**THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS**

**Robert B. Silvers (1929–2017)**

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*Bob Silvers, my friend and the editor of* The New York Review*, died on March 20, shortly after completing the April 6 issue. Together with Barbara Epstein, Jason Epstein, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Robert Lowell, he founded the* Review *in 1963; for fifty-four years he was either co-editor with Barbara or, after her death in 2006, editor of the* Review*. Bob worked almost to the very end of his life, which would be no surprise to those who knew him well, including those who have written these brief memoirs.*

*—Rea Hederman*

**ELAINE BLAIR**

Until I arrived at the *Review* as an editorial assistant, I had never met anyone who so rarely engaged in idle pleasantries as Bob. His daily language was pared down, accurate, and sincere. I found his example revelatory, and I would ponder his usage and elisions like a giddy college freshman. Bob would never, for instance, wish us a good weekend. Presumably he had no particular investment in the quality of our weekends, and possibly he didn’t even know when his assistants’ weekends were, since we took turns working Saturday and Sunday shifts with him.

But was he also, I wondered, rejecting the implied value of a good weekend? Is the goal of leisure time pleasure? Edification? Novel experience? If we couldn’t settle on criteria, we couldn’t possibly arrive at a valuation, in which case why bother asking on Monday morning how someone’s weekend had been? The rest of us walked around in a fever of sentimentality and superstition, it suddenly seemed to me, sloppily wishing each other good days and good trips and merriment at Christmas. But Bob said only as much as he meant. When I left the office after a night shift of taking dictation, sending out books, going over a manuscript with him, he said, “Thanks a lot!” And it felt like a lot.

Still, it was hard to get used to a professional relationship that was, by design, largely impersonal. There were four of us assistants and we were supposed to be nearly interchangeable extensions of Bob himself, the extra hands he needed to manage so big a job. Usually only Bob communicated directly with contributors, and when we worked on a manuscript he carefully went over every one of our suggestions or marginal notes. We rarely spoke to him about anything that wasn’t directly relevant to *Review* pieces. This too seemed to me tied up with Bob’s stringent rejection of linguistic and sentimental cliché, including the commonplaces of workplace relationships. Bob did not take us under his wing. He was not our mentor. He did not believe in us. These were impossibilities because the *Review*’s lexicon did not allow for them. They may not, in any case, be the best measures of a boss’s generosity.

I don’t remember exactly what Bob said when I gave him an essay I had written on spec and asked if he would consider it for the magazine, but I remember that the look on his face suggested that I’d ruined his afternoon. I’m sure that if I hadn’t worked in the office and had simply sent him the piece, he would have rejected it. But I was there, in person, so he gave the piece his attention and a few weeks later handed me something of rare value: an unsparingly marked-up text.

**IAN BURUMA**

My first communication from Bob arrived by telex in Hong Kong, I think sometime in 1984. It read simply: “When can we expect Keene?” On a visit to New York, I had foolishly blurted out the idea of writing about Donald Keene’s enormous two-volume opus on modern Japanese literature, about which my knowledge was not nearly sufficient to write a serious essay.

But my fit of bluff in Bob’s office had piqued his interest. He had wanted something on Japan. The piece was deemed adequate enough for publication (“very fresh” might have been his scribbled note of encouragement). After that it was “on we go, old boy,” his usual phrase as soon as another piece had been printed. And what a journey it has been.

My life as a writer owes everything to Bob’s editorship. He had too much respect for writers he trusted to wish to change their individual styles. In this respect he was quite different from many editors, especially in the US, who see the words delivered by their contributors as raw material to, as one distinguished editor once put it to me, as though I should be grateful, “get [his] teeth into.”

Bob’s teeth marks never showed. But he had an infallible eye for loose thinking. His brilliance lay in his sense of clarity. He made you think harder. There was no room in his “paper” for fuzziness or vague abstractions. He wanted examples, descriptions, and concrete thoughts. And because he was the ideal reader you most wanted to please, you gradually learned how to express yourself better.

Some people liked to mock Bob’s mid-Atlantic drawl, which owed something to Oxford High Table talk, Plimptonian (as in George) classiness, and Long Island lockjaw. But this was not a mere affectation. Bob was that rare person: an American who loved France as dearly as he loved England, if not more so. The University of Chicago, the Sorbonne, and the best of liberal Oxford philosophers shaped his intellectual life. His clarity came from French thinking as well as Anglo-Saxon empiricism. But he remained deeply committed to the country of his birth. And I don’t just mean the Metropolitan Opera or the Ivy League schools. One of his fondest memories, which he would rehearse when he felt most relaxed, was to have been the only white soldier in an all-black military unit being trained somewhere in the American Deep South.

To me, Bob represented the best of a civilization that was rooted in the Enlightenment. But part of that liberal humanist tradition is openness to other civilizations, hence Bob’s thirst for knowledge about China, Japan, the Middle East, or indeed anywhere that was of interest.

Susan Sontag’s definition of an intellectual as someone who is interested in everything is perhaps an exaggeration. No one can be equally interested in everything, but Bob came damned close.

The idea of civilization that Bob personified is now under siege, not least in the countries that he was most closely associated with. We have lost him just when he was most needed. Our tribute must be to defend what he stood for. On we go. We owe it to him.

**DAVID COLE**

The package came unannounced, via Federal Express, with two books and a handwritten note: “We wondered if you’d be interested in reviewing these books for us. Bob.” That was thirteen years ago. I’ve been contributing frequently to *The New York Review of Books* ever since. And that means every word I’ve written—on legal subjects spanning terrorism, crime, gay rights, affirmative action, freedom of speech and religion, and the laws of war—has been handled with exquisite care, obsessive attention, and quiet grace by Bob Silvers. I’ve spent my life teaching and litigating these issues; Bob, who went to three semesters of law school in the late 1940s before deciding he wanted to be an editor, understood them as well as or better than I did.

