

## Memory, Nature, and the Futility of War in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

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### Abstract:

Although Alice Oswald's 2011 *Memorial* derives its source material from Homer's epic poem, it does not move with the same energy as the great epic. Rather, it commemorates the dead with a more muted sense of grief. A memorial operates as a retrospective poem, drawing from memory: the community or the individual who remembers is the impetus for the memorial. In Oswald's *Memorial*, we serve as that impetus – we, the readers, are the conveyors of memory. Oswald's *Memorial* is a written poem, more similar in some ways to a physical war monument than an oral epic, and her style and form must engage the reader in an active manner. This memorial offers a meditative rather than an enraged response to the soldiers' deaths; it commemorates each soldier, from both sides of the conflict, in rhythmic, meditative pacing, with an eye to the future, and a cautionary tale for the present. Oswald's poem offers this space for collective memorialization that includes this "active reciprocity" of simultaneously honoring the dead and admonishing the living. We may grieve for those we've never met, but in the end, we remember the dead for the sake of the living.

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Rage is the impetus throughout Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*. Rage holds Achilles back from battle and then pushes him to fight again; rage drives the Achaeans to attack the Trojans; rage colors the soldiers' grieving as they hear of their comrades' deaths or find their fallen comrades in the field. In fact, in his work *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Jonathan Shay points out that "Rage is properly the title of Homer's poem, and his audience may have known it by that name, not *Iliad*" (Shay 1995, 20). This rage, this energized grief manifests itself vividly in the way in which Achilles dishonors the fallen Hector, for example; in the way the other soldiers mutilate the enemies' bodies; in the way the women wail and tear their hair in ritualistic lamentation and mourning for their dead. Not so much in Alice Oswald's 2011 poem *Memorial*. This *Memorial* derives its source material from Homer's epic poem, but it does not move with the same energy as the great epic. Rather, it commemorates the dead with a more muted sense of grief. For how do we grieve for someone we've never met? Alice Oswald's *Memorial* engages our emotions using familiar imagery, offering us an emotional bridge to the dead of Homer's *Iliad*.

Alice Oswald prefaces her poem with her philosophy of translation, describing her attempt to preserve the ancient Greek epic's *energeia* in her own minimalist, reflective poem. Although it evokes strong reactions in readers, *Memorial* is an entirely new poem, with a modern audience, and thus it connects to its readers through different means and with different effects than the *Iliad*. Oswald must incite some response in us: some emotional, visceral connection to names of men who have been dead for thousands of years. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are not stirred to rage at the thought of soldiers' deaths from the battle of Troy. We are, however, moved by memories of our more recent dead, whether immediate family, our nation's fallen military, or even global losses. We respond emotionally to images or ideas that relate to our immediate concerns and relationships, or to those of our recent past. As members of a community, we engage in shared memories as well as individual memories, and then we preserve these communal memories in ways that are accessible to all members of that community.

Sometimes, these communal memorials are physical monuments such as the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D. C., or the various Tombs of the Unknown Soldier across the globe. Sometimes, these are memorial ceremonies, held in a church or at a Fourth of July picnic. And sometimes, these are written memorials, such as Oswald's. Katharine Derderian explores the shift between oral and written mourning genres in her book *Leaving Words to Remember: Greek Mourning and the Advent of Literacy*. She explains how we adapt our mourning rituals not only according to religious or cultural customs, but also according to the closeness of the relationship with the fallen, and the distance in time after the event of death. Carolin Hahnemann explores the similarity between architectural and written memorial in her review of Oswald's poem, "Book of Paper, Book of Stone: An Exploration of Alice Oswald's Memorial." As Hahnemann points out, the oral effect of the poem is impressive, but the visual effect equally significant, with its lists of names, repeated similes, and effective use of white space – not to mention the carefully designed book cover (Hahnemann 2014, 5). In his article "History's Remains: Of Memory, Mourning, and the Event," Michael Naas likewise considers the role of mourning and the effect of communal memorialization, in particular the Vietnam Memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the 9/11 memorial at Ground Zero. Naas explores how memorials built by communal memory can influence communal stances on war, for good or for ill; but we will consider Naas's admonition towards the end of this paper.

