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Who Lied? Classical Heroism and World War 1

Abstract

Owen's rejection of Horace's *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* as 'the old lie' prompts for me two questions: i) Who exactly does Owen think lied? And is he justified in thinking this? ii) To what extent does Owen's rejection of Horace's words also amount to a critique of the classical tradition more generally, on the grounds that classical conceptions of war and heroism have proved utterly inadequate to the task of articulating the horrors of twentieth century trench warfare? I argue that Owen's main target is a number of poets, including Jessie Pope and Henry Newbolt, who recruited sanitized receptions of the classics to exhort young men to lay down their lives for their country. However, it is not clear that any of these, or Horace himself, is actually lying.

Owen as a keen student of Roman and Greek culture employed classical themes in various poems. Although classical literature offered rich and nuanced conceptions of warfare, its emphasis on the supererogatory and named individual heroes meant that new conceptions of heroism needed to be developed in World War 1 to cope with the conditions of often anonymous industrialized trench warfare, in which even doing one's duty could seem heroic.

*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:
mors et fugacem persequitur virum,
nec parcat imbellis iuventae
poplitibus timidove tergo*

'it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country;
death catches up with the fleeing man just the same,
nor does it spare the cowardly youth's
knees and fearful back.' (Horace *Odes* 3.2)

'O meet it is and passing sweet
To live in peace with others
But sweeter still and far more meet
To die in war for brothers.' (Owen 'The Ballad of Purchase-Money/s' 1914)

'If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, -
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.’ (Owen ‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*’ 1917 (revised 1918))¹

Wilfred Owen’s shifting stance towards Horace’s line between 1914-1917 has often been taken to represent what Vandiver has called ‘the old paradigm’, namely the view that the young soldier-poets of WW1 entered the war buoyed up by ideals of honour, heroism and patriotic self-sacrifice, only for those ideals to be blown apart by the squalid realities of mechanized twentieth century combat.² Furthermore, according to this view the disillusionment was not only with ideals of honour and heroic death in general, but also - and in some cases specifically, as here - with the articulation of such ideals in the classical canon of ancient Greece and Rome, selections of which formed a substantial part of the public school and grammar school curricula.³ This paradigm takes the attitude of Bonomy in Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922) as representative of a much more widespread disenchantment: Bonomy is said to draw ‘no comfort whatever from the works of the classics’,⁴ and although this section of the novel is pre-war, Woolf makes it clear throughout that classical education is put on trial by World War 1 and in some serious respects found wanting.⁵ Nor does the case for the prosecution of classics stop at the charge of uselessness: the accusation is also that a classical education was proven to be positively dangerous, in that its fine but specious phrases lured innocent and idealistic youths to grim, filthy and inglorious deaths. According to this narrative, World War 1 not only resulted in around 9.9 million combatant deaths, plus many millions of wounded military personnel and civilian casualties, but also did irreparable damage to the perceived value of a classical education. In Jacob’s Cambridge room, it is no accident that Woolf has him pressing the petals of poppies within a Greek dictionary.⁶

This narrative has of course been challenged, by Vandiver herself and others.⁷ I shall restrict myself to asking two principal questions (each with sub-questions), the first directly focusing on Owen’s relationship to Horace’s ode and the second arising from that relationship. Firstly: who, precisely, is Owen accusing of lying, and is he justified in that accusation? Secondly, is ‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*’ representative of Owen’s general approach to classical literature? Specifically, is Owen seeking to do away with classical notions of patriotic heroism as no longer of service in modern warfare? And, again, whatever his stance on classical heroic ideals turns out to be, is he warranted in holding it? Towards the end I will widen the scope of this second question to touch on Owen’s attitude to heroism in general: at one point he states firmly in a draft preface to a proposed volume of his poems that ‘This book is not about heroes’,⁸ and we need to ask whether that is in fact true. But for the main I will concentrate on his attitude to the classical canon in general and Horace in particular. Indeed, one of my aims in adopting

I should like to express my gratitude to all the participants for their helpful comments on the first draft of this paper at the *Classics and Classicists in the First World War* conference at Leeds in April 2014, and to Liz Pender for organizing it. And especial thanks must also go to Liz Pender for her very valuable editorial advice in preparing it for publication, and for her wise and scrupulous stewardship of the volume as a whole.

¹ Throughout this paper, ‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*’ in upper case refers to Owen’s poem, while *dulce et decorum est* in lower case refers to the line in Horace *Odes* 3.2 (the only partial exception is the quotation from Vandiver 2010: 395 on p.000).

² Vandiver 2010: 1-2 and *passim*. Notable subscribers to this paradigm include Silkin 1979: 29-36; Spear 1979; Parker 1987 *passim* and particularly 242-54, ‘The Old Lie Exposed’; Winn 2008: 16.

³ For the view that WW1 led to a rejection of classical ideals, see Stallworthy 1974 i 140-1; Parker (1987: 278) calls Horace’s line ‘notorious’. The extent of Owen classical education and aspirations is discussed below n.26.

