

# From a Scribe's Pen to a Harvard Classroom

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I never talked to Horace Lunt about newspaper reporters. But I'll bet he didn't like them.

Something at which Lunt would rail at least once in every one of his classes in Old Church Slavonic was "scribal error." More about that in a moment, but let me point this out: The scribes of old were the journalists of today. Or something thereabouts.

You see, right there &mdash; Lunt would be unhappy. "Something thereabouts." What the hell does that mean? Be specific. Be clear. Be *exact*.

Well, here I am, in my guise of a newspaperman, writing about Horace Lunt. Sorry, Professor. I've got to do it. There was a memorial commemoration of Lunt's life and work held on Friday at Harvard University and I couldn't be there. So I'll need to have my say this way, on a newspaper website, from Russia.

I had the privilege and good fortune to be a very small &mdash no, minuscule &mdash part of what was for decades an institution in American Slavic studies. I was one of Horace Lunt's students in the famous course in Old Church Slavonic. This was a rite of passage for every graduate student in the Slavic Department at Harvard, one that gave you instant and eternal cachet with every other Slavist in the United States and much of the world.

Consider this for example: Rebecca Reich, my friend and former editor at The Moscow Times, wrote me recently that "unfortunately," she arrived at Harvard too late to study with Lunt. The reputation of the man's work continues to be as weighty as ever.

Lunt died in August, just short of his 92nd birthday. He lived an extraordinary life, the life of a true American intellectual. So influential was his work that he became a national hero among Macedonian-speaking people, for whom he wrote the first-ever Macedonian grammar in 1952, and became anathema in Bulgaria and Greece because of their historical claims on the Macedonian language and culture. The name of Lunt, who was stubbornly apolitical in his work, is still capable of stirring controversy in the Balkans. And, as recently as 2006, a writer working on a novel called "[The Macedonian Tendency](#)" was planning on making Lunt a character in his narrative.

Lunt's colleague at Harvard, Michael S. Flier, wrote [a brilliant obituary](#) that says all of this far better than I could. My designs are more modest.

By the time I got to Lunt in the mid-1980s, the word was that he had mellowed. But stories from the old guard among the grad students who knew former grad students were still enough to make any incoming first-year student go weak in the knees. I remember having visions of people being tortured on racks, body parts piled in a corner and clanking chains in the dungeon, I mean basement, of the Science Building where our classes would be held.

Those concerns were not alleviated when Professor Lunt walked into the room that first day. That is how daunting the stories were about the man. Daunting because, in fact, Horace Lunt was a fine-looking man, astonishingly fit as he neared the age of 70, and really quite personable.

But there was Lunt's conviction and dedication to his work to contend with. And that was revealed in his every gesture, word and glance.

Lunt did not brook lazy thought, to say nothing of lazy actions. He would not abide it in his students or in his scholarly opponents. The professor's often cranky, cantankerous articles, reviews and letters to editors were legendary. And this is important &mdash in fact, it is the whole point: The legend grew not because of Lunt's acerbic pen, but because of the unparalleled clarity and superiority of his arguments.

Lunt may have shot down more puffed-up academic careers than any other scholar of his time. And it was all because he believed in the truth and in doing things thoroughly and right. People established reputations by concocting elaborate theories for aberrations in syntax or word formation in old texts, or at least until Lunt realized that their whole argument was based on that simplest and most malicious bane of human existence &mdash the error. The scribal error.

The wrong letter in the wrong place; a strange shift in the narrative flow of a sentence. What some interpreted as Old Church Slavonic morphing into Old Russian or showing the influence of some other linguistic construction was nothing more than the result of a scribal error.

I love conjuring Lunt in my mind as he describes the situation to us.

"The candle was burning low. The poor monk had been without sleep for 24 hours. It was cold outside. No. It was freezing. The cell in which the monk worked was like a block of ice. A wolf howled outside his door. He took his mind off what he was doing for just one second, but when he turned his bleary eyes back to the page he had lost his connection to what he was doing. He wrote down the wrong letter. Scribal error. This is *not* an example of linguistic development."

Sure enough, Lunt showed us similar situations in the same text, recorded by the same scribe, and all were correct. Only this one was wrong. Scribal error. Bleary eyes.

Horace Lunt and I were never close. I wasn't of much interest to him, for my field of study was literature, not linguistics. He knew perfectly well that those of us studying literature just needed to get some requirements out of the way in order to go about doing what we were in graduate school to do. I don't think he begrudged us that. It was merely another of those things about which nothing could be done — like scribal errors. If the latter could not be suffered, the former could.

I'll go further in the interest of full disclosure and honesty. I did not much like Old Church Slavonic, which we all called OCS. Oh, there were things that fascinated me and stuck with me, like the fact that the name of Old King Wenceslaus from the Christmas carol can be demonstrated to be the same name as the Slavic Vyacheslav. But that's the pop version of OCS. It's pretty much all I retained in the way of the discipline's science.

Which brings me to the point of this freeform remembrance: Horace Lunt had more influence on me than any other scholar I studied with. His rigor came through loud and clear during that first class I had with him in September 1983. I can still hear it in my head to this day.

Every time I fail to catch a typo, every time I fail to properly check a fact, every time I say "good enough," only to learn later that I was less than exact, I remember Horace Lunt. Scribal error. For all that I never learned or retained from his truly extraordinary course in Old Church Slavonic, I was profoundly affected by his attitude, his approach, his honesty before himself, his colleagues and his work.

Horace Lunt had a fine, rich, productive long life. That is something to celebrate. What he gave his students and the world cannot be measured fully by anything, unless it is love.

That may be an odd word to use for one who was famously unsentimental. But what else could have driven this extraordinary man to such heights of perfection? What else would have allowed him to have such a lasting impact on all those fortunate enough to come even briefly into his orbit?

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