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C.J. Herington: an homage

by [Roger Kimball](#)

Anyone who sets out to predict any aspect of future society must begin by acknowledging that we are now in the midst of a cultural transition compared to which the transitions from oral to written literature, and from manuscript to print, may prove to have been quite minor affairs.

—C. J. Herington

When the British-born classicist John Herington died suddenly in April at the age of 72, another irreplaceable light went out in the academic firmament. It was not, I hasten to add, a light that the public, even the academic public, knew much about. For although John had long ago earned the respect and admiration of his peers, the affection and gratitude of his students, he never achieved anything like the celebrity that has been lavished upon such academic mountebanks as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Indeed, although he may fairly be said to have enjoyed a distinguished career—replete with honors, encomia, and plum professorships—he neither aspired to nor achieved even the more transient notoriety that waits upon the self-aggrandizing intellectual antics of such academic tricksters as Harold Bloom or Stanley Fish, to say nothing of their many epigoni.

John's distinction was something altogether quieter, more solid, less common. In brief, John Herington was a dedicated scholar whose commanding knowledge of Latin and Greek (along with French, German, and Italian) was everywhere animated by a frank and thoroughly unpretentious passion for literature. If this seems like small beer, pause to consider how rare the union of deep scholarly accomplishment, infectious enthusiasm for the riches of literature, and unfeigned personal modesty is in the academic world today. Can any of us go far beyond the fingers of one hand enumerating living examples of men and women who embody such qualities? John Herington was not a star by the tawdry standards of contemporary academia. But in his career as a scholar and teacher he represented the accumulated achievements of Western civilization. He was a man through whom European culture from the Greeks down to our own time resonated in the patient syllables of earnest humanistic inquiry. The sadness of John's death is compounded by the knowledge that, rare though teachers and scholars of his caliber have been in the past, they are many times rarer today, when so much of academia—like so much of our culture generally—is devoted not to the preservation but to the debasement and destruction of that legacy.

Cecil John Herington was born in November 1924 in Isleworth, England, and educated at Oxford. He taught at Manchester University and Exeter University in the late 1940s and 1950s before coming to the United States in 1960 to teach at Smith College. In subsequent years, he taught at the University of Toronto, the University of Texas at Austin, Stanford, and Yale, where he was Talcott Professor of Greek and, for several years, chairman of the classics department. Along the way, he became a U.S. citizen. After his retirement in the 1980s, he taught briefly at Duke and then at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

John's early work, published under the name C. J. Herington, included books on Greek religion and—a lifelong passion— Aeschylus. (He later collaborated with the poet James Scully on a translation of *Prometheus Bound* and with the poet Janet Lembke on a translation of *The Persians*.) He was fortunate to arrive at the University of Texas at a moment when it was flush with oil money and the galvanizing efforts of a triumvirate of ambitious young scholars: John Silber, chairman of the philosophy department and later president of Boston University, the classicist William Arrowsmith, and the critic and poet Roger Shattuck. These men were given direct access to the chancellor and were thus able to transform the humanities at Austin by attracting important literary and philosophical talent.

In 1962, three years before John Herington joined them at Austin, Arrowsmith and D. S. Carne-Ross helped to start *Arion*, a quarterly journal of the classics and humanities. Designed to appeal more to the literate Common Reader than the academic specialist, *Arion* was a breath of fresh air in the musty, philological corridors of professorial classics. In those years, *Arion* was bold, passionate, and not infrequently idiosyncratic; more than anything, it pulsed with life. (*Arion* has had a complicated publishing history; the current run of the magazine, which was reborn with a new editor in 1990 after a fifteen-year hiatus, has in general been a disappointment.) A prime tenet of the original *Arion* was that the classics belonged not just to classicists but to anyone interested in the art and the human wisdom they contained. In other words, it was custom-made for a scholar like John Herington, who went on to write some of his best essays for the magazine, including a long and dazzling essay on Seneca.

John's career blossomed. He went to Yale in 1972. There were grants and prizes and scholarly recognitions. In 1978, he was invited to give the prestigious Sather Classical Lectures at the University of California at Berkeley. These were published, in expanded form, as *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition*, in 1985. Also in the mid-1980s, John inaugurated Hermes Books, a series of short, nonspecialist books on classical authors, for the Yale University Press. His own contribution to the series, on Aeschylus, manages the difficult feat of bringing to life for the Greekless reader this great but remote giant of Western culture. As general editor of the series, he matched writers and subjects, overseeing books on (at last count) Homer, Pindar, Catullus, Hesiod, Ovid, and Virgil.

As with any such series, Hermes Books contains a dud or two. But it is surprising how frequently John succeeded in finding writers who fulfilled the stringent requirements he outlined in the note that prefaces each volume. What he sought were men and women who were possessed of “a love for literature in other languages, extending into modern times; a vision that extends beyond academe to contemporary life itself; and above all an ability to express themselves in clear, lively, and graceful English, without polysyllabic language or parochial jargon.” Again, this may seem like a perfectly ordinary set of desiderata: but it takes only a quick look at what the academic presses are turning out these days to remind one how seldom such requirements are met.

