Arts & Humanities

The Many Lives of Moses Hadas

Teacher, translator, scholar, rabbi, husband, and father—an affectionate portrait of Moses Hadas by his daughter Rachel Hadas.

By |
Fall 2001

In the 1930s, the decade in which my father, Moses Hadas ’30GSAS, began his long career in the Department of Classics at Columbia, the discipline of classical philology was still strongly influenced by German and British models. Whether the student was reading Homer, Sophocles, or (A.E. Housman’s specialty) Manilius, expertise in textual criticism and in grammar was paramount; interpretation and appreciation of the text were secondary. If a student happened to enjoy the poetry of Homer or the tragedians, well and good; but such enjoyment was not the point of the exercise. The possible benefits of a literary critical approach, let alone of teaching texts in translation for students who knew no Greek or Latin, were by and large sternly ignored.

In the last half century, a dramatic cultural shift has clearly occurred in the teaching of classics in American universities. So pervasive has been this change that it’s all too easy to take it for granted. A detailed account of Columbia’s Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization courses such as *Great Books* by David Denby ’65C ’66J virtually ignores the shift, focusing instead on what might be labeled the Anti–Dead White Male reaction against the teaching of Western masterpieces that arose in the politically conscious seventies and eighties. It’s worth pondering, then, that had it not been for teachers like Moses Hadas (1900–1966), generations of students who knew no Greek and Latin and did not major in classics might never have had the opportunity to read translations of epic or tragedy in the first place.

Hadas’s former Columbia colleague William M. Calder III notes: “That Sophocles is almost as well known as Shakespeare to so many Americans educated after 1945 is largely due to Hadas.”

How did this quiet revolution come about? Hadas was reticent about his own career. But an early experience to which he often referred to illustrate the importance of teaching the classics in translation is fully narrated in an unpublished and undated typescript of a talk entitled “On Teaching Classics in Translation,” which was evidently delivered to, as the writer puts it, “colleagues in other branches of literary study.” (He adds mischievously, “It is a delicious experience to emerge from the academic limbo to which so many of us have been relegated and to say, reproachfully, ‘We always tried to tell you that we are indispensable.’”)

Here is Hadas’s account: “I am so far a renegade from the principles of my own teachers as to believe that the teaching of ancient books in translation, even of the Bible, is a good thing. In the early years of my own teaching I had simultaneously a course in Euripides, with four students, and one in Greek tragedy in translation, with twenty. At the end of the term I decided that it was useless to set the Hellenists the usual examination, for I had heard them perform daily, so I asked them the questions on Euripides which I was putting to my tragedy class; I had after all not limited my exegesis to metrics and grammar. I learned a useful lesson when I found that what the English readers had received was more meaningful and more likely to endure than what the Hellenists had learned. I still teach Euripides, and other authors, in Greek, for that is the prime obligation of my profession; but I have regarded it as no less an obligation to multiply the beneficiaries of the legacy by teaching the ancients in translation.”From this point on, Hadas never looked back but enthusiastically taught texts in translation. And not only taught them—translated them.

Translating for a new generation

For Hadas, in a way that seems to me characteristically self-effacing, fails to mention in the above anecdote that he himself did an enormous amount to multiply not just the beneficiaries of the legacy but also the legacy itself, by his numerous translations. Both as a teacher and as a translator of the classics, Hadas prized clarity above all. He saw that each generation needs its own versions, and in “On Teaching Classics in Translation” he has penetrating things to say about the perils of Victorian renderings of Greek tragedy that give students the misleading impression that Aeschylus or Euripides were Old Testament prophets. He once commented: “It’s a little too much to expect a student to pick up a Victorian translation of the *Iliad*.

He’s got two strikes against him if he does. No, let each age put down the classics in its own language, just so long as they keep the spirit of the original.” Hadas’s own way of remaining faithful to the spirit of his beloved Euripides, for example, was to efface himself, presenting a plain if formal prose text in place of the flowery and fanciful spirit of an earlier translator like Gilbert Murray. Below is Murray’s rendering of a choral strophe followed by the heroine’s opening lines in Euripides’ *Medea*, and then a translation of the same passage by Hadas and his Euripides co-translator, John McLean. The contrast speaks eloquently for itself.