But that was the least of it. Bob did the same with every article in everyissue—on subjects as diverse as opera, history, poetry, education, contemporary politics, jazz, psychology, television, religion, film, medicine, the environment, art, fiction, and drama. From 1963 until 2006, he shared the responsibilities with Barbara Epstein. When she died, Bob never replaced her; he just added her writers to his plate.

To attend to every article in even a single issue of the *Review* would be a stunning achievement. Bob did it for decades (with help from a small group of extremely talented, devoted, and self-effacing editorial assistants and senior editors). If my experience is any guide, each article went through as many as five or six rounds. What this prodigious production meant was that, even in his seventies and eighties, Bob practically lived at the *Review*. He was seventy-four when I *began* working with him. He’d call with an urgent and always perceptive thought about a piece, usually at an inconvenient hour; I always took the call. I’m a morning person, but I had many conversations with him well after 11:00 PM on a weekend evening—from his office.

If Bob was willing to work around the clock on every piece he published, how could I say no to a phone call at an odd hour? He’d inevitably raise a question I hadn’t considered or had thought I could finesse. “Well, I just think the reader will want to know…,” he’d say. And he was always right. When the conversation was done, Bob would just hang up. Never a good-bye. The first five or six times, the abruptness took me aback, so out of keeping with his gentle manners and grace in every other respect. But one soon learned that it was nothing personal; he was just too busy. On to the next galley.

Bob was a consummate generalist, conversant in virtually all fields. He eschewed jargon and the language of specialists, and pushed his writers to say things as simply and clearly as possible, without in any way reducing the sophistication of the thought. Most of his writers had spent decades toiling away in the depths of their fields; Bob ensured that we communicated in ways that those not so steeped would understand. He was a master at the art of translation.

Bob was celebrated, justly, for the publication he fashioned. He received many honorary degrees and awards, including the National Humanities Medal from President Obama in 2013—a man the *Review* did not hesitate to criticize. But he never seemed to care much about the accolades; to Bob, they were almost a distraction from the work. The only reward he really seemed to prize was the appearance, every two weeks, of the “paper” itself. *The New York Review* will go on; it will be Bob’s legacy. A week before he died, even as he was confined to his apartment, he e-mailed me with an idea for a new piece. Fittingly, I suppose, he went out without a good-bye, working on the next galley.

**MARK DANNER**

I began working for Bob Silvers in September 1981, when I was twenty-two and fresh out of college. I was one of three assistants, informally known to contributors as elves and—to us—as slaves. Because of Bob’s astonishing appetite for work, *New York Review* assistants had two shifts, nine to five and two to ten. I quickly came to prefer the late shift, though this meant in practice that one often worked until eleven or twelve or even later.

The workspace was what is customarily referred to as Dickensian: towering piles of books on his large desk and our much smaller ones, which had a disconcerting habit of toppling over catastrophically at inopportune moments, heaps of manuscripts everywhere, clouds of cigarillo smoke. (Bob at that time was a chain smoker.) As an assistant I would sit behind my small piles of books, place his endless stream of phone calls to writers (“Can you hold for Robert Silvers?”), and listen for the sound of a manuscript or a book or a set of galleys landing in Bob’s outbox. Galleys—this was pre-Internet—had to be sent off by mail, FedEx, or carrier pigeon to wherever in the world the writer was hiding.

Heavily edited manuscripts had to be retyped: a delight for me because it meant deciphering Bob’s handwriting and marveling at the way he transmuted dross into gold, with nary a trace of his own voice trespassing into the piece. He was an arch ventriloquist, able to adopt the tone of any given writer: the artist as editor. The editor as artist. Manuscripts would be worked on, sometimes extensively, retyped, then set in galleys and mailed off to Berkeley, Chicago, Lucca, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge. Even on pieces he had largely rewritten, Bob would scrawl his typical note: “Dear So and So, Great thanks for your strong piece. You’ll see we have made a few small suggestions. Please let’s have changes soon. Best, Bob.” I would marvel that the authors of pieces that had been substantially rewritten would often call and profess themselves astonished that “Bob hasn’t changed a thing!”

During those long evenings Bob had a way of sensing when you were getting ready, however surreptitiously, to slip out the door. He would begin piling material into the outbox: letters to post, galleys to send, books to mail, manuscripts to type. The hours would pass: eleven, midnight, one AM. Again and again the assistant struggling to leave would be forced to shrug off his or her coat and sit back down at the typewriter. Bob fought against being alone—for he knew that soon he inevitably would be.

If one stayed late enough there was a special bonus: at a certain moment he would leap up from his chair and charge into the publisher’s office next door, and in a few minutes one would hear this somewhat gruff and imperious boss chuckling and joking and mumbling endearments. He was calling his lady love, who was just then rising in Lausanne. The sound of his voice at these moments—animated and happy, distracted for once from the piles of manuscripts and the towers of books—was enough to make up for the late hour and the terrors of the brimming outbox. He taught me, beyond editing and writing and so much else, the necessity of devotion.

**JOAN DIDION**

When I heard that Bob had died, I felt that the bottom had dropped out of my world. I was unprepared for it. I should have been prepared, but I wasn’t, because it seemed impossible. People like Bob don’t die; we need them too much.

Bob always shaped how I thought. I had no opinion I did not run by him first. “New York: Sentimental Journeys” (1991), on the Central Park jogger case, was far and away the hardest piece I ever worked on for this reason. Bob from the beginning knew what the piece had to be—he knew before I did—and he pushed me until I got it there. He knew exactly how dangerous the subject was, and his reaction to this danger was to make it more dangerous. His idea from the first was to get it right, to make it perfect, regardless of whatever negative reaction it might elicit in the city at that moment. When I first turned it in to him, it was clearly too long. His solution was to insist I go further. This meant making it longer. If that piece succeeds at all, it succeeds because he gave me permission to finish it.

I loved having dinner with him. We would go to the Knickerbocker Club on 62nd Street and eat Dover sole and sautéed vegetables and talk about what we needed from each other. From me, he needed a willingness to work, and from him, I needed work to do. He understood this as the fair exchange that it was.

