

Homer's Weeping Horses: Cultural Perspectives on War in the Context of Global Education

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1 The Classics and Cultural Diplomacy

Education, especially international education, has always regarded cultural diplomacy as part of its mission just as diplomacy has played its part in the development of culture. One has only to think of the impact on Cicero of his three years spent studying philosophy in Rhodes and Athens in the mid-70s BCE , or of how Chaucer's diplomatic mission to northern Italy in 1372 led directly to the writing of *The Canterbury Tales*. In turn, the works of both Cicero and Chaucer, like many others similarly affected, became canonical texts in the educational curriculum of elite schools across the world, influencing thinkers, leaders, writers and artists for centuries afterwards.

It is not only on the elite academies that such classics, the founding texts of Western cultural identity, performed their work of cultural diplomacy. The historian of reading, Alberto Manguel, has recorded how, in 1990, the Colombian Ministry of Culture set up an itinerant donkey library to take books into remote rural regions. Though normally respectful of procedure, the villagers refused to return the Spanish translation of *The Iliad* included among the technical works, agricultural handbooks and collections of sewing patterns they had been given. Asked why, the villagers replied that Homer's story reflected their own: it told of "a war-torn country in which mad gods mix with men and women who never know exactly what the fighting is about...or why they will be killed".ⁱ

It is of course significant that many of our canonical texts, from *The Iliad* or the early Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*, to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the British War poets, Picasso's *Guernica* or Heller's *Catch-22* have war at their centre . Each of these texts is organised around a nexus of ambivalent responses to the tragic conflict they simultaneously memorialise and celebrate. The Hydra-headed subject of war has always been a major component of the Humanities. "Our wars", the ones we have learned to love, providing a touchstone for our different cultural identities.

Even though many of these classic texts have now been dropped from the modern curriculum, popular culture, especially film, has made good the deficit. From the mega-successful 2004 Warner Brothers film *Troy*, starring Brad Pitt and Eric Bana as Achilles and Hector, to the inspired TV series, *Rome* in 2007, it is apparent that the recycling of Homer and his Latin successors has lost them none of their former power. *Troy*'s shining city of bronze continues to dazzle even sophisticated post-modern audiences and university students unhesitatingly refer to *Troy* as their "favourite film". When asked what attitude to war it purveys or how it has helped to shape their own thinking, hesitation and uncertainty are usually the result. Hector must fight because his younger brother has formed a politically disastrous relationship, while the moody, charismatic Achilles, despite his love of life and all its cultural rituals of music, art, friendship and love, is finally forced into the conflict by the machinations of the gods. This story of two young heroes, who, within any enthusiasm for the

war, know they must play a deadly and decisive part in it, nonetheless engages their attention at the deepest level. Drawing a line south from Troy, they find the past on one side; on the other the explosive instabilities of the Middle East. Regardless of the specifics of these conflicts, they observe wearily: “There’s always a war somewhere”.

In Homer’s *Iliad*, the brief, final stage of the ten year conflict is triggered when Hector mistakenly kills Patroclus wearing the armour of Achilles. Patroclus is not only the childhood friend, he is also the chariot driver of Achilles, his team of horses “magnificent racing stallions, gifts of the gods to Peleus, shining immortal gifts”ⁱⁱ. When the horses realise their driver is dead, they refuse to move from the spot, turning to memorial stone while they weep huge horse tears for their lost charioteer.

Homer’s weeping horses describe an arc in the cultural representation of war which has turned full circle in the human tears shed over Stephen Spielberg’s 2012 adaption of Michael Morpurgo’s novel, **War Horse**. The 1918 climax of this First World War story shows British and German soldiers disobeying orders to cut free a war horse trammelled in the murderous barbed wire of No Man’s Land. As in Thomas Hardy’s Napoleonic epic, *The Dynasts*, where the Battle of Waterloo is narrated from the view point of field mice and rabbits, animal tropes are used to critique conventionally heroic perspectives on war, indicating deep disagreement with traditional modes of representation. Like the recent BBC adaption of Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End*, **War Horse** continues to enshrine the First World War among the legendary conflicts of the past, while encouraging the reformulation of cultural memory. Significantly, the First World War signalled an end to that exclusive and elite educational system for which the classics were a keystone. There are no gentlemen in these battles and no superior species either.

