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ISAAC JACOB MEYERS

February 2, 1979 – March 17, 2008

IN MEMORIAM: ISAAC JACOB MEYERS



Isaac Meyers entered the graduate program in Classical Philology at Harvard in Fall 2004, having completed the degrees of BA in Classics (Latin) at Yale in 2001 and MSt in Jewish Studies at St. Peter's College, Oxford, in 2004. At the time of his death, in a traffic accident in Cambridge on March 17, 2008, he was about to embark on his dissertation, having completed his Special Exams in a distinguished performance in January. The areas he chose for his Specials reflect the range and depth of his scholarly interests: for his Greek author, he studied the fragments of the Greek historians in Jacoby's monumental edition; for his Latin author, Cicero; and for his field, Translation and Bilingualism, ranging over texts as

varied as the *Res Gestae* and the *Book of Mormon*. This was a challenging trio of assignments, but their difficulty would not have entered into Isaac's calculations; he studied what he studied for its intrinsic interest, and he derived great joy from the enquiry.

Isaac was a delight, in the purest and most fundamental sense of that word. He was entirely happy in what he was doing, and his engagement was infectious. His capacious intellect ranged far and wide. The small and simple details gave him as much pleasure as the grandest edifices of the past: the clumsy Latin of a semi-literate subject on the fringes of the Roman Empire, trying to express himself in an inscription, would make Isaac's eyes widen with pleasure, and he would nod appreciatively as he gazed at the text and grasped its author's intentions across the centuries. What he studied was of a piece with what he taught: he saw no hierarchical divisions in learning, and he delighted in bringing his students in beginners' Latin extra material, such as a grammatical solecism from an inscription, to engage their interest and stimulate their imagination.

Isaac was a faithful member of Harvard Hillel, and a devoted student of Jewish texts, which he read with great intensity, focusing on the nuances of every word and phrase.

At Hillel, and in the Classics Department, his friendship was greatly cherished by many, students and faculty alike. His abstracted manner suited the quintessential scholar; and yet, he was not in the least remote from the practicalities of graduate student life, serving as graduate representative to the Department of the Classics as soon as he arrived. His scholarly precision and linguistic expertise earned him an appointment as proofreader of Greek, Latin, and modern languages for *The American Journal of Philology*, a task that he acquitted with great distinction, catching errors that had eluded authors and editor alike. His own writing was marked by unpretentious elegance, every word chosen with such sensitivity that it seemed the utterly natural and mellifluous choice, expressing precisely and memorably just what he wanted to say.

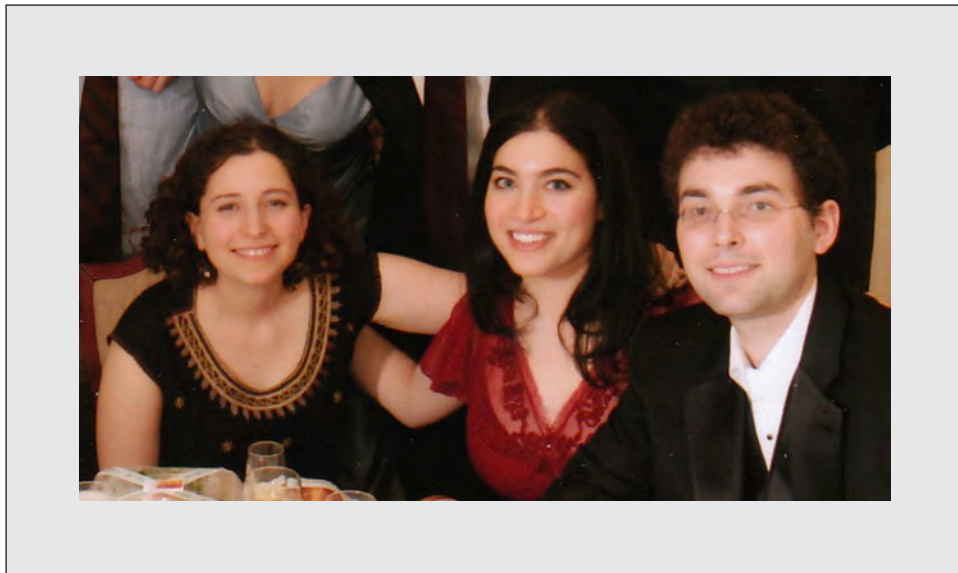
Isaac's tragic death, at the age of twenty-nine, has robbed the world of a true scholar and a most lovable person. We extend our deepest sympathy to his parents, William Meyers and Nahma Sandrow, his sister, Hannah, and his beloved fiancée, Margot Lurie. We are the richer for his years among us, and deeply saddened by his passing.

Kathleen Coleman, Harvard University, Director of Graduate Studies 2002–05, 2006–07

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above: July 2005; center: with Hannah and Margot, October 2007



below, left: Jerash, Jordan, July 2000; below, right: with Margot in Jerusalem, summer 2006



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The following remembrances were part of the funeral service for Isaac at Ansche Chesed Synagogue in New York City on March 19, 2008.

Andrew

Hi, I'm Andrew Koss and this is my wife, Alison. We've known Isaac since our freshman year at Yale (1998), and he was our best friend.

When we were sitting together last night, trying to piece together what to say here today, we realized that we couldn't possibly summarize Isaac's life or what he meant to us, and that to even try would be futile and reductionistic.

So instead we'd like to share a few things in a way that Isaac would probably find way too diffuse and highly disorganized, in the hope that we will be able to share and communicate just a few of the wonderful things he was and will always represent.

Yesterday afternoon, we received an e-mail from a friend of Alison's who only knew Isaac for a few hours. Isaac came with us to visit her, her husband, and their three children on a summer evening several years ago. I'd like to read you part of what she said.

"Even though we spent just a few hours together, I really got a sense of the very special person he was. He was so amazingly brilliant and ambitious, yet so incredibly down to earth, funny, and full of life. I remember how impressed my husband was, and how crazy the kids were over him, especially Dovid" (who was nine at the time). "Isaac was really able to get down to Dovid's level, and made every person feel that everything they said was impor-

tant."

If one person could form this impression of Isaac from just one evening, how much more do those of us who have known him for many years have to say about him?

We would like to share just a few of these things.

First and foremost, Isaac was kind. Many of you who knew Isaac from Yale remember how he walked to the Jewish Old Age Home every Shabbos morning to help make a minyan and lead the services. In addition, he would wake up extra early to pick up the rabbi, who was in a wheelchair, and push him to the Old Age Home.

Beyond that, Isaac encouraged and inspired others to come with him and help out and to really get to know the Home's residents.

This was so typical of so many things he did.

I am sure that many of the younger people here also had the pleasure of attending an Isaac Jacob Meyers BBQ or, for those of us who were especially lucky, an Isaac Jacob Meyers Latke BBQ (which somehow never quite coincided with Chanukah, and sometimes wasn't even in December).

Isaac loved bringing people together, and making them happy, and feeding them oily yet delicious food.

Isaac really treasured these get-togethers. Alison and I have in our e-mail inboxes pictures from various parties thrown in Oxford, Cambridge, New York, and New Haven—each person, many of whom we have never met and only heard of through his stories, carefully labeled and lovingly described. People were so important to him. More than he sometimes gave them

to realize.

Isaac also had a gentle strength about him. His inner sense of self, and of right and wrong, was so powerful that he never cared so much about what people thought of him, yet always wanted to make people happy and to do the right thing.

Of course, this inner sense of right and wrong did not always lead to happiness in others, particularly editors of those news wires and newspapers that had, unfortunately for them, run stories Isaac found preposterous, despicable, irresponsible, or simply false. In response to a particularly inflammatory article about the so-labeled "massacre" of Jenin, in which the author made allegations about the actions of the Israeli army that he justified by saying he "smelled something fishy," Isaac wrote a lengthy and mocking letter to the editor entirely focused upon the awesomeness of the writer's omniscient and omnipotent olfactory sense, including a line about how all should hail the author's great nose. Woe to the news bureau that did not do its homework when Isaac was on the warpath.

Alison

Isaac saw beauty in so many places—in lilting poetic verse and meter, in ancient inscriptions in obscure languages, in so many different kinds of music (and especially in anything he produced with his much-beloved ukulele), and, of course, in the people he daily encountered.

As many of you know, Isaac was very interested in translations and translating. He loved playing with words, and the challenge of

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expressing one thought in another language's vocabulary, as well as the reasons why this was sometimes impossible. I also think, though, that maybe he saw translations as a means of bringing a form of beauty accessible only to a small group of people to a much larger group.

Isaac was also quirky, in all the best ways. He often wore a treasured pocket watch, which he always seemed to be taking to the jeweler's to get fixed. Early in his academic career, he dreamed of majoring in zoology, despite the fact that there was no such major at Yale, or probably at any Western university in the past one hundred years. He had a jaunty way of wearing his scarves that we have never seen replicated, even by French men. And he really loved corduroy pants.

He once arranged to take me for a night on the town when Andrew was away, complete with a steak dinner and a leisurely stroll through Midtown—Isaac loved walking in Manhattan—and then showed up at my door in a three-piece yellow tweed suit, which he was incredibly proud of and couldn't stop talking about. He looked a little like a curly-headed Sherlock Holmes.

And of course he loved writing lyrics for his Jewish-themed pop group, the Rothschilds, including such clear hits as "Sara Is A Lawyer" and "Shidduch Date Gone Bad."

Isaac was an amazing friend. He was also unfailingly honest. When we needed advice or guidance about a difficult situation, or an ethical dilemma or judgment call, he was always the first person we would go to. His advice would always begin with a loving sigh, then "Well,

Ali ..." We will miss those sighs.

Isaac also has the distinction of being the only person to have read both our senior essays, along with a vast majority of the papers we wrote for our graduate and law school courses. His edits were, without fail, invaluable.

Of course, Isaac was not only an amazing friend; he was a loving son and brother and boyfriend. He was so close with his sister Hannah, and adored her so much and spoke about her all the time. Before I met her, I already felt like I knew her. Isaac so admired her creativity, her intelligence, and her amazing capacity for life, and often repeated jokes she had made the last time they spoke.

My last conversation with him, which of course took place at some ungodly hour of the morning, was all about how excited he was about the graduate programs to which Hannah had been accepted, and how unsurprised he was that she had been so successful with her applications. He spoke of her, as always, with pride and admiration. He greatly admired her opinion and approval; the idea of sharing things with her—news articles, song lyrics, experiences—informed so much of how he looked at the world. They had a powerful connection.

We know this is getting long, but there is just one more thing we want to share today.

Andrew

Isaac loved Purim.

Just about every year that we knew him, Isaac would write a Purim Shpiel—a humorous play—and cajole members of whatever community he was a part of into putting it on and acting it out. (One year I

got to play a sacrificial lamb.) We have at least three or so years' worth in our inboxes, Shpiels he was so excited about that he sent them to us so we could share in some of the faraway merriment. Isaac was so enthusiastic about doing something to bring together the communities he was a part of and was so enthralled with the idea of making people laugh. He was also an amazing megilah reader; his whiny Vashti interpretation will likely go unmatched. As many of you know, Purim is tomorrow night. One of the commandments for this holiday is that Jews should be happy for its duration. We don't know how we are supposed to be happy this Purim. It is the kind of thing we would have loved to discuss with Isaac, who loved philosophical questions, especially Jewish ones.

But maybe if each of us takes at least some joy in these memories, or in the many, many others that lie in all our hearts and thoughts, Isaac will have given us many more Purims.

Andrew Koss and Alison Hornstein Koss, Yale University classmates

On the face of it, you might not have been able to predict that Isaac and I would have been friends. He was a very observant Jew; I barely go to shul. He was politically conservative; I am quite liberal. He studied history and Classics; I studied science and the latest technology. He wrote poetry in ancient forms; I built solar cars. He was in Magevet; I was in the Klezmer Band.

But we shared a love of ethnic

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folk music—all sorts of music: African, Eastern European, gypsy, Latin—and a curiosity about the world and its people. He lent me recordings for my world music radio show in college. We bonded over foreign records and instruments with funny names.