Whatever their genre, these memorials operate as a social unifier, a vehicle for individual and collected memories, that allows both the individual and the community to connect through a shared loss – a shared emotion. Derderian explores the genres of mourning in ancient Greece in her book *Leaving Words to Remember*, explaining how mourning is represented differently in oral genres than in written genres. As she explains, "gesture, ritual activity, iconographic representations, and material monuments or artifacts add different levels of meaning to the exchange between the mourners and the dead and among the community of survivors" (Derderian 2001, 189). In addition, "the temporal and spatial distance of each medium from the immediacy of death determines its varying function as communication with the dead or as dialogue among the living." (Derderian 2001, 191-2).

Given the distance of three thousand years, any attempt on our part to mourn the dead of Troy will inevitably lack the intensity and exigence of Homer's work, even at it too is distanced by some 300 years. Oswald has been careful not to address the dead in her poem, as Homer does (and as she notes that he does); the "temporal and spatial distance" of her poem from the dead is further than Homer's, and thus her *Memorial* engages with them at a different emotional tenor. By definition, a written memorial is not a funeral, not a lamentation, not an elegy, not a eulogy. These are each, in themselves, different forms of mourning that are demonstrated in the *Iliad*. However, if we consider the etymology, a memorial is based on memory: something intangible, distanced from the immediacy of grief, and from its physical and ritualistic manifestations. A memorial operates as a retrospective poem, drawing from memory: the community or the individual who remembers is the impetus for the memorial. In Oswald's *Memorial*, we serve as that impetus – we, the readers, are the conveyors of memory. In Homer's oral tradition, the bard served as that conveyor, bringing memories of the dead to the audience through performed oral poetry. We still have modern oral traditions, but Oswald's *Memorial* is a written poem, more similar in some ways to a physical war monument than an oral epic, and her style and form must engage the reader in an active manner. This memorial offers a meditative rather than an enraged response to the soldiers' deaths; it commemorates each soldier, from both sides of the conflict, in rhythmic, meditative pacing, with an eye to the future, and a cautionary tale for the present.

We will discuss this forward-looking aspect of the poem in a moment, but first, *how* do our memories engage with the *Iliad*'s dead? Oswald offers three kinds of memories or experiences that we can connect with, evoking a sense of grief for these long-forgotten dead: she offers images of contemporary war, familial scenes, and nature similes. Each soldier's death is given its own few lines in the poem, with reference to his character or, as often as not, to his family. Each death is followed by a repeated simile that offers scenes of nature: animals, the weather, the elements. Oswald is tying their deaths to different kinds of memories that we already possess, that we can already draw from. As readers, we receive these images of familiar collective memories, whether contemporary war, familial scenes, or nature similes, that we relate back to the story. In this way, Oswald offers us sensory imagery, whether the form of the poem itself or relatable similes, and we are invited to reflect or project our personal experiences and emotions onto those images. As Mark Freeman suggests in his book chapter "Memory and Narrative," sensory aids such as a photograph "allow a different kind of relationship to the past, one that is more concrete, more sensuous" (Freeman 2010, 271). Through these different forms of imagery, Oswald offers us a specific, sensory connection to the dead from a war that took place thousands of years ago. We fill in these emotional gaps, but we are filling them in with different emotions than rage; once again; the distance between us and the fallen soldiers of Troy is considerably more than from Homer's audience, so Oswald must appeal to our sense of grief through different channels.

Oswald engages many poetic resources in evoking an emotional response from her audience, including the form of the poem itself. The list of names at the opening of the poem, the repeated

similes, even the blank space on paper 52 (which I will discuss further on) engage our sensibilities. The way Oswald introduces contemporary war imagery is beautiful, and her references to the soldiers' families are poignant, but in this paper, I will focus on only the nature similes.

Although this poem is ostensibly about the dead of the Trojan War, nature serves as the overarching theme. Each soldier is commemorated with a few lines, but they always end in the soldier's death. Oswald reminds us that even though "they took a ship to Troy their story / Finishes here in darkness" (Oswald 2011, 20). There is no hope for continuation or renewal of their lives, as they die "in a daze of loneliness / Their conversation unfinished" (Oswald 2011, 23). There is only the finality of death. Each soldier in the poem is introduced, described, and killed. These men were the focus of Homer's epic, with each battle scene and each death scene gorier and more glorious than the last. In *Memorial*, however, it is nature that drives the motion of the poem, and, perhaps more significantly, the emotional tenor. The "darkness" and "loneliness" depicted in these lines do not evoke vengeful rage. The soldiers' deaths punctuate nature, but they cannot affect nature; nature is constant, and an individual death is hardly a momentary interruption. Oswald cleverly weaves the names of the dead with nature similes: she starts with the lists of names, weaves in the antiphonal similes of nature, then ends with a list of just nature similes. The names of the dead pass us by – or do we pass them by? And are absorbed in time. Homer's epic works as a continuity of war, beginning and ending *in media res*, without resolution. *Memorial's* lack of resolution comes from the continuity of nature and the futility of war, almost in direct contrast to the epic.

Consider the first nature simile that Oswald offers us, following the death of the first soldier: "Like a wind-murmur / Begins a rumour of waves / One long note getting louder / The water breathes a deep sigh / Like a land-ripple / When the west wind runs through a field / Wishing and searching / Nothing to be found / The corn-stalks shake their green heads" (Oswald 2011, 9). We have hardly begun the poem, and already the fear of unescapable doom sounds in our ears. Nature herself gives warning; this death will serve as a "land-ripple," creating a domino effect: it will lead to another death, and another, as war is wont to do. Oswald engages our attention and emotion through her stunning sensory imagery. We hear the effect of the soldier's death: the "wind-murmur," the "rumour of waves," the "one note getting louder." We see the effect: "the corn-stalks [shaking] their green heads." We feel the effect the "rumour of waves ... wishing and searching / Nothing to be found." Oswald's language is not difficult; it is, in fact, fairly commonplace. It does not take great concentration to enter the "mind-space" of the poem; instead, it draws us in, gently, easily, while simultaneously gaining access to our own memories. The emotional door opens in both directions. We engage easily with the imagery, while the poem engages our sympathy. This creates an open-door effect for the poem, which then helps us connect to the other aspects of the poem as well – including, and more significantly, the soldiers' deaths. Once we are emotionally connected to the sensory imagery, it becomes easier to connect emotionally to those parts and people we are less familiar with as well.

One of Oswald's most beautiful similes demonstrates this unstoppable force of nature and the futility of our own actions:

“Like in Autumn under the dripping wind / The earth’s clothes grow heavy she can hardly stand / God rains on the roof hammering his fists down / He has had enough of violent smiling men / Now every one of us is being looked at / Under the rain’s lens / Now the rivers are filling they are overflowing / There are streams sawing through the hills / Cutting up the grass into islands / Everything is clattering to the sea / This is water’s world / And the works of men are vanishing” (Oswald 2011, 41).

Unlike Homer’s epic that emphasizes the continuity of “the works of men” (war especially), this poem demonstrates the continuity of nature. If war is futile and nature continuous, though, how does this affect our approach to memorializing the war dead? We cannot still feel rage at their deaths. We don’t feel the immediate force of their soldiers’ deaths, as each narrative ending works like a flashback, caught between similes and scenes of nature. Nature, the constancy of nature, and the continuation of nature despite war and death, is the unifying theme of the poem; in a sense, death serves only as a place marker for an individual.

Sometimes Oswald offers imagery that connects nature similes with contemporary war imagery as well as parental scenes, linking our memories more firmly to the poem. It is worth noting that it is always the soldiers’ parents who hold memories of them, and never their children; for example, the reference to Hector’s death mentions his wife Andromache, but not their son. With war, their lineage ceases and memory ends. Moreover, there is a finality to their deaths beyond the parent-child bond; there is a social and cultural gap: a lost generation. Oswald sometimes mixes her similes with these parental figures or contemporary war imagery; for example, in her simile for Gorgythion’s death: “As if it was June / A poppy being hammered by the rain / Sinks its head down / It’s exactly like that / When a man’s neck gives in / And the bronze calyx of his helmet / Sinks his head down” (Oswald 2011, 29). I don’t think I will ever be able to separate the image of poppies from war. Just as we associate World War II with a tiny paper flower, so Oswald gives us this magnificent juxtaposition: the brilliant, fragile red poppy being “hammered by the rain,” just as the warrior’s neck is broken under his bronze helmet. We can see the poppy with its gauzy red petals; we can see its crisp green stem being snapped, and it’s a short leap of imagination to picture the same for the soldier.

Now, let’s consider the death scene of Patroclus in both the *Iliad* and *Memorial*, comparing Homer’s energetic similes with Oswald’s more melancholy imagery. Oswald is able to evoke a sense of grief for these men by relating their death scenes to images and emotions that are familiar to us today. First, we have Homer’s simile:

“As when some lion overpowers a tireless wild boar / up on a mountain summit, battling in all their fury / over a little spring of water, both beasts craving / to slake their thirst, but the lion beats him down / with sheer brute force as the boar fights for breath / so now with a close thrust Hector the son of Priam / tore the life from the fighting son of Menoetius, from Patroclus who had killed so many men in war, and gloried over him” (Homer 1990, 959-967).

This simile is full of the energy and rage of glorious war. The animals fighting are strong and powerful; the water, the prize from the fight, is simply a “little spring.” This image of the “little spring” is not the focus of the simile, but it serves as a quiet reminder of the causes of war and the futility of the struggle. This is, of course, only one reading of that moment in Homer’s epic poem, but Oswald adopts and adapts similar moments to emphasize nature’s power and endurance over even powerful creatures such as the lion and the boar.

Her simile for Patroclus’ death in *Memorial* is gentle and nostalgic: “Like moonlight / Or the light of a bonfire / Burning on the cliffs / When sailors get blown along / Homesick over the sea / They notice that far-off fire / And think of their wives” (Oswald 2011, 61). There is no violence in this metaphor, no combat; the struggle is homesickness. How is homesickness the proper emotion to evoke at Patroclus’ death? It is a gentler emotion and perhaps a keener emotion than rage; it is an enduring emotion that does not flare up and cool down at whim. There is a gnawing constancy to homesickness that invites us to enter that emotion and to feel the pangs, which are perhaps more relatable to most than vengeful rage. Again, we are not stirred to revenge for the deaths of men from three centuries ago; but Oswald taps into other emotions, such as homesickness and the grief from more recent wars, to help us empathize with the characters in her poem and understand the effects of war – whether recent or long gone – on our community.

There is, moreover, the underlying reminder of the futility of war. Oswald’s 21<sup>st</sup> century *Memorial* helps us bridge the gap of thousands of years to remember and connect with men who are long dead and gone, but it is not simply for the sake of their honor and glory that we remember them. They say that those who don’t know history are doomed to repeat it, and Oswald invites us to remember our history in order to learn the consequences of war. She tells us of Iphidamas: “Far from his wife all that money wasted / A hundred cattle he gave her / A thousand sheep and goats / All that hard work feeding them wasted” (Oswald 2011, 35). We can feel the emphasis of the “waste” through her repetition of the word. On page 52, she leaves a wide gap of space, taking up half the page: we can fill that space with any memories that we might want to preserve in connection with these men, but it also reminds us of the emptiness: what other names might be filling that space? This blankness offers a void, a reminder of possibility as well as futility. This is not a space for rage, but a space for contemplation and reflection. If the similes serve to evoke our own memory-related emotions for the soldiers who are unknown to us, this blank space offers a vehicle for those emotions.

