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‘A word from another world’: mourning and similes in Homeric epic and Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*

Corinne Pache*

This article focuses on Alice Oswald’s 2012 Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad and its connections with ancient epic and lament. Oswald’s poem is inspired by the Iliad, but omits the plot and most of the main events to focus on minor characters’ encounters with death and the grief they leave behind. Memorial thus strongly rejects the possibility of heroism on the battlefield, and foregrounds mourning. Oswald’s narrator interacts with both the characters of the poem and the audience, reactivating an ancient tradition for a modern audience, turning readers (and listeners) into mourners, and connecting the dead from the past and the audience in the present.

In this article, I focus on the ways in which Alice Oswald presents lament in her 2012 *Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad*. The poem is directly inspired by Homeric epic, but by foregrounding the theme of mourning, *Memorial* invites us to revisit the ancient poem’s relationship with lament. Oswald rejects the *Iliad*’s focus on Achilles, who appears in *Memorial* only fleetingly as a secondary character, and instead turns to remembering the deaths of all the warriors who die in battle in the poem, giving each of them equal attention. The theme of lament is thus a central point of contact between the *Iliad* and Oswald’s *Memorial*, and when it comes to mourning, both poems accomplish the same thing by eliciting mourning for the heroes of the past in the present of their audience. Yet the two poems differ in how they connect past and present, and the ways in which the narrator interacts with the characters and audience. After a brief introduction of *Memorial*, I examine the theme of lament in the *Iliad* and in Oswald’s poem, focusing on the connection between narrator and audience, and more particularly on the ways in which *Memorial*’s narrator addresses readers (and listeners) as if they were mourners at a funeral service.

Retelling the *Iliad*

Memorial is divided into three sections. The first consists of a list of 214 names printed one name per line in upper case letters (1–8). With the exception of the horse

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Pedasus, all the names belong to Greeks and Trojans who die in Homer's *Iliad*, and they are listed in chronological order of their deaths (and using inconsistent spelling). The second section (9–69) begins with the biography of the first man to die at Troy, Protesilaos (also listed first in the first section), followed by a simile repeated twice, establishing a pattern that continues throughout this part of the poem, with some variations and occasional interruptions by shorter lists of names. All the names in section 2 align with the ones listed in section 1. The final section consists of a series of eleven similes, with the last one repeated twice (70–81).

Memorial is ostensibly inspired by the *Iliad*, which is reflected in the subtitle of the US edition 'A Version of Homer's *Iliad*', a variation on the more evocative 2011 British edition's subtitle 'An Excavation of the *Iliad*'.¹ Oswald herself describes her project as 'a translation of the *Iliad*'s atmosphere, not its story' that 'takes away the narrative, as you might lift the roof off a church in order to remember what you're worshipping' (ix). Oswald depicts the biographical vignettes as paraphrases of the Greek text, while she considers the similes translations, but a kind of translation that does not attempt to carry 'the words over into English', but rather uses the Greek words 'as openings through which to see what Homer was looking at' (x). Oswald thus presents the biographical vignettes' and similes' relationship to the original in a fundamentally different way, a distinction that also reflects her belief that these two forms have their origins in two different genres: the biographies arising out of lament and the similes out of pastoral lyric.²

Another important feature of *Memorial* is that the poem is meant to be experienced both as a printed text and as oral art. We have seen above how the text evokes ancient epitaphs with the names of the heroes printed in upper case letters on individual lines in the first section.³ As oral art *Memorial* has connections with both contemporary funeral services and ancient Greek lament. Oswald herself has recorded an audio version that was released at the same time as the book and she also performs the poem from memory, while her work has taken on a life of its own in live public readings in the UK and the USA.⁴ In performance, the repetition of the similes can be appreciated in the same way the repetition of a melody can enhance a musical piece. As Hahnemann observes, repetition enhances the similes because it 'changes the way we listen' allowing us to hear differently, a feature that can only be appreciated when the poem is read aloud (2014: 4–5). Oral performance also allows for the inclusion of different voices: for example, in a reading at the American Philological Association's annual meeting in Chicago in 2013, a man read the

1 On the different connotations of these terms and the significance of seeing the poem as an excavation, see Hahnemann (2014: 27–30).

2 Oswald (2011: ix). On the connection between the biographies and lament, see Tsagalidis (2004: 179–192). On Homeric similes reflecting lyric traditions, see Martin (1997).

3 On *Memorial*'s connections with physical war memorials, see Hahnemann (2014).

4 On Oswald's performance of the poem, see Harrop (2013).

narrative parts while a woman read the similes; in a public reading at Trinity University in the fall of 2014, the director, Rachel Joseph, also chose to have a male actor read the narrative part, but had the similes read by a group of three female students, who alternated between one or two voices (when repeating similes) or spoke in unison (for the series of twelve similes at the end). The contrast between male and female voices evokes many passages in the *Iliad*, when women lament the dead and their mourning provoke the internal and external audiences to reflect on these losses. In *Iliad* 19, Briseis strikingly leads her female companions in a lament that focuses on both Patroklos and the women’s own individual sorrows (19.301–302). When heard in performance, we also experience Oswald’s similes as deeply interconnected with lament, a connection that in fact exists already in the ancient poem, and to which I will return below. The Trinity production also emphasized the resemblance between the poem and a funeral service by having the actor who read the narrative parts welcome members of the audience and showing them to their seats before the performance, and thanking them after the performance with a handshake.

Mourning in the *Iliad*

Memorial, from its title, its first section in the form of an epitaph, and its remembrances of dead warriors, has obvious connections to lament, which can in turn be traced back to the *Iliad* since the poem as a whole can be construed as a lament for the Greek warrior Achilles.⁵ The hero’s imminent death is thus at the notional centre of the poem, and the *Iliad* includes many laments for dead warriors that prefigure the mourning for Achilles.

