Arts & Humanities

Gilbert Highet and Classics at Columbia

Gilbert Highet—a prolific author, charismatic teacher, renowned scholar, and devoted Columbian—made his professional life an exuberant celebration of the classics.

By
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Fall 2001

Most eloquent among the sons of Scotland, educated at Glasgow and Oxford, you have for the last forty years enriched the world of classical letters with the richness of your scholarship. You have been at once a support and an ornament to humane learning in this, your adopted country. Generations of Columbia students can testify to the scope of your erudition and the precision of your wit. In nearly a score of books—*doctis, Iuppiter, et laboriosis* [from Catullus 1, meaning “learned, Jupiter, and full of labor”]—you have charted the enduring forms and themes of literature, with a spirit as indefatigable as it is passionate. A Varro in learning, a Cicero in eloquence, you have not only defended the vitality and grace of the classical tradition, you have also embodied it.” So spoke President William McGill ’70HON at the spring 1977 commencement in awarding Gilbert Highet the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters for his stellar achievements as a world-class educator. Indeed, during his long and warm association with Columbia, Highet became the most famous classical scholar in the United States, with a career that streaked through the sky like a blazing comet. Consummate teacher, author, and literary critic, he used the classroom, his publications, and the electronic media to bring the classical world to the specialist and the general public. For countless thousands who had never studied the classical languages, he breathed new life and meaning into the literary masterpieces bequeathed to posterity by the Greeks and Romans.

Before coming to Columbia in 1937, Highet had demonstrated his love for classics as a youthful prodigy and throughout his university studies. Born on June 22, 1906, in Glasgow, Scotland, to educated parents, he began learning Latin at the age of eleven, and soon afterward Greek, on special scholarships at Hillhead High School. By fourteen he could read Homer and Vergil with ease and for pleasure, and by sixteen he read Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, and also read and analyzed ten plays of Shakespeare. At Glasgow University (1925–28), he became the most well-known classicist in Scotland, where he earned a master's degree in Greek and Latin, and a diploma in ancient history and archaeology. He also received the Logan Memorial Medal and Prize (as most distinguished graduate) and the Snell Exhibition and Newlands Scholarship (entitling him to four years of study at Oxford). At Oxford's Balliol (1929–32), he earned a B.A. in classics and received a number of prestigious awards—the Ferguson Scholarship, the Craven Scholarship, the Jenkyns Exhibition. There he studied under three great teacher-scholars—Cyril Bailey, Maurice Bowra, and Gilbert Murray, who collectively provided him with outstanding role models for his own career. He taught at St. John's, Oxford (1933–37) as tutor and fellow—something that he regarded as one of the best experiences of his life—while studying for and obtaining a master's degree in classics. During this period he and his wife, Helen MacInnes, co-translated from the German Otto Kiefer's *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* and Gustav Mayer's *Friedrich Engels: A Biography*.

Highet's defining moment (professionally) came in 1937, when Columbia hired him as a visiting associate on a one-year appointment. President Nicholas Murray Butler had originally (albeit unsuccessfully) attempted to recruit Maurice Bowra for the position, which carried with it an attractive salary. In declining the offer, Bowra allegedly informed Butler that he (Butler) would never be able to lure an Englishman to America but that he might well be able to lure a Scotsman for the money. When the Scotsman arrived at Columbia, he joined a classics faculty that included LaRue Van Hook, Wilbert Carr, Clinton Keyes, William Dinsmoor, and William Westermann. In 1938, within one year of accepting the temporary appointment, Highet became Professor of Greek and Latin—a remarkable accomplishment for a man who was just turning 32. Highet came to realize that during the 1930s American classical studies had suffered serious damage, partly brought on by the social and economic upheavals that followed World War I. In the painful aftermath of the Great Depression, classicists witnessed the onslaught of educational reform that banished Greek and Latin from the center of the liberal arts curriculum. Convinced that classics needed a fresh direction to survive this assault, he worked with Moses

Hadas ’30GSAS, then an untenured member of the faculty, on revitalizing the humanities program. In Humanities A, where Columbia’s freshmen read the classical works in English translation, Highet kept his “pupils” on the edge of their seats in his early days on Morningside Heights.

