

## More Context and Less: A Response to Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff\*

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### 1. Preamble

As a digital, open-access publication, *Connotations* is particularly well-suited to serve as the venue for a multi-disciplinary exchange of ideas, such as the discussion of Alice Oswald's poem *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* has turned out to be. Upon its publication, first in the United Kingdom in 2011 and then in the United States in 2012, the poem was widely reviewed in Anglophone newspapers and poetry magazines. More recently, it has become the subject of scholarly articles, mainly in the area of Classics, but also in Theater Studies, Eco-Criticism, and English Literature. In order to facilitate this engagement across different types of publications and disciplines further, I include at the end of my response an extensive list of reviews, interviews, and scholarly treatments of *Memorial*. It is my hope that my response will, in its turn, inspire other responses and thus provide a stimulus to further discussion of this remarkable poem.

In addition to transcending the disciplinary boundaries of more traditional journals, *Connotations* also provides a significant advantage due to its particular publication format, which allows for a seed article to be followed up by a series of linked responses. Consequently, I ask

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\*Reference: Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff, "[M]emories and similes laid side by side": The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, *Connotations* 27 (2018): 19-47. For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debate/the-poetics-alice-oswalds-memorial/>.

readers of this response who are not familiar with the poem to consult the description offered in the seed article, only one click away.

## 2. Overview

In their article, “[M]emories and similes laid side by side’: The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*,” Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff explore Alice Oswald’s practice of lifting Homeric similes from their original context in the *Iliad* and integrating them, in adapted form, into the long middle portion (henceforth labeled Part B) of her poem *Memorial*. They state that, by replacing Homer’s plot with an unconnected sequence of poetic obituaries for the casualties of the Trojan War whose deaths are recounted in the epic, the poet poses herself “the task of producing a new kind of coherence” between the transplanted similes and their new context. Thus, they conclude, Oswald’s poem constitutes “an act of creation by decontextualization and recontextualization” (22).

In what follows, I seek to inflect this conclusion in two seemingly opposite ways. First, I argue for a broader definition of “recontextualization.” For Linne and Niederhoff, the new context of a simile in *Memorial* consists solely of the preceding obituary, but a simile may connect in a meaningful way with other passages of the poem as well. Second, I draw attention to a group of similes where the authors’ concept of “recontextualization” does not apply, because the simile follows a list of names rather than a verse obituary. This observation leads to an investigation of Oswald’s extensive and innovative use of blank space as a constituent element in *Memorial*, where the blank spaces do not merely create a generic void but rather evoke a specific context of missing material. In an earlier article on the poem, I showed that the lamentation for the dead in *Memorial* is radically inclusive in that it records the loss of life of the men fighting on both sides without distinction, and even reaches beyond the human realm by including an obituary for a horse killed in combat (Hahnemann, “Book” 18-26). In the final section of the present article, I argue for a third type of

inclusiveness by suggesting that *Memorial* commemorates not only the 215 dead who are named explicitly on its pages, but extends also to the many casualties of the Trojan War not mentioned in the *Iliad*, and perhaps even to the casualties of all wars since, down to our own time.

### 3. Argument and Findings of the Seed Article

At the center of Linne and Niederhoff's article stands a series of test cases in which the authors interpret seven similes from *Memorial*, each in connection with the obituary that precedes it in the modern poem on the one hand, and with reference to its original context in the ancient epic on the other (25-38):<sup>1</sup>

	Simile in the <i>Iliad</i>	Context in the <i>Iliad</i>	Preceding Obituary in <i>Memorial</i>
a.	wind on the sea and on a cornfield (2.144-48)	Agamemnon's exhortation of the Greek army	Protesilaus (9)
b.	a dog chasing a deer (22.189-92)	Achilles chasing Hector around Troy	Diores and Pirous (12)
c.	a little girl crying and begging to be picked up (16.7-10)	Patroclus begging Achilles to help the Greeks	Scamandrius (14)
d.	a woman weighing wool (12.433-35)	a stalemate in the fighting around the Greek camp	Acamas (22)
e.	oaks withstanding the wind (12.132-34)	Leonteus and Polypoetes defending the Greek wall	Ilioneus (49-50)
f.	generations of leaves (6.146-48)	generations of men	Hector (68-69)
g.	a shooting star (4.75-77)	Athena descending to the battlefield	—

