Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War

August 2014 marked the First World War Centenary and around the globe commemorations are in place or in progress. In the preface to the hardback edition of Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Reception in British Poetry of the Great War, first published in 2010, Elizabeth Vandiver comments: ‘Ninety-one years after the Armistice was signed, public interest in the First World War remains strong and growing’ (p. ix). Almost four years after this publication, and with the release of the paperback edition in 2013, this interest has not waned. In fact, and unsurprisingly, with the onset of commemorations, publications and media stories have increased.

Vandiver suggests that ‘it may seem audacious to assert that there is room for yet another book on First World War poetry, let alone one that involves a hitherto unexplored aspect of that poetry’ (p. ix). Yet there is room for another book, particularly this one, which approaches the topic of First World War poetry through a new lens, namely classical reception studies. This burgeoning sub-branch of classical studies has resulted in a plethora of important research on the far-reaching influences of ancient Greece and Rome on post-ancient environments and genres from Renaissance science, philosophy and magic to Gothic literature and contemporary film. By applying classical reception studies to First World War poetry, Vandiver has chosen a rich subject of enquiry and one that was, until this book, a ‘lacuna’ (p. x) waiting to be filled.

The main title of the book references the penultimate line of Patrick Shaw-Stewart’s poem, ‘I saw a man this morning’. An Oxford classicist who recognised the foreboding and poetic connections between the campaign of the Gallipoli peninsula and the Trojan War, Shaw-Stewart composed the piece after being told his leave on the island of Imbros had been cut short. The last stanza reads:

I will go back this morning

From Imbros o’er the sea.
Stand in the trench, Achilles,

Flame-capped, and shout for me.

The allusion is to Homer’s *Iliad* 18.203–9 in which a grief-stricken Achilles stands in the Greek trench, revealing his dazzling form to the Trojans. For Shaw-Stewart, the dream of having Achilles on his side materialised at Gallipoli. But having survived the campaign, Shaw-Stewart lost his heroic phantom, dying in France on 30 December 1917.

Shaw-Stewart was one of hundreds of First World War poets who utilised classical imagery as a means of communication and comment. This is not surprising in view of the British education system, which valorised Classical Greek and Latin as integral to the public school curriculum. This pedagogical emphasis on classics, and its lasting effects, are major themes of part one of Vandiver’s book:

Many graduates of public schools may indeed have learned very little Latin and Greek while they were there; many may have considered classics useless … But many others found in Latin and Greek a lasting source of imaginative inspiration, so much so that they turned to those languages and their literatures for comfort and for self-expression during the war and in later memoirs about it (p. 38).

In chapter one, Vandiver examines the officer class, those men who attended public schools and who may have gone on to read classics at Oxford or Cambridge. These were men like Shaw-Stewart who composed classically-inspired poetry, and Harold Macmillan who read Aeschylus for consolation ‘as he lay wounded in a shell-hole at Loos’ (p. 61). In chapter two, Vandiver discusses poets from the middle- and working-class with a focus on Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and J. W. Streets. Such men may not have been able to read Homer in Greek or Vergil in Latin with an easy proficiency; nevertheless they too brought ancient voices to the trenches. In addition to discussing their poetry, Vandiver provides some fascinating details about them. She discusses Owen’s obsession with mastering the ancient languages, and Rosenberg’s lack of formal schooling and his struggle with English literacy (Yiddish being his first language). There is also a touching letter by Streets to his friend W. H. Wright on 13 May 1916:

I had dreams, I had ambitions, because I strove even in boyhood after learning, after expression. But because I had love (I am proud to say this) I drowned all my ambitions of a brilliant career and gave my life for my family … I became a coal miner (p. 147).

In her research on Streets’ unpublished papers, Vandiver also reveals his passion for learning the languages of the elite by describing one of his notebooks, which preserves not only elementary French exercises but a Latin paradigm for the verb esse (‘to be’), rendered in the present, imperfect and future tenses (the type of mandatory school exercises all students of Latin, past and present, are required to do). These men’s appreciation of ancient poetry is, in a sense, more fascinating than that of the upper-class, because the rarefied world of a classics education was initially denied them.

Part two deals with the various approaches to representing the War through a classical lens. Vandiver opens this section with a discussion of the themes of ancient literature that proved well suited to poetry crafted to reflect heroic and patriotic values. The glories of the Persian Wars in the 5th century BC were extremely popular motifs, as evidenced by W. Macneile Dixon’s ‘To Fellow Travellers in Greece, March–September 1914’. Here Dixon, Regius Professor of English at Glasgow University, compared an archetypal clerk who had previously only ‘Battl’d with ledger and with pen’ to the heroic Athenians and Spartans who faced the Persians at Marathon and Thermopylae, respectively. One of the few female poets of the First World War, Amy Clarke, employed references to the men who faced the Persians at Marathon and Salamis in ‘Not Solely to Enshrine a Tyrant’s Mood’. As Vandiver comments: ‘For Clarke, as for other writers, ancient
Greek culture was so fully established as a rhetorical trope for “freedom” that the problems with that comparison went largely unmarked’ (p. 175). Such problems include the fact that the Battle of Thermopylae was a defeat for the Spartiates and as such the British had to frame it as the epitome of heroic and glorious self-sacrifice in the face of impossible odds (just as the Greeks did some 2000 years earlier).