Wartime service

Highet’s American career was just beginning to soar when he was called up to serve in the British Army at the outbreak of World War II. From 1941 to 1946 (on leave from Columbia) he served in the British Mission to the United States, in the British Intelligence Center in New York, and in the British Zone of occupied Berlin. Under Sir William Stephenson, the Canadian special operations executive, he carried out many missions, shrouded in mystery over the decades by the British Official Secrets Act. During the war he pioneered the art of preparing psychological profiles of Nazi leaders such as Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, and Himmler—based on his psychoanalysis of Roman emperors. With limited information about his German subjects, he succeeded in predicting their behavior under different circumstances, in documents regarded as highly significant in those days. As America armed herself for battle, he shuttled between New York and Washington, and traveled to Canada and South America and Great Britain on military airplanes and ocean liners. On the shores of Lake Ontario, in a secret Canadian training facility, he prepared the first draft of the recently released volume *The Secret History of British Intelligence in the Americas*. As a member of the British Army of Occupation, he entered the smoldering remains of Hitler’s bunker and became responsible for helping to recover the gold reserves hidden by the Nazis. During the war he also completed his three-volume translation from the German of Werner Jaeger’s *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, still the classic model of the translator’s art.

When Highet returned to the United States in the summer of 1946, he left his duties as a lieutenant colonel to take up those of a college professor. Although he had offers at the end of the war to pursue a more lucrative career, he turned them down to resume teaching at Columbia—a decision that he claimed he never regretted. He regarded the ex-soldiers who came in on the GI Bill as highly intelligent and remarked that in those postwar years he got from his students almost as much stimulus as he gave them. In full bloom as a teacher and scholar, he became Anthon

Professor of the Latin Language and Literature in 1950 and an American citizen in 1951, committed to his adopted homeland. He continued to strengthen instruction in the humanities with his colleague Moses Hadas, who himself became Professor of Greek and Latin in 1953, then Jay Professor of Greek in 1956. In the spring of 1953 Oxford University asked Highet to allow his name to be entered as a candidate for the Corpus Professorship of Latin, which would open at the end of that academic year. He wrote to President Grayson Kirk ’53hon that although he had aspired to that position for many years, he would not permit his name to be submitted because Columbia had treated him so well. Devoted to Columbia and to the students whom he found so stimulating, Highet taught the Greek and Roman classics on a campus that featured an exceptional liberal arts professoriate. He belonged to a faculty that included such luminaries as Mark Van Doren ’21GSAS ’60HON, Lionel Trilling ’25C ’38GSAS, and Jacques Barzun ’27C ’32GSAS, who all helped enhance Columbia’s reputation in the nation and the world.

A legendary teacher

When Gilbert Highet entered the classroom, one felt as though the curtain were going up on a Broadway play, with a living legend in the lead. He reminded students (not surprisingly) of a British Army officer— of the kind portrayed by Jack Hawkins in motion pictures—tall, erect, handsome, clean-shaven, and impeccably dressed. He consistently gave his audience a commanding performance, whether he spoke or sang or stood or walked, with a presence comparable to that of Laurence Olivier or John Houseman. With his Scottish-English burr and his riveting, rapid-fire delivery, he dazzled students with his dynamic lectures, brilliant in their organization and brimming with critical insights. The inspired anecdotes, the poignant pauses, and the sudden bursts of laughter formed part of a magnificent, comprehensible structure that gripped the heart and held one spellbound. He loved Vergil and taught the *Aeneid* (in the original Latin) every year to packed classes; he loved his “darling” Juvenal and the Roman satirists for exposing decadence and corruption. He detested Plato and Julius Caesar—the one, for outlining the principles of dictatorship; the other, for becoming the accomplished dictator who crushed the life out of the Roman Republic. Imitating a Roman soldier, he brandished a window pole; impersonating Marius at the gates of Rome, he crouched down, then sprang across the floor to battle his great rival Sulla. With his powerful and speculative mind, he

gave his students an extraordinary intellectual experience, capped by a showmanship perhaps unparalleled in the American college classroom.