In their discussion of these similes, the authors discern several patterns in the way Oswald departs from her Homeric model. To begin with, they note that in the *Iliad* the similes serve to illustrate a variety of events while in *Memorial*, whose "narrative" consists purely of obituaries, all of them come after the description of a death (a: 28; e:

33). As a result, the contrast between the world of the similes and the world of the narrative, although it exists also in Homer, emerges more starkly in *Memorial*: whereas the similes for the most part describe ordinary events that happen again and again, the obituaries focus on the extraordinary moment when the life of a unique individual is irrevocably lost (d: 32; e: 34). At the same time, Oswald tends to shift the focus of the narrative from the victorious warrior to the man killed, which lends her poem the tone of a lament (b: 29 with n12; e: 33).

In a second set of observations, the authors note that the point of contact between tenor and vehicle, technically known as the *tertium comparationis*, is less clear in Oswald's poem than in Homer's, since she eschews the use of signposts and different simile markers, opting instead for a looser link by opening each simile with the word "like" (a: 26; b: 30; e: 33). At the same time, however, in many cases she also creates subtle connections between an obituary and a simile by re-shaping the Homeric material so as to give rise to a shared concept (a: 26; c: 30; e: 33-34), which can be reinforced by verbal echo (c: 30-31; d: 32; f: 35). Consequently, in some instances the meaningful similarities Oswald employs to tie together obituary and simile are shot through with equally meaningful contrasts, for example in the juxtaposition of a warrior's death on the battlefield with a peaceful domestic scene (c: 31; d: 32; e: 35).

Finally, Linne and Niederhoff propose a pattern of a different kind, arguing that certain similes can be interpreted as meta-poetic, self-reflexive statements about *Memorial* as a whole. They suggest this reading apropos of the similes framing Part B of the poem—the wind simile (quoted and discussed below on pp. 49-51), and the simile about the generations of leaves and men—and return to it in their discussion of the simile about the shooting star at the end of Part C, the very last simile in the poem (a: 26-27; f: 36-37; g: 37-38). In my opinion, this pattern, which lacks an analogue in the *Iliad*, is especially intriguing and warrants systematic study. Similes relevant to such a study could include the one about the olive wand which "became a

wind-dictionary [that] could speak in tongues" (27-28), an evocative neologism which Mira Rosenthal borrowed for her description of *Memorial* as a whole. Given the poem's frequently noted similarity in format and content to an inscribed tombstone or casualty list (e. g. Green; Cole; Rosenthal; Hahnemann, "Book" 5-14; Schein 156), another simile with a potentially self-reflexive dimension is the one about "a stone [that s]tands by a grave and says nothing" (43). The recurrence of failed speech acts in these self-reflexive similes also makes for a fascinating link to Stephe Harrop's view that *Memorial* casts death primarily as a loss of the human faculty to speak.

Due to the somewhat subjective nature of the connections proposed by Linne and Niederhoff, readers will disagree as to which ones they find convincing, and one may hope that other scholars will feel inspired to continue, complement, or contradict some of the lines of thought they have broached. Regardless of such disagreements about individual instances, however, the authors' exploration of the connections that tie a particular simile to the preceding obituary forms a valuable contribution to the growing body of evidence supporting the view that the placement of the similes in *Memorial* is meaningful and worthy of investigation. That this should be so is by no means a foregone conclusion. To the contrary, several of the poem's early reviewers complained that, removed from their original context, the similes no longer make sense; William Logan, for example, whose sentiment is shared also by Guriel and Green, describes Oswald's method as a "rough-and-ready recycling" which "too often [...] destroys the force, and the cunning, of the *Iliad*," resulting in a "Frankenstein transplant."