We took playwriting together, and, surrounded by overachievers, stood out in striving to write things more intricate and complicated than our meager training would allow. We each became completely entangled in our creations while both loving and cursing every minute of trying to meet the semester-imposed deadline. When we reviewed each other's semi-tamed thickets of characters and ideas, it was affirmation that we were kindred spirits—impatient, striving for greatness, trying to vastly exceed whatever reasonable levels of achievement others might set for us.

For a city kid, Isaac had an inexplicable love of barbecuing. In the Branford courtyard, on the Slifka Center patio, and then, in post-college life, in various greenish spots on the Upper West Side. Spring would roll around, and inevitably a cheery e-mail from Isaac would pop up into my inbox inviting me to a barbecue. I missed too many of those in the recent years.

He had a thing for pointing out the use of “bcc” in mass e-mails, receiving untold enjoyment from the fact that messages would arrive delivered to “undisclosed recipients,” so much so that he addressed us, his minions, as “Dear Undisclosed Recipients,” with e-mail titles like “Still undisclosed after all these years ...”

In 2002, I took a trip to Eastern Europe—a sort of klezmo-cultural

exploration. I sent out an e-mail to my friends with a life update and a rough itinerary, suggesting a rendezvous if anyone would be in that part of the world. The e-mail included some thoughts on where I might like to live when I returned to the U.S., a desire to avoid a “big smelly city” and a mention of “eventual plans for world domination.” Isaac replied:

“I’m going to be in Bulgaria August 27–Sept. 10 or thereabouts. We have to meet up.

“I’m thinking of living in Queens next year. That’s sort of rural. Has it occurred to you that all things considered, big cities are less likely to be smelly than little ones which are full of trees and pigs and things? NYC used to be full of pigs in the 1800s but I notice that we’ve gotten rid of ours, while I can’t vouch for Burlington, for instance. The exceptions to this rule are San Francisco, where they consider public defecation the next civil rights frontier; and DC, which the entire world can smell, believe me.

“See you round world domination headquarters. Isaac.”

In classic Isaac style, he addressed every point in the e-mail I had sent out, adding his own thoughts and wit.

In September, we met up in Sofia, Bulgaria. He was thin and pale because he could hardly find sufficient Kosher nourishment, but still vivacious. We found some Chabadniks who gave him matzoh, canned olives, and other Israeli delicacies. It wasn’t hearty, but it kept him going for the next few days as we schlepped around to other cities. We met up with the multinational friends he’d made at one of the large universities—I’m not sure I

ever understood how this New York Jew had become fast friends with a Bulgarian, a Romanian, and some of their classmates, but we got to swap stories with them about school and life in an impromptu cultural exchange.

We turned out to be perfectly matched traveling companions. In the weeks prior I had learned to read Cyrillic and had spent time living with Bulgarians, when I learned some basics of the language. It was enough to get us on the right buses, to the youth hostels, and fed. But when we got to the ancient Bulgarian ruins in Veliko Tornevo, built out of even more ancient Greek grave-stones and other various inscriptions, Isaac’s background in Classics couldn’t have been more useful. He was able to explain the stuff to me beyond what any tour guide could do, no matter how proficient in English he or she was.

We found a poster for a musical spectacle in Plovdiv—was it Bulgarian? Greek? Macedonian? We had no idea. But we had to go. We got to the outdoor amphitheater at the appointed time, but there was no sign of the show. Somehow we were able to ascertain that it had been moved indoors due to threat of rain. We bolted for the concert hall. Our reward was a bombastic evening of post-Soviet cultural revelry—dozens of singers and dancers and flashing lights, traditional Bulgarian bagpipes and electronic guitars, aging rock stars, and Bulgarian women’s choirs in full Slavic garb. We both sat there, jaws dropped, 110% amused and supremely happy. And I know that he enjoyed the recording I made of the concert for years afterward.

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We spent Rosh Hashanah together back in Sofia. He made friends with the rabbi at the synagogue. We went to a small service, all in a Sephardic incantation that was completely foreign to my ears and absolutely beautiful. Fully entrenched in ethnomusicologist mode, I snuck in a little audio recorder under my tallit and recorded it. Isaac looked the other way.

I think it was after we shared Bulgaria together that I really got to know his family. As everyone knows, they are some of the most loving, warm, welcoming, and wonderful people, inviting me to Shabbos dinner sometimes when Isaac wasn't even around. It was clearly from them that he learned hospitality and general awesomeness.

We continued to meet sporadically. A random phone call generally meant he was in town and good for a Kosher Chinese meal on the Upper West Side. When I was in Boston, he would show me where to get the good falafel. I'd run into him and Hannah at the Central Park Summerstage. And he was always ready with a smile, some witty anecdote about something he'd seen or heard or read, and an ear open for whatever was on my mind.

Looks like things in this life are going to be lonelier around world domination headquarters.

Jeff Perlman, Yale University classmate

My name is John Schafer. I knew Isaac from Harvard, from the Classics Department. Our friendship, I think it's fair to say, sprang from a particular

place, and developed in accordance with its ways and its rhythms—the graduate student lounge. This was a *very* particular place, usually cluttered, occasionally moth-infested, and always populated by smart and opinionated and intellectually passionate people. It was a place to discuss anything, to argue the world, to go from Sophocles and Cicero to Paul Simon and Ali G via God and the movie *Ghostbusters*. This had been my place—I arrived in the Department five years before Isaac—and Isaac made it his, and I like to think it was ours together, that we were like-minded coregents of a little cosmos designed by a crazy person.

You couldn't—and more than one person has said this to me—you couldn't walk into that place and not be gladdened he was there. Most of my colleagues knew better, but I largely wrote my dissertation in that room, late at night, when he worked too. I would leave the house at nine, maybe, or ten. When I left, my wife would give me a wry look and say, with perfect justice, “Yer just gonna talk to Isaac for four hours.” She was right—I talked to Isaac to hide out from my work, and I hid from my work to talk to Isaac. I am, now, incredibly grateful for my paltry self-discipline.

In conveying the Isaac I knew, I thought I would pass lightly over his brilliant intellect—everyone knows that about him, and anyway it was his less remarkable feature, compared to his humanity—how he was liked by all who knew him slightly and loved by all who knew him well; how his humor was irresistible, while utterly free of malice (me: “Isaac, you're just being contrary.”

Isaac: “No, I'm not.”); his knack for disagreeing, strongly, without taking or giving offense, with no rancor in his heart; above all, his ability to detect distress in others and to do what he could to remedy it. But now I see that a common thread ran through these parts of him; that his kindness was a *part* of his intelligence. Isaac's great scholarly interest was the theory and practice of translation. He was fascinated by translation, by the possibility, and the difficulty, of conveying across languages and times that which is common, shared, human. He chose his field well; he knew it, he was good at it. The vulgar saying is that poetry is what gets lost in translation—Isaac *found* poetry in translation, Isaac *put* poetry in translation. His empathy for others was itself an act of translation—he saw, through differences of every kind, the common beat of humanity in people so little like him, in people so much less than him. And, he didn't just see, and understand, and translate the humanity of others into Isaac; he translated little, beautiful, pieces of Isaac into us, into me. My pride in possessing these pieces, I cannot tell you.

I want to mention one in particular. A year ago, on Isaac's birthday, my daughter Maddie was born. Isaac, you were so sweet with her! It is a small connection she has with him, but it is for me an immense comfort, to know that, for as long as she is and I am, February the second will make new in my heart Isaac's incomparable memory.

May it be for a blessing.

John Schafer, Harvard University classmate (PhD '07)

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I met Isaac through the Old Broadway Synagogue five or six years ago. I have no idea how he found his way up to 126th Street and Old Broadway, but he did. I had my first inkling that he was someone special when I asked at *Shacharis* if he could come back for *Minchah* that Shabbos afternoon, and he did. And this was despite the fact that he had to walk two miles to get to Old Broadway. Once he started coming regularly and even after he moved out of New York, he was always willing to put his excellent Jewish education to good use. “Isaac, can you daven *Shacharis*?” Modestly, he’d say, “Okay.” “Isaac, can you do the *haftarah*?” “Sure.”

At that point, Isaac was working at the Jewish Theological Seminary Library and living at home, and he would make it his business to come to as many services as he could, often bringing his father and sometimes his mother. During this time, we had an opportunity to get to know Isaac’s parents, Bill and Nahma, and Isaac’s sister, Hannah. Later we got to know Margot. All of them are wonderful, talented people, and you could see where Isaac got his love of language, his love of history, his curiosity, and his creativity. Yet to have all these qualities in one person is really something special.

After that year at JTS, Isaac spent a year in Oxford, spent time in Israel, and then went on to Harvard. Still, he would come home for the holidays and would join us at Old Broadway. When other people went away, he would be there. Sleepy, but otherwise a warm, familiar face.

Walking home from shul with Isaac was always a treat. We had fascinating conversations about

politics, religion, Yiddish, Latin, and history. The last conversation I had with him is perhaps a good example. I had just visited the new Greek and Roman galleries at the Met and I pointed out that the earlier statues, that is, those from the Roman Republic, were more lifelike, while the later statues, from the Roman Empire, were more stylized. Isaac, rather typically, said that it was actually a lot more complicated because there were a number of additional factors that impact the stylization of these classical works. From there we went off on a conversation about the periodization of Roman history.

As much as Isaac enjoyed an academic conversation, he had an almost childlike sense of wonder, and he also profoundly loved children. Isaac and his family invited my family several times to their apartment to join them for a Shabbos or holiday meal. Isaac regaled us with his lizard and his comic books. He also brought out toys for my children and showed them all how they worked and he really spent time with them. At shul, in my apartment, in his apartment, with children, as with adults, Isaac was gentle and caring.

For me, above all of Isaac’s many great qualities was his phenomenal sense of humor. He deployed his humor with tremendous economy: the way he raised his eyebrows, or in the mildly sarcastic way he said “right.” He never put anyone down but put everyone at ease.

He could also be very funny. One year, he wrote a Purim Shpiel that made us all cry with laughter. In the Purim Shpiel, he parodied not only the megilah, but also a number of

the members of the shul. Those of you who know the people will know what I mean. When Igor Gantz refused to play Esther, Isaac, in a moment of casting genius, gave the role to the long-bearded Herschel Manischewitz, whose deep rabbinic knowledge often saved us in a pinch, and who played the part for all it was worth. Avi Terry, who, as many of you know, mediates between many worlds, was given the role of Mordechai. It was a wildly funny Purim Shpiel, in large part because it lovingly revealed a certain reality that was going on at Old Broadway at the time.

A phrase from the megilah that we use quite a bit at this time around Purim and also throughout the year is *le-yehudim hayitah orah ve-simchah ve-sassaon ve-yekar*. “For the Jews there was light, happiness, joy, and honor.” This beautiful phrase relates to Isaac as well.

In Pirkei Avot, Ben Zoma teaches, “Who is honored? The one who honors others.” In the warm, loving way that Isaac related to the people he knew, he treated them with *kavod*, with *yakar*, with honor. Through his acute sense of humor, Isaac gave us *simchah ve-sasson*, happiness and joy. And with his brilliant intellect and with his open heart, Isaac gave us *orah*, light. *Le-yehudim hayitah orah ve-simchah ve-sasson ve-yakar*. From Isaac, we had light, and happiness, and joy, and honor.

It is our job to remember him with these qualities, so that even though his light has dimmed, it will continue to shine forever.

Dr. Paul Radensky, Old Broadway Synagogue, New York City

MEMORIAL SERVICE

The following remembrances were part of the memorial service for Isaac in Memorial Church, Harvard University, on May 7, 2008.

I agreed “in principle” to do a Special with Isaac on Jacoby’s fragments of Greek historians months before I signed my contract with Harvard in the fall of 2006. I told him that I wasn’t at all sure I was the right person; I said, “Isaac, I’m a Roman historian!” But, as always, he was quietly persuasive and made it sound easy. “We’ll just read texts together,” he said, “and you like ethnographies, and you like local histories, so we’ll just read lots of those.”