Homeric epic distinguishes between two forms of laments: the spontaneous lament (*goos*) inspired by grief performed by those close to the dead and the stylized lamentation (*thrênos*) sung by professional mourners.⁶ Both *goos* and *thrênos* are further described as antiphonal in nature.⁷ Both types of laments typically alternate between a single voice and a chorus (or between two groups): the single voice belongs to those who were close to the dead, while the chorus constitutes the voice of the community. Hector in *Iliad* 24 is mourned both with a *thrênos* (24.720–722) and with a series of three *gooi* sung in succession by his wife, mother, and sister-in-law,

5 As Gregory Nagy argues, ‘the theme and diction of lament appear to have shaped the *Iliad* and can even be found embedded in the name of Achilles, “grief of the fighting-men”’. See Nagy (1979: 69–71).

6 Alexiou 12–14; on *goos* in the *Iliad*, Tsagalis (2004: 171).

7 See Tsagalis (2004: 17) for different types of *goos*. For examples of antiphonal *goos* in the *Iliad*, see the lament for Patroclus by Briseis with the other the other slave women responding (19.282–302). In the case of the *thrênos* for Achilles, two groups — the Nereids and the Muses — mourn in turns (*Od.* 24.58–62).

and in both cases, both types of laments are described as being echoed by groups who take up the *thrēnos* and the *goos*.⁸

Mourning is an essential component of the *Iliad*, yet despite their importance, Iliadic laments exist in tension with a narrative that remembers the great deeds of heroes and their exploits on the battlefield as their primary means of gaining immortal glory. Hektor embodies this contradiction when he rejects Andromache's request to stay with her and his son, and imagines his wife's future after his death in terms of his own reputation:

Ἕκτορος ἦδε γυνῆ ὃς ἀριστεύεσκε μάχεσθαι
Τρώων ἵπποδάμων ὅτε Ἴλιον ἀμφεμάχοντο.

This is the wife of Hektor, who was ever the bravest fighter of the Trojans, breakers of horses, in the days when they fought about Ilion.
Hom. *Il.* 6.460-461 (Lattimore)

Hektor grieves for his wife, but is trapped by his desire to be mourned as the greatest fighter. Sarpedon expresses a similar outlook when he reminds Glaukos why they must fight:

ὦ πέπον εἰ μὲν γὰρ πόλεμον περὶ τόνδε φυγόντε
αἰεὶ δὴ μέλλοιμεν ἀγήρω τ' ἀθανάτω τε
ἔσσεσθ', οὐτέ κεν αὐτὸς ἐνὶ πρώτοισι μαχοίμην
οὐτέ κε σὲ στέλλοιμι μάχην ἐς κυδιάνειραν:
νῦν δ' ἔμπης γὰρ κήρες ἐφ' ἑσπᾶσιν θανάτοιο
μυρίαί, ἃς οὐκ ἔστι φυγεῖν βροτὸν οὐδ' ὑπαλύξαι,
ἴομεν ἢ ἐ τῷ εὖχος ὀρέξομεν ἢ ἐ τις ἡμῖν.

Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle, would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal, so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory. But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them, let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.
Hom. *Il.* 12.322-328 (Lattimore)

Like Hektor, Sarpedon and Glaukos exist in a world where war is a given and their sense of honour is dependent on their willingness to strive for glory, to kill or be killed honourably.

⁸ Andromache lamenting Hector with a group of women answering (24.723-746); Hecuba's lament (24.747-760); Helen's lament (24.761-776). On female lament in Greek epic, see also Murnaghan (1999).

There are other moments when the poem points to alternative perspectives: Achilles questions the heroic ideal in Book 9, and Book 24 offers a fleeting vision of reconciliation and humanity regained in the encounter between Priam and Achilles and the funeral of Hektor, when Greeks and Trojans pause to acknowledge the loss of his life. Laments also provide a counterpoint to the heroic code as expressed by Sarpedon's speech or Hektor's wish to be remembered after his death as the bravest fighter. Iliadic laments focus not on the heroes' exploits on the battlefield, but on the consequences of their deaths for the living. I mentioned above Briseis' lament for Patroklos (*Il.* 19.287-300), in which she remembers him for his sweetness (*meilikhos*, 19.300). Andromache does praise Hektor for his skill in battle in the middle of her lament, but that passage is preceded by her prediction for her son's and her own dreadful future and followed by a heartbreaking description of the grief that Hektor's loss provokes in his people, his parents, and Andromache herself, who ends her lament with a wish that he could have died in bed and shared his last words with her (24.725-745). Helen strikingly performs the last lament in the poem, again praising Hektor for his gentleness (*aganophrosyne*, 24.772), kindness, and friendship (*êpios* and *philos*, 24.775). The *Iliad* is thus unflinching in its vision of the devastation of war for both individuals and their community, yet epic glory, or *kleos*, remains as a way of transcending death, destruction, and oblivion.

The *Iliad*'s complicated engagement with *kleos* is in contrast absent from Alice Oswald's *Memorial*. By omitting Achilles from the opening list and the biographical vignettes, *Memorial* focuses on all the other war dead, whose names—many of which are foreign, hard for us to pronounce—have mostly been forgotten. While Oswald 'takes away the narrative' in the sense of leaving out the story of the Trojan War, she does not take away the narrator, who leads a lament in a poem that makes its focus on grieving explicit throughout. The narrator laments the dead from both sides of the conflict indiscriminately, thereby creating a new narrative that resolutely rejects the possibility of heroism and privileges the arbitrariness and ultimate meaninglessness of death in war.