⁴ 1992: 229.

⁵ A point made powerfully by David Scourfield in this volume.

⁶ 1992: 48-9.

⁷ E.g. Hynes 1990.

⁸ Parker 1987: 243.

this approach is to pay more attention to Horace himself than is often the case in discussions of ‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*’.⁹

So, firstly, who does Owen think is lying in his corruscating attack? To tell a lie is knowingly to utter a falsehood with the intention of deceiving,¹⁰ and it is of course often very hard to ascertain exactly what someone knows, let alone what their intention is. Other World War I critics of Horace’s *dulce et decorum est* do not usually go so far as to call it an outright lie: N.P.Graham, for instance, in his scathing ‘How do you sleep’, dismisses it as a ‘platitude’:

“‘Dulce et decorum’, we said to you,
Then put the deed apart with a platitude
Out of our hearts, or sent it shivering
Round to the cold back-door of charity
To claim its unavoidable reward!
O men, O brothers, always was it thus,
Even from the first faint flicker of the world,
That sent the blood-cry ringing down the ages:
‘For us! For us!’ and never a word of doubt!’

But Owen is adamant: ‘*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*’ is an outright lie. Who does he think is telling it? Clearly, he does not think Horace’s depiction of what it is like to die in war is accurate, and we will be examining Owen’s relationship to Horace below - where we will also ask whether the perceived inaccuracy amounts to an actual lie. However, the real key to uncovering the main target(s) of Owen’s scorn lies in his choice of the word ‘children’: if the ‘friend’ had seen what Owen has seen, then she or he would not with such zest tell the ‘old lie’

‘To children ardent for some desperate glory’.

Horace’s *Odes* may indeed be old,¹¹ but they were obviously not old when he wrote them - even supposing ‘*dulce et decorum est*’ was a deliberate lie on Horace’s part (on which more below), it was from his pen a newly-minted lie; the ‘friend’ Owen has in mind is someone repeating this ‘lie’ to children now, or who has been repeating it recently. Furthermore, crucially, Horace was not primarily writing for children. Indeed, in *Satires* 1.10,75 he explicitly says that he does not want his work to become a school text-book (although in *Epistles* 1.20,17-8 he jestingly predicts that this might be his fate). But if Horace is not primarily addressing children then who was? Does Owen simply mean the teachers who used Horace for their own patriotic and imperialistic ends? I am sure that such teachers are included in the vocative ‘my friend’, but there are more precise targets too. Earlier drafts of ‘*Dulce et Decorum Est*’ are dedicated, with savage irony, ‘To Jessie Pope’ and ‘To a Certain Poetess’.¹² Jessie Pope was a one-woman production line in verses; her main intended audience was boys and young men, although the parents and girlfriends who had influence over them were also very much in her sights. Her verses - highly popular at the time - may well strike us as truly terrifying: in *Jessie Pope’s War Poems* (1915), *More War Poems* (1915) and perhaps her tour

⁹ There is, for instance, no mention of Horace in Stallworthy’s magisterial study of Owen (1974).

¹⁰ The intention to deceive is important: an ironical comment may be false but is intended to be understood as false, at least by a selected few; indeed the use of irony may be the tool designed to select that few.

¹¹ Books 1-3 of the *Odes* were all published in 23 BC.

¹² ‘BM has two drafts, the earlier of which gives, beneath the title, *To Jessie Pope etc* (cancelled), and *To a certain Poetess*. HO has two drafts, one subscribed *To Jessie Pope etc.*, the other, *To a certain Poetess*.’ (*The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, C. Day Lewis (ed.) 1963: 55).

de force *Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times* (1916) she exhorts ‘laddies’ to dash off to glorious death for their native land and its empire, fired up by a lethal concoction of sanitized classicism, romantic chivalry and muscular Christianity. A particularly disturbing example is ‘The Call’:

‘Who’s for the trench –
Are you, my laddie?
Who’ll follow the French –
Will you, my laddie?
Who’s fretting to begin,
Who’s going to win?
And who wants to save his skin –
Do you, my laddie?
Who’s for the khaki suit –
Are you, my laddie?
Who longs to charge and shoot –
Do you, my laddie?
Who’s keen on getting fit,
Who means to show his grit,
And who’d rather wait a bit –
Would you, my laddie?
Who’ll earn the Empire’s thanks –
Will you, my laddie?
Who’ll swell the victor’s ranks –
Will you, my laddie?
When that procession comes,
Banners and rolling drums –
Who’ll stand and bite his thumbs –
Will you, my laddie?’