After my husband John died, when my daughter Quintana was very sick, Bob grasped my situation, and blessedly kept me writing—on the Bush administration, on euthanasia. He intuited that I would either work or I would die. He was among the few who understood this.

I knew in 1973 how important he was to my work. I didn’t know how important he was to me personally until much later. In the last few years, our friendship was closer than it had ever been, and I thought about him every day. I wished I could have seen him more, but I knew he needed to keep working.

An editorial note from Bob would open up new possibilities both in a piece and in life itself. What could have been an empty place suddenly flooded with light and understanding.

I will always need Bob.

**DEBORAH EISENBERG**

It was my great and improbable good fortune to work for Bob in two capacities—once as his assistant in around 1973, and decades later as a contributor. One could say I hardly knew him, yet these experiences and the line between them are etched about as deeply as any marks in the person I feel to be myself.

Having several assistants at a time was indispensable to Bob. Tensions ran high and spilled over largely on us, so through the years Bob inevitably had many assistants, of whom I was almost certainly the worst.

I remember magic personalities orbiting the office, electric excitement and glamour. People who encountered Bob only in his later years might be surprised to learn that when my boyfriend first met him, he said, “But he makes Cary Grant look like a knobbly old turnip!” What I don’t remember is what we assistants actually did, other than wade despairingly through a loam of books, papers, and cigarette ash, and rush off to the post office at all hours.

My first day, Bob asked me to take a letter. After what seemed many hours of rhetorical sublimity declaimed in his startlingly patrician accent, Bob said, “All right, read it back, please, uh…”(What *was* my name?)

I was clutching pages of incomprehensible scrawl. “Gosh,” I said, “that’s the hard part, Bob.”

One’s hair really can stand on end, I learned in the frozen silence. Bob produced a brief, grim chuckle. “*That’s the hard part, Bob. That’s the hard part, Bob*…” he echoed, apparently in sheer incredulity.

Bob was severe, Bob was exacting, Bob was irascible—oh, why did he not fire me that day, or on any of the following days, during which I demonstrated equal incompetence, often sobbing? To escape I had to quit.

Many years passed. I was out of town, but a large package found me, bearing the familiar return address. Not possible, not possible…I quaked for a few days before opening it to find a book by a favorite writer of mine, Péter Nádas.

I wrote to Bob, saying that I was overextended as it was, and explaining the many reasons I was unqualified to write about the book. Bob wrote back immediately—countering, with immense charm, each of my points.

He remembered my name now! That note, plus irrepressible vanity on my part, equaled the French Horn of Destiny.

Well, that was the only book ever written that could tempt me to write a review, I thought—until a second one arrived, and the process was repeated, almost exactly.

It seems that Bob had an uncanny, almost diabolical, insight into what book would be irresistible to whom. But also irresistible, it turned out, was the prospect of working on another piece for him. His inexhaustible appetite for exploring the wide world was alloyed with a fastidiousness regarding detail. He attuned himself astonishingly to one’s purposes, and his delight in a finished piece was thrilling.

One feels profound gratitude to someone who wants one to accomplish something that’s apparently beyond one’s reach and who makes it possible to do so. And Bob’s conviction that the smallest elements of expression are the foundation of rigorous thought—that rigorous thought lights up the world—permeated the magazine, issue after issue. The world is in crisis; the loss of such intellectual finesse, curiosity, and force, of such wide-ranging vigilance, is a crisis on its own.

**JASON EPSTEIN**

When Elizabeth Hardwick, her husband Robert Lowell, Barbara, and I conceived what would become *The New York Review of Books* during the newspaper strike of 1962–1963, we knew that our dear friend Bob was the only possible editor. Bob, then a brilliant young *Harper’s* editor, had recently commissioned Lizzie to write an essay on the decline of serious criticism in America, in which she savaged the dismal Sunday book reviews for their “flat praise and the faint dissension, the minimal style and the light little article, the absence of involvement, passion, character, eccentricity—the lack, at last, of the literary tone itself.”

It was with Lizzie’s *Harper’s* article in mind that the four of us saw the opportunity wordlessly presented by the strike: either create the kind of review that she had envisioned or forever stop complaining. There was no middle ground, no escape, and therefore no discussion. The opportunity—indeed the obligation—had arrived of its own volition. There was no ignoring it. Bob was born to edit the review that Lizzie’s piece demanded. I called him the following day and, to our delight, he immediately accepted. He then called Barbara and asked her to be his co-editor.

That all this came together seems in retrospect to have been a miracle. The first issue achieved just the quality of gravitas and fluency we hoped for. No reader could fail to see the point of our project. What we could not have imagined at the time was the utter greatness of Bob’s achievement over fifty-four years, and the kindness and fairness that accompanied his profound wisdom. Bob was a man for the ages.

**TIMOTHY GARTON ASH**

We are just sitting down to Christmas lunch in London when the telephone rings: “It’s Bob. We have a dangling modifier on galley D4.” FedEx packages appeared at the remotest croft, island refuge, or East European enclave. *The New York Review* would always get through.

Bob Silvers was the greatest editor I have ever worked with, and part of his secret was in that D4. First there was a package, usually containing the proof copy of a book and, folded inside it, the unmistakable double-spaced typewritten letter with its famous “we hope that something might be done.” (I remember Zoë Heller joking that she would try this courtly formula when asking her children to tidy their rooms: “We hope that something might be done.”) You could not plead other commitments, because he would give you all the time you needed. There followed more packages, faxes, and e-mails, full of supporting material. When you sent him the article, on which you had sometimes worked for months, you would receive a swift response, usually containing the locution “great thanks,” and a small selection from his personal sushi tray of adjectives to describe the piece (“strong,” “important”).

But then came the marked-up text, with his characteristic scrawl on the margins of galley proofs. His essential questions were also the simplest: What do you mean? What do you really want to say? These comments were written on successive galley proofs—D4 meaning the fourth page of the fourth or D set of galleys. Loving this attritional improvement, I once got to an F galley.