Special Examinations, in my view, thoroughly deserve the adjective “special” and are definitely the part of the Harvard Classics graduate curriculum that I would have most liked to do myself. After General Exams at the end of the second year, the students identify three areas, each of which might be an author, a genre, or a theme, and they identify a faculty member appropriate for each. Like Albert Henrichs and Ben Tipping, I was lucky enough to work with Isaac on a Special over a period of a year. Specials can be highly individual, and in Isaac’s case they most certainly were. They are a chance to craft out from scratch a curriculum that makes intellectual sense, and that also fits perfectly the interests of the student, looking ahead to the original dissertation that will follow the Specials.

Jacoby’s fragments of Greek historians is a formidable collection of 856 authors whose writings survive only in fragments, that is, quotations or glosses of parts of the works, or statements about the authors made by later writers, often in Greek, but

sometimes in other languages, such as Latin, Armenian, Syriac, or Arabic. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, Felix Jacoby, a German philologist, collected and edited these fragments, sorting them into broad categories of “testimony,” that is, statements about the author, and “fragment,” and then seeking to distinguish gloss from verbatim quotation. The commentary was left unfinished at the time of Jacoby’s death, but the collection is in the process of being completed, revised, and updated by a large international team of scholars.

We had our work cut out for us. We roughed out a list of authors that we frequently revised, because it was too long and because we became interested in new questions that required us to take detours. But the central questions remained: the ways in which “non-Greeks,” such as Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Jews, were represented and represented themselves; the ways in which authors invoked authority: foreign sacred texts, or a source of improbable antiquity; and, above all, how reliably we can distinguish direct quotation from gloss, testimony from fragment; the whole knotty issue of what the author doing the glossing or quoting or testimony might be up to; and, let’s face it, what Jacoby might be up to in making his editorial choices.

Daunting as this project was at times, I think in many ways it was perfect for Isaac, as an exercise for his extraordinary linguistic facility, in the perspectives it offered on interfaces between different ancient cultures, and between authors and editors of wholly different chronological periods and societies, and above all in its sheer open-endedness. As I talked to him over the course of the year, I was often struck

by the fact that goals and ends defined in any conventional way didn’t really figure in his thinking about his projects, such as his PhD and where it might take him, and I mean this in an entirely positive way. He had a total intellectual integrity that one doesn’t encounter very much: all his rigor and creativity were focused on engaging with the project in hand, and not at all with what he might gain from it, in terms of grades, prizes or, ultimately, jobs. I wouldn’t have dreamed of trying to label Isaac (you couldn’t and you just wouldn’t), and describing his interests as interdisciplinary doesn’t get close to his exceptional curiosity and the connections he made between cultures and modes of thought.

Thinking about Isaac and talking about Isaac so much, so intensively over the past weeks, I have felt humbled by how little I knew about someone who was and did so many things, seemingly all at once. It’s been a chastening experience to try to write about Isaac after spending a year with him working out the criteria for a genuine fragment, and which bits of testimonies were nothing more than projections of later authors onto their subjects.

But one way in which Specials are special is that the intellectual and the personal spill a little into each other. I used to worry because we’d meet at 1 or 2 or even 3 or 4 p.m., and Isaac wouldn’t have eaten. There wasn’t much that he could eat in Harvard Square, but he was good at finding something he could eat, so we settled into a routine of going round the corner to Finale. Little things like Saranac Root Beer, “brewed in Utica, New York, since 1888,” and Sun Chips, occasioned total delight, and the root beer and chips somehow

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helped us to get a bit further with the fragments.

On the way to Finale and back again, there were plenty of other things to talk about, and one theme that ran through many of our conversations was human individuality, something one finds plenty of at Harvard and in the scholarly world more generally. We talked a lot about the overlap between lives and works. It wasn't gossip, and Isaac was never cruel about or dismissive of anyone, but he was genuinely fascinated by the quirks that distinguish us, and by complicated lives and intellectual interests. There was a natural flow in our conversation between, say, Ctesias of Cnidus or Philo of Byblos, and the German Jewish Oxford Latinist Eduard Fraenkel, or Frank Snowden, author of two pioneering books on ancient views of black people, or Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church.

Weeks after Isaac died, I still catch myself looking out for him in the computer lab, in the seat just by the door, in his cap and scarf, between places. I was often looking for him when he was alive, not least because I think he ran on a unique system of time, Isaac Time, and even when I thought we had fixed a date in our calendars the timing of our meetings was always a surprise. I still think I can hear his melodic voice and the beautiful ways in which he expressed himself, even when we were talking about the weather. "We shiver through May" is one poetic expression that stays with me; I think this is a genuine fragment. I miss never quite knowing what would come next, and the conversations continued over days or in inboxes, drawing in or invoking colleagues, and friends, and Margot, and

family. I have had the constant feeling of conversations interrupted, and just recently the occasional experience of starting to pick up the threads, of continuing them somehow, however changed, updating them and seeing where they go.

Emma Dench, Professor of the Classics and of History

My name is Paul Kosmin. I am one of Isaac's friends and colleagues from the Classics Department.

Mr. and Mrs. Meyers, Hannah, Margot.

To speak to you today about my friend Isaac truly is a great honor, before which I feel humbled and inadequate. I can only hope to give some small indication of the ways in which Isaac touched my life. Isaac was one of the most gentle, kind, and genuine people I have ever met. An unusual, very funny, generous and sometimes critical friend. Isaac was his own man.

Emma has spoken about Isaac's scholarship. I shared with Isaac a love for the fragmentary and little-studied Greek-Jewish texts of the Hellenistic Age. Coming across one another in the Yard, in the Department's lounge or computer room, or at Hillel's Cheap Eats, we would easily divert ourselves into hours of debating the Letter of Aristaeas, Hekataios on the Jews, or the tragedy of Ezekiel. As anyone who witnessed would affirm, these discussions were long and loudly argued, as Isaac's probing intelligence would hammer away at an issue—for Isaac was easy to persuade that a question was interesting, but resistant to easy

solutions. Time and again, he would return to the question of being a good Jew in a Gentile court.

For Isaac, the philhellenic Jew, there was no divide between his studies in Classics and his religious life. I'm sure that many of us remember Isaac's Chanukah party invitations. His most recent opened, in typical Isaac humor, "Soon we will celebrate the holiday that our ancestors should have called, but did not, *ta Latkepoieia*, the festival of making the potato pancake or *latke*. In ancient times, our ancestors would use special latke-making implements, *latketêres*, to craft myriads of latkes. Hoards of these latkes are still being discovered around the eastern Mediterranean. Once sufficient latkes were fried, the women, ululating, would fling them at small children and animals, also ululating, while the Levites played silver banjos. And the cry would rise up: 'Latkepoieia!'"

We all know Isaac's devotion to Judaism—a love that was as natural and unforced as it was uncompromising and rigorous. This was an area of his life he and Margot generously shared with me. I remember with great tenderness Isaac and Margot's Shabbos meals or Rosh Hashanah picnic lunches or Wednesday dinners at Cheap Eats, where Isaac would know everyone, introduce everyone, listen, debate, tell anecdotes, and share.

From time to time, I would meet with Isaac by the river: we would read part of the Parasha together, first in Greek and Latin, and then Isaac would correct my Hebrew and guide me through the Aramaic. It was at those times that I got a sense of what a brilliant teacher Isaac

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was: his gentleness and patience, his excitement at my faltering progress, and his sensitivity to nuance and beauty.

Isaac's was not only a life of academic brilliance. For as long as I knew him, Margot lay at its center. Sweet, loving Margot, who fitted Isaac, rounded him off, softened him. The Californian and the New Yorker.

Margot, I recall Isaac's pride as he told me several times in one day about your acceptances into the creative writing programs you wanted. Or how anxious he could be until you arrived somewhere, and how calm when you sat by his side. Yours was a love that shone out, total and complete.

Isaac has been snatched from us. I have no words of my own for the anguish we feel in our hearts, but I will read in English translation, and then in Hebrew, the wiser, better words of the twenty-third psalm.

Paul Kosmin (G4)



Psalm 23

A Psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters;
He leads me in right paths for His name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup overflows.
Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Psalm 23, Mizmor leDavid

יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחָסֶר: בְּנֵאוֹת דָּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל-מֵי מְנוּחֹת
יְנַהֲלֵנִי: נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב יִנְחֵנִי בְּמַעְגְלֵי-צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:
גַּם כִּי-אֵלֶךְ בְּגֵיא צַלְמוֹת לֹא-אִירָא רָע כִּי-אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שְׁבִטָּךְ
וּמִשְׁעֲנָתְךָ הִמָּה יִנְחָמֵנִי: תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שְׁלֹחַן נֶגֶד צָרָרִי דִשְׁנָתְךָ
בְּשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי בֹּסִי רוּיָהּ: אֵךְ טוֹב וַחֲסֵד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל-יְמֵי חַיִּי
וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית-יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמִים:

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Catullus 101

Through many countries and across the sea,
I've come, brother, to perform these rites,
To do you one last service,
And talk to unhearing, unreplying ash,
Since fortune stole the real you from me,
Oh brother, poor brother, unjustly taken.
But for now, these gifts, which by custom
Are given to the dead—
Take them. I'm sorry they're wet.
Brother, this is it: hail and farewell.

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora uectus
aduenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem,
quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,
heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi.
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,
accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu,
atque in perpetuum, frater, aue atque uale.

Translated and read by John Schafer (PhD '07)

Photo credits: *Front cover*: William Meyers (The British Museum, June 1997); *Page 2*: Alison Hornstein Koss and Andrew Koss (October 2007); *Page 3, top left and right, and bottom left*: William Meyers; *Page 3, center*: Alison Hornstein Koss and Andrew Koss; *Page 3, bottom right*: Isaac Meyers; *Page 11*: Alison Hornstein Koss and Andrew Koss (October 2007); *Page 15*: Alison Hornstein Koss and Andrew Koss (February 2006); *Back cover*: William Meyers (July 2005). *Nota Bene* is the biannual newsletter of Harvard's Department of the Classics. Contributions are welcome and should be sent to Lenore Parker, *Nota Bene* Editor, 204 Boylston Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138, or lparker@fas.harvard.edu. A special thanks to Isaac's family, friends, students, and colleagues for their contributions and help with this issue.

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Isaac was very special to me, both as a person and as a student. I found him fascinating. He had an almost ineffable quality—a rare combination of gentleness, curiosity, self-absorption, hilarity, wit, and wisdom. His presence was a sheer delight, but it also mystified me. There were moments when he appeared vulnerable and evanescent, to the point that I was more than a little bit worried about him. Even during our closest encounters, in the spring of 2007, he struck me as a very private person who was focused on his work and his faith. He did not speak to me about his personal life, except once, when the prolonged infestation of his apartment by bed bugs hit him hard and almost derailed him. Isaac's plight reminded me of the similar plight of Strepsiades (also caused by bed bugs) in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. I was very sympathetic, even though I did not fully understand why he was convinced that the bugs came from Eastern Europe and why it took so long to eradicate them.

The saga of the critters made Isaac even more vulnerable, and more private, in my eyes. This explains why I find it hard to talk about him. I feel as if I were intruding on his privacy. Our contact over the two years that we worked together was strictly academic, from a Hellenistic poetry course in the spring of 2006 to his Special Exams in January 2008. The only place where we met was Boylston Hall. We never went out for coffee or lunch, not once. This would have doubtless happened had he lived. We shared a deep respect and love for the Greek and Latin texts we studied together, but we

never shared a private moment in the ordinary sense. The last time we talked to each other, a few weeks before his tragic death, he was still mulling over possible dissertation topics, but he never told me what they were. I have no doubt that his thesis would have been a study of the philological acumen and cultural ambience of ancient Bible translations, either from Greek into Latin or from Hebrew into Greek, or both, and I have a feeling that he would have asked me to serve on his committee. In fact I was looking forward to it. But alas, it was not to be.

