic linguistics benefit immensely from workshops like this, and that benefit is compounded by the sharing of ideas and experiences with other participants.

Meeting colleagues from outside one’s home institution is the last fear I will say a few words about here. Beginning with the very first paper I wrote for my “Verbal Categories” class with Howard Aronson, I was highly encouraged to continue and expand the work on the topic, to present it in front of a larger audience, and to submit it for publication. Of course, such attention was not just my prerogative, this is the encouragement all my graduate student colleagues at the University of Chicago receive and highly appreciate. Yet, for a long time, I was hesitant to develop my course papers for the fear that what I was saying was actually not so interesting or that I would be judged too harshly. Finally, somebody suggested that “they can cut you some slack” and I decided to give it a try at AATSEEL’98 in San Francisco. Not only did I survive, but I received very meaningful words of encouragement from senior members of the audience. From that conference on I have had many opportunities to convince myself that, in addition to one’s scholarly work and field research, it is also essential to establish contacts with colleagues, to interact with them in conferences and workshops, and to learn about their work and talk about common interests. Although there are some things a graduate student does not have much say about, developing professional contacts is one thing we do have control over and it is our obligation to exploit this to the fullest.

Many of us, my fellow graduate students in Slavic linguistics, have been following the discussion over possible directions for our field with understandable interest and with the hope of finding the nostrum for future success. Sorry to say, the right prognosis, if such exists, keeps eluding me. But the first and most important step is overcoming our fears. Only then can we take the initiative to do what needs to be done to build a career. And while I have surely been working towards the conclusions expressed here for several years, for me personally I finally came to under

stand the role of “total fears” through interacting with my fellow participants at the excellent North Carolina summer institute and its unflagging organizers. The hard work and dedication to the field which they expressed, and the respect with which all were treated, have provided an answer to my previous questions and fears.

Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures
University of Chicago
1130 E. 59th St.
Chicago, IL 60637 USA
dhristov@midway.uchicago.edu