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# Elizabeth Cheresh Allen (1951-2017) IN MEMORIAM

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### Elizabeth Cheresh Allen (1951–2017)

Elizabeth Cheresh Allen, Emeritus Professor of Russian and Comparative Literature at Bryn Mawr College, passed away on September 18, 2017, after a long struggle with illness. Liza, as colleagues and family alike referred to her, provided unparalleled leadership in Bryn Mawr's Departments of Russian and Comparative Literature over the course of several decades. She was a generous colleague, mentor, and teacher to so many of us, including the numerous undergraduates and graduate students who studied Russian and comparative literature at Bryn Mawr and at neighboring Haverford College. Liza's leadership, grace, and intelligence will be sorely missed at Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and beyond.

Liza grew up in the Chicago area. After receiving her B.A. from Harvard University in 1973, she went on to Yale University for her doctorate in Slavic Languages and Literatures. At Yale, she wrote her dissertation (on Turgenev) under the close guidance of Robert Louis Jackson. In 1984, Liza received her Ph.D. from Yale, and she remained there for seven more years as an assistant professor in the Slavic Department. In 1991, Liza came to Bryn Mawr, where she received tenure in 1994 before being promoted to full professor in 2004. In May of 2017, she was granted emeritus status. In the final years of her life she resided in Honolulu, Hawaii, with her husband, James Sloan Allen.

Liza was a formidable and highly productive scholar. Her first book, *Beyond Realism: Turgenev's Poetics of Secular Salvation* (Stanford University Press, 1992), insightfully explored the narrative and ethical underpinnings of Ivan Turgenev's prose. Through a series of close textual readings, Liza delved into the multitude of ways that this nineteenth-century Russian realist ventured beyond a straightforward representation of reality to establish complex aesthetic and moral principles in his work. Liza's second book, *A Fallen Idol is Still a God: Lermontov and the Quandaries of Cultural Transition* (Stanford University Press, 2007), offered an eloquent, original look at Mikhail Lermontov's works and their place in the transitional post-Romantic era. By moving past the Byronic code of Romanticism toward Realism, Lermontov articulated the metaphysical, psychological, and aesthetic ambiguities of his time, as Liza insightfully underscored in her close, comparative readings of Lermontov's poetry, prose, and drama. These two books by Liza will benefit both students and scholars for years to come.

Liza also served as co-editor, along with Gary Saul Morson, of *Freedom and Responsibility in Russian Literature: Essays in Honor of Robert Louis Jackson* (Northwestern University Press, 1995), in which Liza's essay, "Turgenev's Last Will and Testament: Poems in Prose," appeared alongside work by other leading scholars in the wide field of Russian literary studies. More recently, Liza was editor of *Before They Were Titans: Essays on The Early Works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy* (Academic Studies Press, 2015), a collection of essays that included Liza's fine piece on Dostoevskii's underappreciated, unfinished novel *Netochka Nezvanova*. Along the way, she also edited and translated a volume of Turgenev's works (*The Essential Turgenev*, Northwestern University Press, 1994), and toward the very end of her career she produced an impressive translation of Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* (Northwestern University Press, 2016).

At Bryn Mawr (and, from time to time, at Haverford), Liza taught a wide range of Russian literature and comparative literature courses. Among her most popular offerings were The Great Questions of Russian Literature, The Russian Anti-Novel, and The

Serious Play of Pushkin and Gogol. In the classroom, Liza guided students through the major works of Russian literature with insightful, engaging clarity and a willingness to grapple with the aesthetic and ethical issues at the heart of these works. Her graduate course, Seminar in Scholarly Research and Writing, became an essential component of Bryn Mawr's doctoral program in Second Language Acquisition.

In addition to her scholarship and teaching, Liza devoted countless hours to editing others' work, for she was a masterful writer with a knack for cogent argumentation and clear, rigorous prose. Few were better at finding those pesky, inconspicuous spots where a piece of writing could be improved or tweaked, and many in the Slavic field have benefitted from Liza's discerning edits, penetrating forthrightness, and selfless mentoring.

Not only did Liza chair Bryn Mawr's Department of Russian for many years, but she also served as the director of the Bi-College (Bryn Mawr and Haverford) Program in Comparative Literature between 2004–2007. Later on, she chaired Bryn Mawr's Committee on Appointments during the 2011–12 academic year. Liza carried out all of her academic responsibilities at Bryn Mawr with the utmost conscientiousness, professionalism, and integrity.

In retrospect, it is Liza's humanity that many of us at Bryn Mawr and Haverford will remember her by the most. She was a kind, caring colleague who enriched those around her with her levity, generosity, and myriad interests, which ranged from baseball (the Mets and the Red Sox) and horseracing to cats and the movies. We could not have asked for a finer colleague, chair, teacher, and friend.

Finally, for those of us who teach Russian literature, the question inevitably arises, why devote so much time to the hallowed classics, as Liza did? In other words, what is there to gain from grappling with Turgenev, Fedor Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi, and the others? The issue of relevance proved especially pertinent for Liza, given her Great Questions of Russian Literature course that she taught for many years at Bryn Mawr. She and her students wrestled with the ways Russian literature illuminates the mysteries and complexities of human existence. Over the last number of years, Liza herself came to embody the benefits of such an approach, through her unwavering intellect, perseverance, and ability to face the vicissitudes of life with grace, courage, and nary a complaint. She surely gathered strength from all those beloved novels that she introduced to her fortunate students, and to which she devoted her impressive career.

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