‘The Call’ was first published in the *Daily Mail* on 26th November 1914: its diction makes it clear that it is directed at boys and very young men, and the chosen vehicle of publication strongly suggests that Pope also wants to work on those youths’ mothers and sweethearts. Indeed, the *Daily Mail* frequently published Pope, and Owen says himself that he regularly received the *Mail* while he was teaching and tutoring in Bordeaux from 1913-15.¹³ It is very likely indeed that it was in the *Mail* that he first came across her verses.¹⁴

Nor is Pope alone in trying to tempt impressionable young minds with this particular brew. Sir Henry Newbolt also served great bowlfuls of it, and in ‘Clifton Chapel’ (1898) he appears to be deliberately filtering Horace through a romantic screen of medieval chivalry and Christianity when he invents an entirely fictional inspirational plaque for the very real chapel of Clifton College:

‘*Qui procul hinc*’, the legend’s writ, -
The frontier grave is far away -
‘*Qui ante diem periit:*
Sed miles, sed pro patria.’¹⁵

¹³ *Collected Letters* p.311: ‘I used to have the Daily Mail (continental) given me.’

¹⁴ Stallworthy 1974: 227; Parker 1987: 243.

¹⁵ ‘Who perished far away from here and before his time – but a soldier, but for his country.’

Newbolt is well aware that the simple phrase ‘*pro patria*’ will evoke memories of Horace’s line in his target audience of a presumed future officer-class,¹⁶ and he is happy - or at least prepared - to utilize Horace as a recruiting tool to persuade healthy and life-loving boys and young men that it would be a sweet and fitting thing to lay down their lives for a potent ideal of *patria* which fused notions of country, empire and school. ‘Clifton Chapel’, and particularly the tag ‘*sed miles, sed pro patria*’, became very widely known, loved and used both before and during World War 1, in letters and articles as well as poems.¹⁷ It is highly likely that Owen was also responding to Newbolt, whom we know he read (and on other occasions even admired):¹⁸ Vandiver (2010: 395) persuasively argues that ‘Owen’s use of untranslated Latin in the final lines of ‘*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*’ can be read as, among other things, a direct response to the concluding Latin lines of ‘Clifton Chapel’’. Nor does the list of Owen’s most likely targets end with Newbolt. The mix of classicism, chivalry and Christian virtues in Newbolt’s fusion of country and empire had been formed by his own childhood reading: in his memoir *My World As In My Time* he admits that his approach to the classics was ‘from the romantic side’, originally inspired by his love of stories about ‘the Greek Heroes and the Lays of Ancient Rome.’¹⁹ Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* was first published in 1842 and their tales of heroic and patriotic deeds had been hugely popular ever since: Catherine Edwards notes that the British Library Catalogue lists sixty-three editions between 1842 and 1939 and that they were ‘one of the most widely read texts in the schools of imperial Britain.’²⁰ In fact, Macaulay himself is careful in his preface to disentangle Roman attitudes and ideals from Christian and medieval chivalric ones:

‘The old Romans had some great virtues, fortitude, temperance, veracity, spirit to resist oppression, respect for legitimate authority, fidelity in the observing of contracts, disinterestedness, ardent patriotism; but Christian charity and chivalrous generosity were unlike unknown to them.’²¹

Unfortunately, many of Macaulay’s admirers, including Newbolt, were either unaware of Macaulay’s preface (very possible if they were introduced to him as children) or disregarded it, and blithely included the *Lays* in the fashionable late-Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian amalgam of classics, Christianity and chivalry (though even divested of the amalgam it is

¹⁶ The connection between Newbolt and Horace is also made by W. Rhys Roberts 1916: 94: Newbolt ‘has given Horace’s “*pro patria*” in a modern setting.’

¹⁷ See Vandiver 2010: 72-8. Care needs to be taken here: as Newbolt was himself almost certainly referencing Horace, the phrase ‘*pro patria*’ on its own might be referring primarily to Horace, primarily to Newbolt, or to a fuzzy amalgamation of the two. However, there are plenty of unmistakable citations of ‘*sed miles*’. A particularly interesting example is Digby Bertram Haseler, who in ‘If I must die’ explicitly references both Newbolt and Horace 3.2 and prefers the former (though in the same poem he also approvingly combines Newbolt with an adaptation of another Horatian ode, 3.30: Horace’s ‘*non omnis moriar*’, ‘I shall not wholly die’, becoming ‘*non omnis periiit*’, ‘he did not wholly die’):

‘If I must die write not ‘Tis sweet
To fall for England in the fray’.
But write, ‘*Non omnis periiit,*
Sed miles sed pro patria.’

¹⁸ Parker 1987: 243.

¹⁹ This romantic (and specifically Romantic) reading of classical literature was prevalent throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras: see Caesar 1993:7. The stories of Greek heroes that Newbolt mentions almost certainly included Charles Kingsley’s *The Heroes*, of which more below.

²⁰ Edwards 1999: 70.