John's ambition for Hermes Books followed naturally from his understanding of what had happened to classical studies in the modern university. “It is,” he wrote, “a strange situation.”

On the one side stand the classical masters of Greece and Rome, those models of concision, elegance, and understanding of the human condition, who composed least of all for narrow technologists, most of all for the Common Reader (and, indeed, the Common Hearer). On the other side stands a sort of industrial complex, processing those masters into an annually growing output of technical articles and monographs.

“Narrow” was one of John's severest terms of opprobrium, along, perhaps, with “technical” and “specialist.” There was something a little odd about this because John was himself the most

fastidious of scholars. One could almost see him wince at a false quantity or boorish translation. There is a story about his having once written, in Latin, to the Vatican Library about some project he was working on. When in due course he received a reply, he could not forbear to point out the writer's various solecisms: that such and such a word would never have been used before the fifth century, etc.

For all his learning, John was exceptionally unassuming. He was the least professorial of professors—not, as is the fashion these days, because he dressed and acted like the adolescents he taught, but because his concern with the art and insights of the classical masters left little room for displays of egotism. In this sense, anyway, John was a true Arnoldian. He believed, as Arnold put it in *Culture and Anarchy*, that culture ultimately aims “to do away with classes” and “make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere.” He held himself to the most exacting standards. And yet his enthusiasm for the classics—and for literature generally—was such that he would ignore all manner of ineptness in others in order to bring them closer to the heart of literary experience.

I was myself one of the many beneficiaries of this largess. I met John when I was a graduate student at Yale. I had joined a small group of philosophy students who met weekly each semester with an unusually dedicated professor to read slowly through some philosophical text. These extra-curricular sessions were among the most intense and rewarding of my graduate career.

So it happened that I found myself working through *De li non aliud*, a short, difficult work by the Renaissance philosopher and theologian Nicholas of Cusa. Although I had had Latin in high school, topped off with a bit more in college, I quickly found that I was not up to the rigors of Cusa's Latin. (We were reading the work in English, but in order to understand what Cusa was saying it was often necessary to refer to the original.) I decided to try to brush up my Latin and asked around to see if anyone might be able to help. Someone suggested that I talk to John Herington, who was then chairman of the classics department. I am a little embarrassed to admit it, but I simply presented myself at his office one day and suggested that he tutor me, a student from another department whom he had never laid eyes on before, in medieval Latin. Youth is self-absorbed and insouciant, so I was not as surprised as I ought to have been when he agreed. Perhaps the fact that John had been laboring for some years on a medieval Latin workbook (which was never, I believe, published) tipped the scales in my favor. In any event, we met an hour or more most weeks for an entire semester, I stumbling over Cusa's grammar with (as I later discovered) one of the country's most eminent classicists.

That semester marked the beginning of our friendship. We were never intimate friends, but we kept in touch and saw each other occasionally through the years. And while John was only briefly and informally my teacher, I nevertheless learned a great deal from him—though not, alas, as much Latin as I should have. John's wide culture meant that sharing a meal or conversation with him always left one a little richer.

There is a deep sense in which John's love of literature was continuous with his appreciation of other products of human ingenuity. He was unusual among academics in being exceptionally handy. He was an accomplished sailor; and he once, I am told, constructed an elaborate model of a classical temple in his backyard, replete with a hand-chiseled inscription. His fascination with poems was in one sense part of his fascination with all intricately wrought products of the human imagination. For him, they were spiritual markers, incarnate tokens of human yearning and habitation. So it was that John did not simply “profess” literature, he lived it. I do not mean that he looked to literature as a substitute for life. He was not an aesthete. On the contrary, he looked to literature as a means of illuminating life. It was pleasure and insight that he sought, not escape. He understood that literature in its highest sense was one of humanity's primary antidotes to barbarism and spiritual narrowness. The facts of modern life dictate that most people who read literature at all will read a lot of it in

school and college. But if it stops there, if what one reads does not become a part of the way one experiences the world—part of one's moral makeup, the pulse against which life is tested—then (in T. S. Eliot's phrase) one has had the experience but missed the meaning.

I fear that I may be making this sound more solemn than it was. A conversation with John might well revolve around the niceties of Greek stage design or the remarkable editions of Latin classics that were prepared for the Dauphin. But it might just as well revolve around other important matters—the works of P. G. Wodehouse, for example. I am especially grateful to John for having introduced me to Wodehouse's reflections on Mr. Mulliner, in particular the story "Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court," which contains that immortal paean to the joys of hunting, "Good Gnuus." ("When cares attack and life seems black,/ How sweet it is to pot a yak," etc.)