More recently, however, reviewers as well as scholars have been adducing insights that contradict these indictments, and the findings of Linne and Niederhoff fit well into this framework. The shift of focus from victor to victim, for instance, was first observed by Elizabeth Minchin, who specifies that in reworking the Iliadic material for her obituaries, Oswald erases all references to the victor's gloating over his success and in fact often does not even provide his name (209, cf. also Pache 176). Linne and Niederhoff extend this insight by show-

ing that the same shift applies also to the similes (29 with n9). Their observation, in turn, constitutes an important link to Oswald's habit of underlining the opposition between the genders in the similes by consistently marking the victims of violence as female and the aggressors as male (Hahnemann, "Feminist", forthcoming).

#### 4. Problems of Recontextualization I: The Boundaries of Context

Surprisingly for a study focusing on the role of the similes in Part B of *Memorial*, Linne and Niederhoff offer no discussion of the remarkable fact that most of the similes are repeated.<sup>2</sup> Critics have described the effect of the repetitions in a variety of interrelated ways, stating that they create the solemn, even otherworldly atmosphere associated with a state of trance or prophetic utterance (Kellaway; Womack, "Memorial"); that they allow the readers/listeners to absorb the image first cognitively and then emotionally, while also granting them a respite from the grief induced by the poem as well as its fast pace (Jaffa 19; Crown; Rosenthal); that they serve as an element of music and a source of pleasure (Hahnemann, "Book" 4-5; Minchin 212n31). Adopting a more philosophical point of view, Teju Cole explains them as a "clarifying echo [that] invites the reader to place, one more time, each death into its proper natural context of dispersal and oblivion" (15), and David Farrier sees them as a "spectral echo in Derrida's sense of a moment that is both 'repetition *and* first time'" (4).

Most relevant to the investigation undertaken by Linne and Niederhoff, however, is a statement by Oswald herself. While the authors limit their analysis to a selection of similes and the preceding obituaries, the poet cites as one of her intentions in repeating (almost all of) the similes a desire to encourage the reader to think of them as connecting forward as well as back: "the first one links to the life behind it, and the second one links to the one in front. They're like [a] kind of swing doors" (Jaffa 19). Corinne Pache (182-85) provides a compelling example of such a double-headed reading in her study of the obituaries for the brothers Polydorus and Lycaon, which in *Memorial* appear

less than forty verses apart and are each preceded by a sea simile and followed by a lion simile. Moreover, as she points out, the mention of Polydorus' bereft father in his obituary resonates with the image of a male lion leading his cubs in the accompanying simile, while the central role given to Lycaon's traumatized mother in his obituary is picked up by the plight of a female lion whose cubs have been stolen. As these insights show, a broader definition of the new context into which Oswald has transplanted a simile can lead to the discovery of larger structural patterns in the poetic design of *Memorial*.

The double-headed approach suggested by Oswald and exemplified by Pache also lends support and nuance to Linne and Niederhoff's provocative interpretation of the first simile in the poem (9-10):

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  
 (*repeated*)

Since this simile follows after the obituary for Protesilaus, the authors suggest that there is "a kind of dialogue between the wind on the one hand and the sea and the cornfield on the other—as if the wind is saying, 'What about Protesilaus?', to which the waves respond with a deep sigh, and the cornstalks by shaking their heads, indicating that the wind is searching for a man who no longer can be found" (27). Indeed, it seems especially appropriate that the wind should search for Protesilaus among the sea waves, since this hero was killed "jumping to be first ashore" (9) when the Greek armada made its landfall at Troy. Complementarily, the second portion of the double simile with its mention of the corn-stalks can be related to the two subsequent obituaries for Echepolus and Elephenor if we recall a passing remark in the *Iliad* which suggests that the battlefield beneath the walls of

Troy had formerly been a cornfield (21.602-03). The knowledge that the plain where of late Echeolus “mov[ed] out and out among the spears” (10) had, in times of peace, bristled with ears of corn instead of the blades of spears also creates a tension between the simile and the obituary in *Memorial* akin to the bitter irony inherent in the Homeric simile—not used by Oswald—that compares the Greek and Trojan warriors cutting each other down on this very plain to two lines of reapers mowing down a cornfield (11.67-69).