In my mind’s eye, I see Bob forever picking up, perusing, and then casting aside a set of galleys. That casting aside was important, because when he came back to the D galley for the *n*th time, he would see something afresh. Along the way, there were wonderful long telephone conversations, drawing on his extraordinary range of knowledge and reference. I look back through the online list of my contributions over thirty-three years, and I can remember our long-distance exchanges on almost every one.

I think too of our many meetings, in Budapest, Oslo, Paris, or London, dinners in the New York apartment, lunches in the Japanese restaurant below the office: Bob always in his dark blue suit, alight with geniality, laughter, enthusiasm, and a glint of quiet steeliness. Yet even at the height of his reputation and powers, he also had an endearing touch of vulnerability.

He was never earnest but always serious. His support for dissident intellectuals everywhere was steadfast: Václav Havel, Andrei Sakharov, Nadine Gordimer, Fang Lizhi, to name but a few. Shaped by his experience in Paris during the early years of the cold war, Bob represented the values of the transatlantic West at its best. His was a self-confident but also a self-critical liberalism. The more the *Review* criticized the dark sides of American policy (in Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, and elsewhere), the more it enhanced American soft power. Despite several brave attempts, no one has ever made a successful pan-European literary review, and so *The New York Review* remains the nearest thing we Europeans have to one—a common intellectual reference point from Lisbon to Tallin, and from Athens to Edinburgh.

When I wrote about fifty years of *The New York Review* in these pages in 2013, I reflected on how this liberal, transatlantic West was already under challenge from many sides. There is bitter irony in the fact that Bob has died just as an antiliberal counterrevolution, already manifest in Moscow, Beijing, Istanbul, and Budapest, is threatening the three Western heartlands he knew and loved best: Britain, with Brexit, France, with the rise of Marine Le Pen, and the United States, with you-know-who. We need his spirit more than ever, and we shall keep its flame burning.

**ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO**

When in 1998 John Paul II became the first pope to visit Cuba, Bob immediately agreed that I should go. Of course there was never any money for travel, but he scraped something together. I joined a cheap package tour of Catholic pilgrims at a travel agency in Mexico and happily wrote two stories from that trip: one about the pope’s visit and a later one about Fidel Castro, whose infirmities were just beginning to show (although he would hold on to power for another ten years).

Even as we were closing the pope story Bob was on the phone about another one. Shouldn’t I be doing something about human rights on the island? My back stiffened. I dislike categories in general because they narrow down reality, and “human rights,” I said, was one that in Cuba led readers and writers right back to a useless cold war understanding of a Latin American country.

Bob was having none of that. How could we run two stories on a country that had lived under the systematic repression of thought and expression for decades, and not mention it? I grumbled and fought; the summer heat was approaching, I had no sources, a rumor was going about that everyone’s go-to human rights victim was now suspect, and, ultimately, I hated the very idea. Not knowing of Bob’s ties to that institution, I said the whole thing sounded like something worthy of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Well, dearie, Bob said (dearie, unlike kiddo, was in Bobspeak a term not of affection but of annoyance), one’s thoughts go back to those poor men, the writers and the thinkers and those who simply wish to remain apart, held in dark, dank cells for years and years. One’s thoughts go back and linger there with them, and one can’t help wondering, is there something to be done? Are we not obliged to address their situation in some small way?

The argument went on for days. The pope story ran, the Fidel story went into galleys, and Bob wouldn’t give up. In the end, it became a question of being unspeakably rude to him or saying yes, and so I went and reported and wrote the story I should have volunteered for in the first place. Indeed, the situation of dozens of men (men only, at that point) held in prison on absurd charges, in obscene conditions, was intolerable. I was embarrassed for myself and both appalled and fascinated by what I saw. How could we not address, in some small way, the situation of people laboring under such injustice? Bob made his writers better writers by pushing them to think better.

**SUE HALPERN**

Nine days before she died, I turned in my last piece for Barbara Epstein, which, as one of “Barbara’s writers,” I assumed would be my last for *The New York Review*. I knew there was little chance she would read it, and even less chance it would be published, but it felt imperative to see through that final collaboration, ignoring the reality at hand and offering up a little normalcy. For months she edited manuscripts while hooked up to the chemo machine, so I could also imagine her, pen in hand, wrestling with words till the very end.

A few weeks later, the phone rang. It was Robert Silvers. “We’ll be sending galleys of your [fill in the blank with an adjective of high praise] article soon.” We talked briefly about the piece, and at length about Barbara, whom we both loved dearly. “What would you like to do next?” Bob asked before we hung up. And with that, I was one of “Bob’s writers,” too.

Packages of books began to arrive unbidden. Tucked inside would be a brief, telegraphic message, something on the order of “see what you can do.” I confess that I was not always happy to find these leaning up against the front door, and I would give them a wide berth for days, knowing that once I tore open the FedEx envelope, I’d be working like mad to master the subject at hand. But I also knew that before long Bob would be calling to wonder if I’d gotten those books, and when I might have something for him. He was wily like that.

I loved talking with Bob. On the phone, for sure, when I could always count on him to leave me with some insight or something to think about, but even more sitting knee-to-knee on the office couch, where somehow, always, we would make each other laugh. The truest thing I know about Bob was expressed in that sound: his delight in the world. If I had to pick a single word to describe him, it would not be brilliant, or driven, or perspicacious, or courtly, or generous, or honest, or curious, or kind, or polymathic, or good—all of which apply—it would be “delighted.” Just look at his eyes in any picture and there it is.

A while ago, a writer with a number of best sellers to her name got in touch after getting her first *Review* assignment, to ask what she needed to know in order to write for Bob. I was stymied at first, and then realized why: one didn’t write *for* Bob. One wrote for oneself, and for the reader, and Bob was there to ensure that—to paraphrase (and contradict) T.S. Eliot—every raid on the inarticulate did not end in the general mess of imprecision of feeling. His goal was not to insert himself and his point of view into a piece, but rather to enable the writer to make an argument with clarity and disposition. He trusted his writers to say what they needed to say and they, in turn, trusted him to help them do so. He knew their capacities. Sometimes he knew them better than they did themselves.