Memorial and lament

While *Memorial*'s treatment of lament differs from Homer's, Oswald draws on Homeric poetry for her inspiration, which allows us in turn to rethink the role of lament in the *Iliad*. First let us look in more detail at the connections between ancient lament and *Memorial*. We have seen above how the names of the heroes are capitalized in the opening list, a feature that is repeated when the names reappear later in the second section (where the names are most often located at the beginning or end of a line), reminiscent of the capital letters used in ancient funerary inscriptions.

The tripartite division of the poem (list of names, narrative and series of similes) parallels the structure of traditional lament, which typically begins with an address to the dead, followed by a narrative section about the past (or the future), and a return to address and lament in the concluding section.⁹ The structure in the second

9 On the tripartite division of ancient lament, see Alexiou (2002: 133).

section of *Memorial* also reproduces the antiphonal aspect of ancient lament discussed above by including two forms: short narrations of individuals' deaths followed by similes, most of which are repeated twice. The 'bipolar' structure of the middle section of the poem (as Oswald describes it in her preface) thus evokes the traditional antiphonal structure of ancient lament: the narrative vignettes telling of the warriors' death resemble the mourner's song of sorrow recalling the deceased's life and death,¹⁰ while the similes function as a kind of poetic refrain that considers the human condition from a wider perspective.

Both Homeric epic and *Memorial* explicitly bring the past back to life through poetry, but *Memorial* also plays on the permeability of past and present: by modernizing the biographies and similes, omitting the story of the Trojan war, and focusing on the human consequences of war, *Memorial* often blurs the boundaries between past and present. Oswald's narrator also directly addresses both her audience and her characters in a way that is explicitly mournful, drawing on the conventions of memorials for the war dead and funerals, thereby drawing its audience into the role of mourners, something that is particularly striking in live performances of the poem.¹¹

Telling the past

First, let us look at how Oswald presents the dead from the ancient past to the modern audience of the poem. The poet connects past lives with the present both through the similes, about which I will have more to say below, and by mixing past and present tenses in the description of the warriors' death. The poem starts firmly in the past:

The first to die was PROTESILAUS
 A focused man who hurried to darkness
 With forty black ships leaving the land behind
 Men sailed with him from those flower-lit cliffs
 Where the grass gives growth to everything
 Pyrasus Iton Pteleus Antron
 He died in mid-air jumping to be first ashore
 There was his house half-built
 His wife rushed out clawing her face
 Podarcus his altogether less impressive brother
 Took over command but that was long ago
 He's been in the black earth now for thousands of years
 Oswald, *Memorial* (9)

¹⁰ Tsagalis (2004: 179–192) has noted the connection between Homeric biographical vignettes, which he describes as 'short obituaries' and lament. See also Dué and Ebbott (2010: 322–23) for their discussion of the vignettes as 'focalized through the eyes of a mother or a widow'.

¹¹ Hahnemann (2014) beautifully explores the connections between *Memorial* and the practice of erecting monuments inscribed with the war dead.

While Protesilaus’ death took place ‘long ago’, the description of his home as ‘Where the grass gives growth to everything’ connects the moment of his death to the ‘now’ of the audience of the poem. Oswald makes the chronology of the deaths more straightforward than in the *Iliad*, in which we learn of Protesilaus’s death, the first Greek death in the war, in a flashback in the catalogue of the ships in Book 2. The death of Echepolus, which signals the beginning of the first sequence of battle deaths in the *Iliad*, here comes second, and the contrast between the ancient poem’s emphasis on the action of killing, as seen for example, in the many scenes of warriors taunting an adversary, is replaced by Oswald’s focus on the experience of dying, with death bringing ‘a daze of loneliness’ (23). Whereas the *Iliad* highlights both victors and victims in battle narrative, Oswald often omits the name of the killer to focus on the dying and the dead and the impersonal manner of their death: ‘the darkness hit’ Democoon (12), while Phegeus ‘met a flying spear’ (13) or ‘a spear with its own willpower’ strikes Archelochus (48). The killers’ names (Odysseus, Diomedes, Ajax) and actions are absent in these examples and many other death scenes in *Memorial*.¹² Oswald not only mixes past and present tenses, but also evokes the future:

DAMASOS the Trojan
Running at a man thinking kill kill
In years to come someone will find his helmet
Shaped like a real head
Oswald, *Memorial* (41)

The narrator describes the death of Damasos in a vivid progressive present ‘running’ and ‘thinking’, bringing the ancient warrior into both the present and the future when someone will find his head-shaped helmet. Damasos was thinking of killing, but is remembered for dying. The helmet will survive, which will make Damasos’ death ‘real’ again, though the passage also points to the passage of time as a way of forgetting the past. Without poetry, no one will remember Damasos’s name, a point also made at *Iliad* 23.331 when Nestor is unable to determine whether the signpost for the chariot race was once a tomb for a now forgotten man.

Performer and audience

The narrator also connects past and present by addressing her audience, as for example in her description of the death of Echepolus, a Trojan killed by Antilochus:

You can see the hole in the helmet just under the ridge
Where the point of the blade passed through

12 In contrast with the *Iliad*, Patroclus is mentioned only once (60) as the killer in a battle scene in *Memorial*; Agamemnon (32, 34), Antilochus (10, 20), and Achilles (66, 67) twice each; Menelaus (14, 20, 25) three times; and Diomedes (17, 19, 27, 31) four times. On Oswald’s lack of mention of the victors, see also Minchin (2015: 209).

And stuck in his forehead
 Letting the darkness leak down over his eyes
 Oswald, *Memorial* (10)

Here and elsewhere Oswald's narrator addresses her reader, 'you', and points to details of the action as if the audience were present on the Trojan battlefield. Past, present, and future merge in the image of the hole in the helmet that is *seen* again every time the story is told.