Old Wine, New Bottles is the title of one of Hadas’s many books. Even a partial list of the remarkable variety of wines Hadas rebottled includes works from Hebrew and German as well as Greek and Latin; the astonishing range speaks to Hadas’s cultural reach, which encompassed European historiography, biblical scholarship, and much else as well as classical philology. Thus in addition to such classics as Euripides, Aristophanes, and Plutarch (as well as the Hellenistic romance writers Longus and Heliodorus) among the Greeks, and Caesar, Cicero, Tacitus, and Seneca among the Romans, Hadas also translated from German the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt and scholarly works by Walter Otto, Karl Vietor, and Elias Bickerman. Then there was the other branch of his expertise, expressed in translations of medieval Hebrew poems and fables. His last book, posthumously published in 1966 and soon to be reissued by David R. Godine, is entitled *Fables of a Jewish Aesop*.

Transmitting the classical legacy

Moses Hadas was raised in Atlanta in an Orthodox household by Yiddish-speaking parents and trained as a rabbi (he graduated from Jewish Theological Seminary in 1926 and completed his doctorate in classics in 1930); later in life he continued to fulfill the rabbinical function of performing wedding ceremonies, specializing in marriages, like his own second one, between Jews and Gentiles. Thus not only in his teaching, translating, and scholarship but also in his own life, Hadas was a bridge builder who crossed his own bridges; a mapper of cultures who especially enjoyed seeing where traditions converged. His linguistic talent (Yiddish, German, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and add later some Spanish, Dutch, Modern Greek, and Hebrew as he experienced it spoken in Israel) was mirrored by a remarkable cultural fluency. Hadas’s bookplate, designed for him early in his career, neatly illustrates what would now be called multiculturalism: it depicts a menorah for Judaism,

Athena’s owl for Hellenism, and Roman fasces. Throughout his career, most notably in his 1959 study *Hellenistic Culture: Fusion and Diffusion*, Hadas traced connections between these worlds—an undertaking that has now become far more fashionable than it was in his day, in the field of classics as in other areas of the humanities and social sciences, but one that even today few scholars are fully equipped to undertake.

Thus although Hadas was praised by his colleague Jacques Barzun ’27C ’32SGSAS as belonging “to that ancient time when scholars loved to teach, knew how to write, and developed personalities without effort,” his distinctively multicultural interests and identity make him look, from my perspective now in 2001, more like a man ahead of his time. Hadas was also ahead of his time in his populist instinct. A crucial—perhaps the crucial—theme of his career was the urge to transmit the classical legacy, in the widest sense of the term, to as wide an audience as possible—certainly an audience outside the classrooms of Columbia College. Thus mid–century technology allowed him to reach a television audience; he spoke about the classical legacy on Channel 13 and traveled to Israel with Eric Sevareid in 1965 for a program about the Shrine of the Book. And in 1963, in a pilot program conducted under the auspices of the Ford Foundation, Hadas delivered lectures on classical civilization by telephone to several Southern black colleges, including Grambling State University. (Partial tapes and transcripts of these lectures survive; it is a chapter of his career worth reexploring, and more surprising than the fact that Hadas corresponded with Robert Graves about Greek mythology and with Mary Renault about the way Euripides’ Medea hisses her s’s.)

As his supple use of media shows, Hadas welcomed technology as a means to his humanistic ends. A wry comment in an unpublished 1959 talk entitled “Science and Education” gives a clue as to what his opinion of e-mail might have been: “I . . . like the gadgets that technology produces; a tape recorder is a very handy thing on which to dictate a harangue against gadgets.” But he continues on a more serious note: “The real issue . . . is not between science on the one side and the humanities on the other, but between one approach to both science and humanities and another. Humanity is more important than either science or the humanities separately.”

