Dulce et Decorum Est: Wilfred Owen?s Latin

Wilfred Owen fought hard to learn Latin. He was acutely aware of the importance of the classical tradition in English poetry. In addition, he was determined to attend university if he could, and he needed Latin for the entrance examinations. However, his educational path meant that opportunities for learning the language were scarce.

Owen began Latin at his first school, the Birkenhead Institute, but when he was fourteeen his family moved to Shrewsbury. He enrolled in the Shrewsbury Technical Institute, which did not offer Latin. His later attempts to study the language on his own were only moderately successful. When Owen chose to give a Latin title to one of his poems, Siegfried Sassoon had to correct his friend's garbled "Apologia pro poema mea" to "Apologia pro poemate meo."

It is one of literary history's great ironies, then, that one particular Latin phrase is now better known from Wilfred Owen than from its original ancient Roman context. A Google search for the words dulce et decorum est brings up thousands of hits; the first forty-nine of these reference Owen, and the fact that those words were actually written by Horace, a Roman poet of the first century BCE, only emerges on the sixth page of the Google search?where many people would probably never find it. A search for the whole phrase (dulce et decorum est pro patria mori) does feature Horace as the first hit, but the next ten hits and most of those for the next several pages refer to Owen. Owen has displaced Horace as the author of these Latin words.

And yet it seems quite probable that Wilfred Owen himself did not know the origin of what he called, in a letter to his mother, "the famous Latin tag". By the late nineteenth century, the phrase dulce et decorum est had taken on a life of its own as a stirring sentiment to use in patriotic stories and poems and as an inscription for war memorials. Douglas Kerr suggests that Owen may have heard Lieutenant-Colonel W. Shirley's rousing recruiting speech, which includes the Latin line (1993, 173-74, 183), and Guy Cuthbertson points out that a poem by that title appeared in the Boy's Own Paper in 1916 (2014, 163). Along with these possible contemporary sources, I suggest another?a Boer War memorial in the vestibule of St. Pancras New Church, Bloomsbury.

In October 1915, Owen spent two weeks in a boarding house on Tavistock Square while he was in London to enlist in the Artists' Rifles. The Headquarters of the Artists' Rifles is on Duke's Road, just opposite the churchyard of St Pancras. Owen does not mention the church in any of his extant letters from this period, but it seems quite possible that he went into it. Someone standing in the doorway of the Headquarters and looking across the road would see the church's famous Caryatid Porch, an architectural feature that could well have piqued Owen's interest in the building. If he did go in, he would have seen in the vestibule a memorial to Alfred Frederick Cleave, who died in the Boer War, aged twenty-two ? coincidently, the age Owen was when he enlisted. Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori appears prominently on this memorial, before the personal inscription.1

Did Owen see this memorial, or hear Shirley's lecture, or read the poem in Boy's Own Paper? There is no way to know. But taken together, these possible sources remind us that the tag dulce et decorum est was embedded in contemporary British culture, as a standard form of praising and commemorating death in battle.

Certainly, when Owen denounced dulce et decorum est pro patria mori as "the Old Lie", he was very likely thinking more of the tag's militaristic use in British popular culture than of anything that Horace may have meant to imply about warfare in 1st century BCE Rome. Horace himself, after all, had been a soldier who served at Philippi; he was not writing out of ignorance about the reality of grisly death in battle or out of any naive belief that dying from a sword- or spear-wound would be "sweet" or pleasant in any literal sense. Owen's indignation was not so much at the classical saying itself, I think, as at the uses to which it had been put by specifically British authors. As is well known, early drafts of "Dulce et Decorum Est" were headed "To Jessie Pope" and another "To a Certain Poetess". I have argued elsewhere that the faux Latin inscription at the end of Newbolt's "Clifton Chapel" may also have been in Owen's mind as part of what he meant by "the Old Lie" (2010, 395). Unlike Horace, Jessie Pope and Henry Newbolt could both fairly be accused of glorifying and romanticizing realities of which they had no experience, and both of them wrote specifically for children, with the apparent intent to make those children "ardent for some desperate glory".

How deeply ironic it is, then, that Owen's poem has become so embedded a part of modern literary consciousness that readers cannot now encounter Horace without thinking of Owen. Owen's recasting Horace's words as "the Old Lie" has shaped the way later generations read not only Owen's poem, but Horace's as well. Indeed, Owen's framing has affected modern readings of other ancient literature too. As a professor of Classics at a small American college, I have encountered many students who assume, without hesitation, that any poetry concerning war must be "anti-war". They automatically read the Iliad as an anti-war poem; they assume that Horace must have been writing ironically when he declared that death for one's fatherland was "sweet and fitting"; they read a bitterly ironic tone into Simonides's epitaph for the Spartan dead at Thermopylae ("Stranger, go tell the Spartans that we lie here, obedient to their laws") as well. Owen's presentation of ancient militarism as an "Old Lie" has carried the field, and teachers of classics now have to persuade their students to believe that there were times and contexts in which such exhortations to die for one's country were not meant ironically. Owen famously said that "the true Poets must be truthful"; for many readers, "Dulce et Decorum Est" has recast basic assumptions about what can be "true" concerning war and the experience of death in battle.

Notes

1. See the War Memorials Register © WMR-47616 at the Imperial War Museum for further detail.

Works Cited

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