John's palpable enthusiasm undoubtedly aided his effectiveness as a teacher. I remember an occasion when my wife and I had dinner with him and another friend in New Haven. My wife happened to be reading Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurian*. Pater had based part of that book on letters by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius that had been accidentally discovered by one Cardinal Mai. Mai had been reading through some antique manuscript in the Imperial Library in Milan in 1815 when he noticed a palimpsestual text embedded in the document. Further investigation showed that the text behind the text consisted of letters by Marcus to his tutor, Marcus Cornelius Fronto. At a stroke, these personal letters revealed a new, more intimate dimension of the great Stoic philosopher and statesman. It was the kind of discovery that any scholar would die for. John of course knew all about this famous story, but he positively vibrated with happiness as he filled us in on various details about the discovery and what it revealed about Roman life.

John published a half a dozen pieces in *The New Criterion* over the years, beginning in June 1990 with a translation of a chorus from the *Operette Morali* by the nineteenth-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi. He also contributed a handful of book reviews on classical subjects to the magazine, and, just this past February, an essay for our year-long series on "The Future of the European Past." Entitled "Possessing the Golden Key," this ambitious piece assesses the likely prospects for classical studies in this country. It is not a cheery piece—how could it be?—but as always John approached the subject with a combination of quiet wit, percipience, and judicious understatement. He begins by acknowledging the fact—as quoted in the epigraph above—that the so-called information revolution bequeaths not only classical studies but society as a whole both a tool and a temptation of momentous power.

Mankind has always sought ways to escape from the burden of self-knowledge. Drugs and alcohol are but crude expedients compared to infinite regress offered by computers and the Internet. Modern technology offers us a galaxy of information at the click of a mouse. How can one overstate the technical advantage this represents? It is nothing short of a marvel, putting at the fingertips of the most ignorant schoolboy in the remotest hamlet the accumulated research of a thousand libraries. But John's point—a point that the extraordinary power of modern communications seduces us into forgetting—is that this marvel can be a destructive simulacra of knowledge rather than the real thing.

If the humanities have anything to teach us, it is that information, whatever its uses, is not wisdom. At best it is an enabling complement to wisdom. In the end, the information revolution is a double-edge gift to the humanities. It makes more, much more, possible in the realm of culture; but ever less, it seems, is actually accomplished. Increased possibilities do not necessarily translate into increased accomplishments. What the humanities offer us cannot finally be speeded up or expedited. They depend crucially on first-hand experience. As John observed in "Possessing the Golden Key," "the real, the lasting culture is that which one has to go out and get for oneself, perhaps through great labor; not that which has to be laid on, piped in from outside like the water through the giant aqueducts." And again, "people who have once lost the habit of going out and reading for themselves will gradually lose the capacity to love what they read or even to understand it."

John anticipated many of the points made in “Possessing the Golden Key” in “Litterae Inhumaniores,” an essay he first published in *Arion*. The humanities, he noted there, “were not in the business of solving problems. They were in the business of enlarging individuals.” To what extent is graduate education in the humanities—presumably the very apex of humanistic culture—fulfilling its task of enlarging individuals and encouraging them, as teachers, to enlarge others? Even to ask the question is to induce a shudder. The truth is that in this country higher education in the humanities, especially on the graduate level, has lost its way. Today, John observed, the humanities, “instead of enlarging the individual, . . . now seem to narrow and pervert.” The folly of so much that goes on under the name of “higher education” in this country is a powerful reminder that the humanities are in a state of crisis that requires for its solution not more information but more wisdom.

John freely admitted that much of what he had to say about the humanities was a cliché. But he also noted that “it is in the nature of clichés to be both profoundly true and perpetually forgotten.” It is the task of the humanities to recall us to such truths. In this battle, a battle to preserve our interior life, literature is a potent weapon. It is an enemy of amnesia, a prop of emotional delicacy, a repository of insight about man’s struggle to understand himself. In this sense, great works of literature are both windows onto the world and mirrors that reflect the soul. I was reminded of this when re-reading John’s beautiful translation of Horace’s Ode 1.11, the famous “carpe diem” ode. Often cited as a celebration of greedy hedonism, Horace’s poem is in fact a melancholy reflection of the action of *invid invida aestas*, “envious time.” John deepens that reflection, linking time with its great companion and antagonist, love:

You must not ask the end (to know is

wickedness)

that God has set for you and me,

Lynne, my white heart: Leuconoe: you must

not

search in our horoscopes. Let’s take what

comes; maybe

this stormwind is the last that God

will let us feel, us together, this same wind

which even now is breaking the rampant

Tuscan seas

in foam against embattled rock.

Now have some sense, pour the wine! And

cut away

long ages of our hope in the brief slash of love.

While you and I are talking, were

talking, Time envies, envied, comes and

went; oh

pick today's flower! As little as you can
trust in tomorrow, Leuconoe. White heart.

Lynne.

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