He came to Harvard from Oxford and Yale highly recommended. The greatest scholar in the Yale Classics Department, now an emeritus, described Isaac as the best student he had had in forty years "in general knowledge, linguistic ability, the ability to write clearly and forcefully." How very true. He was one of the last applicants for the PhD program in Classics to be interviewed by this Department before he was admitted. I participated in the interview and still have my notes from February 27, 2004. Here are a few tidbits: "Very nice guy—thoughtful, wise." "Shy, but a cheerful communicator." "Strange comments on the 'low' style of Virgil's *Eclogues*." "Not satisfied to do just literature." This last admission, in combination with the dissertation topic he announced in the course of the interview, made us reluctant to take him, not because he was not good enough—far from it—but because he was different from the rest of us, from the mainstream of the Department. The dissertation topic that he mentioned was unorthodox,

indeed problematic from a classical point of view: "Modern Hebrew translations and Classical texts." He didn't elaborate, and we didn't ask him to. It was a non-topic, but he got in anyway.

In early June of 2006, a few weeks after he had passed his General Exams, I received the following e-mail from him: "I still haven't decided about my specials and I know it's coming down to the wire. I am sorry to sound vague, but I was hoping you would be willing to direct one of my special courses; the problem is, I don't exactly know which one. As you know, what I'd like to do ultimately is write on ancient translation—probably centering on the Vulgate. My original intention was to learn ancient scholarship with Francesca Schironi, but as you know, Professor Schironi will be on leave next year. I would then have asked you for advice on which Greek author to study. But now the range of possibilities is even wider. Do you have advice for me? I've thought about proposing a special on translation *per se* that might include anything from the LXX and Ezekiel the tragedian, to Roman comedy, to the *Res Gestae*, to the Hexapla, etc. I'm not sure whether that's been done before. I certainly would be very excited to do it. But most of all I would like your advice as, now that generals are over, I am feeling quite at a loss. If you have any suggestions, not just about a special course *you* might teach, but about any others, I would be very eager to hear them."

Well, this is how we bonded, over translation literature, bilingual inscriptions, sacred texts, and two religions, one ancient and one mod-

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ern, that started as sects and became mainstream, namely Manichaeism and Mormonism. Between December 2006 and May 2007, we scrutinized the Aristeas letter that tells the story of how the Septuagint came about at Alexandria in the early Ptolemaic period. We looked at the earliest papyri with Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, copies from the late Hellenistic period in which the name of Yahweh still appears in four Hebrew letters (the tetragrammaton) in an otherwise completely Greek context. Jerome's Bible translations and Augustine's writings on biblical translation literature came next, and I will be eternally grateful to Isaac for the things I learned from him. He was a true expert in these matters. Next we compared the Latin text of the *Res Gestae* of the emperor Augustus with its Greek translation, and read the Greek version of Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* against the Latin original while reading Eduard Norden's *Die Geburt des Kindes* on the side. Turning from Rome to Egypt, we studied the bilingual Rosetta Stone and the Decree of Canopus. Next we took a close look at the so-called Isis aretalogies and discussed the two conflicting theories of a Greek or an Egyptian original. Isaac read through the Cologne Mani Codex in preparation for an in-depth discussion of multilingualism as a missionary tool in Manichaeism. And finally, arriving in the modern age, we looked at Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church, and at his claim that he received the Book of Mormon from the angel Moroni and translated the original gold tablets with this sacred text from "reformed Egyptian"—an

otherwise unattested language—into American English.

We met about a dozen times over six months. For each session, Isaac prepared lengthy pages of talking points that he often e-mailed to me ahead of time. The precision of these notes is as amazing as their erudition. There was plenty of material for more than one dissertation. On a more personal note, Isaac's interests coincided with the earlier Patristic and Manichaean phases in my academic career, which tended to confirm my belief that the founder of the Eliot Chair of Greek Literature was right when he stipulated in 1814 that future occupants of that chair should be versed in Septuagint and New Testament Greek. Familiarity with both surely came in handy in my meetings with Isaac.

Isaac was an observant Jew and I was raised in a Catholic environment that predated the Second Vatican Council. For different religious reasons, he and I shared a strong interest in sacred writ and in ritual, along with a deep respect for people of faith. This shared sympathy may help to explain our last e-mail exchange this past January, shortly after his Specials, which he passed with distinction in the area that was closest to his heart, translation literature and bilingualism in Greek and Roman antiquity. In the course of his Special Examinations we talked about the Book of Mormon and the angel Moroni. He seemed perplexed when I reminded him that a golden statue of Moroni could be seen topping the steeple of every Mormon Temple. No, he insisted, only on the original temple in Salt Lake City. The next day I e-mailed him pictures of the fairly recent

temple in Belmont, with a close-up of the golden Moroni statue on top of it. "Wow, and it's beautiful," was his reaction. In passing I mentioned the Mormon temple in Manhattan, but he e-mailed me back saying that he was sure no likeness of Moroni crowned it. In response, I e-mailed him a picture of the Manhattan Temple *cum* Moroni. Here is his reply, from last January, which resolves the mystery, and suggests that we were both right: "The Manhattan statue was placed there a month after I moved to Cambridge. I'm glad it's there, since the building is otherwise very drab, as you can see, especially for a Mormon temple." Indeed, before the building was converted to a temple, it served as an office building.

This was not the end of our Mormon dialogue. When I expressed reservations about the secrecy that surrounds Mormon temples, which are not accessible to non-Mormons once they have been consecrated, he chastised me, and rightly so. What I said was—and I regret saying it—that "I find the secrecy that surrounds Mormon temples strange, even offensive." He replied: "I don't think it's any more offensive for Mormons to restrict attendance in their own temples, than for the Classics Dept. to write the guest list for its own parties." True enough. I stood corrected, and when I asked him about access to the Second Jewish Temple before its destruction in 70 CE, he regaled me, as he had done on numerous other occasions, with a remarkable disquisition on Jewish lore and with a piece of his mind regarding the status of Jerusalem and today's conflicting politics of the Temple Mount.

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“I don’t doubt that the concept of restricted Temples is borrowed from Judaism. The Temple was organized in concentric rings of sanctity, with the Holy of Holies in the very center. The land of Israel itself, while necessarily open to all, had (and has) a different legal status and higher level of sanctity than the rest of the world; Jerusalem and Mt. Moriah were similarly open but even higher in sanctity; the Temple’s outer courtyard (Azara), however, could be entered only by Jews in ritual purity; the inner courtyard was reserved for priests and male sacrificers; the vestibule of the Hekhal (Temple proper) only for priests; and the High Priest alone could enter the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, on Yom Kippur. There was nothing in the Holy of Holies but the Ark of the Covenant, and after the first exile, not even that: it was an empty room that God’s presence would sometimes fill, according to the Talmud and Josephus (who says that Titus found a Torah scroll there). Even though the contents of the Holy of Holies were not a secret, it was still too sacred a space to enter. This allowed libels like the one about the ass’s head (sometimes a golden ass’s head) that is found in Tacitus and discussed in *Contra Apionem*. I’m sure it is still alive and floating around the internet. I saw an Ethiopian church in Jerusalem that had a Holy of Holies, which only the priests (in black robes, wearing sunglasses) were allowed to enter; I think Orthodox Christian churches have them too—which is a little ironic, since Jewish synagogues don’t. The Salt Lake Temple has one; why not?”

He goes on: “Separating the Azara from a large forecourt was a fence called the Soreg that excluded non-Jews and the unclean on pain of death. Several fragments from it have been discovered with warnings in Greek and Latin.” At this point, Isaac cross-referenced a website where a photo of the so-called Soreg inscription with the complete Greek text of the prohibition can be found (http://www.bible-history.com/gentile_court/TEMPLE-COURTSoreg_Inscription.htm). Discovered on the Temple Mount in 1871, it reads as follows (*OGIS* 598 = *CIJ* 2.1400, 1st century CE; cf. Josephus, *The Jewish War* 5.194, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.417):

μηθένα ἄλλογενῆ
εἰσπορεύεσθαι ἐντὸς τοῦ
περὶ τὸ ἱερὸν τρυφάκτου καὶ
| περιβόλου. ὃς δ’ ἂν λη|φθῇ,
ἑαυτῷ αἴτιος ἔσ|ται διὰ τὸ
ἔξακολου|θεῖν θάνατον.

“No outsider shall enter the partition and enclosure around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for the ensuing death.”

Isaac continues: “It is worth pointing out that at this point it is the *Jews*, or rather non-Muslims, who are excluded from all parts of the Temple Mount. Most of the Orthodox are unwilling to risk walking accidentally into the places of holiness. But of course a more immediate danger is violence from the Muslims. Meanwhile the Waqf has been excavating, in fact destroying, as much of the pre-Islamic archaeology of the Mount as possible. This is the reason the Southern Wall is on the point of collapse. I find *that* offensive, but not strange.” This is Isaac’s voice, speaking from

his heart, and from the heart of his faith.

Let me conclude with a ritual phrase of commemoration and blessing in the language that he loved so much and that he revered above all others: *zichrono livracha*—“may his memory be for a blessing.” Indeed, all of us here have been blessed by Isaac’s life, by his companionship, by his words of wisdom. May we continue to be blessed by remembering him, each in our own way, not only now during this commemorative hour, but in years to come. Let us pledge here and now that we will always remember him, and never forget how special and dear he was. I deeply miss him, and I will never know the full extent of what he could have taught me. I often felt like the disciple during our sessions; he was the true teacher.

Albert Henrichs, Eliot Professor of Greek Literature



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The following remembrances are from Isaac's friends and colleagues in the Department of the Classics, Harvard University.

Isaac, your peaceful, dreamy smile along with your warm words and kooky sense of humor will stay with us forever. Rest in peace. We miss you. Emily

Emily Allen (G6)

He always struck me as constitutionally incapable of disingenuousness. Always careful about the significance of words in life (from which, I suspect, his philological acumen issued and not, as sometimes happens in our field, the other way around), Isaac would not have called me a “friend.” We shared no formal academic relationship. Our encounters these last two years were occasioned by chance and the geography of the campus. And until his wrenching death and the profile in eulogies which followed, I could not have told you anything precise about his academic focus, or indeed much else about him. Save for this. Isaac never said, “Hi, how are you?” in that clipped tempo designed to ward off any reply which might delay either of us with an earnest answer. I sometimes wondered after one of our spontaneous conversations how it was he never had to be somewhere. Recently I learned from his friends the phrase “Isaac time” and I smiled as I noted the explanation for his improvised availability, an uncommon thing in a place such as this.

Discussion with Isaac was no mere time-filler. For all his unfussy demeanor, there was nothing casual about the working of his mind. I quickly learned after our first couple of exchanges not to take anything for granted in conversation with Isaac, other than his readiness to tell me when I had, and that I was perhaps wrong to do so. He was tireless when we seized on a subject, without a hint of the fear that stalks all of us lest we reveal how much we don't yet know. Ironically, perhaps, it was this intellectual honesty that at once disarmed you and drew you out. Maybe that is why so many of us recall feeling as though talking with him meant learning. I have no apt words to describe the consequence for all those who knew him, and the many who never will, of getting by without his singular way in this world.

Emmanuel Bourbouhakis (PhD '06)

I only really got to know Isaac in the past year or so because of his and Margot's extraordinary kindness in helping me through a difficult time in my life. He was so unusual, and his sense of humor was so clever and offbeat, that it took me a long time to figure out what a rare and generous soul he was, and that he was doing all these little things behind the scenes to help me. It seems almost unbelievable, first (perhaps less so), that I could take so long to realize it, and second, that someone who had nothing to gain from it could go to such lengths for the sake of someone else. But apparently that was Isaac's way. It was never sentimental. It

was just incredibly kind. But also pragmatic, ironic, and unassuming to the point of camouflaging what he was doing.