Even for moments other than a soldier’s death, Oswald offers similes that help us connect our memories to the ancient dead. For example, she borrows directly from Homer’s depiction of Achilles chasing Hector: “Like a man running in a dream / Can never approach a man escaping / Who can never escape a man approaching” (Oswald 2011, 55). Again, we see that cyclical simile, reminding us of the constancy of nature and time, and the futility of our own actions. Oswald reminds us that, despite his best efforts, “HECTOR died like everyone else” (Oswald 2011, 68). Our most brilliant, manly, virtuous, heroic warriors face the same death as the naïve youth who jumps off the ship when it first lands, and is cut down instantly. Hector’s death in *Memorial* is followed

by a flashback scene and not a nature simile, but Oswald does offer us a contemporary image linked to Hector: “Like a man rushing in leaving his motorbike running” (Oswald 2011, 69). We know this feeling, this expectancy, this moment where we pause time to accomplish a task before continuing our journey – but Hector’s journey ends at that pause, an unfinished work.

I mentioned before that the list of names is woven between similes of nature. Although we begin with the names, by the end of the poem, all we have is nature, and Oswald ends by repeating her last simile: “Like when god throws a star / And everyone looks up / To see that whip of sparks / And then it’s gone” (Oswald 2011, 81). What kind of mourning ritual ends with something other than the dead? This is the forward-looking impetus of the memorial that emphasizes the living and warns of nature’s continuity without us. Hahnemann reminds us too that “Memorial portrays war not as a conflict waged for the attainment of a goal, but as a catalyst of death that affects both sides without distinction” (Hahnemann 2014, 21). This poem is not about the war, but about the effects of the war; it is not about the glorious deaths of the soldiers, but about the consequences of their deaths for those who survive them.

What, then, are those consequences? Naas analyzes the consequences in connection with the use of war monuments as military promotion and considers the ceremony behind the burial of the Unknown Soldier: “These remains remain to claim us, I thought, in some very powerful way, reminding us that the separation of the dead from everything that remains for us the living, and so the separation of the dead from their very name and history, remains for us more palpable here, the absence more present and more pressing” (Naas 2003, 88-9). Naas questions the usual forms of memorial as propaganda pieces, inciting further war by promising heroes glory and honor, without a thought as to further consequences. As Derderian reminds us, “with the increasing relevance and permanence of the written memorial within the public domain, death adopts an additional significance as a civic act and as a collectively accessible historical fact; accordingly, mourning becomes associated with active reciprocity as well as the artistic and ritual activities of establishing a memorial” (Derderian 2001, 192). Oswald’s poem offers this space for collective memorialization that includes this “active reciprocity” of simultaneously honoring the dead and admonishing the living. Jonathan Shay offers this admonition as well, demonstrating the effects of war and the importance of memorializing the dead for the sake of the living: in his work *Achilles in Vietnam*, he places a huge emphasis on veterans’ need for closure after the deaths of their comrades-in-arms, usually through proper burial rites and memorialization. These rites were complicated in Vietnam when dead soldiers were shipped home without their friends’ knowledge, or when soldiers went missing and were never found again. For those who die, the consequences of death are (typically) honor and mourning, even though they are not alive to receive it; the consequences for the living, however, are significantly more dire: continued war, continued rage, continued death. The “whip of sparks” is extinguished through “the works of men,” through our own choices and actions. The memorial serves as a reminder that, although absent physically, the dead can still offer lessons for the living.

Ultimately, although we see how Oswald perpetuates the memory of the dead through these repetitive but moving images of nature, we still ask why. Why *should* our memories engage with the Iliad's dead? T. S. Eliot has already answered this question for us. In the *Four Quartets*, he tells us: "This is the use of memory: / For liberation – not less of love but expanding / Of love beyond desire, and so liberation / From the future as well as the past" ("Little Gidding"). We do not remember the dead for their sakes, but for our own. Oswald shows us nature's continuity, how the same "little spring" in Homer's simile will endure the fight between the lion and the boar, and remain unaffected. We may grieve for those we've never met, but in the end, we remember the dead for the sake of the living.

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