²¹ *Lays of Ancient Rome* 1842: xxvi.

undeniable that Macaulay presents both fighting and dying for one's country as heroic).²² We do not know whether Owen himself was influenced by the unnuanced view of Macaulay, or whether he simply took umbrage at his portrayals of glorious patriotic feats in battle; but he certainly seems to mock the *Lays of Ancient Rome* in his disquieting poem 'Schoolmistress'. In this the eponymous teacher - whom Owen treats considerably more savagely than he does Macaulay himself - 'bleats' on about Macaulay, Horatius and the 'brave days of old' while snobbishly refusing to respond to three real, working-class soldiers (one mischievously called 'Orace) who speak to her through the schoolroom window.

The 'my friend' whom Owen sardonically addresses in '*Dulce et Decorum Est*', then, is likely to refer primarily to Jessie Pope, but also to all those, such as Newbolt, (possibly) Macaulay and assorted teachers, who recruited the classics and classical notions of patriotic death in general,²³ and Horace's *dulce et decorum est* in particular, to seduce impressionable youths into thinking that dying for one's country is a sweet and heroic thing, when in fact, in Owen's view, it is filthy and inglorious.²⁴ But is Owen right to say that such authors and teachers are necessarily lying, are deliberately uttering falsehoods which they know to be false, and with a clear intention to deceive? I do not believe that he is. I do not believe that Jessie Pope, or Newbolt or Macaulay, can fairly be depicted as lying – although it is certainly true that they did not choose to embrace a sweet and fitting heroic death for themselves. Although reading Pope and Newbolt in particular may now make us profoundly uncomfortable, their views can be held without contradiction, particularly if 'dulce' and 'decorum' are interpreted in a moral rather than superficially aesthetic sense (even if the moral code is now unfashionable),²⁵ and indeed their views were even endorsed by some who had taken part in the conflict themselves, as Vandiver makes plain.²⁶

So much for Owen's main targets. We now need to consider his stance towards Horace, and whether he thinks Horace himself is lying. The answer is clear: even if Horace is not the 'my friend' trying to fire up children with a passion for self-sacrifice, it is still plain that Owen scathingly dismisses this line as a lie (what he thinks of the rest of the ode is not known; indeed it is not even certain that he had read it, even in translation).²⁷ Is Owen justified in thinking

²² Though we should note that in his most famous poem, 'Horatius', Macaulay interestingly chooses to follow Livy's version of the tale, in which Horatius survives, rather than that of Polybius, in which Horatius perishes. Although Macaulay does indeed portray patriotic death as heroic, he does not make a cult of it.

²³ So far we have considered the recruitment of Latin authors and invented Latin tags. It is perhaps true that Roman *mores* and ideals and the Roman empire offered more fertile territory for those wishing to exhort boys and young men to fight for country and empire (and in any case Latin was more widely taught and understood), but Greek authors could also be harnessed to the cause, as Thucydides was on London buses (see Morley in this volume p.000). However, as we will see below, Owen's attitude to Greek mythology and literature appears to have been considerably more positive than his stance towards aspects of Roman culture (though even in the case of Rome the story is complex).

²⁴ Owen's translation of Horace's line in a letter to his mother is particularly telling: 'The famous Latin tag means of course It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And decorous!' Owen initially and correctly translates 'decorum' as 'meet', but he then elaborates on this and translates it as 'decorous' – which is certainly a possible translation if 'decorous' is just supposed to mean 'fitting', but perhaps less so if it has connotations of 'decorative' in the looser modern sense of that term. Owen appears to be particularly incensed by attempts to 'prettify' deaths in battle. See *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters* edd. Harold Owen and John Bell 1967: 500.

²⁵ I am not of course claiming that every poet or teacher explicitly cited Horace in their exhortations (although many did); my point is that it is not incoherent to portray patriotic death as sweet and fitting in a general sense, especially if the terms have moral rather than aesthetic resonance.

²⁶ Vandiver 2010: 394-401.

²⁷ See Vandiver 113-21 for a detailed appraisal of Owen's classical education and interests; his knowledge (or lack of it) of Horace *Odes* 3.2 is discussed on 129.

this? Once again, I do not believe that he is. There is no reason to suppose that Horace is lying when he writes *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*: he may perfectly well believe it, even as someone who has taken part in military combat himself at Philippi in 42 B.C. and witnessed deaths in that ferocious battle first hand.²⁸ However, there is a complex narrative here, and one which needs unravelling. It is precisely Horace's experiences at Philippi which inform another ode, 2.7, which was also published in 23 B.C., and when 3.2 is read in the context of 2.7 - as it would have been by Horace's original audience - it takes on a very interesting new light which I have not seen considered in the English commentaries on the *Odes*.²⁹ In 2.7 Horace cheerfully admits that at Philippi he very definitely chose not to lay down his life: his 'courage cracked' (*fracta virtus*), and he beat a swift retreat, abandoning his iconic shield in the process. We do not know how accurate this story is - Horace may to some degree have been trying to emulate his Greek poetic heroes, Archilochus and Alcaeus, who both claim that they did the same.³⁰ But this accuracy does not matter; what matters is the close proximity of the two odes in publication and the light that each sheds on the other. This does not mean that Horace is being disingenuous when he writes *dulce et decorum est* - it is perfectly possible to admire ideals which you recognize that you do not live up to - but it does show that his treatment of war, and life and death in war, is more subtle, teasing and elliptical than is often supposed by those who only know 3.2. It may even be the case that, when confronted with imminent death at Philippi, he decided the Republican cause was *not*, in fact, the cause of what he understood to be his *patria*, and not worth his life.³¹ And this in itself would be arresting: it would demonstrate that Horace wants the reader of all his work to think clearly and deeply about what *patria* really means, and what is really worth dying for.