Besides his generosity and kindness, I found his wit, quirkiness, and rigorous intellect tremendously enriching. In the summer and fall we were the late-nighters in the Department and spent many hours chatting in the graduate lounge. Our discussions were always memorable. We talked about the purpose of studying Classics, about writing—academic vs. other more literary forms (he was skeptical about the former and singing the praise of the latter)—and about racism in antiquity. He always had strong feelings and a completely unconventional perspective, which made one think hard about things that previously had seemed simple. If something interested or bothered him, he would keep talking about it until his energy on the topic was spent or he became frustrated with the discussion. I don't ever remember an occasion when he would cut short a conversation for the sake of sleep or any other practical constraint. Isaac's lack of interest in conventions of any kind was one of the most refreshing things about him.

I suppose I never knew quite what to expect from him. Sometimes it was just hilarious. I think he enjoyed teasing me and knew that I quite enjoyed it as well. (I think he had given up on my ever understanding his jokes.) He was also extremely persuasive. Once, when I was fast asleep on the big couch in the lounge, he woke me up and made me move to the little one, because he couldn't fit on it. I can't remember how many times I encountered

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his sleeping form there. He also always seemed to be hungry and was profoundly grateful for donations of kosher pretzels. Once he got very excited about a granola bar which I was eating for my tea, and managed to persuade me to surrender half of it. In exchange for the nourishment, he introduced me to some independent rock groups which he was listening to on YouTube. I think he was trying to educate me, but without a great deal of hope in the cause—I owe to Isaac my acquaintance with latkes, zombies, and the ukulele, to say nothing of *Caddyshack*.

I also encountered a more vulnerable side to him, which I found tremendously humble and sensitive. He talked about the challenges he had faced in teaching and on one occasion, when I was feeling disillusioned about an application which hadn't worked out, he listed a whole array of things which he had tried for but which hadn't worked out. Given his gifts, I found this astonishing, but I also greatly valued the honesty and humanity of his telling me.

I was always struck by the great affection with which he would speak of his family. He was tremendously proud of his sister, Hannah's, recent successes in applying to grad school. He seemed to derive enormous strength from his family and, of course, from Margot. I was always amazed at how Margot would come and sit with him in the Department while he was grading. I often commented to him on how lovely she was, and he would smile, say slowly, "Yes, she is, she really is," and nod knowingly as if he was in possession of some wonderful secret. Isaac had proudly told me about all her

successes in applying to creative writing programs, and we had talked about the possibilities of life in Iowa and New York. I so often thought how blessed they were to have found one another.

Until March I had never encountered in any serious way the workings of blind chance in life. I suppose I didn't really believe in it. Certainly I never believed that so much hope, beauty, joy, and richness could be ripped away so tragically and so gratuitously. I feel tremendously privileged to have known Isaac. I suppose I don't really believe he has vanished. I think of his soul hovering somewhere in the ether like a bat making hilarious observations in a deadpan tone of voice and warning me with a grin against the dangers of surrendering my soul to Hades-of-Smyth. I miss you, Isaac. Thank you for everything.

Sarah Burges Watson (G9)

I relished any chance for a conversation with Isaac. Meeting Isaac in Boylston or Widener meant ten minutes—or two hours—of lively but relaxed back-and-forth. It could be about religion in Josephus, Fraenkel's Horace, or the lesser-known songs of Warren Zevon. Isaac had a lot to say about a lot of things—and all of it refreshing, honest, and with good humor. I miss but will long remember these conversations.

Timothy Joseph (PhD '07)

I once called Isaac a "Burkean." We were arguing about politics in the graduate student lounge—where else?—late one night. As was usual, I was losing and had decided the way to claim a victory was to give a pat label to Isaac's position. Isaac rather took the wind out of my sail by saying, "Am I?" He had turned my strategy around and pushed me to really think about the terms I was using. That was Isaac—intellectually searching, a wonderful debater, and adamant about his politics. I have many similar memories of him in the Department, in the lounge, and as a classmate in a Catullus seminar, and outside, at parties and at dinner in Hillel and the Chabad House (truly an education!). The Classics Department can be a difficult place for a first-year graduate student, in a new place geographically, academically, and personally, and one needs guides to help with those first baby steps. I came to consider Isaac as one of those people. I hope he realized that he made the Classics Department a better place to be for me, and many others. It deeply saddens me that I only knew Isaac for seven short months. I cannot imagine the magnitude of the loss that his family and those who knew him longer have suffered. My most sincere condolences go to them.

Duncan MacRae (G2)

A few of my memories of Isaac: his witty responses during exchanges in the computer room; his quiet, smooth voice (which I continue to hear in

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my head); the smiles—the friendly and the arch; Margot; the funny e-mails; the bed bugs; the egg nog; encountering Isaac some months back lying down for a rest in the lobby of Robinson Hall and the conversation we had then about his upcoming Specials and about current Department happenings; looking out into the audience of a Sackler Gallery talk in January and seeing Isaac's and Margot's friendly faces and then talking about epigraphy and various other topics afterwards; running into Isaac on the street. Collectively my memories are a mass of fondness, wonder, and respect.

Added to those memories now are the shock and horror of a spring day that was not supposed to have been tragic, and thoughts of recent and upcoming events where he should have and would have been present. There is also sadness and some regret, as my mind often turns to missed opportunities to spend time with Isaac, and how it never occurred to me that there would not be more time to do so in the future.

Dreya Mihaloew (G6)

The tragic, needless death of Isaac has stayed with me as a bitter grief ever since he was taken away from us. Thinking of what he could have become as a great scholar, a great classicist and Judaist, is almost too much to bear. But even more, the absence of his shining personality, gentle and loving nature, and brilliant intellect leaves an irreparable gap in the hearts of his innumerable friends and colleagues in the Department, at Hillel, and far beyond. I cannot re-

member a more grievous loss to the life and spirit of the Classics community than his being taken away from us so abruptly. While I did not know him well, I shall cherish his spirit and his memory always.

David Mitten, James Loeb Professor of Classical Art & Archaeology

I had Isaac for only one semester, but that was enough for me to gain a great friend. I would like to impart what it was like to be one of Isaac's pupils.

I will start off with the way our class started off. He was always late. Early in the semester, he would regularly come in ten or fifteen minutes late, and the best part is that, while we were able to see this as a habit, Isaac saw each individual tardy as unique and unrelated to him. Every time, we were greeted with a new excuse that we never really believed, but we always told him it was all right. As if to make up for his tardiness he would do everything from that point on much faster, quickly throwing his coat on its hook, grabbing a stray piece of chalk, and writing something in Latin on the board.

On one occasion we sat waiting in the classroom for thirty-five minutes, when he burst in with a new and exciting excuse. He was so sorry that we had missed such a large portion of class that he offered to teach well past our allotted time. Almost simultaneously we all found a reason that prevented us from staying longer, much to his dismay.

Isaac's dress was always appropriate for a TF, but he had a habit of wearing wool sweaters with holes

in obvious places. He had a puffy, one-size-fits-all winter coat that he would attempt to throw onto the hook but rarely would succeed.

His voice had a slippery quality, not in a deceptive sense, but it was almost feline. It was warm.

Isaac knew his Latin very well and wanted to make sure we did, too. He had a way of picking you for the question you least wanted to answer, and even when you had gotten it wrong the first time, he didn't let you off the hook but forced you to get it right. It may have been excruciating, but, in the end, we learned our Latin. He was a stickler for correct pronunciation, something that few of us had, and so, as we would read over a sentence, he would read it almost right behind us, loudly pointing out our flaws.

As much as it may seem that he was all business, he had a lighter side that he showed to us as well. His random stories were often strange and comical and lightened the mood on any of the four days we met for class.

Perhaps my favorite time with Isaac was the last day of class before winter break. It was a rainy day, and in that rain we trudged over from Robinson Hall to Memorial Hall, and Isaac led a reading of the Latin inscriptions written on the wall. He brought to life the words that I had always glossed over, giving us tips along the way and helping us get to a finished product that had some semblance of an English sentence.

One day, three of us brought in bagels and cream cheese and, although none were eaten by anyone else, Isaac was very appreciative and enjoyed his "everything" bagel. From then on he referred to our gift-giving

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trio as “the rufies” for our red hair.

Once, while I was prying a frozen five-dollar bill from the ice, Isaac spotted me and, clearly not pleased with my behavior, demanded that I rush off to class.

In February, right around the fourteenth, two of us sent him a singing Valentine from an a cappella group. Though he appeared embarrassed, he showed his appreciation with a long, meaningful thank-you note written, of course, in Latin.

I will always remember his slightly held-back smile, showing some of his teeth, with a little crinkling on the side of his stubbled mouth. His glasses were always that color between clear and inky black. He always seemed at ease teaching, exuding confidence at the head of our little table, and I will never forget those classes, or Isaac.

Marcel Moran ('11)

I have the fondest memories of working with Isaac in the courses he took from me. He had such a delightful sense of humor. I think back wistfully to my dialogues with him about passages dear to his heart, including Lucian’s humorous fantasy about interviewing Homer, who takes such a dim view of Homeric editors like Zenodotus and Aristarchus. Lucian’s exquisite whimsy appealed to Isaac, and it suited him. Those whimsical dialogues with Isaac will live on forever in my sad old heart.

Gregory Nagy, Francis Jones Professor of Classical Greek Literature and Professor of Comparative Literature

Every time I walk into the Classics Department, I remember something different about Isaac. Sometimes I think of him and Chris and me in our tiny proseminar, or the celebratory trip to Grendel’s after the General Exams that only he and I took. Sometimes I think of Heroes grading meetings, where Isaac’s meticulous attention to student papers was matched only by his care for the struggling students who failed to submit one. Sometimes I think of Isaac late at night in Boylston 234 trying different Latin translations of “How would you like me to sock it to you” on the board. Sometimes I think of him stopping by Happy Hour on his way to Friday night services, carrying his pocket edition of the Septuagint like the Jews of Alexandria. Mostly, though, I think of conversations—about New York, about religion, about music, about bilingualism in Roman North Africa. I think of the humor and humility that accompanied his wide learning. Every day for almost four years, I looked forward to seeing Isaac. I miss him very much.

Peter O’Connell (G5)

As Assistant to the Director of Graduate Studies, I had the privilege to get to know Isaac on a personal as well as an academic level during his four years in the Department. Our conversations were always touched with his special sense of humor and humanity, and they left an indelible impression on me.

Recently I was riding back to Cambridge from downtown Bos-

ton on the No. 1 bus on a Sunday morning. A young Israeli woman sat in the seat next to me with her baby and husband. I struck up a conversation with them and asked if they were Orthodox Jewish. (They were.) When I learned that the woman’s husband was a graduate student at Harvard, I asked if he attended Hillel services. (He did.) I then asked if he had known Isaac. He nodded sadly, and we commiserated together about his death.

A young man interrupted us at that point and said that he couldn’t help overhearing our conversation, and that he had been an undergraduate classmate of Isaac’s at Yale! How like Isaac, in death as in life, bringing all sorts of people together in the most serendipitous way.

I miss his daily presence with us.

Lenore Parker, Nota Bene Editor

As a teacher, Isaac always believed in his students. He believed, for example, that we could get to class at five instead of seven minutes past the hour, and wasn’t afraid to tell us so. He often said things that were surprising in their reason and directness, things no other teaching fellow had ever pointed out, and always with a dash of Isaac humor. He also passed on his love of Latin to all his students. He wanted us to examine, absorb, and love every aspect of the language. While helping us become better classicists, Isaac was always patient and always gave second chances. He really was an extraordinary teacher.

Emily Pickering ('08)

ISAAC JACOB MEYERS

In a seminar on Ancient Landscapes, we spoke of Poets in the Landscape and discussed the differences between “turbid” and “turgid.” Isaac wrote a brilliant paper on Sperlonga. His contributions to that class were great throughout, and my notes from his presentations have already helped me improve its second season, as they will again.