“All right, kiddo,” he said, signing off, the last time we spoke. In that conversation he happened to mention that the medications he’d been taking were not working. Honestly, he seemed more concerned about Trump’s immigration policy. He suggested, in his offhand way, that I might read a certain article in *Foreign Policy*. It was something to think about. So I did.

**JENNIFER HOMANS**

I always thought of Bob as a brilliant man, all mind. This could be disconcerting, and there was a moment when I thought of him as strangely impersonal and detached. It was 2008 and my late husband Tony Judt had just been diagnosed with ALS and had written to Bob explaining his dire situation. Tony had been writing for Bob for nearly two decades. Before Bob, Tony had been an accomplished historian of Europe. Almost immediately though, Bob pushed him to expand his range and began sending him books on American foreign policy, Primo Levi, Jean Genet, Israel-Palestine, and, later, the Bush years, the Iraq war, and more. He pushed Tony’s writing too. Pre-Bob the writing was academic; post-Bob, there was a sea change and Tony’s prose became lighter, clearer, “strong,” as Bob liked to say.

Bob had become a constant presence in our lives. Which is why I was so shocked when he responded to Tony’s helpless note with a few breezy lines: We’ll be in touch soon! Weeks passed. Then he came for a visit. Tony was feeling low that day, sitting wan and pale in the back room in his corner chair. I felt like I had been living with Bob for years, but in fact he had never been to our apartment. He wafted cheerfully into the room in his suit and scarf, bringing the news of the world with him. After some very British-sounding abstractions about how tough life could be, they immediately switched to politics, and I remember Tony struggling to keep up or care. He was just too sick. It seemed an impossible situation, these two men, all mind, one rapidly losing his body, and neither knowing quite what to say.

What happened next changed my view of Bob, but also of Tony. By then, Tony was quadriplegic and on a breathing machine, writing only with the help of an assistant or whoever was there to be his hands at the keyboard. He started composing pieces at night in his head and reciting them in the morning. He sent one to Bob, who immediately published it. They were back in touch. There would be a series, it was a project, and Bob was right there. But these were not the usual pieces on books and politics; they were deeply personal reflections and memories. Soon after, Bob told me the essays made him think of Central European writers and a memoir form he hadn’t seen for some time. He and Tony had found a common language.

When Bob turned eighty in 2009, Tony composed a note, knowing he would die soon:

*More seriously, and I know that I have to stand in line to say this, you will always be an extraordinary editor—by far the best I have ever known and, it seems fair to assert, by far the best there is. You surely do not need me to tell you about the place that the NYR holds in the hearts and minds (sorry!) of hundreds of thousands of readers from Berkeley to Beijing. And, of course, above all, you are a legend in your own time zone. It is a pleasure and an honour to work with you and I look forward to many more conversations and galleys….*

*Affectionately,
Tony*

Bob wrote back with his preternatural restraint:

*I just read your words here and wanted to tell you how much they meant to me. Every good thing to you both.*

*My best,
Bob*

Tony forwarded me the response with a brief message:

I think this is the closest I have ever seen Bob get to being moved. I am so pleased I wrote it. Love, T

When Tony died, Bob was still there. Upon the publication of *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, Tony’s last book, written with Tim Snyder, I called Bob: I don’t know if I can do it, but will you help me if I write something? He said yes, please try. When he received my text, Bob focused on certain emotional words, encouraging me to rein in the feeling, take out the fleshy excess, leave only the bones. I fought for the flesh but he called again and again, telling me how much stronger it would be if understated. I was still in grief: it felt horrible, let it be horrible. But he was looking for a kind of poise. Distance and reflection, even in the face of disaster.

Bob had a classical mind, I think. Disciplined, spare, all emotion distilled. In late December when his partner Grace died, I wrote him a note of condolence. He had always said that she was “marvelous,” “quite a gal,” and she was often tucked somewhere into his notes about the work: “I’m in Switzerland with Grace.” “Grace sends love.” When he got my note, he wrote back as he did to so many with a rare show of raw emotion: “I am nowhere without Grace.” It is often said that people die the way they live, and his death made him come clear in my mind. He died with the woman he loved. Without her he was nowhere. It was poetic, understated, a life well lived. His absence is difficult to accept. He was always there and now he is not.

**MARK LILLA**

*We do not have too much intellect and too little soul, but too little intellect in matters of soul.*

—Robert Musil

It’s a romantic dogma, rooted in God knows what gnostic heresy, that the world is divided into those who think and those who feel. The Mirror and the Lamp, the Dynamo and the Virgin. And that this is how it should be. Tell a romantic you understand him and you have pronounced a death sentence. It means his wings have been clipped and his soul has begun its descent. Oh, Lord, please let me be misunderstood. What keeps him airborne is the conviction that those are philistines pounding the pavement below.

Countless little magazines and literary reviews have been conceived as a refuge from the crowd, a perch for Icarus. *The New York Review* was meant to be different. Frustrated by the lazy gentility of American book reviewing and its detachment from wider intellectual and cultural currents, the editors invented a genre for what they hoped would be a new audience. The digressive review-essay style that became the paper’s trademark presumed that a writer could bring intellect to matters of soul without violating either, and that there was an audience for such writing. From the start, the *Review* was a democratic, pedagogical project.

This I knew when I began writing for Bob Silvers back in the 1990s. What I didn’t know was that the pedagogy was intended for the author as well. Bob was a teacher, one of the greatest I have ever encountered. Many stories have been told of his legendary interventionism—the late-night calls about an obscure sentence, the flood of packages, faxes, and later e-mails with suggested reading, not always to the point but welcome as signs of his enthusiasm. Profiles by journalists could make him appear an endearing fussbudget. But nothing I have read asks the only pertinent question: Why did he take the trouble? Why bother? After all, people now consume so much “content,” so fast, that they don’t notice. Errors in print can be fixed online instantaneously. And besides, we’re all publishers now, so who needs a superego?