2 Global Education and Cultural Diplomacy

The study of culture at all levels continues to inform our educational curriculum, both for its promotion of value and for the cultural diplomacy which is now regarded as essential to its mission. The increasing significance of international education, with its plethora of study abroad programmes, continues to highlight the importance of cultural awareness in all its forms. Helena K Finn arguing “The Case for Cultural Diplomacy” stresses the need for extended foreign exchange programmes **and** for a reform of the traditional curriculum in favour of an interdisciplinary approach capable of “promoting critical thinking, independent thought and the questioning of received wisdom”.ⁱⁱⁱ

With the twenty-first century, the advent of Global education as a major development beyond the concept of the international exchange poses a new set of problems and offers a new set of opportunities some of whose consequences are difficult to predict. To work at NYU, London, part of a ground-breaking global network university, is to feel these fresh challenges with particular force. Students are beginning to expect that they will spend at least one year of study in a foreign country absorbing the practices and perspectives of a different culture, and they have an increasingly wide range of choice. NYU, for example, has campuses in major cities across the world: in Washington, London, Berlin, Paris, Madrid, Sydney, Florence, Prague, Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, Abu Dhabi, Shanghai, Ghana and Accra. Beyond these study centres are work placement schemes in locations such as

Tanzania and Costa Rica. Over 40 per cent of NYU's students are currently choosing to study beyond their cultural and intellectual comfort zones, the number rising every year.

The programmes offered through the global network encourage a proliferation of cultural dialogues: between countries, between different types of cultural and political institution, between the academy itself and the cultural resources of the city in which it is placed. New conferencing technologies remodel pedagogic practice, connecting the centres as occasion requires. This superb educational tool creates interconnectivities of people on an unprecedented scale, as only major wars have done in the past. Joseph S. Nye's states in *Soft Power* (2004) that 700,000 people have participated in American cultural and academic exchanges in the post war decades, educating heads of states and many others influential figures.^{iv} Impressive those these figures are, they will be seed corn to what lies ahead.

The new global network will give the university itself and others like it a major voice and presence in the shaping of the new world order, establishing a world-wide intellectual forum which could transform relations between the academy and the political establishment. Cultural diplomacy cannot be considered merely as an instrument of government policy; as Cynthia P. Schneider has argued, independence is necessary to create a climate of credibility for its reception^v and the new global academies will have agendas of their own. So too, it is possible to imagine, will the student body. Beyond their impact on the local and international jobs market, this new global student body and its alumni will constitute a new intellectual community. The students themselves, highly intelligent, technologically informed and from privileged backgrounds, will not only become "citizens of the world" as the university's global mission states^{vi}; they will also be in a position to define what form that citizenship should take.

Faced with the task of educating "citizens of the world", what should the curriculum contain in terms of creating a two-way cultural awareness? Each of the NYU study centres currently has freedom to interpret its introductory Cultural Foundations syllabus according to its own strengths and resources, while remaining subject to certain shared constraints. Approximately one quarter of the syllabus must focus on cultures other than the Western, Judaic Christian foundation. It is here that the issue of teaching war in the context of a global education starts to acquire a cutting edge. Educated mainly in liberal individualist traditions, students are not only deeply sceptical about war, they are also confused as to how it relates to their value system or religious beliefs. This is particularly the case when each classroom contains a mixture of nationalities, ethnicities, religious affiliations and political histories, some with very recent and difficult memories. Students of culture address these issues in a context of on-going conflicts that often affect them directly. Young Muslims study with Jews, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. One of the most culturally sacred locations in the world remains the site of intense political hostilities. How does the soft power of cultural diplomacy address this issue in the classroom?

Teaching the relationship between war and culture from a global perspective requires a new educational paradigm. Is war central to the development of culture; does it come into being in the marginal of cultural interaction; or is it aim the destruction of one culture and the imposition of another? When it comes to cultural narration of war, American students are at a particular disadvantage. If, as has been argued, the aim of cultural diplomacy is to enable "America to tell its story to the world"^{vii}, America's students are deeply uncomfortable with the task. Interdisciplinary,

through which different disciplines make their own specialised contribution, offers one answer to the problem.