Betsey Robinson, Assistant Professor of the Classics and of History of Art and Architecture

Caro Isaac, grazie per i tuoi sorrisi e il tuo calore nel dipartimento. Ora vorrei che il mio congedo non ci avesse impedito di lavorare insieme. Avrei imparato molto da te. Con affetto, Francesca

Francesca Schironi, Assistant Professor of the Classics

I remember how cheerful Isaac was when he ran into me in the graduate lounge or the hallways of the Department. One day, at the beginning of the spring of my second and his third year, he decided we should inaugurate “Ariane and Isaac appreciation days” since we saw each other in class on certain days of the week that semester. For the rest of term, whenever I would see him on a Tuesday and he would see me on a Thursday, we would exclaim, “It’s your appreciation day!” It’s that sort of thing that Isaac always did because he wanted to see a smile on your face no matter the circumstances of the day.

Ariane Schwartz (G4)

It is easy for me to single out my strongest, sharpest, dearest memory of Isaac, for it is a memory of the last time I was to see him.

Isaac was taking my seminar on Catullus, and on March 13, four days before he was taken from us, the seminar had two reports on Catullus and Callimachus, one on Poetic Ideologies, the other on Translation, a topic dear to Isaac’s heart, as everyone who knew him knows. At some point during the second part, we got sidetracked onto Virgil’s adaptation of Callimachus and Catullus in *Eclogue 9*, the famous, moving lines where the old shepherd Moeris remembers his boyhood putting the sun to bed with song: *saepe ego longos / cantando puerum memini me condere soles*. We didn’t have a copy of Callimachus’ *Epigrams* but Isaac and I did a passable job of reconstructing from our own memory the famous Callimachean source of Virgil’s lines:

Εἴπε τις, Ἡράκλειτε, τεὸν
μόρον, ἔς δέ με δάκρυ
ἤγαγεν· ἐμνήσθην δ’ ὁσσάκις
ἀμφοτέροι
ἥλιον ἐν λέσχη κατεδύσαμεν.
ἀλλὰ σὺ μὲν που,
ξεῖν’ Ἀλικαρνησεῦ, τετράπαλαι
σποδιή,
αἱ δὲ τεαὶ ζώουσιν ἀηδόνες,
ἦσιν ὁ πάντων
ἄρπακτὴς Αἴδης οὐκ ἐπὶ χεῖρα
βαλεῖ.

There is also a famous—infamous, even—Victorian translation by William Johnson Cory, whose beginning goes, “They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead; I They brought me bitter news

to hear and bitter tears to shed.” From the moment I heard our own bitter news, that became Isaac’s song, and so it will remain in my own memory.

Richard Thomas, Director of Graduate Studies and Professor of Greek and Latin

Although Isaac and I arrived at Harvard more or less simultaneously, in Fall Term 2004, we did not meet properly until Spring Term 2006, when he requested that I supervise his reading of Cicero’s prose. I am less familiar with and less fond of that author than I ought to be, but, as I might have predicted had I known Isaac better, my pleas and protestations of ignorance and prejudice proved unpersuasive. *Faute de mieux*, I proposed that Isaac help me interpret the *De officiis*, a text to which I have occasionally turned in the hope of finding out how to be Roman. My strongest and happiest recollection from our subsequent meetings is of rediscovering a mode of intellectual exchange that, at best, is small-scale, wide-ranging, and free from the inhibitions and hierarchies of lecture and classroom. As far as possible, I limited discussion of the *De officiis* to *obiter dicta*, yet, to my amazement and immense gratification, in Fall Term 2006 Isaac sought from me supervision for a rather more formal and extensive, albeit again “Cicero-centric,” study of ancient rhetorical theory.

I am even now disposed rather to wonder at Antony’s patience than to lament his brutality, but am also, of course, indebted to Cicero,

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inasmuch as he afforded me the opportunity to enjoy Isaac's company for at least one or two hours a week over a period of nine months. (Some would say that the ancient world is valuable less as *lieu de mémoire* than as locus for imagination.) During that time, and subsequently, I flatter myself that Isaac became as much my friend as my student: in part, because he taught me far more about ethics, rhetoric, language, literature, and graphic novels than I could ever have taught him; in part, and more importantly, because he brought me Hamantaschen, fed me latkes, and, as we sat down to Seder, announced not only to our Yiddish-speaking hosts but also to me that I should be posing the ritual questions in Latin.

I am inexpressibly grateful to Isaac for sharing with me his intellect and his humanity. May his memory be a blessing to all who were fortunate enough to know him, however briefly.

Ben Tipping, Assistant Professor of the Classics

Isaac would often drop by our house on his way to and from campus. He sometimes brought things for Balthazar, who loved these impromptu visits. This past Chanukah, Isaac came equipped with potatoes and helped Balathi carve from them a menorah, which they proudly set in the window. Sometimes he came with goodies for the adults, a John Wayne movie to watch and a box of malt balls, for example. Or it would be the Marx Brothers and jelly beans. Once he brought an entire feast assembled

from various Brookline shops: pickled fish and smoked fish and breads and knishes. He liked preparing feasts for others, and often in his enthusiasm he would begin the preparations so far in advance that some of the food would have spoiled by the time he brought it out to eat. So we had to throw away the knishes that night and, on another occasion, half the spinach for a salad Niçoise. But the meals were always delicious.

The last evening we spent with Isaac and Margot was at a Balkan music festival in Concord, Massachusetts. We had arranged to meet at his place. It was raining quite dramatically that evening, and when Anna, Marianne, and I pulled up in front of his building on Magazine Street, we saw Isaac standing in the doorway with a towel. This was for Margot, who was on her way and who he knew would be wet from her walk. At the concert, after a brief nap on Margot's shoulder, Isaac got up with her and danced a Syrto. This is one of the last images I have of him. We miss Isaac every day.

Daniel Tober (MA '08)

While taking Professor Coleman's Epigraphy class in the fall of 2007, I noticed that there was one student in the class who possessed a remarkable knowledge of languages. He seemed to know everything, and his sensitivity to the intricacies of language made him one of the most adept in the class at interpreting a Latin inscription that was not written in standard Latin because it had

been composed, for example, by a native Greek speaker.

As the semester progressed, I came to know and admire Isaac more and more, not just for his facility with language, but for his kindness and his whole-hearted dedication to his students. Many times he would say to Professor Coleman: "I might be a bit late next time. My students are taking an exam, and I want to make sure they have enough time to finish." He willingly sacrificed his own classroom time to ensure that his students had enough for themselves, and his passion for learning—both his own and that of others—was obvious.

Isaac was truly a gifted scholar and a natural teacher, and his friends, colleagues, and students will miss him dearly.

Katherine Van Schaik ('08)

Dear Isaac always had a special way to connect with people. Our connection was through music. He always had a song in his head and in his heart. He would sing this said song loudly and proudly and in the key of Isaac. We bonded over semi-obscure indie bands from the early 90s. He'd mention a band and often times I'd own their entire catalog. I have a stack of CDs on my desk that I lent to Isaac. Whenever he returned a CD, he made sure to share his opinion of the music. He was never vague. Now, whenever I look at the CDs and listen to them I think of Isaac. I miss him.

Teresa Wu, Administrator, Department of the Classics

Dear Mr. Meyers and Ms. Sandrow,

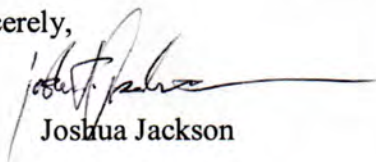
I wish to convey, as best as I possibly can, my sympathy, sorrow, and anguish in regards to the loss of your son. Zoe Teegarden was kind enough to share your address at my request, as I had contacted and informed her that I wished to write a letter. I feel compelled to relate my brief encounter with Isaac last Spring. We shared only a short hour, but he made a deep and lasting impression upon my memory. I pray that my few words will cast just a thin shaft of light upon those moments of his life unknown to you, to honor his life and add my own recollection to so many others.

I met Isaac briefly last March while preparing a document for my volunteer work at the Perkins School for the Blind in nearby Watertown. As a reader/monitor at the Perkins Braille/Talking Book Library's recording studio, I was wrestling with a text by Henry David Thoreau, an essay entitled "Wild Apples," which was replete with Latin fauna nomenclature for apple trees, and even a good bit of Greek. Feeling completely intimidated and dumbfounded, I contacted the Classics Department in the hopes of finding someone who might be willing to assist me with pronunciation. I was invited to send an email to the Department's list-serve, and was soon after contacted by your son. I called him that evening, and incredibly, Isaac had already found a copy of the text online and had prepared to assist me over the phone! When we realized that the texts differed substantially, we agreed to meet and review my working copy.

We met at the Gato Rojo Café on the main campus, and I offered to buy him a coffee in gratitude, but he would have none of it. As I fumbled over the words, Isaac very patiently and instructively pored through the text with me. His passion and fine knowledge for the languages was only matched by his humility and eagerness to assist me in my efforts. I was frankly surprised that anyone had volunteered to help, and even more surprised that any student in such a program, at Harvard no less, would be so gracious, persistent, and warm. I was quickly disabused of my foolish misconceptions and assumptions. I must say that I was immediately struck by his singular demeanor and simple kindness. After laboriously reviewing each and every instance, I once again offered to purchase anything at the Café, but he again refused. Desperately wanting to thank him for his assistance, I asked him if I could include his name and recognize his help on the recording, but he refused this as well. I have no doubt that his magnanimity and selflessness was entirely customary and second-nature, and that there are countless others who could relate similar accounts.

Please know that your loss is felt widely and deeply by so many people, like me, who were fortunate enough to have met your son, even just for a moment.

Sincerely,



Joshua Jackson

Yale's Tricentennial Commencement, May 2001

IVY ODE

Ter iam annos nobis centum
Congregamus in conventum
Stirpium situm recentum.

Ecce in campos quos amamus
Hederam libet feramus.
Dum gaudemus, haec precamus:

Numina nunc sunt oranda;
Ite turpia et nefanda
Ac negotia agitanda!

Procul, Mars, abes, portaque
Tecum proelia; pax quaque
Labat, Venus, i firmaque!

Alma mater Venus bona,
Grata si probaris dona
Nos ut augeas, patrona!

Laeta et his emolumentis
Grandescas plus iam tricentis
Hederatis monumentis.

Twice one hundred years, and then
One hundred more have passed. We band
Of faithful scholars take in hand
The shoots of living vine again.

In well-loved fields we make our way
In our solemnity. Tradition
Mandates this be our commission,
That we rejoice, and meanwhile pray.

For divinity must be addressed:
Now every sort of toil or shame
Or petty bickering, or blame
Must be rejected and repressed.

And War be far from us, along
With you your quarrels! but where Peace
Is wavering, may Love not cease
To go to her and make her strong.

O mother, Alma Mater, Love,
This gift we bear, we bear for you,
O grant us what our gift is due—
To live, to flourish, to improve.

And if our prayer be not in vain,
And if you look on us with pleasure,
You shall receive this ivy treasure
Thrice one hundred years again.

Isaac Jacob Meyers

The Ivy Ode is traditionally read aloud while senior class representatives plant ivy as part of Yale's Class Day celebration. The Ode typically describes a symbolic connection between the growth of the ivy vine and the flourishing of the graduating class.

“Grazing in the Ruins”

There has always been bucolic poetry. Anyone who has read the *Song of Songs* understands how ancient and vital is the connection between song and the shepherd’s life, and anyone who has heard Arab boys play the flute as they herd their goats (or, for that matter, the cowboy poetry that NPR broadcasts every so often) can attest that the tradition lives on to this day. In Greece and the Italian *rus* of ancient times, shepherds and drovers composed tunes and verses in their heads and played them on their pipes—the word “bucolic” derives from Greek *boukólos*, meaning “cowherd.” When, in their lonely rambles over fields and mountains, they happened upon each other, they seized the opportunity to swap songs and hold competitions in which they improvised couplets and traded comic insults in verse.