Part two also includes a chapter on the most obvious poetic comparison for the Western Front and Gallipoli: the Trojan War. Indeed, the Gallipoli campaign ‘almost demanded to be cast as a revisiting of the Trojan War; the correspondence of place inspired some poets even before they had arrived at the Dardanelles’ (p. 241). Brooke, for example, carried a copy of the Iliad with him on his journey to Gallipoli and on the voyage penned drafts and fragments of poems based on the Trojan War. Found after his death, these pieces indicate how strongly his classical education shaped his view of the War in general, and the Gallipoli campaign in particular:

They say Achilles in the darkness stirred

And Hector, his old enemy,

Moved the great shades that were his limbs. They heard

More than Olympian thunder on the sea.

; Death and Sleep

Bear many a young Sarpedon home (p. 242).

In part two Vandiver consistently demonstrates the ‘idea that the modern soldiers at Gallipoli were re-enacting the Trojan War’ (p. 245). This idea and ideal took various poetic forms from ‘only passing references’ (p. 245) to more overt and detailed evocations, sometimes occupying an entire poem. Edward Shillito’s ‘A New Iliad’ discusses his indifference to the Iliad as a schoolboy in contrast to his adult understanding of its painful messages. The following excerpt ‘shows the boy how real Homer is’ (p. 246):

Deaf to the music, once a boy

His Homer, crib in hand, has read;

Now near the windy plains of Troy,

He lives an Iliad instead.

Part three examines death and remembrance, considering the ways the poets sought appropriate ways to express ‘the scale of death in the war and to memorialize the dead’ (p. 283). Here Vandiver discusses the styles adopted by poets, such as ‘elevated diction’ (p. 291), incorporating a strategy of ‘severe detachment’ (p. 291), to more personal statements and sentimental expressions of grief. Vandiver unearths some interesting themes in these poems of mourning and memorialization, including katabasis, an individual’s journey to, and return from the Land of the Dead, which was a motif of Greek and Latin epic in particular. Robert Graves, the English classicist, poet, novelist and officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, employed the theme of katabasis in ‘Escape’, which chronicles his ‘real’ journey to, and return from the Underworld (having been so badly wounded he was initially listed as deceased). Nowell Oxland’s ‘Outward Bound’, appropriates classical scenes as a means of mediating the grief of burial abroad’ (p. 323) and uses katabasis in a different way compared to Graves. Oxland addresses the very real concerns about being buried on foreign soil – a fear that also haunted the Greeks and Romans – and attempts to alleviate such anxieties by suggesting that although the bodies of fallen soldiers will never rise from the ground and make the journey
home, their spirits will. Oxland’s katabasis is linked with another theme of Greek epic, namely that of nostos, the journey home. A dominant, if not the dominant theme of Homer’s Odyssey, which traces Odysseus’ lengthy journey home after the end of the Trojan War, nostos is employed by poets such as Brooke, whose famous sonnet, ‘The Soldier’ was imitated in a parodic style by Philip Bainbrigge’s ‘If I should die’. The fear of never returning home, never being buried on home soil appears to be feared almost as much as death itself.

Vandiver defines her approach as being characterised by an ‘emphasis … on cultural history and the reception history of classics rather than on literary criticism’ (p. xi). Such self-reflexive appraisal of her research methodology is correct as Stand in the Trench, Achilles takes the reader on a wonderful journey from Greek and Latin classrooms, to self-taught Latinists, to the English class system, to the world of Greece and Rome as well as its multifarious legacies, and to the battlelines of the Great War. But it is also literary criticism as Vandiver seamlessly weaves insightful discussions of poetry into her narrative. Her methodology also incorporates biography and elements of traditional history in what is, ultimately, a truly successful interdisciplinary achievement.

The release of the paperback edition coincides nicely with the First World War Centenary and this is important for several reasons. Primarily, its significance lies in the cliché of humanity’s constant repetition of the mistakes of its ancestors. A cliché that began with ancient authors. A warning not to repeat the mistakes of their times that was, perhaps, no more flagrantly defied than on the battlefields of the First World War. In the words of Livy, who was not a poet, but a wise Roman historian:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful … (The History of Rome, Preface §10, trans. C. Roberts, 1912)

Or should we end with the words of Horace, which Vandiver’s poets found so inspirational:

It is sweet and appropriate to die for one’s country … (Ode 3.2, trans. M. Johnson).

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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