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## **CLASSICAL PHILOLOGY GONE WILD: THE USE OF CLASSICAL TEXTS IN THE FILM *ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT***

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Studying the texts of the Greco-Roman era has long been a tradition in the West. Works such as *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, and *The Republic* were understood to be liberating texts which enabled students to think more critically and as a result live more wisely. Many of the leading scholars in this field of “Classical Texts” (also known as Classical Philology) hailed from 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. The 1930 German film *All Quiet on the Western Front* presented viewers with a classroom scene set at the start of the First World War where selected classical texts were written on the chalkboard, apparently by the teacher. The camera brings the viewer in from a street scene and focuses on a teacher who is lecturing. The teacher, in an increasingly frenzied state, is persuading his students to join the German war effort. He used the classical tradition represented by the quotations on the chalkboard as ammunition for irrational and self-destructive thinking. He had taken a tradition valued for critical thought and just actions and turned it into an overemotional, anti-rational Nationalist machine. This project sought to understand the means by which the classical tradition was turned on its head and the implications and warnings which it held for viewers then and now.

## Classical Philology Gone Wild:

### The Use of Classical Texts in the film *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Tysen D. Dauer

Looking at this title you may be thinking: “How could anything ‘classical’ possibly ‘go wild’?” Especially philology! Or perhaps you’re wondering: “What is Classical Philology!?” Let’s start there.

Philology is the study of language and literature, more specifically it is the study of language and literature viewed in light of the culture in which they were produced. And in this context, classical refers to Greco-Roman culture from around 1000 BCE to 500 CE. Therefore, Classical Philology is the study of the language and literature of the Greco-Roman Culture. Often it is centered on well known texts such as *The Odyssey* by Homer, *The Aeneid* by Virgil, and *The Republic* by Plato, among others.

Many of the texts which the Greeks and Romans left behind were thought to be of extraordinary quality by later generations. These texts were deemed fit for both literary imitation and life-long contemplation. Many believed that a thorough study of these texts would give the student an appreciation for balance in life, elevate the intellect via philosophical rationalism, and produce moral excellence. All of these things were thought to encourage one to become a better citizen.

Therefore the benefits of studying these texts seemed so evident that they became the basis for education in the humanities. As a result, Classical Philology has its own complex history in the academy. But in simplistic terms, respect for Greco-Roman culture was lost during the Middle Ages and regained with the reentry of the Classical texts themselves during the Renaissance. The academic center of Classical Philology

moved, ultimately ending up in Germany already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Germany maintained its leadership in Classical Philology into the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* was made (in the late 1920's).

The film chronicled the lives of a band of students during World War I. These young German students were experiencing part of a long educational tradition in which classical philology was the basis of a liberal arts education. In fact, the first time the film audience encountered them, the students had just been listening to a lecture on some classical texts. But the professor used these texts as a bridge to discuss one of his seemingly favorite topics: the war. World War I had just begun and the professor encouraged his students to join the military in order to defend the fatherland. And after all, he argued, “Is a little experience such a bad thing?” He went on to describe the wonders and glories which awaited the students both on the battlefield and when they returned home.

At the beginning of the scene, the audience saw the professor standing in front of a blackboard with two quotations on it. One Latin, one Greek, the two linguistic pillars of classical philology (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Latin and Greek Quotations

The Greek quotation reads as follows:

Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ  
("Trivium") which Richard Lattimore translated this way: "Tell me Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven far..." (Homer 27). The man of many ways is Odysseus and the quotation is from Homer's *Odyssey*. From the professor's selected excerpts it appears that this Odysseus fellow was rather grand. He had a great time traveling and even the Muses spoke of him. The professor had taken this passage out of context. In fact, he cut Homer off mid-sentence (Fig. 2).



