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*The*  
CLASSICAL  
LEGACY  
*of*  
GILBERT  
HIGHET

*An In-Depth  
Retrospect*

Robert J. Ball

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The Classical Legacy of Gilbert Highet:  
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# THE CLASSICAL LEGACY OF GILBERT HIGHET: AN IN-DEPTH RETROSPECT

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## Dedication

For Gilbert Highet (*in memoriam*),  
For his son Keith (*in memoriam*),  
For his grandson Ian, and  
For his great-grandson Gilbert (aka Gil)

\* \* \*

*et quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt.*  
And like runners, they pass on the torch of life.  
—Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 2.79

*Degno di tanta reverenza in vista ...*  
His bearing filled me with such reverence ...  
—Dante, *Purgatorio* 1.32

**And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.**  
And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.  
—Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, *General Prologue* 308



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## PREFACE

What will you think about me when I die,  
Helen? There won't be an official life—  
a paragraph at most ...

—Gilbert Highet, "Post-Obit" (undated),  
final entry for Highet, G. in Works Cited

A few years ago, I began to think about the self-effacing statement (quoted above) with which classicist Gilbert Highet began a poem he had addressed to his wife, the novelist Helen MacInnes. He wrote that poem toward the end of his life, when he apparently believed (one cannot know how strongly) that, in spite of everything he had achieved, he would not be remembered in any substantial way.

Although many tributes and testimonials about Highet (including my own) appeared after his death, nothing was ever published that one could regard by any stretch of the imagination as "an official life." An official life should not only contain facts about and memories of the subject but also demonstrate broad-based research, steeped in considerable detail and documentation, while treating controversial issues objectively. Advances in electronic technology, which evolved during the more than forty years since Highet's death, have enabled me to extract much useful information from a variety of databases critical for this biographical undertaking. These advances have also enabled me to incorporate in this undertaking updated bibliographies of publications by and about Highet, in which regard publications about him or referring to him have more than doubled since his passing.

This fully documented examination of Highet's life, teaching, and scholarship, enhanced by fully updated bibliographies of publications by and about him, should (I hope) fill in the gap for an official life. Highet, a unique and towering figure in Classics in the mid-twentieth century, whom I had the great fortune of having as my mentor during my doctoral studies at Columbia University, deserves nothing less.

Robert J. Ball  
Professor Emeritus of Classics  
University of Hawaii



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Ian Highet, representing the Gilbert Highet Estate, for encouraging me to pursue this biographical retrospect about his grandfather and for authorizing me to reproduce several unpublished documents written by and about him;

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Judith Hallett, professor emerita of Classics at the University of Maryland, for reading a draft of my book, for offering incisive comments, and for regarding Highet as one of very few classicists worthy of a retrospective monograph;

Matthew Santirocco, professor of Classics at New York University, for reading a draft of my book, for providing valuable suggestions, and for supporting my view that in his day Highet was the most celebrated classical scholar in America.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

For Classics and Classics-friendly journals cited in the bibliographies at the end of this retrospect, I have used the abbreviations in *L'Année Philologique*, which I have also listed below with their full titles (multiword where applicable). For journals and periodicals not indexed in *L'Année Philologique*, directed primarily at a general audience and containing information important for this undertaking, I have listed their titles in full in the bibliographies at the end of this retrospect.

<i>AJPh</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
<i>Arion</i>	<i>Arion</i>
<i>C&amp;M</i>	<i>Classica et Mediaevalia</i>
<i>CB</i>	<i>Classical Bulletin</i>
<i>CHum</i>	<i>Computers and the Humanities</i>
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Classical Journal</i>
<i>ClAnt</i>	<i>Classical Antiquity</i>
<i>CO</i>	<i>Classical Outlook</i>
<i>CPh</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>Classical Review</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>Classical World</i>
<i>G&amp;R</i>	<i>Greece &amp; Rome</i>
<i>Gnomon</i>	<i>Gnomon</i>
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>Hermes</i>	<i>Hermes</i>
<i>HSPh</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
<i>ICS</i>	<i>Illinois Classical Studies</i>
<i>IJCT</i>	<i>International Journal of the Classical Tradition</i>
<i>JHI</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>MD</i>	<i>Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici</i>
<i>PAPHS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society</i>
<i>Phoenix</i>	<i>Phoenix</i>
<i>PVS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Virgil Society</i>
<i>QS</i>	<i>Quaderni di storia</i>
<i>SO</i>	<i>Symbolae Osloenses</i>



<i>SyllClass</i>	<i>Syllecta Classica</i>
<i>TAPA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association*</i>
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
<i>Vergilius</i>	<i>Vergilius</i>

\* The full title of this journal applies to articles published in it until 2014, when the American Philological Association became the Society for Classical Studies.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on Highet's extraordinary career over forty years after his death, one cannot help but admire his amazing achievements as a teacher and a scholar. In his final book, looking back at his forty years as a teacher, Highet provides a stimulating essay about one of his own great teachers, regarded in his day as Britain's most distinguished classicist.<sup>159</sup> This essay begins with a description of that teacher and his reputation in the English-speaking world, much of which applies to Highet himself, who may have seen in that teacher's career a model for his own.<sup>160</sup>

Highet himself provided a diamond-hard model for the strength, the vitality, and the brilliance that he found in the literature of the classical world. Regarding his legacy as a teacher, one may say that he provided his students with a spectacular intellectual experience, built on a solid foundation for learning and accompanied by a showmanship unparalleled in the American classroom. He lived up to his own vision of the true liberal teacher, the liberal traditionalist, who had intellect and character, who believed in the maximum development of all the students, and who nurtured them to succeed

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159. See Highet 1976a, 145–74 for Highet's warm tribute to Gilbert Murray (above, n. 14).