If Horace is telling any lie at all in 3.2, then, it is not necessarily in the line *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. But, if we read 3.2 in the context of 2.7, we can see that he may perhaps be guilty of, if not exactly a fib, then at least giving a rather false impression in the lines that follow *dulce et decorum*. For as we saw at the outset the ode continues,

‘ ... death catches up with the fleeing man just the same,
nor does it spare the cowardly youth's
knees and fearful back.’

Certainly death will catch up with all of us in the end, whether we are courageous or cowardly; but these lines give the impression that death will hunt down the coward as he flees, and that definitely did not happen in Horace's case when he ran off without his shield at Philippi; on the contrary, 2.7 tells us that the messenger god Mercury helpfully wafted him clear of the enemy lines and deposited him safely home, to enjoy drinking excellent Massic wine at merry parties with his friends. Horace is not as straightforward to interpret as he is sometimes supposed.

²⁸ Horace fought as an officer in the Republican army of Brutus and Cassius, which lost to Antony and Octavian (the future Emperor Augustus). According to Plutarch *Brutus* (45.1) 24,000 died on the first day of the battle.

²⁹ I have, for instance, found no discussion of the relation between 2.7 and 3.2 in the commentaries of Nisbet and Hubbard (*Odes* 2 1978), Rudd and Nisbet (*Odes* 3 2004), West (*Odes* 2 1998 and *Odes* 3 2002) or Fraenkel 1957. In respect of 3.2, West does note that Horace writes it in a place of comfort and is not enduring the hardships that he recommends.

³⁰ Archilochus (5W) says he lost his shield fighting the Thracians (near Philippi), and Alcaeus (428 (a)) wrote a poem about the loss of his shield at Sigeum.

³¹ Commenting on 2.7, Nisbet and Hubbard (1978: 107) are of the view that 'Horace had no obligation to suffer further for a hopeless cause.'

To sum up so far: in answer to our first question, Owen's chief target is Jessie Pope, together with any other recent and contemporary writers and teachers who exploit the classics for their own belligerent and imperialistic ends; Horace, as the original composer³² of the hated line, is in this respect at least also an object of scorn. Whether Owen's anger at the sentiments of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* is justified will be a matter of subjective opinion (and certainly the times have on the whole moved with Owen and not those he opposes on this); but it is nevertheless not clear that anyone has actually *lied*.

What of our second question? Is '*Dulce et Decorum Est*' representative of Owen's general view of Latin and Greek literature? And, specifically, does he feel that the ideals of patriotic heroism embodied in some classical texts are redundant in the face of mechanized twentieth century warfare? Here the picture becomes even more nuanced, as there were many aspects of classical culture which fascinated Owen, and acquaintance with which he felt to be necessary to his development as a poet.³³ He made great efforts to study Latin after his formal Latin education stopped when he moved school at fourteen (though the fact that Sassoon had to correct the title '*Apologia pro poemate meo*' suggests he may not have attained a very great proficiency in it);³⁴ and in a letter to his mother on 12th June 1912 he writes that he longs to learn Greek 'whose spirit giveth life to so much poetry.'³⁵ Vandiver argues persuasively that Owen had read Homer in translation (probably that of Chapman, the one preferred by Keats), and that in 'Strange Meeting' and 'Spring Offensive' we find echoes of Odysseus' visit to the Underworld in *Odyssey* xi; she also makes a compelling case that in 'Strange Meeting' there are allusions to Achilles' powerful and moving speech to Lycaon in *Iliad* 21.106-13 (Lycaon is the 'friend', *philos*, whom Achilles is nevertheless about to kill); she sources the desire of the 'Strange Friend' to wash the blood-clogged chariot wheels with water from sweet wells to passages in *Iliad* 20. 498-503 and 22. 147-56.³⁶

Of especial relevance to our current concerns is that - his 'This book is not about heroes' preface notwithstanding³⁷ - Owen seems to have been particularly interested in classical mythology and in the heroes of those myths. His library included Kingsley's *The Heroes*, in which the stories of Perseus, the Argonauts and Theseus are engagingly re-presented with children particularly in mind; it was almost as popular in the Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian periods as Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*. The black and white plates of Owen's copy of *The Heroes* have been coloured in, and if the colouring was done by Owen, this suggests the book was particularly loved by him. Also present in his library were other handbooks on and narrations of classical myths for both adults and children, such as *Contes Fabuleux de la Grèce Antique*.³⁸ In addition he may well also have come across Mary MacGregor's adaptation of Kingsley's *The Heroes* for still younger children, although it is not in his library.³⁹ In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf writes that 'it is the governesses who start the Greek

³² There is no record of any writer before Horace saying that it is 'sweet' to die for one's country, although Tyrtaeus thought it '*kalon*', 'fine', 'beautiful', and Virgil's Aeneas also calls it '*pulchrum*', 'beautiful' (West 2002: 25).