When describing the double death of Diores and Pirus, the narrator again addresses her audience and describes the latter's dead body as if it were still visible:

And PIROUS the Thracian
 You can tell him by his knotted hair
 Lies alongside him
 Oswald, *Memorial* (12)

While the Homeric narrator occasionally addresses his audience in the second person with an optative with *an/ken*, in each one of those passages, the narrator stresses a contrast between the audience's expectations and the reality of the poem.¹³ We find two parallels of this use in *Memorial* when the narrator observes 'you would think the sea could do something' to help Amphimachos, a warrior related to Poseidon (43); another instance occurs after the death of Satnius son of River, which was so cold, '[y]ou'd never think it was his mother' (48).

Oswald occasionally uses 'you' in the colloquial sense of 'anyone': 'You can see no further than you can throw a stone' (12); 'To get there you have to go miles over mountains' (55); 'how can you kiss a rolling head' (43). These examples are similar to Homer's optative addresses to his audience or the use of *tis* ('someone' or 'anyone') in general statements. But Oswald also uses the second person in a more pointed way to create a connection with the audience over specific events. *Memorial's* narrator tells the audience that 'you can see' the hole in Echepolus' helmet (10) and 'you can tell' Pirus by looking at his knotted hair (12), as if the poetry brought them directly into the world of the poem.

Another Homeric parallel for Oswald's use of the indicative can be found in the particle *ara*. When a Homeric speaker uses *ara*, he recreates and points to a shared experience from the past and recreates it as a 'shared reality in the here and now of the present' (Bakker 1993: 18), in a process Bakker further describes as '*activation of the tradition*' (20, his emphasis). The particle *ara* calls attention to a speaker's (whether the poem's narrator or one of its characters) re-experiencing the past and activating it for his audience. The particle is often used in the short vignettes to introduce biographical details about dead heroes in the *Iliad*. This process of calling attention to

13 Hom. *Il.* 4.223, 4.429, 5.85, 15.697, 17.366. For a discussion of these direct addresses, see de Jong (1987: 53–68), on negative statements in the narrative as a way for the narrator to interact with his audience, and 98, on direct addresses arousing emotions.

the speaker’s experience and power to activate the tradition is particularly striking, Bakker argues, when it is combined with a direct apostrophe to Patroklos in *Iliad* 16, a moment when ‘the dividing line between private imagination and public experience is at its weakest’ and Patroklos becomes present (Bakker 1993: 23). Yet the passage also stays focused on the ‘past-ness’ of this moment described with one verb in the imperfect and three in the aorist tense. Homer recreates the past in the present, but never ceases ‘pointing to the past’ (to use Bakker’s formulation, 25).

Memorial similarly ‘activates’ the Homeric tradition, starting with the first man who died at Troy thousands of years ago and ending with the death of Hector. But the narrator’s and audience’s relationship to the past is conceived differently as the narrator explicitly directs her audience ‘to see’ the past with direct addresses in the indicative present, recreating an experience shared by narrator and audience. Oswald’s use of direct address in the indicative, which is never used by the Homeric narrator in his apostrophes, thus establishes a closer emotional and temporal relationship between narrator and audience.

Addressing the dead

The Homeric narrator also interacts with his audience in a more indirect way when he addresses his own characters. In the *Iliad* such apostrophes usually occur at moments of great emotional intensity and focus especially on two characters the narrator seems particularly fond of such as Menelaus in *Iliad* 7 and Patroclus in *Iliad* 16.¹⁴ While these apostrophes reflect the poet’s sympathy for his characters, they can also be understood in a broader way. As we have seen above, the poet often addresses characters at key moments when both poet and audience re-experience a past event together.¹⁵ While *Memorial*’s narrator often addresses her audience directly as discussed above, apostrophe of a character occurs only once, in a passage that can help us understand better how Oswald reconfigures Iliadic themes and how apostrophes can simultaneously involve both characters and audience:

Come back to your city SOCUS
 Your father is a rich man a breeder of horses
 And your house has deep decorated baths and long passages

14 There are six addresses to Menelaos at 4.127, 4.146 (when wounded by Pandaros seemingly fatally), 7.104, 13.603, 17.679, and 23.600, and eight addresses to Patroklos at 16.20, 16.584, 16.693, 16.744, 16.754, 16.787, 16.812, 16.843. See also Kahane (1994: 112–13), on apostrophes a way of highlighting characters such as Patroklos, Menelaos, and Eumaios, who are more sympathetic and more similar to his audience than the epics’ protagonists, Achilles and Odysseus.

15 Bakker (1993: 23); see also de Jong (1987: 60), on apostrophes as being meant indirectly for the audience. See also Kahane (1994: 104–13), who concludes, 113, that the Homeric narrator addresses characters to whom he is sympathetic, and who are ‘closest in disposition to’ his audience. For the connection between apostrophes and characters’ lives being threatened, see Hornblower (2012).

But he and his brother weren't listening
 Like men on wire walking over the underworld
 Oswald, *Memorial* (39)

As the passage begins, the narrator seems to address Socus directly, 'Come back to your city SOCUS'. But four lines down the apostrophe becomes more ambiguous as it could also be construed as a quotation of what his family or friends said to Socus before he left his city for the Trojan War. They tried to hold him back but 'he and his brother weren't listening/Like men on wire walking over the underworld'. In a typically striking simile, Oswald compares Socus' refusal to listen to the reckless daring of men who chance their lives by walking on a wire, which is itself in a sense always a 'walking over the underworld'. By recalling the prospect of a no-longer possible return at the very moment of his death, it is as if Socus finally—too late—hears his family's words. Yet the ambiguity of the apostrophe with its repeated personal pronoun 'your' also evokes a more generalized helplessness that is also felt by the poem's audience in the face of young men who are thirsty for violence and refuse to stay or 'come back'.