160. Although Highet regarded Cyril Bailey (above, n. 12) as his greatest teacher, he may also have seen in Gilbert Murray (above, n. 14) a significant model—the view of Suits 1990, 183, who, citing Highet's opening description of Murray (Highet 1976a, 145–46), applies a modified version of it to Highet, which I am quoting below, but in a way that includes a part of that description not included by Suits, the part beginning “and because he had a peculiarly, almost uniquely charming, personality ...”:

“For many years he was the most famous classical teacher in the world. The most highly respected in his own profession: no. A dry specialist like A. E. Housman [above, n. 80], a diamond-hard and many-faceted genius like Wilamowitz-Moellendorff [above, n. 70], although less widely known to the public, stood higher in the regard of their colleagues. But for many years everyone in the English-speaking world who heard any mention of Greek poetry at once thought of [him] ... He became famous for a number of convergent reasons: because he was a superb teacher; because he translated Greek dramas into modern verse ... because he wrote fluently and gracefully on many themes, not all of them classical; because he talked well and often on the B.B.C. ... and because he had a peculiarly, almost uniquely charming, personality, full of grace and delicacy unexpectedly combined with an indomitable will and phenomenal physical vigor.”

And yet, Highet's teacher Maurice Bowra (above, n. 13) may have served as a model for Highet's performance in the classroom, in which regard see Calder 1978, 430 (repr. 1984, 52), who attributes to Bowra Highet's “dramatic delivery, timing, clipped sentences, the sudden roar, even the laugh ...” and who recalls how Highet described Bowra in a letter he (Highet) had once sent to him (Calder): “Many people are made of pulp and warm water: Maurice was made of fire covered over with ice.”

wherever life would take them. Regarding his legacy as a scholar, one may say that he furnished his readers, whether classical scholars or a literary-minded general audience, with incisive and compelling interpretations of the great authors and the contents of their writings. Although some criticized his scholarship, at times perhaps for justifiable reasons, he received unfair criticism from those who, ignoring everything he was accomplishing, blatantly demonstrated their elitist snobbery and arrogance of expertise.<sup>161</sup> Although he may well have felt wounded by the opinions of his detractors, never once—either during the many courses I took with him or during the many conversations I had with him—did I ever hear him denigrate or disparage any of them.

Confident in his own critical judgment of antiquity's literary treasures, Highet dazzled audiences with his encyclopedic knowledge of classical civilization. Finding his inspiration in the Greek and Latin masterpieces and in the eternal moral value he believed that they conveyed, he communicated his enthusiasm for them in the classroom and in his publications. Expressing his views through a humane yet rigorous form of scholarship, he lived up to the highest standards of his profession while reveling throughout his career in the pleasures of teaching and learning.<sup>162</sup>

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161. See above, nn. 46 and 113, on elitist arrogance, which was indeed directed at Highet for his efforts to popularize classical culture and could be directed at professors in disciplines other than Classics whose approach to teaching resembled Highet's, professors like Joseph Machlis (1906–1998), who, although a spellbinding performer in the classroom and the author of a celebrated textbook on the enjoyment of classical music, received his own share of highbrow criticism (Ball 2012, 625–26). Highet and Machlis, two inspirational educators, who (quite coincidentally) were born in 1906 and began their multidecade teaching careers in New York City within one year of each other (Highet in 1937 at Columbia, Machlis in 1938 at Queens College), became famous for making classical works accessible and attractive to a broad general audience—Highet, by showcasing the literary texts of the great classical authors, Machlis, by showcasing the musical creations of the great classical composers.

162. See Highet 1976a, 74, for an anecdote epitomizing his view of teaching and learning as the two complementary aspects of the scholarly life, where he recalls how a colleague astonished a class of young students by describing the contents of new and stimulating articles in specialist periodicals, in a way that explained what problem each article addressed and how each problem was handled—an eye-opening experience that led one student to remark: “I never knew there was so much going on!” As Highet then comments: “They had assumed that the world of scholarship was static or moribund, like those stars called ‘white dwarfs’ which gleam faintly before they become dead, ice-covered dots; and that we ourselves, if not dead, were at least cataleptic. Not so. Ours is a lively world, ringing with conflicts and buzzing with problems. One of the central principles governing both our teaching and our learning is incessant *renewal*”—renewal being, for Highet, the cornerstone of the scholarly life.