³³ See n.26.

³⁴ Vandiver 2010: 118.

³⁵ *Letters*, 141.

³⁶ *Katabasis*: Vandiver 2010: 302-5 and 308-14; Lycaon: 305-8; chariot wheels and sweet wells: 132-5.

³⁷ See n.8 above; the point is also discussed below p.11.

³⁸ Marion Adams, adaptation française par Mlle Latappy, Paris, n.d. (also with underlining). For others see Stallworthy *Wilfred Owen* 308-22.

³⁹ Although largely unknown now, MacGregor was a hugely prolific and popular author of retellings of mythological tales for children in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras.

myth', and that 'we have been brought up in an illusion'.⁴⁰ Although Owen's childhood was far removed from the materially privileged world of governesses, his library certainly testifies to the prevalence of books on classical mythology for children; however, it is far from clear that he would have agreed that such mythology is in itself necessarily part of a dangerous 'myth' and 'illusion', as his long-standing interest in Greek mythological heroes nourishes his poetry and poetic fragments and plans. Apart from the Homeric echoes in 'Strange Meeting' and 'Spring Offensive' already noted, he worked for years on a long poem about Perseus, and the surviving fragments of 'The Wrestlers' tell of the battle between Heracles and Antaeus (a battle treated by Theocritus, whom we know Owen read in Lang's translation.⁴¹)

All these receptions have one thing in common: it is particularly *Greek* authors and stories who and which fire Owen's imagination. In any assessment of Owen's stance towards classical literature and classical models of heroism, it seems important to distinguish between Greece and Rome: in another letter to his mother, written after attending a Catholic service in France, he writes 'it would take a power of candlegrease and embroidery to romanize me. The question is to un-Greekize me.'⁴² He also writes to a cousin that J.A.K. Thomson's *The Greek Tradition* is a 'glorious book'.⁴³ Nevertheless, one might still perhaps argue that what Owen chiefly deploys from this tradition is its mythological heroes, and that while he finds such heroes useful for many purposes - in 'Strange Meeting' for example, as well as in 'The Wrestlers' and the plans for Perseus - he still felt that classical literature in general, both Greek and Roman, conveyed too sanitized a notion of war and death in battle.

Would such a view of classical portrayals of war be fair? It is certainly not true that, taken as a whole, Greek and Roman literature shies away from the gore, anguish and moral complexities of war. There are plenty of gruesome descriptions of death in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* alone, and plenty of the victims are depicted as an anonymous mass, clogging the chariot wheels of their killers, as we saw in *Iliad* 20.498-503. There are also searing illustrations of the pity and waste of war: Achilles wonders in *Iliad* 24.542 what he is doing in Troy, bringing nothing but sorrow to Priam and his children, and no more savage indictment of the pointless brutality of conflict has ever been written than Euripides' *Trojan Women*: it ends with Troy in smoking ruins, its women enslaved, the storm mounting that will destroy the returning Greek army who committed such atrocities, and the dead body of the child Astyanax, son of Hector and Andromache, taken off for burial as a heart-wrenching symbol of innocent lives cut down. For a twentieth century writer wishing to depict the horror, gore and pity of war, many - though not as we shall see all - of the resources are there within the classical corpus. Classical depictions of war are collectively and individually highly complex: far more views are expressed than the sentiment that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country - including, as we have seen, by Horace himself.⁴⁴

If Owen did not avail himself of such resources, then this could have been for one of two reasons (or most probably a mixture of the two). Firstly, he may not have been aware of the rich complexity of depictions of war on offer within Greek and Latin literature, and, as we have seen, that may reflect not just the curtailment of his formal education in the classics at fourteen,

⁴⁰ 1992 (1922): 189.

⁴¹ Owen includes Lang's translation of Theocritus in a list of 'books read at Scarborough, Dec. 1917' (Vandiver 2010: 119-20).

⁴² *Letters*, 311. If Owen is also making a subtle allusion to his sexuality here, it is presumably for his own satisfaction only and not intended for his pious mother to pick up.

⁴³ In a letter to his cousin, Leslie Gunston, 8th Jan. 1918 (Vandiver 2010: 130-1).