In his 35 years of teaching at Columbia, Highet never found anything as painful as the student riots that exploded on campus in 1968. During the late 1960s his classics colleagues included Coleman Benedict, Howard Porter, William Calder, James Coulter, and Steele Commager (not the historian but his son the Latinist). During those years of violent protest and agonizing reappraisal, Highet came to despise the student radicals, especially those who wanted to destroy Columbia during the Vietnam War. Although he had misgivings about America's involvement in the conflict in Southeast Asia, he believed that the student activists had gone far beyond the motivation of an antiwar protest. When some threatened to burn down Butler Library tier by tier, he may have recalled the Dark Ages, when the forces of barbarism almost extinguished the Greek and Roman classics. Regarding the anarchists, whom he characterized as dirty and dizzy with drugs, he allegedly uttered his famous paraphrase of Matthew 7.6: "I shall not cast false pearls before real swine." He recalled a doctoral examination, interrupted by the rhythmic shouts from a protest rally, which reminded him of the "SIEG HEIL! SIEG HEIL! SIEG HEIL!" of a Hitler demonstration. When demonstrators blockaded the entrance to his building, he angrily told them that after teaching at Columbia for thirty years, he would be damned if he would leave through the window. He wrote to President Grayson Kirk, who resigned in 1968, that he blamed him no more than he would blame the director of a museum if a gang of hoodlums began slashing the paintings.

Labor of love

Highet's complete bibliography, spanning a fifty-year period, consists of roughly a thousand items—a monumental achievement for a classicist. He authored 21 books, which (excluding the translations referred to a little earlier) fall into three categories—pedagogy, scholarly research, and essays of a general nature. (His wife, Helen MacInnes, published 21 books of her own as a best-selling novelist who became famous for her tales of intrigue and espionage set during and after World War II.) His articles demonstrate an extremely broad range of interests—from essays on the classical authors and the classical tradition to essays of a nonclassical and more general nature. His reviews of books about classical and contemporary literature enjoyed a large audience during the years that he held prestigious

editorial appointments with several major publishers. As chief literary critic for *Harper's* magazine (1952–54), he reviewed new books every month in his own column, in a potpourri format, involving clusters of books on various themes. As chairman of the editorial advisory board of *Horizon* magazine (1958–77), he reviewed numerous books, including his critique of William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. As a member of the board of judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club (1954–78), he wrote over 400 book reviews, which appeared continuously in *Book-of-the-Month Club News*. Clifton "Kip" Fadiman '25C, a fellow judge, regarded him as the most erudite member of the board, with a histrionic talent that would rescue their meetings from excessive sobriety.

Highet's books on pedagogy sprang from his seeing teaching and research as two complementary endeavors, each replenishing the other. His ideal teacher— a liberal educator in the best sense—will consistently and enthusiastically communicate to his or her students the genuine and permanent importance of the subject. Such a teacher will also engage in productive scholarly research, as a means of discovering new knowledge and demonstrating the importance of reevaluation and reinterpretation. While teaching at Oxford, he published *An Outline of Homer*, a student commentary on 23 passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that form a microcosm of Homer's poetry. Before his departure from Oxford, he also completed *Beginning Latin*, a textbook divided into 72 lessons, displaying his talent for presenting difficult material clearly and crisply. *The Art of Teaching* (1950), on the methods of teaching, became an instant success—reprinted numerous times in English and translated into sixteen languages, from Arabic to Urdu. In it Highet describes the qualities of the good teacher, the methods to be used in class, and those used by some of the world's great teachers—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, and the Jesuits. *The Immortal Profession* (1976) consists of a series of essays on the joys of teaching and learning—a retrospective of his earlier views, but with special application to the college teacher. In it one also finds stimulating pieces on Gilbert Murray, Albert Schweitzer, and Jesus—not on Jesus' methods of teaching but his relation to the Twelve Apostles and other secret disciples.