What the journalists missed, but his writers knew, is that the process of endless refinement was the point. Bob at work on a manuscript resembled nothing so much as a Jesuit spiritual adviser, minus the collar, helping the novice refine his raw inner awareness. It was a vocation, in the strict sense, an expression of magnanimity. He was determined to see that a book got the appreciation and criticism it deserved. But even more, it seemed to me, he wanted the writer to understand himself better than he already did. You say this, and you’re on to something, but what does it really mean? What are you trying to say? Bob had a profound abhorrence of vagueness. It was the cardinal sin because it was cowardly, a self-evasion. More than once I wanted to tear the hairshirt off. *Icarus, c’est moi*. He never permitted it because he was more loyal to me than I was to myself.

In reading the *Review*, you always learn something. In writing for Bob, you became something. It was a gift none of us really deserved. But what gift ever is? That’s what makes it a gift.

**JANET MALCOLM**

“What are you working on?”
“I’m writing a piece for Bob.”

This exchange, often heard around the city, will be heard no more. Now we will have to write for an imaginary Bob—though on some level we were always writing for an imaginary Bob. He was our literary conscience. He was the figure looking over our shoulders as we wrote, holding us to a rare standard. When you wrote “for Bob” you felt the pressure of a demand to be interesting. You do not bore a genius. You do as good an impersonation as you can of someone worthy of his attention.

The imaginary Bob appealed to the better parts of our writing natures, to our capacity for audacity and unpredictability; and, of course, he couldn’t always rouse them. But the best pieces in the magazine had a shimmer that came from outside of themselves. As one read them a sense of Bob came into the room.

His actual interventions in the manuscripts I submitted usually had to do with questions of fact. He wanted to know more about something, or he wanted something added that he knew should be there. He was after the truth of things, which begins with the facts of things. He seemed to know more facts than anyone else in the world did and to understand their power. In today’s new order of untruthfulness (do you remember the good old order of mere truthiness?) his legacy has a moral significance beyond description.

**FINTAN O’TOOLE**

The great editor is a chimerical creature, combining contrary qualities in one mind: assertive and self-effacing, commanding and sensitive, infinitely curious and sharply focused, patient and fearfully demanding, wide-angle and close-up. Robert Silvers was the greatest editor of our time because he managed these contradictions with a seemingly effortless elegance. He was able, somehow, to show his writers only the gentler sides—the civility, the patience, the infinite care for the smallest details of an essay. Their other sides—the unbending standards of excellence, the phenomenal drive, the larger mission of which your own piece was but a tiny part—were never explicitly expressed. They did not have to be: writers—and more importantly readers—could never miss the force of their steadfast presence.

The thing that everyone privileged enough to write for Robert Silvers will remember is the mystery of the Federal Express packet of books that would arrive every so often. Mysterious because you had no idea what you were going to get. Sometimes it would be stuff that you more or less knew about; sometimes not. Bob did not believe in comfort zones. In any other editor this might have been eccentric, even perverse. But with Bob it was a deeply serious act of faith. He believed that there is such a thing as the general reader, that public life depends on the existence of a common space in which ideas can be shared, absorbed, mulled over, kicked around. And if there is the general reader, there must also be the general writer. If you were lucky enough to write for *The New York Review*, you had to be prepared to share what you knew or thought without arrogance or condescension. Sometimes you had to go further and share what you didn’t know until Bob’s quiet demands sent you off to learn it.

What he was doing in this was holding a crucial middle ground. He understood better than anyone else that the public realm has to fight for its existence against two equally great dangers. One is the culture of self-enclosed, technocratic expertise, the hiving off of intellectual life into increasingly minute specializations and increasingly impenetrable professional dialects. The other is the insistence—so much in the ascendant now—that there is no expertise at all, that scholarship and rigor and evidence are the mere playthings of elitist eggheads. Bob’s great gift to civic life was the living demonstration in every issue of the *Review* that these impostors could be treated with equal—and magnificent—contempt. He held open the space for that great republican virtue: common curiosity. He made this fierce effort seem so natural that it is only in his absence that we realize how hard it is to do and how much it counts.

I always come back in thinking about Bob to his imperturbable courtesy. His good manners were not mere mannerisms. They said something. They were a constant reminder to the rest of us that we owed readers the same consideration—to think things through as best we could, to avoid shortcuts and lazy assumptions, to write as well as we could manage. And to remember that it all matters, that the life of a great journal is part of the life of democracy itself. We know better than we have ever known how boorishness and vulgarity pollute public life. Robert Silvers showed us better than any other editor how courtesy and care sustain it.

**DARRYL PINCKNEY**

For the longest time I called him Mr. Silvers. A couple of Elizabeth Hardwick’s other former students were his editorial assistants and I hung around the office while still an undergraduate. After college, I got temporary work in the mailroom of the *Review*. Then one day a parcel arrived at my apartment, a book and a letter from Robert Silvers. Maybe he used that phrase—to see what can be done. I’d never had a conversation of any kind with him before. I’d been introduced, but after that he lived in his own world in the office. Barbara Epstein in those early years wouldn’t talk to me any more than she had to. When it came time to discuss the piece, he was pleasant, talked easily of Jimmy Baldwin, and knew more about my subject than I expected him to. Professor Hardwick—not yet Lizzie to me—had been through the piece before I walked it in, so there was not too much of a painful nature left to say.

I’d sat down scared out of my head and I stood up still scared stupid and down through the next forty years I never, I mean never, got over being scared of him. James Fenton, my partner, could talk with him at length, but in a social setting, I had to let him turn away after two minutes or so. Mr. Silvers, back when, had among his assistants a smart, poised girl who was sometimes absent for elegant reasons. I became her substitute and so spent some hours with him, listening to him talk to others. One New Year’s Eve about nine o’clock I asked him if it would be OK if I went off. He said yes, but it would also be OK if I wanted to stay.