⁴⁴ See Hobbs 2000: 205-19 for a discussion of the many-sided portrayal of war in the *Iliad*.

but also, crucially, how the classical canon was taught in schools and selectively utilized in the mythological handbooks, the retellings of Macaulay, Kingsley, MacGregor and others, and the poems of imperialists such as Pope and Newbolt. Woolf's claim in *Jacob's Room* that governesses start to indoctrinate children with a certain interpretation of 'the Greek myth' has more general applicability outside the narrow confines of the upper classes: children from many backgrounds began to be immersed in a particularly English, patriotic and imperialist reading of the classics from a very young age.

The second possibility is the one that we have just touched on, namely that although Owen found tales of, particularly, the Greek myths and heroes useful for some of his poetic purposes, he nevertheless may have thought such tales inappropriate for depicting the new conditions of industrialized twentieth century warfare, and particularly inappropriate for depicting death in such conditions. In other words, he may have derived much in the way of succour and solace from such stories, and found them an ideal vehicle to convey certain thoughts on the human condition and the hope that human civilization could survive, but still held to his view that the realities of modern trench warfare and gas attacks offered few opportunities for such heroism and none for a sweet and fitting patriotic death. If this was his view, then we can understand why he might think that it would be perniciously deceptive to employ such classical heroic ideals to mask the filthy banality of anonymous death and dying in the trenches.

The fact that a view is understandable, however, does not mean that it cannot be explored. The question of whether a gruesome death in a gas attack can ever be regarded as 'sweet and fitting' is clearly just as much a matter of subjective response as Owen's anger at such a response,⁴⁵ and by no means all of Owen's fellow-soldiers agreed with him: Vandiver details a number of entirely unironic citations of Horace's line, even by those who had first-hand experience of the war.⁴⁶ But the question of whether classical ideals - or indeed any ideals - of *heroism* can survive the filth and mass death of the trenches is an issue open to more objective considerations and one which warrants serious debate. Two features of fighting and dying in the trenches may in particular give us pause: firstly, the fact that in the extreme confusion - and thick murk of gas - many of the actions could not be attributed to named actors, and many of the deaths were anonymous; secondly, the fact that the mechanization of war in some cases - though certainly not all - may have increased the role of chance and reduced the opportunities to display skill. Very great courage, of course, was often displayed, and we shall return to this shortly.

The anonymity of many of the actions and deaths raises one of the most interesting and difficult questions in any discussion of heroism: namely, can there be unnamed, unknown, and unsung heroes, or does the very concept of a hero - rather than simply a potential hero, or hero-in-waiting - require there to be at least someone doing the singing? A working definition of a hero might be: 'someone who does something which his or her community, or sub-section of it, reasonably believes to be of very great benefit to that community, and which most people would find difficult or impossible to perform.' If this is on the right lines, then the very concept of a hero involves some measure of subjective response from others, and suggests that the idea of the unsung hero may be intrinsically problematic. The anonymity of much World War I action, therefore, poses questions in such cases for the ascription of the term 'hero' in general, and it poses particular questions for the ascription of Greek notions of heroism: although, as we have seen, texts such as the *Iliad* certainly depict the horror of nameless deaths in battle,

⁴⁵ See p.000.

⁴⁶ See n.25.

the Greek hero himself is always seen as pre-eminent, a named individual whose actions and qualities mark him out from the crowd.⁴⁷ There were of course individual actions of great heroism ascribed to named individuals on the battlefields of France and Flanders; nevertheless conditions meant that situations such as that described so powerfully by Owen in '*Dulce et Decorum Est*' were more common: namely, the mass fighting and mass suffering and dying of men whose identities could not immediately be discerned, and in many cases never were.

Mechanized mass warfare also considerably increased the role of chance: whether a soldier's actions were successful or unsuccessful, whether he lived or died, could still of course be a matter of skill or courage, but was often simply a matter of luck - and again, this might be thought to reduce the opportunities to display heroism on one of the Greek models, which require a display of supreme skill, moral excellence or both. In the Greek models - and indeed in most models of heroism - there is often an emphasis on the notion of supererogation, of going beyond the call of duty: it is this that is often thought to distinguish genuine heroism from everyday courage.⁴⁸ An interesting exception to the anonymity of many World War 1 combatants and to the enlarged role of luck in their lives and deaths is that of the fighter-pilot, who does sometimes have a little more control over his actions; he is also of course more readily named, and literally pre-eminent, flying above the mass of the fighting and taking on his opponent in sometimes one-to-one combat. These duels in the sky in particular are closer to the terrestrial duels depicted in Greek myths and epic, and it is significant that in the notes he left for his planned poem 'Perseus', there are suggestions that Owen intended using Perseus as a symbol for fighter-pilots.⁴⁹ The classic first-hand account of the experiences of a World War 1 fighter-pilot is Cecil Lewis' remarkable *Sagittarius Rising*; and although Lewis himself does not make an explicit connection with classical models, his descriptions of the dogfights and, especially, the duels certainly evoke comparisons: see, for example, the account of the prowess and cool nerve needed for such duels on pages 169-70 (and the Latin root of the book's title conjures up images of a classical archer). Lewis' extraordinary life - supererogatory in every way - encompassed not only his exploits in World War 1 (which earned him the Military Cross), but two years in China as a flying instructor in the embryonic Chinese airforce; being one of the founders of the British Broadcasting Company (later the British Broadcasting Corporation); writing, producing, directing and winning an Oscar; more distinguished action in World War 2; farming in Africa; and, of course, *Sagittarius Rising* itself.

