

## Translucent Transplants: On the Similes in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

The publication of Alice Oswald's *Memorial. An Excavation of the Iliad*, which first appeared in the UK in 2011 and a year later in the US, caused quite a splash. NPR's Alan Cheuse rated it among the five best books in fiction and poetry of the year. In addition, it was shortlisted for the T.S.Eliot Prize and has since won the Warwick Prize for Writing as well as the Popescu Prize for European Poetry. Reviews in newspapers and magazines, however, have been mixed, including several scathing remarks concerning her treatment of the Homeric similes. In this paper I offer a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis to show that Oswald's practice in this regard reinforces the overall goals of her poem. In fact, her use of the similes can help us (and our students!) to grapple with the manifold functions of this literary device in the ancient epic as well.

Oswald explains that in *Memorial* she has stripped away the narrative to create a "bipolar poem" that alternates between short biographies of the soldiers, both Greek and Trojan, who die over the course of the *Iliad*, and loosely translated similes. "I write through the Greek, not from it," she says of her rendering of the latter, "aiming for translucence rather than translation" (2012:9-10). An example will illustrate her method (Oswald 2012:16):

Brave HYPSENIOR the stump of whose hand  
Lies somewhere on the battlefield  
He was the son of Dolopion the river-priest  
Now he belongs to a great red emptiness

Like when rainy fog pulls down its hood over the mountains

Misery for the herdsman better than night for the thief

You can see no further than you can throw a stone

The fact that most of the similes are repeated—for reasons of space I have omitted the second iteration—prompted Peter Green to question if they were “really that important?” William Logan protests that Oswald’s “insistent use of ‘like’ for ‘as’ turns her narrator into a gum-chewing Valley girl.” Against these complaints I argue that in both cases the repetition must be understood acoustically, in light of the poet’s goal to create an “oral cemetery” (2012:9). The bulk of my paper, however, is devoted to countering another dismissive comment by Logan:

A deeper and more disturbing problem is Oswald’s Frankenstein transplant of similes from the original... Too often this rough-and-ready recycling destroys the force, and the cunning, of the *Iliad*.

In fact, as I will demonstrate, Oswald has imbued her similes with a new force and new cunning. For example, her decision to do away with Homer’s distinction between heroes and minor warriors in the biographies is reinforced by her avoidance of Iliadic models featuring “heroic” animals (like boars and lions; cf. Alden 2005:335-36) in the similes. Furthermore, in her similes she describes animals, plants and even animals in strikingly anthropomorphic terms. A similar blurring of categories can be observed in the biographies, which often contain no clue as to which side the dead man was fighting on. Thus Oswald creates a communal memorial for the casualties, not as Greeks and Trojans, but as human beings. And she goes further still. While some of her similes, like their Homeric counterparts, seem connected to the preceding verses in more or less obvious ways, she also employs free-standing ones, most notably a sequence of eleven of them at

the end of the poem. Homer, too, uses similes to pace his poem, but in service to the human narrative. Inversely, in *Memorial* the commemoration of the dead is at first balanced and in the end eclipsed by scenes from the timeless world of nature present in the similes.

The talk is designed to be accessible to listeners who have not read *Memorial* and may not have read the *Iliad* in a long time; it should be of special interest to those who teach the *Iliad* in translation.

### Bibliography

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