*Figure 2: Homer Quotation*

He stopped the quotations right before the Greek word “πλάγχθη” (meaning: ‘wandering’ or ‘roaming’) which Lattimore translated as “journey”. The Greek word has a decidedly negative connotation. This word for roaming or wandering suggests that at times our ‘hero’ did not know where he was or where he was going, making his travels less glorious than the professor may have wished them to seem. The biased selection process by the professor became evident when the full context of the text passage was revealed. The passage as a whole reads:

Tell me Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven  
far journeys, after he had sacked Troy’s sacred citadel.

Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of,

many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea,  
struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions  
(Homer 27).

From the context, a more complex hero is shown. With his travels afar came hard times for himself and his companions as they struggled to return home.

The text also presented a complex view of war. While not denying that Odysseus saw and learned many things because of his involvement in the war, the text also made clear that he experienced much suffering because of his involvement. And this suffering is not just the obvious physical pain which soldiers endured but also a suffering of the spirit.

While the quotations on the blackboard were being presented to the viewer, the professor excitedly told his hesitant students that the war would be a quick one and that if they hesitated; they may miss their opportunity to become heroes. To back up his argument he had placed a Latin quotation on the board in addition to the selection from *The Odyssey*. It was from Ovid's *The Remedies of Love*. Here's a translation of the section which the professor wrote on the board: "Fight the disease at the start, for once the symptoms develop / Medicine comes too late" (Ovid 184).

*The Remedies of Love* described how to avoid getting killed by love. It was a kind of handbook for avoiding a tragic death from excessive passion. How ironic then that the professor here used it to promote war! The students in his view must fight the disease, the enemies of the fatherland, before those enemies have an opportunity to win. But once again the selection is made grossly out of context. The contextual passage reads as follows:

While you still have a chance, and your heart is moved, but not deeply,  
If you're uncertain at all, never step over the sill.

Crush, before they are grown, the swelling seeds of your passion...

Watch, with circumspect mind, what kind of a thing you are loving:

Get your neck from the yoke, if you suspect it will gall.

Fight the disease at the start, for once the symptoms develop

Medicine comes too late, losing effect from delay (Ovid 183-184).

This context would have the students critically analyze what the professor proposed, while their hearts were moved, yet not too deeply to think rationally. And if they were unsure of what action to take, the text encouraged them to “never step over the sill.” In this case: not to join the army if they are uncertain about it.

The text advocated the avoidance of extreme emotion even as the professor worked himself into an increasingly emotional state during his speech. Perhaps the most striking part of the text came in the fourth line: “watch what kind of thing you are loving”: is it war? The fatherland? Glory? The text encouraged the readers to consider the things they love with the intellect: reason. So while the professor encouraged the students to fight the disease of the fatherland's enemies, the text argued that they should fight the disease of emotionalism.

During the professor's rant another quotation suddenly became visible on the blackboard. Since the professor never turned to write, it must be assumed that he did not put it there. The text is in Latin and reads thus: “Whatever you do, do it wisely and keep in mind your purpose” (“Trivium”). It appeared to be a “writing on the wall” situation. The attribution of the text is unknown but one thing was clear, whoever or whatever wrote

this passage on the board is warning the students. Whether they chose to join the war effort or not is their choice, the text is neutral in this respect. The text simply asked that the reader's mind be part of the decision process. Then the question for the students was: What will be achieved by joining the military and going to war? The text urged the students to make a decision using the facilities of the mind: another encouragement for a reasoned decision!

This does not deny that some classical texts were nationalistic and pro-war. The professor quoted one such text, asking his students to remember the Roman saying, "Sweet it is to die for the Fatherland." Clearly the original speaker was Roman and was referring to the Roman Empire. The professor wanted to make this quote equally applicable to the German students he was teaching. In doing so, he localized what had been universalized: when these classical texts reemerged during the Renaissance these nationally specific aspects (textual references to specific wars and nations) were put in their historical contexts. The professor in *All Quiet on the Western Front* sliced out the one-thousand plus years of history which separated his students from the texts. He made Germany the new Rome or Athens and selected literature which promoted their protection and collective emotionalism, leaving out the portion of the Classical tradition which encouraged individualism and thoughtfulness.

Rather than using these texts to ask his students to contemplate their decision (should they join the military or not) the professor used the tradition to tempt students away from their reason and embrace emotionalism. He hoped that this emotionalism would lead them to join the military. But even the texts which the professor used to begin

his emotional tirade warn their readers about the dangers and pitfalls of non-rational decision making (especially when seen in their contexts).

Unfortunately for them, the students did not heed these warnings. The emotional rhetoric of their professor ultimately won them over to an irrational and overemotional state which the professor used to ensure their enlistment in the army. Thus their behavior was transformed into German nationalism. They jumped to their feet with shouts of excitement. Running to the front of the classroom, they sang a nationalistic song as they crossed out the Latin texts on the board. Over the top of them they wrote, in German, “Nach Paris” or: To Paris (Fig. 3). The classical languages of Greek and Latin have been obscured and overridden by the new ‘classical’ language: German.



*Figure 3: “To Paris”*

The classical texts which were the backbone of their education and which could have helped them make balanced and rational decisions were now covered by war propaganda. The blackboard showed the new hierarchy of education: nationalism (and soon after World War I, nationalistic myth) built on top of hero worshipping epic (represented by the Homer quotation).

The professor manipulated the classical texts to his own nationalistic end. It was interesting that he appealed to these texts at all since what he cites could be used against him if his listeners (and 1930 movie-goers) knew their contexts. He assumed then, that his students did not. Or perhaps he could not ignore the value which others place on these texts and so he was forced to refer to them in order to have credibility. Once the texts were fully replaced by the coming nationalistic propaganda (the new 'classical' language and literature of German) he could stop appealing to the classical texts. Thus the students of the next generation would be taught an emotional nationalism in place of balanced reasoning.

But back to the current students: they ended up joining the war and most were killed in the first stages of the war. En route their spirits suffered like their predecessor, Odysseus. And, like that hero, they experienced the struggle and desire of returning home, a home which some never reach and which is beyond comprehension for others. The medicine came too late for these student soldiers, losing effect from delay. They questioned the purpose of their decision only after there is no turning back.

One of the characters recruited by the professors was a young man named Paul. Unlike most of his fellow students, he survived the first phases of the war and eventually returned home for rest and recovery. While at home, he decided to visit the classroom

where this story began. He discovered that the same professor was still there and was still trying to convince his students, now even younger than Paul and his classmates were when they were recruited to join the army.

Paul entered the classroom while the professor was giving the students an emotional speech about serving the Fatherland. The camera showed the viewer that the blackboard where the Classical text selections were written was erased. Someone tried to erase the quotations but they were still just barely visible underneath the chalk dust.

When the professor saw Paul he begged him to speak to his students about the glorious war he had just returned from. Paul was supposed to tell these young men how much they are needed. Paul began hesitantly, telling the students that he saw death out there and it was not glorious. As he spoke he became more excited, he told the students that he “learned that death is stronger than duty to one’s country.” At this, he was promptly booed by the students. Now upset, Paul exclaimed that “We [the professor’s students] used to think you [the professor] knew” but experience had taught them otherwise.

Paul, like Odysseus, learned that war did not bring only glory and honor but also death, suffering, and disappointment. He now understood the contexts of the passages which the professor had on the board the day Paul joined the military. He understood the contexts because he lived them, unlike the professor who remained a permanent fixture in the classroom.

It is significant that the Classical quotations could not be removed from the board. No doubt the professor’s goal of eliminating the need of such references had come to

pass, and thus he tried to erase them. But he could not eradicate them. They were still there for the student who was willing to do some further reading.

Under the control of a skilled manipulator like the professor, classical philology can indeed go wild. But, if you listen and read closely, the wisdom stored up in classical philology can also save lives.

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