Living many lives

Translator, scholar, builder of cultural bridges, charismatic teacher with a restless sense of his mission—Moses Hadas was all these things. And if it seems paradoxical that so dynamic a figure is now less remembered and celebrated than his slightly younger Columbia colleague Lionel Trilling ’25C ’38GSAS, part of the reason lies in an elusive quality in Hadas’s temperament, a reticence inseparable from, indeed inextricably linked to, the very modesty and versatility I have already mentioned. At a recent (and rare) Hadas family reunion, my sister Beth commented in exasperation that the Hadas family motto ought to be “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” She had a point. In Hadas’s rather short life he managed to play a striking number of successive roles, to undergo a number of fundamental changes. His work as teacher and scholar was a constant, but this work was performed by, at different times, an Orthodox Jew and—as he once described himself to some proselytizing Jehovah’s witnesses—a godless person (he seems to have broken with Orthodox practice well before 1945, the year he remarried). He was a Southerner by upbringing and accent (“He sounds like Jimmy Carter!” gasped one of my Rutgers students some years ago upon hearing a tape of him reading *The Apology*—in translation, of course), then a New Yorker. He was a rabbi, then a professor; then, like many academics in his generation, an O.S.S. operative who, more unusually, took an active interest in Greek politics after the war; and then a professor again, not to mention a talking head on TV and a telelecturer. He was a scholar at home in three ancient languages who was also a Groucho Marx fan. He was a husband and father to two very different families in succession. Three of his four children have had careers in the academy or the humanities; the youngest of the four, I was born when he was 48.

It's as if it were possible, just barely, to live all these lives; but only if no time was wasted talking about them. Or writing about them—for much of Hadas’s personality, let alone his experience, remains outside the scope of his written work. However regrettable, this omission is consistent. In transmitting the classical heritage, Hadas prized clarity; accordingly, a quality of transparency prevents his books from becoming personal documents in the sense many of Trilling’s books are. Given the life he led, did my father never feel ambivalence, nostalgia, divided loyalties, regret? Don’t ask, don’t tell.

One thing I do know he felt was exhaustion. By the time I was finishing high school, he would lie down as soon as he returned from teaching, so that he and I read Cicero’s *De Senectute* together horizontally. *On Old Age*—how apt it sounds. When I was sixteen, he naturally seemed old to me, but he was only 65. He was never too

tired, though, to teach. He could translate any Latin poem at sight; late in his life he taught me the Greek alphabet (though he refused to transliterate the word *fuck*, spelled in Greek letters, when I came across it in an e.e. cummings poem) and a little German; and I'm aware these interchanges only scratch the surface of what he knew. He always praised my poetic efforts, moreover. Two of my books have titles that pay tribute to him in ways I was unconscious of at the time I chose them: *Pass It On* and *The Double Legacy*.

A puzzle of contradictions

The legacy Hadas left us is at once substantial and elusive. In looking over tributes from his Columbia colleagues, some of whom knew my father for longer than I did, I find myself identifying pieces of the puzzle of a temperament that had its contradictions. For example, Hadas was simultaneously extroverted and reticent. How would this combination play out in the classroom? Gilbert Highet's eulogy supplies at least part of an answer:

"Well before his career came to an end he had the pleasure of teaching the sons of some of his earlier pupils. They found him just as charming and just as stimulating as their fathers had found him. He really knew a great deal more by that time; but he did not let it show because it might inhibit them. He would rather efface himself (in part at least) than seem mentally distant or pedantically erudite, and risk cutting down a young mind. That is rather difficult. It can be done only by a man who is fundamentally wise, learned, and warm-hearted."

And, I would add, by a teacher whose mode is essentially dialogic. My father needed his students to complete his thought, to earn for themselves what he had to give them. In this connection there is a most germane passage in "On Teaching Classics in Translation"—germane for what it shows us about Hadas in the classroom, as well as relevant to anyone who has ever tried to teach literature.