3 Representing War in the New Global Story

The idea of a shared story of humanity provides a useful approach for the discussion of conflict. Attempts to rationalise war out of existence, to imagine a human world without it, appear both necessary and utopian. In the onward sweep of human conflict, Homer's weeping horses are not allowed to pause for long. War is too big an entertainment for the gods at least, if not for ordinary mortals; there are too many interests at stake in its continuance and Zeus, now as then, intervenes personally to reinvigorate the over-emotional equines. Conflict, of one kind or another, remains the name of the human game. Neo-Darwinism has been particularly influential in enabling us to participate without cultural guilt in a shared species story: that of *homo sapiens*, the cruel, clever, selfishly cooperative ape, simultaneously frightened and threatening, apparently hard wired to define himself through competition, domination, and increasingly sophisticated forms of aggression.^{viii} His tribalism, territorialism and resource requirements are the inevitable components of the battle for survival. This account of war requires neither representation nor hermeneutics; it is simply how we are. Conflict is a species-requirement; justification and explanation are equally unnecessary.

Equally important is the account which places war within its own evolutionary history. Samuel P. Huntington's article *The Clash of Civilisations?* defines different phases "in the evolution of conflict in the modern world", creating a taxonomy and typology of conflict in which the wars of kings give place to the wars of peoples, ideologies, and civilisations.^{ix} Wars of religion, so central to the shaping of Europe in the seventeenth century, are not included among his designations and the omission is an interesting one. Religion has always proved another definitive species indicator, the factor that has defined our humanity while mediating our understanding of power and its institutionalisation within culture. Gender studies examines the way in which, what Bob Connell calls "hegemonic masculinity" forms part of "a gender order", "a historically constructed pattern of power relations" immanent in all cultures through its "scope and permanence". It is an order which signals, across groups, societies and cultures, "a systematic pursuit of power" by certain types of masculinity.^x

Placed within Huntington's schema and categorised as "Western civil wars", the two World Wars of the twentieth century lose their monumentality. His label matches the perception of poets and writers who acted as interpreters of those conflicts. A recurrent theme of late nineteenth and early twentieth century European war poetry is the poignant sense of friendship and kinship concealed by a fabricated enmity only valid on the battlefield. It is a theme which achieves its definitive statement in Wilfred Owen's famous poem, *Strange Meeting*, where the ghost of a murdered German soldier becomes the poet's own alter ego: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend".^{xi} Some of the greatest war poetry from this period is produced by poets such as Charles Sorley, Robert Graves or Siegfried Sassoon who shared a dual Anglo-German cultural heritage.

Once safely relegated to the past, these conflicts settle themselves within the human story. Andrew Marr in his recent BBC series "A History of the World" sees the justification for war in its capacity to initiate change and trigger creativities on a scale with the profiteering that is also one of its products. War is the ultimate mother of invention. Joseph S. Nye quotes with approval the US military officer who observed that "the mark of a great campaign is not what it destroys, but what it creates".^{xii} If what we want to offer our young "citizens of the world" is renewed faith in the value of war, this is promising approach, one which can also restore confidence in the divine plan for the species, the gradually unfolding wisdom of God, referred to in Mark's Gospel: "And when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom".^{xiii}

Still grounding a tragic sense of humanity, war has proved remarkably resistant to the 'lighten-up' injunctions of post-modernism. We feel too much about it. In post-modern culture, war retains an emotional reality which love, death and the family have in many respects surrendered. It can be responsible for our virtues as well as our depths. The essayist Adam Phillips has illustrated how psycho-analysis internalised war within all of us as the unceasing conflict between Eros and Thanatos. In his provocative account, the war outside frequently proves much easier to deal with and certainly more bracing to the lack-lustre psyche than the internecine conflict within. One has, he reminds us, only to remember all those cheery Londoners putting a brave face on the Blitz. Equally important is the recognition that our sense of ourselves as the embodiments of virtue derives to a large extent from the dialogue with our own inner "Terrifier" and our mapping of his 'evil', ego-threatening qualities onto the image of the enemy. In *Bombs Away*, Phillips argues: "We are in this sense, dependent on the enemy, either within or without, to react against; to free us to construct our goodness, our virtues". "What would we be," he asks, "without the Bad Object"?^{xiv} He concludes his account by suggesting that the Second World War proved - for those who survived it - every bit as curative as psychoanalysis had intended itself to be.