I also remember his tyranny in the office. It was tiresome for Barbara, because she grew up with a father who yelled. I’d gone from Mr. Silvers’s office to the typesetting studio to sitting outside Barbara’s office door and the hardest thing about being her assistant was learning, firstly, that you could not protect her from him, and, secondly, that she didn’t need anyone’s protection. Their battles were over a writer’s argument, a writer’s prose. The *Review*’s style emerged from Bob and Barbara’s clashes that, looking back, obscured how similar in sensibility they actually were. For me, it was part of the emotional chaos and intellectual thrill of the place. A cool friend who also worked at the *Review* had to warn me to chill the *Review* snob act a bit when we were hanging out downtown. The best thing about the *Review* was some of the people in the office, the friends you made, young writers whose work you fell for. And, yes, there was the education you got or made up for just by reading it.

There’s the first word and then there’s the last word, but even Edmund Wilson was dumb once, Lizzie said. Bob and Grace really loved her, and that was my bond with Bob, love for Elizabeth Hardwick and her love for *The New York Review of Books*, which, she said more than once, had saved her life.

**YASMINE EL RASHIDI**

When Bob took an interest in my world, he quite literally opened the world to me. Our relationship began with the Egyptian uprising of 2011, and in a conversation over those initial weeks that extended across months, into years, I lived and thought through with him the most profound experience of my life.

Bob gave me a sense of value as a writer—in the attention he offered, and in the trust. When he asked *if something might be done* about the Egyptian presidential election, he delighted in a piece that instead examined the particularities of the Egyptian bureaucracy. He sent clips, books, letters, offering you things to think about—*consider*—but in the end, he was genuinely interested in what as a writer you came back with, in content, voice, form. The *Review* quickly became my writing home, and Bob my measure, my guide. There was no other reader. He was the one who mattered most.

Bob cared about his writers—not just the legendary ones. He cared about our well-being, our safety, even our personal lives. After sharing an experience I had with Egyptian security that particularly rattled me, his concern grew, and he often called to ask if I felt safe, if I needed anything. He suggested ways I might tell the story, even perhaps “a short story” for the “paper” instead.

He stood by us, too. One of my last pieces for him, about the violent clashes between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood that followed the fall of President Mohamed Morsi’s government in the summer of 2013, generated an avalanche of controversy. Bob had pushed, respectfully, through a rigorous process of checking facts and statements to verify the position my reporting had led me to take—one that ran contrary to that of almost every major international news organization—and once the piece had gone to press, he was unflinching in his support. I heard of the critical and questioning letters from others, never him. He only ever thanked me for writing it.

Bob always seemed immensely pleased to see you. He made you feel as if there was nothing more thrilling—*marvelous*—in that moment than your company. He had an energy, enthusiasm, and buoyancy that were infectious, and he was magnanimous in every way. When I suggested that I might need some time away from Cairo, he did everything to support and make that possible, helping my passage to New York. And when I shared with him my struggle to write a nonfiction book on Egypt, he gently prodded, asking questions to coax out of me thoughts on the story I wanted to tell. He was the first to suggest that fiction might be the form for me. This was a measure of his openness—his understanding and care and sense of his writers beyond the scope of what was considered their realm; it was also part of why and how he came to be their friend as well.

Over the past two and a half years, as I worked on a piece for him from and about Cairo, we had lunches and exchanged e-mails and letters and occasionally the phone would ring. I walked the streets of my city thinking about everything with him in mind. He seemed unwavering in his patience and encouragement, still completely engaged and enthusiastic about the project twenty-eight months later. A couple of months before he died, in a letter about a novel he was sending me for review, he added a postscript about my “Notes”—as we had tentatively entitled the piece—suggesting that it “need not be conclusive.” In his absence, I feel a void, a sense of disorientation, the knowledge that my “Notes” will never, without his eyes, feel either conclusive or complete.

**NATHANIEL RICH**

Sharpening pencils, fetching dry cleaning, taking dictation, dodging sharpened pencils thrown at your head—life as Bob’s editorial assistant was unglamorous and often had little to do with editing. It took time to win his trust. As a new assistant, weeks removed from college graduation, I longed for an editorial assignment, the ultimate test of a staffer’s mettle. Bob only handed over essays that he had grown sick of trying to wrestle into coherence. These forsaken manuscripts sat on a corner of his desk, often buried under books, languishing for months if not years—the pariahs of the editorial roster. Bob rarely gave up on them but the presence of this pile was a constant affront, a black mark on an otherwise undefeated record.

My moment finally arrived several months into the job, when he lifted a manuscript from the pariah pile and called my name—itself a minor milestone in an assistant’s life, the direct address. My excitement curdled to dread when I saw the piece: a British lord’s assessment of a Nobel laureate’s monograph about economic modeling. I could not imagine an essay I was less suited to work on. I had defiantly avoided taking a single economics course in college and could not begin to understand any of the technical words the author used, let alone his argument. Ashamed, I admitted as much to Bob.

“Nonsense!” he said.

He explained that my ignorance of the subject, on the contrary, made me an ideal reader for the piece. He leapt from his chair and scanned the shelves behind his desk, where he kept his reference books. Down tumbled *The Penguin Dictionary of Economics*, *Barron’s Dictionary of Finance and Investment Terms*, *An Encyclopedia of Keynesian Economics*, and a half-dozen other volumes, landing with thuds on his desk. All the definitions I needed could be found in these books, he said, before launching into a brief lecture on growth theory. My job, he explained, was to translate the piece into language that even a person as ignorant of economic theory as I was could understand.

This was my introduction to one of the central tenets of Bob’s editorial philosophy. Good writing is capable of bringing to life even the most arcane subjects. Big ideas demand vivid prose. Academic jargon is fatal, as are stock expressions, terms of art, empty metaphors. Dead language not only obscures the ideas it means to describe. It blocks original thinking. Many writers will say that Bob brought out their best prose. He did more than that. He brought out their highest thoughts.

Clarity of prose leads to clarity of mind. And without clarity of mind, moral clarity is impossible. I forgot what Bob taught me about economics but I’ll never forget that.