Virgil’s *Bucolica*, known in English as the *Eclogues*, in many ways resemble these songs. The bucolic life is featured prominently, the speakers are for the most part shepherds, and the poems claim to be intended for accompaniment on the modest reed pipe. Presumably Virgil knew what true shepherd music sounded like, since he was a provincial, from Mantua—not that Rome itself was so far from the *rus*. But Virgil, unlike some of his contemporaries, was no folklorist. These are no Fescennine verses—crude, mocking songs in rough accentual meter, which Horace identifies as the original Italian poesy, and which a real shepherd might improvise. A sort of pastoral illusion is conjured up in the *Eclogues*, but it is not complete and not meant to be. So, for instance, although the characters in the *Eclogues* are simple rustics, they do not, except for a few phrases and mannerisms, speak a simple, rustic Latin, but rather an elevated and elegant literary Latin, delivered in the same perfect dactylic hexameter (a meter adapted from the Greek by the first great Roman poet, Ennius) that Virgil uses also for the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*.

The real model for the *Eclogues* is not folk music but the *Idylls* of the Hellenistic poet Theocritus. On these poems, which introduced Arcadia (a real district of Greece imagined as a rustic fantasyland), was founded a new literary genre of “illiterate” poetry. Virgil’s debt to Theocritus in the *Eclogues* is incalculable, and certain of the poems (notably numbers II, III, V, VIII and IX) are closely modeled on Theocritan originals. The shepherds in the *Eclogues* are ostensibly not even Italians, but Greeks living in Arcadia, with Greek names, such as Meliboeus and Tityrus, that are found in Theocritus too.

How seriously Virgil wants us to believe this can be gathered from the references that the shepherds make to Mantua and its local river, to Augustus and to Julius Caesar, to the consulate and other uniquely Roman, not Greek, institutions. The Greek is there because Theocritus’ *Idylls* were written in Greek, and the names thus became part of the form; the Greek touches lend the *Eclogues* legitimacy and dignity.

Although the influence of the *Eclogues* on Western poetry has been great, they have found few actual imitators. Only one other Latin poet, Calpurnius Siculus, wrote eclogues that have come down to us. Almost nothing is known about this Calpurnius—he may not even have been Sicilian—but that he worked during the reign of Nero is obvious from the craven flattery of that emperor that burdens his poetry. He modeled himself carefully on Virgil, who had died approximately fifty years before, but his eclogues show the deterioration of style that is common to Silver Age poetry, and the sly, dazzling referentiality that sometimes compensates for the decline is lacking in Calpurnius’ labored verses. Shepherds also appear in later Latin poetry, but nothing more is heard from real pastoral until the Renaissance.

The literature of English-speaking countries (all of which are famous for their pasturage) boasts a long tradition of poetry with pastoral traits, but little that directly imitates the *Eclogues*. What there is, is largely Elizabethan, most notably in Sidney and Spenser, later in Marvell, and, later still, in Pope. Milton’s “Lycidas” and Shelley’s “Adonais” are both clearly influenced by Virgil, but are not strictly eclogues. When it comes to English translations of Virgil, the *Aeneid* and even the *Georgics* have been tackled far more frequently than the *Eclogues*. The translations have trickled out, a few per century, never garnering much fame in their own right. Often they come from poets who, having covered the major classical bases, take a sort of victory lap with the *Bucolica*. Not that their efforts are worthless—far from it. For instance, Thomas Creech’s 1684 version of *Eclogue II* has the lovely lines:

Hast thou not pitty! Must I dye for Love?
Just now the Flocks pursue the shades and cool,
And every Lizzard creeps into his hole:
Brown Thestylis the weary Reapers seeks,
And brings their Meat, their Onions and their Leeks:

A Review of *The Eclogues of Virgil: A Translation*

And whilst I trace thy steps in every Tree
And every Bush, poor Insects sigh with me.

And Dryden's 1697 version of the same poem has:

Come to my longing Arms, my lovely care,
And take the Presents that the Nymphs prepare.
White Lillies in full Canisters they bring
With all the Glories of the Purple Spring:
The daughters of the Flood have searched the Mead
For violets pale, and cropt the Poppy's Head,
The short Narcissus and pale Daffodil,
Pancies to please the Sight, and Cassia sweet to smell:
And set soft Hyacinths with Iron blue
To shade marsh Marigolds of shining Hue,
Some bound in Order, others loosely strow'd,
To dress thy Bow'r, and trim thy new Abode.

Other notable translations of the *Eclogues* include an odd business by Vita Sackville-West. Why more poets haven't tried their hands at them is hard to explain; it could be that the *Aeneid* is so prestigious that it overshadows Virgil's other works and steals, as it were, their fair share of translators. One expects the translator who chooses the *Eclogues* to have some special affinity for the bucolic Virgil.

The latest to venture a translation of the *Eclogues* is the poet David Ferry, the author of several books of original poems, as well as translations of the Sumerian epic, *Gilgamesh*, and of the *Odes* and *Epistles* of Horace. Most of Ferry's poems are not only short but small—intentionally so. They treat of small things—a license plate, a chair, a lawn, a dinner—in a quiet world. Nor do these small things often seem to gesture toward, as small things in poems are wont to do, a larger significance; they make light repercussions. Ferry's poems tend to be like tiny ponds: He has tossed in a stone and is watching the ripples spread and fade away, with no greater consequence than to disturb the water-striders. As an illustration of this, consider an appropriately aquatic poem, "Down by the River":

The page is green. Like water words are drifting
Across the notebook page on a day in June
Of irresistible good weather, Everything's easy.

On this side of the river, on a bench near the water,
A young man is peaceably stroking the arm of a girl.
He is dreaming of eating a peach. Somebody's rowing,

Somebody's running over the bridge that goes over
The highway beyond the river. The river is blue,
The river is moving along, taking it easy.

A breeze has come up, and somewhere a dog is
barking,
Acknowledging the stirring of the breeze.
Nobody knows whose dog. The river is moving,

The boats are moving with it or else against it.
People beside the river are watching the boats.
Along the pathway on this side of the river

Somebody's running, looking good in the sunshine,
Everything going along with everything else,
Moving along in participial rhythm,

Flowing, enjoying, taking its own sweet time.
On the other side of the river somebody else,
A man or a woman, is painting the scene I'm part of.

A brilliantly clear diminutive figure works
At a tiny easel, and as a result my soul
Lives on forever in somebody's heavenly picture.

In short, Ferry, to judge by his own work, hardly seems like the kind of poet to be drawn to epic. Were he required to translate an epic, the one that would seem best suited to his sensibility is probably Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, a six-book meditation on Epicurean philosophy that examines and reexamines pain and entropy, and proclaims the ultimate triumph of death over men.

Instead Ferry turned, for his first translation, to *Gilgamesh*, an epic that details a man's triumph over death. (The poem tells of how the eponymous Sumerian hero, a warrior of Herculean strength and size, storms the underworld to rescue his companion, the wild man Enkidu, who has been poisoned by the gods in revenge for the slaying of the Bull of Heaven.) This in itself is surprising enough, but what's more astonishing is the degree to which Ferry succeeds. His *Gilgamesh* has become a standard classroom text, and this acceptance seems to me completely warranted. True, my opinion may not go

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for much, since I do not know Sumerian, Akkadian, or Hittite (all languages in which various parts of the epic have been found), but I have read John Gardner’s and John Maier’s version, which is itself excellent. Ferry’s translation seems just as conscientious, if less scholarly, and it is better poetry:

Enkidu dreamed that the gods had met in council:
Anu said: “They have killed the Bull of Heaven

and killed Huwawa. One of them must die,
the one of them who felled the tallest cedar.”

Then Enlil said that Enkidu must die
but Gilgamesh, the gifted, must not die.

And Shamash said: “The two of them went together,
companions on my errand into the Forest.

Why then should Enkidu, who went, companion,
into the Cedar Forest on my errand,

why should he die?” Angry Enlil said:
“You went with them as if you were companion,

day after day as they went upon their journey
to violate the Forest and kill the guardian.”

...

And so it was that Enkidu fell sick.

Isn’t this how an epic from the dawn of time should sound? Cuneiform captured the poem like a prehistoric bug in amber—big and odd and fierce-looking, but frozen and perfectly preserved. Ferry knows how to put these qualities into English. He tilts his phrasing toward the Anglo-Saxon—as opposed to the Latinate—side of the language, which gives it a slightly archaic feel. And the words fall out in a common, natural English rhythm, roughly iambic, strongly accented, with simple enjambement. The couplet form is unobtrusive because the thoughts expressed seem to be two-line thoughts.

Ferry’s translation is conscientious, beautiful, and full of life. It is impossible and unnecessary to explain this success away. Nevertheless we ought to note that any translator of *Gilgamesh* enjoys certain advantages. For one thing, very little is known about it. Philologists

have done an amazing job of deciphering the cuneiform, but no one will ever know, not even approximately, how these words sounded in the ear. Similarly, despite the progress that archaeologists and historians have made, the cultures that produced *Gilgamesh* remain shadowy. Sumerians, Babylonians, and Akkadians may have heard in the poem resonances—particularly of a religious nature—at which we can hardly guess. Naturally we cannot expect the translator to take these into account. Second, *Gilgamesh* was not written by one person, but rather accumulated over time, and so the translator need not worry about capturing the distinctive voice of the author; the poem’s terse and all-knowing narrative voice is certainly distinctive, but it has no particular personality. Third, while the spirit of *Gilgamesh* is not what we’d expect from Ferry, its sound is not too far from his own.

Unfortunately, what works to Ferry’s advantage with *Gilgamesh*, either works against him with the *Eclogues*, or does not figure at all. He has none of the leeway here that he had with the Sumerian epic. We know a lot—not everything, but a lot—about Virgil’s milieu. He lived not in the mythical past but in a well-documented time and place. We even know a fair amount about the circumstances in which each of his major poems was written. Virgil is no amalgam of numberless bards, priests, and editors; he was a single person, with both a full understanding of his models and his own poetic program. Virgil wanted himself to be apparent in his work, and he undeniably is.

At the same time Virgil is a representative, in fact the epitome, of the classical style. His diction is clean and perfectly balanced; his thought is marked by clarity, objectivity, and authority; and everything is informed by a consistent seriousness of thought and purpose. His entire oeuvre contains not a single diffident word. He can be lightly humorous, homely and colloquial, as when he writes “cuium pecus? an Meliboei?” (“Whose flock? It isn’t Meliboeus’s, is it?”), which, with its non-standard form *cuium*, is a colloquialism so daring that it prompted the parodist Numitorius, in his *Antibucolica*, to write “cuium pecus? an Latinum?” (“Whose flock? It isn’t a Latin one, is it?”). But with Virgil, even a funny, private poem is to some extent a serious, public poem.

Ferry, in other words, does not seem to have any great affinity for Virgil. At least he has chosen to translate the least obviously public of Virgil’s major works. Pastoral is a form whose tropes have to do with the humility of the

A Review of *The Eclogues of Virgil: A Translation*

countryside. Its characters are simple illiterate shepherds who know little about the world of politics. Their concerns are, first and foremost, sheep. After that come love, song, and fun. Their gods are rural gods, like Pan, or gods with a rural aspect, like Apollo and Diana.

Superficially, then, the *Eclogues* would seem to be in line with Ferry's modest view of things. Yet underneath they have a stone-cut and monumental quality, a classical quality, which is incompatible with Ferry's diffidence and looseness. Consider the following:

Non nostrum inter uos tantas componere lites:
Et uitula tu dignus et hic, et quisquis amores
Aut metuet dulcis aut experietur amaros.
Claudite iam riuos, pueri; sat prata biberunt.

I don't know how to arbitrate this great
Debate between you two. You both deserve
To win the prize, and so do all who have
Experienced the sweet and bitter of love.
But the time has come to close the sluices, boys,
For now the fields have drunk their fill of song.