As we move further into the era of global identities, we may need to challenge the physical force of war with the full power of our intellects, to see it not as a Clausewitz an instrument of politics but as, for example, a post-modern instrument of thought. We might want to view it conceptually in Phillip's signature term as a form of "flirtation", essentially a delaying tactic through which new opportunities and possibilities can be explored. Prolonged war has the attributes of the post-modern flirtation: "From a sadistic point of view it is as though the known and wished for end is being refused, deferred or even denied. But from a pragmatic point of view one can say that a space is being created in which aims or ends can be worked out; the assumed wish ...may be a way of ...making time for, less familiar possibilities. Flirtation, if it can be sustained, is a way of cultivating wishes, of playing for time. Deferral can make room".^{xv} With mourning and hindsight, we come to see what it is that was being worked out through a particular conflict in which this strange attractor of change is embedded.

Homer's Trojan War is essentially a catastrophic and tragic action. Virgil's *Aeneid* turns it into the creative foundation of the Roman Empire. If we are to rethink war as a creative 'brainstorm' in an always developing story, we have still to find some better account for what was suffered and lost in it too. To factor this into our common narrative of humanity, we may need to revisit our post-mortem cultures too and offer the dead more solace and opportunity than we currently do. When Aeneas, escaping the ruins of Troy, makes the hero's descent into the underworld on his way to the

founding of Rome, he meets the ghost of Achilles. War is not worth it, he is told. It is better to be a live peasant than king of the whole underworld.

In teaching the story of war to our new student 'citizens of the world', we need to pause at that moment of flirtation when the epic hero, be he Achilles, Arjuna or Gilgamesh, experiences a moment of hesitation as to whether war is the right course of action. In the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, the anguished hero, confronting family and friends in the enemy ranks, undergoes a crisis confidence while his chariot driver, the god Krishna, delivers an astonishing revelation about the nature of human and divine power. "You don't matter. Just do it!" is Krishna's message. In the *Iliad*, founding text of Western individualism, a counter-disposition is at work. Something of irreplaceable value will die in war and Homer's horses weep for it.

Wilfred Owen's poem, *Strange Meeting*, invokes the same sense of irreplaceable loss. Dying a week before the armistice in 1918, Owen does not talk of the creative forces of war. Instead he refers, in a much quoted passage, to "the pity of war, the pity war distilled". Perhaps the question facing our new citizens of the world is whether there is something necessary for the evolution of the species or the development of human culture, which only war, and the pity it distils, can provide.

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Endnotes:

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- ⁱ Alberto Manguel, *Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey: A Biography*, Atlantic Books, London: 2008, p6
- ⁱⁱ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans Robert Fagles, New York & London: Penguin Classics, 1990, Bk 16, p441 & Bk 17 p456
- ⁱⁱⁱ Helena K Finn, "The Case for Cultural Diplomacy" in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 82, No 6, Nov/Dec 2003, p 17-18
- ^{iv} Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, p113
- ^v Cynthia P. Schneider, *Cultural Diplomacy: Hard to Define, but You'd Know It If You Saw It*, the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol X111, Issue 1, Fall/Winter 2006, p 194
- ^{vi} <http://www.nyu.edu/global/the-global-network-university.html>
- ^{vii} See Harvey B. Feigenbaum, *Globalisation and Cultural Diplomacy*, Centre for Arts & Culture, Issue Paper Art, Culture & the National Agenda, p39
- ^{viii} Matt Ridley's study of co-operation in **The Origins of Virtue**, Penguin 1997 offers an informative and thought-provoking reading of evolutionary biology.
- ^{ix} Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilisations?" in *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, p22-23
- ^x See Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities*, Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2002, 2008, p 95
- ^{xi} Wilfred Owen, *Strange Meeting*, in *War Poems and Others*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1973, p 102-103
- ^{xii} Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power*, p 99
- ^{xiii} *The Gospel of Mark*, Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Ch 13, v 7-8
- ^{xiv} Adam Phillips, *Bombs Away in Promises, Promises*, London: Faber & Faber, 2000, pp 46 -57
- ^{xv} Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation: An Introduction, On Flirtation*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994, p xix