

A Teacher at His Best . . .  
Christian W. Mackauer

The University  
of Chicago



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## Christian Wilhelm Mackauer (1897-1970)

*The University  
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(1942-1970)*

These are offerings of a teacher. The remarkable man who made them never claimed anything higher than the title of teacher, knowing that it was a claim both modest and proud. The accidents of his life never made him aspire to the honors customary in a community of scholarly writers; so, he put all his talents into the life-consuming task of teaching. Students and colleagues admiring the scholar in him found all requests for something in writing countered by the wise understanding: "to write for publication will not let me teach the way I must." He would state his choice clearly, without envy, without the slightest tone of deprecation; he took it for granted that others, with equal devotion, preferred to teach also through their writings; and he valued the strength of an institution that could permit each to make his individual choice. The clear-headed resignation meant increased devotion to this self-imposed striving for excellence in teaching. And when death came, while correcting examinations, the balance held: file drawers filled with the writings a teacher produces to be a teacher; the titles and honors by which an institution acknowledges its gratitude; the admiration of colleagues that speaks quietly in manners founded on true respect; and the untold tokens of reverence—so impossible to gather, but so clearly to be sensed—left by students who knew that there was no way of telling someone he had changed their lives by being the very man he was.

Great teaching is hard to assess in concrete terms; it is an artistry subtly blended out of diverse elements. To rate a teacher is to appraise a style. It is a composite, bearing the marks of training and cultivated habits, but also of gifts for which no manual of rules can account.

Christian Mackauer was trained in the German humanistic gymnasium and university when these were still institutions of greatest renown. From his father, a merchant with a love and talent for languages, even taking up the study of Russian at an advanced age, he early acquired that remarkable sense for language which marked all his work. At Freiburg, Bonn, and especially at Frankfurt he received that enviable philological training which could unlock the old texts. It inculcated habits of

care and critical analysis as well as a beneficial resignation to what cannot be known or must remain, at best, an intelligent guess. The inviolability of a text was for Mackauer a near-sacred matter; it was the test for a historian's scholarly honesty. But he knew how not to confuse philological care as an end with philological skill as a basic tool. The sanctity of the text set limits, but it never hampered the probings of the historian for the past life behind the text. For such probing he needed conceptual tools, tools that worked the better the clearer they were. Mackauer, once drawn to the study of mathematics, learned that lesson early; its highest formulation for him remained Max Weber's conceptual clarity.

The combination of philological precision and conceptual rigor, both of which could be learned and be taught, set, I believe, the basic benchmarks defining Mackauer's excellence as a teacher of the teachable. One could train younger people in the care for the detail that helps guard against intellectual swindle and one could persuade them, at least, of the absolute need to chart their intellectual course by the light of lucid conceptualizations. To do this well demanded never-ending preparation and highly disciplined work. He taught no class for which folders with twenty to thirty pages of excerpts and careful notes could not be found; he gave no lecture that is not buttressed by folder upon folder of such preparation. Every request for yet another lecture on Thucydides sent him back to a fresh reading of the complete Greek text. Such expense of energy paid off in the classroom: in the ability to field a student's intelligent questions about unexpected complications and in the undogmatic assurance with which a historical text was made to surrender to the historian's quest. The extra effort was the difference that turned good teaching into true excellence. And the man who had taught teachers to teach knew how to apply all the self-understood, yet in practice so difficult tricks of the trade: never talk with your back to the class; know what and when to sum up; know what constitutes the appropriate load for the day; and enunciate clearly, please!—resulting, in his case, in the deliciously exaggerated rolling "Rs" that tickled the fancy of his listeners.

But as he himself would say of the advice given to him as a young teacher: the ten rules of good teaching make, at best, for competence. There is need of an eleventh rule, easily summed up in two German words: "Habe Geist!"—do have some sort of *esprit*! The obvious trouble with this extra spark demanded by the eleventh rule was that it could not be taught. A man has it, or he does not; Christian Mackauer so obviously had it. His characteristic style was its expression. But who knows how to account for his great talent in finding the question through which the unexpected interior lines of vision opened up in a topic? What explains that sense of proportion and sane judgment whereby a student was shown how to place the day's detail into the fullness of a human life?



