

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 9, 2008,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Nicolae Iliescu
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

NICOLAE ILIESCU

BORN: May 21, 1919
DIED: November 25, 2007

Son of Romania, student of Italy's literature and culture, proud citizen of the United States, Nicolae Iliescu was all three, and each of these facets of his life experience helped to form the kind, erudite, and principled teacher who devoted his entire academic career to mentoring students in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

Iliescu was born in the village of Constantinesti, Romania. His father, a schoolteacher, also owned a farm where Iliescu helped with the daily chores. In later years he would say, only half in jest, that he was "a peasant at heart." He had only begun his studies at the University of Bucharest when World War II broke out. Conscripted to fight for a regime he did not support, he served on the Russian front until the impending collapse of Nazi Germany and its Romanian sympathizers allowed him to escape into Austria. A series of fortuitous encounters with fellow refugees provided him with the means to travel, first, to Italy, where he earned a degree at the University of Padua, and then to America. He arrived in the United States in 1952, settling in Cleveland among its large Romanian population. Within a year he married and became the editor of a Romanian weekly newspaper called *The Messenger*. He was eventually to apply for admission to the Harvard Graduate School and in 1958 completed his Ph.D. in Italian with a dissertation on "The Italian Novel from Manzoni to Nievo." The same year he was hired as an instructor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, rising to the rank of full professor in 1968. He retired in 1989.

Of the war years and Romania's subsequent political vicissitudes, Iliescu did not like to speak, but their impact was sufficiently great to bring the colleague who worked most closely with him to write that "At the heart of the decisions he made in life lies a refusal to compromise in any way with the government that held sway in his native country." In sharp contrast to that totalitarian regime stood the United States. Iliescu once told a prospective Harvard student, the son of a Romanian dissident, "[I]f you . . . can demonstrate integrity, leadership, and intellect, all doors are open, regardless of how you got into the United States or when."

Iliescu's long peregrination toward a society where his talents might flourish offers interesting parallels to his most important scholarly work, a study of the influence of Saint Augustine on the *Canzoniere* of Petrarch. Although earlier scholars had already established resemblances between the saint and Petrarch, their research had focused on Petrarch's letters and moral writings. In *Il Canzoniere Petrarcesco e Sant'Agostino*, Iliescu proposes that when the Italian poet recounts the story of his love for Laura, he is, in truth, like Augustine in his *Confessions*, relating a Christian's struggle between earthly desires—often painstakingly explored in the text—and the quest to lead a purposeful, spiritual existence. For the numerous concrete examples of Augustine's presence in the *Canzoniere* with which Iliescu buttresses his argument, the study was justly praised. Moreover, since these examples highlight stylistic as well as thematic material, the analysis was also recognized as giving new importance and depth to various features of Petrarch's verse. "One of the most satisfying results of Professor Iliescu's excellent study," a reviewer wrote, "is that it helps us to see clearly that words and expressions that were frequently used rhetorically or lightly in the love lyric before Petrarch undergo a vital transformation in the *Canzoniere*."

Those inner struggles that Petrarch records in his *Canzoniere* resonated with Iliescu, whose deep faith and integrity had been sorely tested by the many dramas of his early life. A former doctoral student, reflecting on Iliescu's teaching style and approach to literature, notes that for this professor "Literature was in a real, direct, and tangible way, about life—especially the moral choices life demands of us—and about how we are to make sense of it all. It is thus easy to understand why, above all, Dante's *Divine Comedy* proved to be his favorite work, one that he taught for most of his nearly forty years in the department and that he continued to teach in the Harvard Extension School for several years even after his retirement."

His teaching and scholarship brought him honors from the Italian government, which awarded him the Premio della Cultura and the Medaglia della Cultura. He served as president of the Dante Society of America from 1972–79. Yet, we may believe that he appreciated no less the Festschrift that a group of past graduate students prepared for him at the time of his retirement. A gentleman of the old school, he could appear severe and reserved. In more private moments, however, he often revealed a fine sense of humor and considerable personal warmth which his students are quick to recall and laud. The affection was mutual. He made no secret of the sadness he felt when his teaching career ended. In consolation, he turned to his beloved Romania, which through his generosity and writing he tried to help recover from the long years of Communist domination.

Nicolae Iliescu died of a heart attack on November 25, 2007. He is survived by his wife Esther, two daughters, and brothers Octavian and Virgil.

Respectfully submitted,

Dante Della Terza
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