"The first rule, especially hard for teachers fresh from graduate school to apply, is to teach the book, not about the book. It is easier to lecture about the time and place of a book, the culture that produced it, the special historical or linguistic problems involved in it. It is harder, but more to our purpose, to face the book as a masterpiece and to help the student understand why it is a masterpiece. The great

audiences which the book commanded over great stretches of time found it meaningful without scholarly subsidia. This must involve a degree of superficiality, but it also encourages freshness. Professional philosophers and philologians who take a year for *The Republic* are outraged that we despatch it in a week. If the students' reading is superficial, any honest scholar will admit that his is also, and *The Republic* was not intended as a preserve for professors. If you dodge the book and conceal your fecklessness by loud noises in the outworks, the whole enterprise becomes fraudulent. There are crambooks from which your students can get all the knowledge you purvey with their bare feet on a table. I emphasize this point because I find it needs to be impressed on all instructors in our Humanities course, and not least myself. I would cheerfully undertake an hour's discourse on any author included in my history of literature courses without preparation; I would not dare to enter a Humanities class without first trying to recover the excitement of a first unprofessional reading."

Clearly, Hadas drew encouragement and energy from his students' response to his own excitement. It was not preparing "an hour's discourse" that so exhausted him at the end of his life; it was being up for the give and take, the call and response. He needed his students as much as they needed him. It is not enough to say he was wise and warm-hearted; rather, he was by temperament that kind of teacher.

The shape of the mind

Another eulogy of Hadas by a Columbia colleague, Herbert Deane '42C '53GSAS, admirably captures some of the contradictions of a complex nature: "By turns he could be puckish, irreverent, idealistic, outrageous, and serious, even impassioned. He was an exquisitely refined person, and yet he was also capable of an almost Rabelaisian earthiness. Although he had an unusual capacity for indignation in the presence of injustice, hypocrisy, or shoddiness, he was never self-righteous or condemnatory. All these different aspects of Moses Hadas's personality lived together in a harmonious whole."

But now, more than thirty years after my father's death, I find I cannot follow Deane quite all the way to his conclusion when he courageously touches on an aspect of his colleague's character that some clearly found disconcerting. Deane honestly notes Hadas's appetite for admiration: "He knew that his students felt affection as well as

respect for him, and he enjoyed their devotion, as he enjoyed the praise of his written teaching when it came, as it so often did, from discriminating men whom he admired. In this innocent joy in the love and praise that he inspired, he sometimes startled some of us who think that we have escaped the danger of vanity by coyly pretending that we do not care about the reactions of our students or our peers."

So far so good. But then Deane continues: "But Moses could enjoy the affection and admiration that came to him because in the last analysis he did not need them; his relations with his family and his close friends were so deeply satisfying that he had no temptation to seek substitute gratifications in his activities as a scholar or teacher."

This seems wrong, for Hadas did indeed need the affection and admiration that came to him and

that he certainly earned. I would amend Deane's conclusion: In the last analysis, Hadas's life was his work. True, he was a loving if weary father whose death when I was seventeen shook me for many years but whose life influenced mine in innumerable ways. True, too, he was beloved by many people during his lifetime. But regarded as a teacher and writer, Hadas remains, as his favorite Stoic writers might have pointed out, far more durable than the driven human being who worked so incessantly and productively all his life.

In yet another affectionate collegial comment on this complicated man's career, William Calder notes that Hadas "died shortly after his retirement from Columbia. There was nothing to live for." So much for those friends and family Deane evokes. The truth, as I now see it,

is that my father knew how to work but not how to rest. Rest turned out to amount to death; but death was not a cessation. Three of my father's children and hundreds of his students continue working in the ever-broadening field of the humanities. Countless other people read his books, particularly his translations. The same transparency that makes much of his written work impersonal also makes much of it accessible and durable. In *Agricola*, Tacitus's eulogy of his father-in-law, is a passage my mother, a Latin teacher, marked for me after the death of her husband and my father:

"*Ut vultus hominum, ita simulacra vultus imbecilla ac mortalia sunt, forma mentis aeterna, quam tenere et exprimere non per alienam materiam et artem, sed tuis*

ipse moribus possis”: “Just as men’s faces are frail and perishable, so are likenesses of their faces, but the shape of the mind is an eternal thing, one which you cannot hold on to and express through an artistic medium or skill, but by your own manner of life.” At seventeen, I found these words consoling, and I still do. Not that I think my father is a perfect role model in all respects, even if I commanded the body of knowledge that was his. But the best way to honor our beloved dead is not by idolatry but by our own conduct. The human mind was Moses Hadas’s constant theme, and he honored it as long as he worked, which was as long as he lived.

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >