

## “The instruments of Destiny”: Reception of *Iliad* in American Great War Poetry

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Claire Davis

1. According to Vandiver, British Great War poetry invokes the classics specifically indicating a focus on a legacy centered on courtesy, discipline, and sacrifice, as well as a need for something familiar in a war so strange.
2. In contrast, American Great War poetry invokes the classical tradition from a distance, idolizing it rather than seeing it as its own history.
3. American poetry also invokes the idea of moral aesthetics by projecting the Great War as a moral obligation.
  - a. “the Greeks always felt that a poet was in the broadest and deepest sense the educator of his people.” Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. 35.
4. American Great War poetry idolizes sacrifice as salvation, not only of the nation but also the world.
  - a. **Amos Wilder’s “Ode in a German Cemetery”** v. Rupert Brooke’s “The Solider”
5. The *Iliad* specifically provided allusions for American and British soldier poets, who were fighting a front in Gallipoli (close to the historical site of Troy) as well as confronting an all-encompassing war.
6. Death in the *Iliad* is final and contested between Fate and the gods
  - a. “if you send Sarpedon home, living still, beware! / Then surely some other god will want to sweep / his own son clear of the heavy fighting too.” *Iliad*, XVI:529-31
7. Death in American Great War poetry is absolutely fated.
  - a. **Alan Seeger’s “The Hosts,” Amos Wilder’s “Ode in a German Cemetery,”** Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Cassandra,” Hermann Hagedorn’s “The Pyres,” Florence Earle Coates’ “Better to Die,” Herbert Kaufman’s “The Living Dead”
8. Death in America Great War poetry is impermanent and redemptive.
  - a. **Amos Wilder’s “Ode in a German Cemetery,”** Alan Seeger’s “Resurgam,” Florence Earle Coates’ “Better to Die” and **“Sing, Ye Trenches!”**

## Ode in a German Cemetery

*Amos Wilder*

Muse on these mute inscriptions, each of which  
Stands for a life past divination rich  
In poignant exploitations  
And eager explorations  
Of its allotted freehold in the Day;

...

Yet those who in the world-old process caught  
Bring thither self-renunciation, aught  
Of loftier aim, of loftier ideal,  
Of loftier thought,  
And bear the common curse, the shared ordeal  
The common retribution, undeserved,  
These in all lands, all times, all causes, these  
That law by innocence appease;  
By their sublime attractiveness they win  
The world from its fatality of sin,  
And from the common lot  
Desiring no exemption,  
Their blamelessness with mighty power is fraught  
When joined with pain,  
For so Redemption,  
Redemption lifts its mighty cross again!

So swerved  
By love's vast leverage from its ancient grooves  
And changeless cycles of eternal wars,  
The planet moves  
To grander revolutions among softer stars  
And skies unblasted by the beams of Mars,  
To placid periods under milder rays,  
Pacific seasons, august nights and days.

## The Hosts

*Alan Seeger*

...

Comrades in arms there—friend or foe—  
That trod the perilous, toilsome trail  
Through a world of ruin and blood and woe  
In the years of great decision—hail!  
Friend or foe, it shall matter nought;  
This only matters, in fine: we fought.  
For we were young and in love or strife  
Sought exultation and craved excess:  
To sound the wildest debauch in life  
We staked our youth and its loveliness.  
Let idlers argue the right and wrong  
And weigh what merit our causes had.  
Putting our faith in being strong—  
Above the level of good and bad—  
For us, we battled and burned and killed  
Because evolving Nature willed,  
And it was our pride and boast to be  
The instruments of Destiny.  
There was a stately drama writ  
By the hand that peopled the earth and air  
And set the stars in the infinite  
And made night gorgeous and morning fair,  
And all that had sense to reason knew  
That bloody drama must be gone through.  
Some sat and watched how the action veered—  
Waited, profited, trembled, cheered—  
We saw not clearly nor understood,  
But yielding ourselves to the master hand,  
Each in his part as best he could,  
We played it through as the author planned.

**Sing, Ye Trenches!**

*Helen Coale Crew*

Sing, ye trenches bloody-lipped!  
Sing! For into you has slipped  
*Lycidas, dead ere his prime.*  
All ye cruel trenches, sing!  
Under frost and under rime  
All his body beautiful,  
All his body wonderful,  
Low hath lain. Now, cunningly,  
April, with sweet mystery,  
Molds the trenches horror-lipped  
Into chalices of spring.

*Who would not sing for Lycidas?*  
See, across the hideous gashes  
Soft green fire of April flashes,  
Starred with windflowers delicate;  
Gemmed with purple violet;  
Roseate with crimson glow  
Where again his pulses blow  
In young clover. For his sake  
See the budding crocus break  
Into flame; and hear the grass,  
Green-tongued, sing for Lycidas!

Sing, ye gaping wounds of earth!  
Tomb-like, ye have taken him,  
Cradled him, distilled him,  
Womb-like, ye have brought to birth  
Myriad flowers and fragrances.  
Requiemed with spring he lies.  
God, who took unto his heart  
All his throbbing, vital part,  
Sowed his body in the earth.  
Let the trumpets of the grass  
Paeon shout for Lycidas!