**INGRID D. ROWLAND**

After any phone conversation, Bob Silvers hung up with a distinctive, resonant *klunk*—he was done, he was satisfied, and it was time to get back to work. He called *The New York Review* “our little paper.” His was certainly an editorial “we”—and who, among editors, had more right to that regal pronoun?—but more importantly, that “we” reflected his sense that the paper truly belonged to all of us: readers, writers, editors, printers, publishers, the people who run newsstands in Athens and Rome and all the other surprising corners of the world where *The New York Review* has become part of life. Pondered quietly, hotly argued, it outlives the paper on which it is printed through memories of words, phrases, readings, experiences, through conversations between people who have connected with one another because of its existence.

And Bob, like an orchestra conductor or a theatrical director, could fixate obsessively on the tiniest detail of phrasing or punctuation without ever losing his grasp of the whole enterprise. In many ways, “our little paper” is a fluid, ephemeral enterprise, writ on water, as Keats might say, but what does water do? When drop meets drop, the two merge to create a rivulet, a stream, the Amazon. Water moves forever onward, bound for the sea—except when it leaps, on clouds, straight into the sky. However fleeting an article, an issue, or a reader’s reverie may be in itself, the momentum they create, like the momentum of water, is relentless. Bob’s great gift was the ability to guide that momentum in every direction, into the desert, into the darkness, into the light. He lived, ultimately, for love and beauty, and he followed them into that good night.

**ZADIE SMITH**

A writer friend asked me: What was it about Bob? The edit? Or the commission? Another writer present—who also wrote for Bob—laughed at the word “commission,” and I realized I found it strange, too. Bob didn’t commission as much as *elicit*, a word whose Latin root means “to draw out by trickery or magic.” He was an expert eliciter. The very first time I wrote for him was because I made the mistake of saying, during the course of a casual conversation, “Well, I’ve been thinking a bit about Kafka.” *Kafka!* He said the name back to me as if I had just mentioned the very latest literary sensation. “Well, why don’t we see if something can’t be done about *that*?”

A fairly recent book about Kafka soon arrived at my door, then several others. Then articles and notes and more books. This was disarming. My experience writing for editors up to that point had been confined to British newspapers where the emphasis was upon speed, topicality, and personal alignment with the subject. There’s nothing a British editor likes more than sending out a recent novel about the Berlin Wall to a writer who only last year wrote a novel about the Berlin Wall.

I wrote on Kafka, it ran, we were off. Many more pieces on even less likely subjects followed. Bob gave a lot of freedom to his writers, but the way he handled pieces was the opposite of a free-for-all. It’s a combination difficult to describe. The things you could get away with at the *Review* you could never get away with elsewhere: Bob wasn’t a grammar weenie; he didn’t rule out the personal or obscenity. He prized rationality and clarity but not at the expense of passion. He taught you not to speak vaguely of “historical context,” or indeed overuse “vaguely,” or suggest that two things were “inextricably entwined.”

But it was more than that. He valued individual sensibilities, more than any editor I ever knew. Though often accused of relying on too small a circle of contributors, it cannot be said that his paper suffered from a uniformity of tone. To read it cover-to-cover was to experience stylistic whiplash, from the conversational to the drily academic, from aggressive provocation to the intimate or dreamily philosophic. Bob’s “paper” was a very broad church with a narrow entrance marked: *if it’s good.*

I don’t know if he ever realized how little I’d known or understood in the beginning. Didn’t know my favorite Sontag essays came out of this “paper,” or that Bob had edited Baldwin, or known Lowell intimately, or helped edit the early *Paris Review*. We’d had lunch quite a few times before I learned he was a Jewish boy from Long Island rather than the Bostonian wasp that—from his fancy suits and frequent references to Lowell—I had somehow imagined he was. But being very stupid about lots of things was not a disqualifying trait in Bob’s mind: like an indulgent parent he focused on your peculiar strengths. He was even a little suspicious of formal academic expertise, at least if it came at the price of a readable sentence.

His greatest pleasure was those people who approached his own intellectual ambidexterity: a doctor with a fancy prose style, say, or a president who understood and appreciated poetry. When considering such people he would get a very merry look in his eye—since he is not editing this piece let’s call it a “glint”—and say, “Well, now, he’s really a sort of genius you know, a genius! Ha! Ha!” Always the happy laugh at the end. Other people’s genius aroused no envy in him; it was only ever a source of delight.

About the rest of us he had a clear eye. She’s a bit weak on Iraq but absolutely marvelous on Alexander Pope. He knows everything about the theater but nothing at all about politics. This is presumably what allowed him to decide, very early on, that he wasn’t a writer himself, though I always found it hard to believe: the way he edited was effectively writing. It was like having a second architect appear during construction, suggesting a west wing here or a second floor. You could get a bit petulant about it. *Have you considered x?* is not always what you want to hear when you’ve just written two thousand words on *y*. But he was always right.

“Will Bob be there? I owe him a piece.” An anxious query tacked onto many an RSVP for a New York literary party. But even if you didn’t owe him you had to be careful: in company Bob was like a shark in a shoal, trawling for pieces, waiting for unsuspecting writers to drunkenly let slip that they were interested in Sibelius or Croatia or had a theory about Philip Glass. Sometimes the process of eliciting could feel a little like entrapment. Not because he was strict with a deadline, but because to agree to write something for Bob was to know there was no way you’d be phoning it in, you’d be holding yourself to the highest standard—his.

Perhaps the greatest aspect of Bob’s legacy is the generations of editorial assistants he spread abroad. Whenever I am being particularly astutely edited elsewhere it usually turns out that the red pen belongs to an ex-assistant of Bob’s. Thank God—I always need the help. Many of Bob’s writers were Nobel Prize winners, true geniuses, all-rounders of the C.P. Snow variety. They would have written brilliantly anywhere. But there were others, like me, from whom Bob not only elicited work, but helped directly to improve, educate, and form. I loved him for it and I’ll miss writing for him so much.

*Additional remembrances of Robert Silvers by more than sixty* New York Review *contributors and friends can be found at* [*nybooks.com/rbs*](http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/03/21/remembering-bob-silvers/)*.*

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