In *Iliad* 11, the encounter between Socus and Odysseus occurs just after Odysseus kills Socus's brother, Charops. The episode is marked by a series of three speeches: Socus addresses Odysseus, offering a stripped down version of the heroic code — kill or be killed (11.430-33) — just before hurling his spear and almost fatally wounding Odysseus; despite the wound (and with Athene's help) Odysseus rallies and tells Socus that he will not escape being killed (11.443-45); and finally, Odysseus boasts over his enemy's dead body:

ὦ Σῶχ' Ἰππάσου νιῆ δαΐφρονος ἵπποδάμοιο
 φθῆ σε τέλος θανάτοιο κιχήμενον, οὐδ' ὑπάλυξας.
 ἄ δεῖλ' οὐ μὲν σοί γε πατήρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ
 ὅσσε καθαιρήσουσι θανόντι περ, ἀλλ' οἰωνοὶ
 ὤμησται ἔρύουσι, περὶ πτερὰ πυκνὰ βαλόντες.
 ἀτὰρ ἔμ', εἴ κε θάνω, κτεριοῦσί γε δῖοι Ἀχαιοί.

Sokos, son of wise Hippiasos the breaker of horses,
 death was too quick for you and ran you down; you could not
 avoid it. Wretch, since now your father and your honored mother
 will not be able to close your eyes in death, but the tearing
 birds will get you, with their wings close-beating about you.
 If I die, the brilliant Achaians will bury me in honor.
 Hom. *Il.* 11.450-455 (Lattimore)

Socus's death is thus framed by two speeches by Odysseus, who taunts his victim and stresses the glory he gains from the killing of his adversary. Odysseus's speech over the body of Socus is in fact the first expanded version of the motif of having an enemy eaten by animals, and the first time that a named hero is described as a feast

for birds in the *Iliad*.¹⁶ Odysseus’s stark words emphasize how even in death, the warriors compete for honour: Socus ‘loses’ since he will not be properly buried, while Odysseus ‘wins’ because he expects to be given a funeral by the Greeks.

In *Memorial*, we get none of the details that make Socus — who manages almost to kill Odysseus before being struck in the back — such a remarkable character in the *Iliad*. The speeches are gone, and so is Socus’s wounding of Odysseus. All is left is a young man’s desperate attempt to escape Odysseus, and by extension the war, and the focus is on Socus’s death and its consequences for his family. The second address to Socus occurs at the moment of his death:

CHAROPS died first killed by Odysseus
Then Socus who was running by now
Felt the rude punch of a spear in his back
Push through his heart and out the other side poor Socus
Trying to get away from his own ending
Ran out his last moments in fear of the next ones
But this is it now this is the mud of Troy
This is black wings coming down every evening
Bird’s feathers on your face
Unmaking you mouthful by mouthful
Eating your eyes your open eyes
Which your mother should have closed
Oswald, *Memorial* (39)

While Odysseus’s speech in the *Iliad* over Socus’s body is clearly an inspiration for this passage, Oswald transforms Odysseus’s scornful speech into the narrator’s meditation on death on the battlefield and a mother’s grief at not being able to give a burial to her son. The direct address to the dead Socus (‘Birds’ feathers on your face’) leads to a shift in perspective: these words are Odysseus’s in the *Iliad*, but here the perspective expands to include that of the narrator, and by extension of the audience. Instead of taunting, there is only pity (‘Poor Socus’), and instead of boasting and victory there is statement of fact and regret in the face of death. When Odysseus mentions Socus’s parents’ inability to close their sons’ eyes, he does so in the context of a taunt contrasting his victory to Socus’s wretched defeat. For Odysseus, parental grief is one more proof of his glory. The *Iliad* thus focuses on Odysseus’ viewpoint in this episode, and his words inaugurate a series of increasingly violent speeches and acts aiming at dishonouring the bodies of enemies. In *Memorial*, the narrator describes the fate of Socus’ body: Odysseus’s exultant perspective is thus replaced by the narrator’s pity and broader outlook on war and death. In the *Iliad*, Odysseus rejoices in the different fates he envisions for Socus’ and his own body, while the narrator in *Memorial* points to birds’ dining on corpses

16 A first compressed and impersonal version can be found in Diomedes’ speech to Paris at 11.395. See Hainsworth (1993: 273).

as a simple fact of nature. The episode concludes in a mournful epitaph for Socus in the second person and with the description of the birds' attacking Socus's eyes, '[w]hich your mother should have closed'. The notion that a mother *should* be the one to close her child's eyes points to the dreadful and unnatural consequences of war, which forces parents to see their children die.

The word 'now' is strikingly repeated: it appears once with a past tense 'Socus who was running by now', and once with the present 'But this is it now'. Here and elsewhere, as we will see below, Oswald's use of the word 'now' is reminiscent of the function of the Greek word *ara* discussed above:¹⁷ the narrator helps the audience seamlessly move from a past 'now' to a present 'now' as the past comes to life in the continuous present of a mother's grief ('this is it now . . . / this is black wings coming every evening'). But whereas *ara* points to the recreation of a past experience, Oswald's 'now' points firmly to the present: *Memorial's* narrator thus recreates and activates the Homeric tradition, mourning Socus 'now' and making the audience share in the grief for him and the other victims of the Trojan War.¹⁸

While the Homeric narrator does not perform any lament per se, he comes closest in *Iliad* 16 when he addresses Patroklos eight times, and most particularly just before Apollo strikes the first blow that brings about his death (16.787-90 and 16.812-17), and one last time just before Patroklos' last words to Hektor (16.843). Oswald's narrator explicitly addresses a character only in the Socus episode, but the difference is telling: in *Memorial*, the narrator addresses a man who is already dead, making the connection between apostrophe and lament explicit, and connecting the poem to the many Iliadic laments in which characters directly address the dead. As Alexiou shows, direct address to the dead is an essential component of ancient laments, where such addresses function as a way of establishing a contrast between past and present, and between the dead and mourners.¹⁹ *Memorial* laments the dead of the past, but in the process also blurs the distinction between past and present, by bringing the ancient heroes in the present and creating a connection with the audience.

Similes and mourning

Homeric similes mark important and often highly emotional moments, and taken together constitute a poetic world of their own that gives the narrator an opportunity to reframe the narrative and involve his audience.²⁰ Similes occur with more

17 Oswald uses the word 'now' a total of twenty times in the poem, in both the narration and the similes.

18 On parental grief in the *Iliad*, see, e.g., Mills (2000).

19 Alexiou 171-77. Oswald also makes the connection between the vocative and lament in her preface: 'The *Iliad* is a vocative poem. Perhaps even (in common with lament) it is invocative. It always addresses Patroklos as "you", as if speaking directly to the dead' (ix).

20 On the traditionality or Homeric similes, see Muellner (1990). For similes as transitions, see Martin (1997: 146). See also Bakker (2005: 135) who argues that similes can help the

frequency and regularity in Oswald's poem since they function as transitions between each death scene. While Oswald herself sees the biographies and the similes as deriving from different poetic traditions, her poem points to a natural connection between the two, traces of which can also be seen in the Homeric epic, something I will return to at the end of this article.

Let us turn to the death of Polydorus and the ways in which Oswald transforms Homeric similes:

Like when a dolphin powered by hunger
Swims into the harbour
Thousands of light-storms of little fish
Flit away to the water-shaken wall-shadow
And hang there trembling

POLYDORUS is dead who loved running
Now somebody has to tell his father
That exhausted man leaning on the wall
Looking for his favourite son

Like a lion leading his cubs through a wood
Walks into a line of huntsmen
And stares himself stronger
Clenching his whole face fistlike
Around the stones of his eyes
Oswald, *Memorial* (64)

To see how Oswald transforms her source, we can compare these lines briefly with Homer's version of Polydorus's death in *Iliad* 20.407-18. Oswald reduces the eleven lines of the *Iliad* episode to four, and frames the episode with two animal similes. In Homer, Polydorus is described as Priam's favourite son, whose disregard of his father's order and his excellence at running eventually destroy him. As Irene de Jong has argued, the two superlatives used of Polydorus 'youngest' at 20.409, and 'most beloved' at 20.410 present Priam's perspective, so it is almost as if we were seeing Polydorus's death through Priam's eyes, though in fact Priam is pointedly not looking at this particular moment, and, we later learn, is not aware of Polydorus' death until much later.²¹

Oswald, like Homer, brings out the pathos of a young man's death and his father's grief, but instead of dwelling on the encounter between Polydorus and Achilles, she leaves Achilles entirely out and starts with 'POLYDORUS is dead', making the

poet communicate 'more directly with the audience'. For similes as a way for the narrator to interact with his characters, see Ready (2011: 150-57).

21 de Jong (1988: 188).

cause of his death irrelevant. The narrator also implicates her audience in Polydorus' death when she points out 'Now somebody has to tell his father'. 'Now' connects past and present, and, strikingly, Priam is left unnamed.

Another way in which Oswald emphasizes the relationship of parents and offspring is through the similes that precede and follow the death. By repeating most of her similes, Oswald also leads us to rethink the relationship between similes and the rest of the poem. Because most of the similes in *Memorial* are repeated twice, they can refer both to the passage that precedes as well as to the passage that follows them in a more explicit way than if were dealing with a single simile, as in Homeric poetry.

Framing the death of Polydorus are two similes that involve animals that are small or young and become prey to powerful hunters. Throughout *Memorial*, Oswald takes her inspiration from Homeric similes, but she gives them her own twist. Here is the *Iliad* simile comparing Achilles to a predatory dolphin just before he kills Polydorus's brother, Lykaon:

ὡς δ' ὑπὸ δελφίνου μεγακήτεος ἰχθύες ἄλλοι
φεύγοντες πιμπλάσι μυχοὺς λιμένος εὐόρμου
δειδιότες· μάλα γάρ τε κατεσθίει ὄν κε λάβησιν·
ὡς Τρῶες ποταμοῖο κατὰ δεινοῖο ῥέεθρα
πτῶσσον ὑπὸ κρημνούς.

... As before a huge-gaping dolphin the other fishes
escaping cram the corners of a deepwater harbor
in fear, for he avidly eats up any he can catch;
so the Trojans along the course of the terrible river
shrank under the bluffs.
Hom. *Il.* 21.22–26 (Lattimore)

The dolphin is described as a huge sea creature (*megakêteos*), and his preys simply as 'other fishes', rather than marked as small as in Oswald's rendering, in which the 'little fish' try to hide in the water, 'trembling'. In Homer, the simile highlights the power of Achilles and the powerlessness and fear of his opponents, while in *Memorial*, the hungry predatory dolphin who devours the fish no longer refer to a single character but rather present war as a natural state in which the only rule is kill or be killed, and the narrator humanizes the 'little fish' further by describing their trembling in the face of death.²² Here, as elsewhere in the poem, Oswald privileges dying over killing.

