

BOOK REVIEW

The Classical Tradition. By GILBERT HIGHET. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xl + 763. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-19-937769-5.

The original appearance of this book in 1949 was one of the highlights of postwar American classical scholarship. The present reissue is essentially a camera copy of this now sixty-six year-old book. There is no updating, no expansion of bibliography, and no essay on the life and career of the author. There is a new foreword by Harold Bloom, one of the most distinguished literary critics of our time, which is shorter than four pages.

The original hard cover book had a dust jacket which displayed a simple sketch of an ancient bust. The new paperback is much more elegant, with a cover and spine displaying the great painting of Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) of "Parnassus, Mars and Venus." The 1949 volume had one corrigendum on page 763; that correction has been made, and the new page is thus slightly different from its original. The only error I noted is that the reprint, on page 707, gives the pages for the table of contents as xiii-xxxvi. These were the original pages; in the new volume they should be xv-xxxviii. Absent any word about the author, I shall give a brief discussion of Highet as teacher and scholar, which may well give an idea why the book is once again in print.

In the academic year 1948-49, I was an M.A. candidate in the Department of Greek and Latin at Columbia University. I was privileged, and lucky, to have Highet as my professor in four courses. I was in awe; he was the best teacher I had ever experienced or seen, and I have not changed my mind in the two-thirds of a century which have ensued. I can still see, in my mind's eye, how he undertook in a course on Plautus to give us students a sense of what the dance and music which accompanied a performance might have been like. He elegantly floated across the room while humming tunes which might have been suitable in Roman days. My chief professors in college had received their Ph.Ds in 1898 and 1908. Highet was very much of a different generation; he was born in 1906 and died in 1978.

When I bought *The Classical Tradition* in spring 1949, Highet inscribed a dedication to me, in Greek. When, two years later, I was preparing for my Ph.D.

orals at the The Johns Hopkins University, I reread it again. It was the only book which proved useful to me before the examining committee, which consisted of fourteen senior faculty, only five of whom were from my department. Its influence on me continued over the years, as I learned more of literature largely unknown to me in younger days.

I was drafted into the U.S. Army immediately after I received my doctorate. Most of my service happily was in Germany. While abroad, I learned from my parents that Columbia had made me an offer. I had a job! When I began teaching as an Instructor, I was able to experience Professor Highet from a different angle, as colleague and mentor.

In the spring of 1954 (if memory fails not), the Metropolitan Museum of Art inaugurated a new large auditorium by asking Highet to arrange a series of lectures which were intended to have great appeal for a lay audience. The subject he chose was "The Classical Tradition and Its Survivals"! Since the lectures were also listed as a course in the Columbia School of General Studies, he asked me if I would assist him by greeting our visitors each week and reading the term papers of those enrolled as students.

Highet invited many of the most distinguished scholars in our varied fields to participate. But one evening, late in the program, boded disaster. When Highet arrived about a quarter to eight, I told him that we had no speaker. The subject was architecture! He went into a corner and communed with himself. He then strode onto the platform, announced that Professor X seems to have been unable to come, and that we could attempt to have him at a later date or that he could talk to the audience. There were some 400 people there; the response was a loud "You do it."

There followed then the most extraordinary talk on Greek and Roman architecture which I have ever heard. Highet made his listeners picture in their minds what he was describing. There were no slides, nothing save his elegant and learned descriptions. When he finished, the audience gave him thunderous applause.

I now append a few references which will give more detail about his life and career.

Robert J. Ball, *The Classical Papers of Gilbert Highet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 1-11.

Thomas A. Suits, "Gilbert Highet," in W.W. Briggs and W.M. Calder III, edd., *Classical Scholarship. A Biographical Encyclopedia* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990) 183-191.

Robert J. Ball, "Highet, Gilbert Arthur," in W.W. Briggs, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of North American Classicists* (Westport, Connecticut, & London: Greenwood Press, 1994) 282-285.

Keith Highet (the son), "The Military Career of Gilbert Highet," *CW* 95 (2001-2002) 386-409.

Herbert W. Benario, "Some Classicists in World War II Intelligence Work," *CB* 84.2 (2008) 1-6.

Gilbert Highet was indeed an extraordinary scholar, an extraordinary teacher, an extraordinary person. I close with two quotations from Bloom's foreword. "Highet shows a deftness at the scholar's art of weaving together a kind of tapestry of allusions, returning again and again to individual re-entrances of abiding masters. . . . my admiration for the book's mastery both of design and of detail in chronicling classical influences upon Western literature remains undimmed" (vii-viii). We should be grateful to the Oxford University Press for reissuing his greatest book.

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