In the area of scholarly research, Highet authored books with widespread appeal for the classical scholar and the educated layperson. *The Classical Tradition* (1949) examines Greek and Roman influences on Western literature from the fall of classical civilization through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This herculean feat reveals not only Highet's mastery of comparative literature but also (as the

critic Edmund Wilson wrote) his ability to cover an enormous amount of literary material. *Juvenal the Satirist* (1954) considers the life, work, and influence of the Roman poet Juvenal, with its central contribution being a detailed literary analysis of each of his sixteen satires. This admirable study—the first of its kind for Juvenal's poetry—reveals Highet's razor-sharp critical acumen and his vast knowledge of previous scholarship on the individual poems. *Poets in a Landscape* (1957), a pilgrimage through places associated with seven Roman poets, received the Italian government's ENIT Prize (*Ente Nazionale Italiano per il Turismo*). *The Anatomy of Satire* (1962), a study of satire under its three main forms (monologue, parody, and narrative), received the Award of Merit from the American Philological Association. *The Speeches in Vergil's Aeneid* (1972) analyzes all the speeches in the *Aeneid*—the speeches and their speakers, formal and informal speeches, and the speeches and their models. This exhaustive labor of love represents the culmination of Highet's experience with the *Aeneid*, which he came to believe gained immensely from its affinities with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

In his books of essays of a general nature, Highet published lectures connected with his radio program of the 1950s, "People, Places, and Books." In 1952, on WQXR (the radio station of *The New York Times*) and under the auspices of Oxford University Press, he began to speak weekly on a variety of subjects in literature and the arts. By 1959, when the program ended, his talks were carried by over 300 stations in the United States and Canada, and by the British Broadcasting Company and Voice of America. His lectures, both educational and entertaining, exhibited a broad range of classical and nonclassical topics—from language and literature, to history and philosophy, to music and art. His eloquent voice captivated the public—whether he spoke about Horace and Apuleius, or Shakespeare and Dickens, or Washington and Jefferson, or Bach and Brahms, or Bosch and Bruegel. John Crosby, who wrote for *The New York Herald Tribune*, described the first season of these popular radio talks as scholarly and flavorsome, and deserving of publication in book form. The critic Edmund Wilson consented to Highet's doing a broadcast about him on six humorous conditions, which included the recording on a silver spool and a case of Old Forester whiskey. Highet eventually revised a large number of the radio talks for Oxford, for publication in five volumes of essays, which stand as a lasting memorial to a program that charmed the nation. One may still savor his winning words in his *People, Places, and Books* (1953), *A Clerk of Oxenford* (1954), *Talents and Geniuses* (1957), *The Powers of Poetry* (1960), and *Explorations* (1971).

Humane scholarship

Although Gilbert Highet became famous for his books and lectures, he may seem somewhat out of place in today's world of literary criticism. In this age of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, some may see him as a "liberal humanist," with an unwavering belief in the moral value of the literary classics. Indeed he was, in the sense that he believed in the universal value of the classics and that the great authors can provide the standards by which people may lead happy and productive lives. As scholars were shifting from the poet's personality to the poet's persona, he pursued his biographical approach to interpreting poetry—an integral part of his work on Juvenal's satires. Facing considerable criticism in this area, he defended his objection to the exploitation of the persona theory in a masterful article: "Masks and Faces in Satire," *Hermes* 102 (1974) 321–37. All in all, he presented his audience with a humane form of scholarship—free of the vacuous, jargon-filled kind of literary criticism plaguing some areas of current classical scholarship. He enabled his readers to experience (heaven forbid!) something called "literary appreciation," to travel through a world of truth and beauty, elegance and splendor, or just plain meaning. He would explore those aspects of great writing that make the classical authors worth reading, without burying the soul of a masterpiece beneath a technical theoretical superstructure. He would emphasize how the authors presented themselves (whether real or a persona) and how they expressed their innermost thoughts, with powerful imagery and quotable statements.

Although Highet rose to eminence in America's cultural pantheon, some classicists regarded him as a "popularizer," in the negative sense. Jealous perhaps of his outstanding achievements and his virtual celebrity status, they could not understand that he had done more than anyone to revitalize the study of Greek and Latin. A frequent focus of media attention in the United States and abroad, he became the most recognized and most talked-about classical scholar in American history since Thomas Jefferson. A popularizer in the positive sense, he provided the classics establishment with something that it desperately needed (as it does today)—respectability with an audience of nonspecialists. The very antithesis of the stereotypical academician, he paraded the classical authors from the groves of academe into the public's living room with his incisive books, articles, and lectures. He invited his audience to a celebration of classical literature, on a journey in search

of broad knowledge about classical civilization—a journey open to both specialists and nonspecialists. Every step of the way, he continuously referred to the literature, music, and art of later civilizations in order to emphasize the majesty, strength, and influence of the classical tradition. The journey came to an end on January 20, 1978; at his memorial service in St. Paul's Chapel on the Ides of March, Columbia paid tribute to the most accomplished classicist of his time. There Alan Cameron, who succeeded him as Anthon Professor, remarked that never again would the profession see the entire field of classics through the perspective of one man's vision.

In 1954, the midpoint of Highet's long and extraordinary career at Morningside, Columbia celebrated the 200th anniversary of her founding. For that occasion Highet wrote "Her Sons—'Alert and Grateful,'" *Life* 36 (February 15, 1954) 126–31—an article in which he showed his respect and admiration for Columbia's students. He described her sons (in those days her daughters attended only Barnard) as diverse and talented individuals, molded by the faculty, by one another, and by the energy of New York City. For that occasion too he wrote *Man's Unconquerable Mind*, on the powers of knowledge and the intellect, and *The Migration of Ideas*, on the influence of great thoughts upon human affairs. He concluded the first of these books by praising the achievements of the world's great universities, in words that one may apply to the 250th anniversary that Columbia will soon celebrate. After referring to the laboratory in which I.I. Rabi worked, he stated: "Even to tread the floor of such a room, knowing no more than the outlines of the work done there, is to forget one's own petty self, to revere the ardors and efforts of the great thinkers and teachers who have helped to make our world, and to feel, like the majestic roll of some vast river, the urgent march of the mind, imperfect but marvelous, unique in every individual and yet super-personal, the mysterious power which has brought us out of bestial savagery toward civilization and wisdom, and will take us further still. It is to dedicate oneself again to the purpose of the university, which is to acquire and to extend knowledge for the service of all mankind."

Gilbert Highet: Poet in a Landscape

Gilbert Highet loved and wrote poetry, having written his first poem at the age of sixteen after reading George Meredith's "Lucifer in Starlight." At Glasgow he composed poetry under the pseudonym of "Cyrano" and at Oxford he composed two verse-dramas, produced in the private theater of the poet laureate John Masefield. At Columbia he translated classical poetry into English, frequently in the meters of

the original Greek or Latin, as with his translations of Catullus and Horace in Poets in a Landscape. During his American career, he published original poetry and translated classical poetry in Harper's, Horizon, The New Yorker, American Scholar, and Columbia's own Columbia Forum. A romantic at heart, he published in American Scholar the following poem—a self-composed epitaph—in which the poet pictures himself (not his persona) in his own special landscape:

Obit

What shall we say about him in the papers?
Stepped out into the path of a speeding car
No. Not such a stupid end for a man of mind.
In Claremont Hospital after a long illness
Among his scholarly works the most important
He had continued yes yes yes no. No.
Suddenly, by a stroke, after a class
No. Not that either, although possible.
Yesterday on the third floor of the library
Among the immortals speaking silent Greek
That would be peaceful, yet perhaps too pat.
But no, the air is wrong, the place is wrong:
Where are the heights, the trees, the wind, the birds?
Write in the notice: on the slopes of—what?
Some insignificant hill, it doesn't matter,
But climbing, with the wind around him and
The sky above and his remembering head
Quite full of poetry and music, climbing
Together with his one true friend and love
Up through the stalwart trees to timberline—
After a life of effort, rest and sleep.

Reprinted from American Scholar 32 (1963) 597.

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