The lion simile that bookends the death of Polydorus in *Memorial* draws on a passage from the *Iliad* when Ajax protects the body of Patroklos:

Αἴας δ' ἀμφὶ Μενουτιάδῃ σάκος εὐρὸν καλύψας
ἐστήκει ὡς τίς τε λέων περὶ οἴσι τέκεσσιν,

22 For more on the ways in which Oswald anthropomorphizes Iliadic similes, see Hahnemann (2014: 18).

ὣ ῥά τε νήπι' ἄγοντι συναντήσωνται ἐν ὕλῃ
ἄνδρες ἐπακτῆρες· ὁ δέ τε σθένει βλεμείνει,
πᾶν δέ τ' ἐπισκύνιον κάτω ἔλκεται ὅσσε καλύπτων·

Now Aias covering the son of Menoitios under his broad shield
stood fast, like a lion over his young, when the lion
is leading his little ones along, and men who are hunting
come upon them in the forest. He stands in the pride of his great strength
hooding his eyes under the cover of down-drawn eyelids.
Hom. *Il.* 17.132-136 (Lattimore)

There, as in several other lion similes in the *Iliad*, we find a lion depicted in the act of protecting or lamenting their offspring. Although these lions are grammatically male, they are presented as maternal figures caring for their young.²³ Because it evokes the image of a father trying to protect its offspring, the lion in Oswald's version can also be understood as Priam himself, a father who tries to 'lead his cubs' to safety, but fails to keep his sons from danger and mourns and will find himself in the role of the mourning lion.

'That exhausted man leaning on the wall/Looking for his favourite son' in fact draws upon another key passage in *Iliad* 22.44-55 when Priam stands on the wall to appeal to Hektor to come back to the city, and expresses his concern for his two sons by Laothoe, Lykaon and Polydorus, whom he cannot see. Oswald alludes to this passage and answers Priam's implicit question about his sons' fate: 'POLYDORUS is dead'; and 'now somebody has to tell his father'. We do not see Priam mourn his son, but Oswald includes so many scenes of sorrow (especially parental grief) that the reader (or listener) will find it easy to picture such a scene: earlier, we see Simoisius die, 'an unspeakable sorrow to his parents' (11); we hear the 'shrill sound' of five sisters calling on the ghost of their brother at his grave (30); we also hear Harpalion's father's 'horrible . . . death-howl' on finding his son gone (47); while the women 'at the washing pools' hear the river 'crying like a human' while they remember their dead (67). Shortly after the death of Polydorus, Laothoe is describing grieving for her (and Priam's) other son, Lykaon:

Laothoe one of Priam's wives
Never saw her son again he was washed away
Now she can't look at the sea she can't think about
The bits unburied being eaten by fishes
Oswald, *Memorial* (66)

Unable to close Polydorus's eyes, like Socus's mother, Laothoe mourns her son in a perpetual present. The two deaths connected by the narrator's insistence on the

23 Ebbott and Dué (2012) have shown in a recent article how these images of maternal lions find their counterparts in the behaviour of soldiers on the battlefield who behave as mothers to one another.

grief of both parents in the present, ‘now’, and both deaths are framed in similar ways, each preceded by a sea simile and followed by a lion simile. Let us first look at the sea simile:

Like on a long beach the rustle of the sea
Opening its multiple folds unfurling waves
Oswald, *Memorial* (66)

The beach scene is generic, but the sea of the simile blends with the sea of the biographical paragraph that follows, in which Laothoe’s imagines her son’s body devoured by fish. Following the death is another lion simile:

Like when a lion comes back to a forest’s secret rooms
Too late
The hunger has taken her children
She follows the racks of that man
Into every valley
With her heart’s darkness
Growing darker
Oswald, *Memorial* (66-67)

This simile is inspired by *Iliad* 18.318-322 when Achilles leads the lament for Patroklos and is compared to a lion who has lost his offspring and seeks vengeance on their killer. As in the *Iliad*, the simile connects mourning with the desire for revenge, and the growing darkness of the lion’s and Laothoe’s heart is typical of the narrator’s pessimistic vision. Oswald transforms the grammatically male lion of Homeric epic into a specifically female lion, who thus becomes more closely connected with Laothoe in the biographical vignette.²⁴

Oswald’s narrator does one thing that never occurs in Homer when she makes her audience part of one simile, inspired by the rain simile of *Iliad* 16.384-92. There a fall rainstorm is the result of Zeus’s wrath at mankind because ‘in violent assembly they pass decrees that are crooked’ (16.387) and the rains swell rivers and sea into a flood that ‘diminishes’ the works of men (16.392). In Oswald’s version, Zeus is tired of violent men, as he is in the *Iliad*:

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

24 As Hahnemann (2016) notes, both lions are clearly female in Homer despite their grammatical masculine gender, so that Oswald’s lions are more clearly connected to the male and female characters in the narrative, Priam in the first passage and Laothoe in the second.

Under the rain’s lens
Now the rivers are filling they are overflowing
There are streams sawing through 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, *Memorial* (40-41)

The narrator implicates all of us in Zeus’s anger by moving from the impersonal third person to an inclusive first person plural pronoun ‘Now every one of us is being looked at/Under the rain’s lens’. We are simultaneously seeing the world of the poem as observers (‘And the works of men are vanishing’) and caught up in the events described (‘everyone of us’). Stanley Lombardo does something similar in his translation of Homeric similes when he exhorts the audience in the second person indicative or imperative to experience the sights and sounds of the world of the similes,²⁵ but Oswald goes further with this single use of the first person pronoun, which places the audience in a different temporal relationship to the entire poem, stressing our presence both in the present of the performance and the traditional past that is being brought back to life.