There was a striking union of critical objectivity and passionately humane gentility. The perverse judgment with which his Nazi superior cut short his German career—"Herr Mackauer has consistently shown a rational objectivity and humaneness that is not reconcilable with our national interests"—put it well. The fascination with the manifold variety of human experience and the habit of viewing life by the long dimension of our Western Civilization were an integrating factor of his style. The humanity of Hellas, of the Renaissance, and of the Enlightenment were historical highpoints; Christian Mackauer knew that he did violence to much of our Western tradition in neglecting central parts, but it was no accident that he chose those three eras for intensive treatment when, in his last years, he was entirely free to choose what to teach. The objective historicist who could make the unwilling student take serious a St. Paul, an Augustine, or Luther, still had his personal stance. The attempts of Western man to build a rational, sane, secular civilization represented for him highpoints, the more so as the insanities of our century threatened.

All of this came together in a man with a sense of humor to counter a sense of the tragic; a sense for forms was wedded to a never-resting critical intellect. He left those he encountered with an impression that they had met a pronounced personality, an autonomous human being, and a model of a gentleman. No one can be said to represent Western Man. But the students who, in half-jest, referred to him as "Mr. Western Civilization" may have had the right inkling—that this long-time chairman and key architect of our Western Civilization course was such an effective teacher because subject and personality blended so well. His style and the style of this freely questioning University, valuing any true commitment to excellence, blended equally well. That this institution treasures good teaching has been signaled by many of its actions. It presents these selected offerings of a few lectures and talks as an example of the teaching in which we take pride. They were all written with the attention upon what the teaching situation of the moment demanded; in my imagination I think I can hear the modest man sigh and with the characteristic motion of his hand ward off the very idea of putting these talks into print. And it is true that despite all their quality, they are but pale reflections of the man's own delivery and his work in the live context of the classroom. The printed word cannot do more than evoke memories for a generation of students and colleagues; but it does point the way to that realm of intellectual activity Christian Mackauer sought to cultivate.

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## Herodotus

*Lecture for students in Liberal Arts I (1969-70) who began the study of Herodotus as a historical text.*

Antiquity already called Herodotus the 'Father of History.' In what sense does Herodotus deserve this name?

But with a few words first let us place him in space and time. We do not know much about Herodotus' life. He was a Greek of the fifth century, the classical age of Hellas in which the Parthenon was built, the age in which Athenian tragedy flourished, and the age in which Socrates laid the foundations of what we mean when we talk of 'philosophy.' But Herodotus was not an Athenian.

He was born ca. 490 B.C. and probably died not long after 430 B.C. He was born almost at the periphery of the Greek world, at the city of Halicarnassus, a Dorian colony in Caria, in the southwestern corner of Asia Minor. At the time of his birth, Halicarnassus was a part of the Persian empire. It was ruled over by a local dynasty; the rulers called themselves kings, but were called tyrants by those who opposed them. Among these opponents was the family of Herodotus. His uncle was killed in a plot that failed. His father and Herodotus himself fled to the island of Samos. In 454, as we know by chance, Halicarnassus was free and joined the Delian Confederacy which at that time already was the budding Athenian empire. Herodotus seems to have returned to Halicarnassus, but soon left for good. At some later date, he joined the settlers who, on Athenian initiative, founded the colony of Thurii in Southern Italy (443). There probably he died. At some time in his life he travelled extensively through all the Greek world and far beyond. He was at Athens, perhaps for years, and at Delphi; he travelled in Egypt, up to Aswan, to Cyrene in North Africa and to Babylonia. He saw the Black Sea, Thrace, Scythia. And he wrote a book which he left unfinished when he died. This is all we know about him.

Was he the 'Father of History'? This title of honor is given first to Herodotus—at least in what has survived of ancient literature—by Cicero; but no doubt the phrase is older and must have been coined by a Greek. The passage in Cicero's *De Legibus* is interesting for us because it leads directly up to our problem. Cicero opens many of his dialogues