Lewis was a hero in a recognizably classical mould, and there were other such heroes in World War 1 (some of them described by Lewis himself in *Sagittarius Rising*). Nevertheless, I think that Owen was right at least to question the general applicability of such classical models of heroism to terrestrial fighting conditions in World War 1: often those conditions simply did not allow heroism on a classical model (and particularly a Greek model) to emerge. But I do not think it follows that World War 1 thereby reduced the opportunities for, and instances of, heroism *per se*: I would argue that, on the contrary, the fighting conditions *widened the scope* of what could be perceived as heroic beyond the Greek archetypes in particular. The appalling, relentless and prolonged fighting conditions were so terrible that even simply doing one's duty - not only going beyond it - could reasonably count as heroic. Ironically, given Owen's scathing rejection of Horace in '*Dulce et Decorum Est*', this widened conception of heroism to

⁴⁷ For a discussion of different models of heroism in Greek literature, see Hobbs 2000, particularly 175-219.

⁴⁸ See Walton 1986.

⁴⁹ Vandiver 2010: 122.

include standing at one's post at whatever cost is one that perhaps has more in common with Roman ideals than Greek ones,⁵⁰ though Roman heroes are, too, always named.

So I would suggest that we can at least question Owen's apparent refusal to portray the deaths of the soldiers 'slain like cattle' in a heroic light, and question too his claim in the draft preface to a collected volume of his poems that 'This book is not about heroes'.⁵¹ In the latter case it is important to note - and generally not noted - that the preface goes on to say that in respect of heroes 'English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them'. Owen is certainly not rejecting the notion of heroism in its entirety, or even the classical notions of heroism (the fragments of 'The Wrestlers' and the plans for 'Perseus' have already disproved that), but he is perhaps denying that his own war poetry deals with any model of heroism. However, I still believe it is perfectly possible for someone reading Owen's '*Dulce et Decorum Est*', and others of his war poems, to forge a (partly) new, broader conception of heroism from them, whatever Owen's intention or assessment of his own work: the soldier trudging on through filth, gas, noise and brutal deaths despite appalling odds; the patient minds of the girls who scatter tender thoughts on their dead sweethearts like flowers, pulling down the blinds each slow dusk, day after day. The conditions of World War 1 - both for those fighting it and for those left at home to wait and grieve - meant that even being able to perform one's daily duties might be thought to take on a heroic quality.⁵²

Even here there are some partial classical models, such as Penelope, weaving and unpicking each day, year after year: 'partial', because these models too are still named. As we have seen, the fighting conditions of World War 1 bring into sharp focus the question of whether the unnamed and unknown can be heroes. If being a hero involves in part being viewed and treated as a hero, as I suggested above, then to function as heroes in their society the unnamed and unknown do at the very least need some kind of vehicle by means of which their society can commemorate them. Such vehicles exist: the various tombs of the Unknown Soldier around the world, for example, serve just such a function. I submit that, whatever his intentions, the poems of Owen and in particular '*Dulce et Decorum Est*' can serve as another such vehicle. In *Odes* 3.30 Horace claims that in his poems he has created a monument 'more lasting than bronze'. Whatever Owen thinks of Horace, they have both created such monuments, and they have thereby both given us the opportunity to validate certain human qualities, including the capacity for heroism. The precise forms that heroism takes in any generation may adapt to the changing conditions that call for it, and especially the changing conditions of war, but the ability of humans to rise to those challenges endures.

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⁵⁰ This is also a contentious claim, as after the development of hoplite battle formation in Greece, the ideal of 'staying at one's post', and 'standing one's ground' becomes a powerful one in Greek culture: it is subscribed to, for instance, by the old general Laches in Plato's dialogue of that name (190e, discussed by Hobbs 2000: 86-99), and is also one of the reasons given by Socrates for not leaving Athens to avoid the death penalty (*Apology* 28d-29a). However, it is certainly true that it is the much-admired aspiration of the Roman soldier (though, as we have seen, not one that Horace lived up to himself).

⁵¹ See n.8 and n.36.

⁵² I am here deliberately using Owen's poetry as material for a new conception of heroism for both men and women. Clearly, beyond Owen's work, women in WW1 did not just perform roles of steadfast endurance at home, but could also attain heroic status as, for example, fighters, resistance workers, nurses and journalists. I am currently writing about this elsewhere.

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