Conclusions

We have seen above how Oswald uses Homeric techniques, such as biographical vignettes, similes, apostrophe, and direct address to recreate and activate the Homeric tradition. While both the *Iliad* and *Memorial* are filled with death and mourning, the *Iliad*’s narrative focuses on a particular moment in the tenth year of the Trojan war and the consequences of Achilles’ rage. Oswald’s *Memorial* omits the story and gives equal attention to all the men who die in the poem. Both poems actively remember the heroes of the past and paint a brutal picture of the destruction brought about by war for both individual and communities, but Oswald leaves out the notion of epic glory that is so important in the *Iliad*. In *Memorial*, there is no glory. Warriors walk, run, or stumble into battle:

DEICOON the Trojan
was too eager too heroic
He found praise yes
But also death
Oswald, *Memorial* (19)

25 See, e.g., ‘imagine the westerly squalls’ *Il.* 11.322 (Lombardo) = 11.305; ‘think of wolves’, *Il.* 16.166 (Lombardo) = 16.156; ‘you can hear the sound from a long way off’, *Il.* 16.805 (Lombardo) = 16.769, which is Lombardo’s rendition of the Homeric formula ἦχῆθι θεσπεσίῃ, which Oswald translates as ‘A word from another world’.

Oswald uses the word heroic only once in the poem and gives it a negative, almost sarcastic, connotation. The praise that Deicoon finds is meaningless since it coincides with his death.

Memorial is relentless in its emphasis on grief and hopelessness. Oswald brings the *Iliad* into the present, but rejects its vision of the hero who can become immortalized through poetry. Both the *Iliad* and *Memorial* end with the death of Hector. But in contrast with the *Iliad's* focus on the truce that makes it possible for the Trojans to give a burial to Hector, *Memorial* ends with his corpse:

Hector loved Andromache
 But in the end he let her face slide from his mind
 He came back to her sightless
 Strengthless expressionless
 Asking only to be washed and burned
 And his bones wrapped in soft cloths
 And returned to the ground
 Oswald, *Memorial* (69)

While the *Iliad* ends with public mourning (the entire *demos* mourns with Helen at 24.776) and a funeral, *Memorial* leaves us with an image of Andromache seeing the dead body of her husband, and the incommensurability of private grief.

Another way in which the two narratives differ is in the relative lack of voice given to the characters in *Memorial*. Speeches account for one half of the *Iliad* and two-thirds of the *Odyssey*, while characters rarely speak in *Memorial*.²⁶ And when they do, it is typically an occasion for sorrow: a father's unanswered prayer to the gods to protect his sons (13) or another's useless plea to his sons to stay home (37); Pandarus' empty wish to destroy his bow if he escapes death (18–19); fruitless supplications to the enemy (25, 33); two young men's foolish and short-lived delight at being captured by Achilles (32); and, finally, Hector's words, 'I know what will happen' (69). Gone are the boasts and taunts that are so overwhelmingly present on the Trojan battlefield in the *Iliad*, and the poem emphasizes the act of dying, rather than the heroes' deeds or words. With her narrator, we experience grief:

Grief is black it is made of earth
 it gets into the cracks in the eyes
 It lodges its lump in the throat
 Oswald, *Memorial* (35)

We have seen how Oswald argues for an essential distinction between biographies and similes on the basis of their different origins, yet the way she uses similes to punctuate her work of loss also goes back to Homeric poetry, and it is in fact impossible to disentangle similes from the rest of the narrative in both works. While no

26 Beck (2005: 1).

similes occur in Iliadic laments spoken by characters, the relationship of biography and simile is more intertwined than Oswald allows. In her poem, as we have seen above, the sea and lion similes bleed into the narrative of the deaths of Polydorus and Lycaon: both young men fall victims to war, mourned by lion-like parents who have lost their offspring and long for revenge. The deep connection between similes and mourning is already present in Homeric epic, where mourning scenes often culminate with a simile, and in the case of Achilles’ and Penelope’s mourning, lion similes.²⁷ It is not surprising that similes often follow lament since these are by definition highly emotional moments for the characters who experience grief, anger, and thirst for revenge in the wake of the death of their loved ones.

Memorial’s conclusion in the form of twelve similes only makes the connection more obvious. In the first of the series, Oswald reworks a well-known Homeric simile:

Like leaves who could write a history of leaves
The wind blows their ghosts to the ground
And the spring breathes new leaf into the woods
Thousands of names thousands of leaves
When you remember them remember this
Dead bodies are their lineage
Which matter no more than the leaves
Oswald, *Memorial* (70)

We have come full circle with the narrator now addressing the reader in the imperative ‘remember this’, from within a simile. And the narrator instructs us to remember names, bodies, and a Homeric simile about life and death in which dead bodies and leaves both make way for new bodies and new leaves: mankind, and by extension, war, are thus presented as a part of nature.

The remaining similes explore and place in parallel human and animal recurring events: harvest, bird migrations, flies surrounding buckets of milk, crickets singing, wasps building nests, generations of bees, locusts fleeing fields on fire, predatory wolves, water breaking a dam, and, finally, the striking image of a shooting star briefly seen before disappearing:

Like when god throws a star
And everyone looks up
To see that whip of sparks
And then it’s gone
Oswald, *Memorial* (80–81)

The shooting star is gone, but poetry remains. Oswald makes her poem into a lament that includes both the human and natural world.

27 On the connection between lion similes and mourning, see Pache (2016).

Whereas Homeric epic brings the past back to life to remember heroes, here as throughout, *Memorial* points to the presence of the past in the present. Just as generations of animals continue their work, human generations are doomed to repetition. We must try to remember the past, as *Memorial*'s narrator enjoins, but even as we do, we must also remember that 'the dead matter no more than the leaves'. Oswald's *Memorial*, '[a] word from another world', strongly rejects the possibility of heroism on the battlefield, yet it paradoxically functions in the same way as its predecessor, immortalizing anew the ancient dead for twenty-first century audiences. By bringing Homeric poetry into the present, Oswald enjoins us to mourn the ancient dead, and also to mourn, each one of us, for our own private sorrows.

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