Never mind that "non nostrum ... componere lites" doesn't mean that Palaemon doesn't *know* how to arbitrate, but rather that he doesn't dare pick between two such fine singers. This is a volume whose advance-praise sheet reads, "'English translators of Virgil traditionally prize what they call 'accuracy' over preserving the text's elegance and readability.'" As a matter of fact I call it accuracy too, since that's what it is. But let's look to the text's elegance instead. "This great / debate"—why the enjambment? The greatness is important only in relation to Palaemon's unwillingness to judge. We are not being told directly that Menalcas' and Damoetas' verses were great; we know this already. Virgil found no reason to emphasize *tantas*, "so great," in the Latin. And even if the word "great" were important, in its current, enjambed position it carries too much force and not enough meaning. When in the next line we learn what is great—namely the debate—it is a bit anticlimactic. To make matters worse, Ferry saddles the lines with a pointless and heavy-handed double rhyme, "arbitrate this great / debate." Ennius' phrase "splendet et horret" was anathematized by all his ancient commentators; *a fortiori*, we should do the same to "arbitrate this great / debate."

Except for their strange jingle and loose pentameter,

these lines, with their almost aggressively ungraceful enjambments, have a decidedly prosy air about them. The last two lines seem to be left to carry the poetic weight of the passage. They are not really of a piece with what has come before; they lilt and take a curtsy, and seem to have been snipped from some pseudo-border ballad: Close the sluices, laddies-o. As though in a rush to prove that the passage has been poetic all along, Ferry foists on us that last phrase, "The fields have drunk their fill of song." Nothing in the language has prepared the way for a fanciful, Romantic, thoughtlessly poetic turn of phrase like "drunk their fill of song," unless "the sweet and bitter of love"—but that at least is justified by the Latin, whereas "drunk their fill of song" is not.

This passage would not merit such close attention were it not typical of the whole. So many fine lines from Virgil have been made needlessly arrhythmic and unpicturesque in Ferry's English. If this were a consistent policy it would be bad enough, but it is worsened by unevenness. Every so often something self-consciously poetic will pop up without (one might say) rhyme or reason. Take this stanza in *Eclogue VII*:

We've juniper trees and chestnut trees, and such
Abundance that the ground is covered with
What falls from the loaded boughs; a smiling scene;
But if Alexis should desert these hills,
The flowing streams would shrivel and run dry.

Note the awkward contrast between "we've" and the circumlocution "covered with / What falls from the loaded boughs." (Virgil simply says "strata ... sua quaeque sub arbore poma," "fruit scattered, each under its own tree.") Again, note the discrepancy between that prosaic, wordy phrase and "a smiling scene," vague, compact and poetic. Finally comes, as in the earlier passage, a closing couplet that attempts to rise to a greater dignity than Ferry's own translation has provided for it.

The *Eclogues* fall into two main categories: conversation/epigram eclogues, where two or more characters speak with one another or compete in alternating stanzas, and long songs sung by a single voice (in some cases with occasional interruptions). The examples already quoted are of the former variety, but we should consider Ferry's treatment of the latter too. These generally are better, if not much. At least the enjambment tends to be

“Grazing in the Ruins”

more sensible, as in this passage from *Eclogue VI* (in which Tityrus is singing Silenus’ mythological songs):

He told the story of Scylla, Nisus’s daughter,
The story often told, about how she
With yelling monsters whirling around her hips
Harassed the wallowing ships of Ithaca,
And oh! Her sea-hounds tore to bits and pieces
The bodies of hysterical Ithacan sailors
Pulled down and whelmed in that devouring vortex.

While the tone here maintains itself better than in the epigrammatic eclogues, this only serves to underscore that it is precisely Virgil’s tone that gives Ferry the most trouble. To offer “hysterical Ithacan sailors” “whelmed” in a “devouring vortex” is to reach for the higher registers but fall woefully short. This is probably the worst case; Ferry does much better in the fourth (or “Messianic”) *Eclogue*, especially at the end:

So, little baby, may your first smile be
When you first recognize your mother, whose
Long nine-months travail brought you into the world.
That child who has not smiled thus for his parents
No gods will welcome at their festive table
Nor any goddess to her amorous bower.

Also in lists of flora, which are a staple of Latin poetry about the countryside, Virgil excels at combining tongue-pleasing names, and Ferry gets this quite nicely in *Eclogue II*:

tibi lilia plenis
ecce ferunt Nymphae calathis; tibi candida Nais,
pallentis uiolas et summa papauera carpens,
narcissum et florem iungit bene olentis anethi;
tum casia atque aliis intexens suauius herbis
mollia luteola pingit uaccinia calta.

The Nymphs are bringing you baskets full of lilies,
See, the lovely Naiad makes a bouquet
Of palest violets and scarlet poppies for you,
Flower of fennel, narcissus blossoms also,
With yellow marigold and hyacinth,
And bound together with twine of cassia
And other fragrant herbs.

This may not be as pretty as Dryden’s version, quoted above, but it is graceful enough. And at the beginning of *Eclogue VIII*, Ferry captures the magic that Virgil works with foreign personal and place names:

The Muse of the shepherds Alpheisiboeus and Damon
At whose contending songs the very cattle
Were spellbound in the field, forgetting to graze—
The lynx was spellbound too, hearing the music—
And the rivers, spellbound, stood still listening—
I sing the Muse of Damon and Alpheisiboeus.
Whether it be you are passing by
The great rocks at the mouth of the river Timavus
Or sailing homeward along the Illyrian coast,
I long for the day when I shall be able to sing
In celebration of your victories,
And celebrate to all the world as well
Your Sophoclean songs.

A great deal of grace and dignity resides in these lines; it is a pity and a puzzlement that Ferry does not gather these qualities into his entire translation.

To read this translation is similar to visiting the ruins of a Roman temple, with its feeling of enduring greatness, and proportional sense of loss. Though the *Eclogues* are not the *Aeneid*—they don’t have the massive marble weight of a Pantheon—their rustic shrine was nevertheless built by the same architect, out of the same fine, hard stone. Walk around inside, and you will find the same grace and dignity. Who would expect such a building to last till today? If one capital in ten had survived the millennia, that would be a reason for gratitude; and however much of the real *Bucolica* survives in the English, that much we should be thankful for. Yet since Ferry’s book is a facing-page translation, you can stroll over to the versos and find yourself in the shrine almost exactly as it looked two thousand years ago. Or else investigate other translations and rebuild the original in your mind.

Isaac J. Meyers, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2001

For my sister, who has trouble sleeping

You are deepening
Like a downstream river, rushing;
It is keeping
You awake, and pushing

Through your sleep. You blush
With many unsounded questions
That come tapping,
And your closed eyes show confusion.

Golden resolutions
Will spring from that fertile ground,
Ripe for reaping
In the morning. But understand

That the skirring sound
Of every individual cricket
And the creeping
Of the tide up each inlet

Are a consummate secret
That the complicated river keeps.
Dear, sleep on;
The river also sleeps.

March 11, 2002

It may seem strange, but I was really solemn
And couldn't even manage a decent smirk
Except the others wanted it to work;
Myself, I swear to God, I felt like Gollum
And couldn't understand what all the doubt
And ironic carrying on were all about.
I wanted justice; viz. I wanted violence.
Although ... some nights in winter, Harkness Tower
Cut into the copper moon, a shard of black,
And I could not bear to breathe to break the silence,
And so I stood and looked for half an hour
Because I could not bear to turn my back.

December 23, 2002

The First Five Letters

⌘ is inaudible and everywhere
it grants others to speak and indicates
Myself, “I will.”
First and first of “last” it is.
I began there; who will end
there? I will.

⌚ the house the world awakes in,
the letter from which essays
the word whose consequent
is creation. God’s abode,
apple of the eye.

λ the camel is
ill at ease in Eden
and could be the first
slightly resentful letter
from the way it grunts.

⌗ Adam’s first innovation
is a door, which remains open;
Till very much later he notices
(As he’s rudely spurred by a flaming sword)
That the same door also closes.

⌗ the window, extraneous
late addition to Eve’s house,
an intimation of privacy,
which, violated, came to be,
predominates the hidden Name:
Look through it into mystery.

August 4, 2002

“The Prophet’s Song for the Choirmaster”

(This article is an explication of the haftarah reading for the second day of the Jewish holiday of Shavuot.)

HABAKKUK 2:20–3:19.

Shortly before the Babylonian Exile in 587 BCE, Habakkuk in his workshop meditates on the visions he has seen: Babylonian soldiers storming westward toward the Kingdom of Judah, driven by the wrath of God himself; a human flood as massive and grave as Noah’s—an unanswerable judgment on the Jewish nation’s unforgivable sins. It is Habakkuk who has provoked the burden of his prophecy. Addressing God, he demands, “How long will I cry, and you not hear ...? The law is slacked ...!” (1:2–4). God is not long to answer: “Behold, I will raise up the Babylonians ... who shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess dwelling-places that are not theirs” (1:6). Again Habakkuk presses God, this time to know the punishment the Babylonians will themselves receive. But for the remainder of this dialogue, God speaks and the prophet takes dictation: “Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables ...” (2:2). Eighteen of the fieriest verses of rebuke in the entire Bible follow: “For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it. Woe to him that builds a town with blood, and establishes a city with iniquity!” (2:11–12). Habakkuk now learns that a prophet’s eloquence, his mental clarity, is

his personal downfall, because the better he speaks God’s words, the more fiercely they burn the speaker. They quickly burn Habakkuk into silence: “But the Lord is in his holy sanctuary; let all the earth hush before him” (2:20). Habakkuk is left much reduced and weak; the fury of God’s word has driven his self out of the text. Here his prophecy ends; he can bear no more.

But later he wrote a song, which was appended to the two prophetic chapters, and this is something very different. This chapter, Habakkuk 3, is a beautiful and unified psalm that testifies to human power to speak with God and yet live, to submit to the divine and stay sane—sane and even creative. It begins with a prayer for mercy, then describes God’s might, not just as displayed in the preceding prophecies, but in a dazzling theophany: God as a warrior, striding over the earth, riding over the sea, bringing retribution and salvation. Habakkuk is a composer, and he does not hesitate to score his psalm with musical directions—*selah*—in the body of the text.

We read this song as the *haftarah* (additional reading) on the second day of Shavuot, *zman matan Torateinu*, the commemoration of the giving of the Torah. Ezekiel 3, like the *haftarah* of the first day of Shavuot, features a theophany like the one on Sinai. These formal and thematic links justify well enough the placement of the *haftarah*.

But I see a broader and more psychological connection between Habakkuk 3 and *matan Torah*. In both cases God appears not just

in glory but in terror; at Sinai he thunders as he gives the law, and in Habakkuk’s prophecies he thunders for the sake of that law, which we, inevitably, have perverted. If we can for one moment imagine that we ourselves were at Mount Sinai (and the Midrash says we *were* there), we can well understand Habakkuk when he writes, “I heard, and my stomach roiled, at the sound my lips quivered; rottenness entered my bones, and I tremble where I stand ...” (3:16). Rashi reads verse 3:2, “Lord, I have heard the report of thee, and am afraid,” as a cry of dismay in the face of God’s justice; it was a cry that began at Mount Sinai.

Yet, amazingly, 3:18 surges into joyful song—“But I will be glad in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation”—and continues into 3:19: “The Lord God is my strength and makes my feet like deer, and He will make me walk on my high places ...” And lastly, nothing could express simple, stubborn confidence in the future better than Habakkuk’s final brief professional note, “For the Choirmaster. With my string-music” (3:19). After all that—after the threatening promise of the Torah, the terrible and true signs—can he still live with his faith, and even, in full knowledge of that horrific wave of destruction gathering force to bear down from the East, continue in his work? His answer is yes, of course. Of course he can; that is his weakness and his strength; he is human.

Isaac Meyers, *The Forward*,
June 6, 2003



Horae Cantabrigenses

IV

Among the college buildings' walls rubbed raw
And red by winter wind and setting sun
I walk, and suddenly I feel
Timid weak and vulnerable
Motherless and brotherless, like one
Who unlike me has known no love nor law.

In all the years filled up with nights and days
In all the ways and places of this earth,
How small a heart beats in my chest,
And these and you, O God, how vast,
That constantly prevail; yet I from birth
Have shied or offered apprehensive praise.

January 1, 2008