Readers might hesitate to accept the reading proposed by Linne and Niederhoff because it attributes to this simile a very specific connection to the man mourned in the preceding obituary while most of the other similes in *Memorial* tend to be more generic. We should remember, however, that the obituary for Protesilaus itself constitutes an exception to a rule, seeing that he is the only casualty included in *Memorial* whose death does not occur during the period of the war recounted in the *Iliad*. Moreover, the image of the wind going in quest of a dead man in much the same manner as the thoughts of his surviving relatives might do fits well with Oswald’s habit of describing nature in anthropomorphic terms. Even the idea of a kind of near-verbal dialogue envisioned by Linne and Niederhoff between the wind and the water that “breathes a deep sigh” and the corn-stalks that “shake their green heads” is not far-fetched, since it receives support from a passage near the end of Part B in which an element of the natural world clearly joins in the human lament for the dead. Here the river Scamander causes the Trojan women doing their laundry on its bank to think of their dead relatives who died in its waters (67):

Women at the washing pools  
 When they hear the river running  
 Crying like a human through its chambers  
 They remember THERSILOCHUS...  
 They remember MYDON...

Homer refers to the washing pools as a landmark that Achilles and Hector pass in their mortal race around Troy: there “the wives of the Trojans and their lovely / daughters washed the clothes to shining, in



the old days / when there was peace, before the coming of the sons of the Achaians" (22.154-57). Oswald, by contrast, has shifted the mention so that it now forms part of the obituary for the multitude of Trojans Achilles killed on his rampage prior to going after Hector. More importantly, she has shifted the chronological perspective as well. In the *Iliad*, the mention of the washing pools occasions a glance backward in time; at the very moment when the drama of the battlefield is about to reach its climax, the epic drives home the horror of war by calling to mind a peace-time scene. Thus Homer emphasizes the contrast between a past lived in peace and a present marred by war. In *Memorial*, however, the reverse is the case: here the washing happens in the present while the carnage is a memory from the past. Evidently, for the Trojan women in *Memorial*, time has come to a stand-still with the result that the distinction between past and present has been erased for them, just as it has for Laothoe, who relives the death of her son every time she looks at the river where he "was washed away" (66). Nor does the grief for the lost human life persist only in the minds of the human survivors; rather, it has been inscribed on the landscape in the crying river and, as Linne and Niederhoff suggest, the wind's futile quest for the dead.

##### 5. Problems of Recontextualization II: The Absence of Context

Oswald has composed verse obituaries for about half of the casualties, while the rest appear only as names in list format (21, 24, 28, 36, 38, 40, 41, 46, 52, 53, 56, 61, 62, 65). Consequently, Linne and Niederhoff's method of seeking for connections within a simile-obituary pair cannot always be applied, because some similes are preceded and/or followed by a bare list of names. It appears, then, that coherence is not Oswald's primary concern; indeed, quite the opposite. According to a statement she made in an interview, she sought to recreate in *Memorial* her own—highly idiosyncratic—experience of Homer's poetry as "things just being little separated blocks next to each other—but not hierarchical" (Jaffa 19). While readers may hesitate to accept Oswald's image as an apt description of the narrative fabric of the *Iliad*, it works very well for *Memorial*, where each chunk of text—be it an obituary, a

list of names, the first or the second iteration of a simile—is set off from its surroundings by a bit of “nontext” in the form of a blank space on the page. Later in the same interview, Oswald makes this very point when she says about the structure of *Memorial* that, instead of “a whole shape spread[ing] over the whole poem, [she] wanted it to have these chopped, side-by-side things” (Jaffa 19). Thus, as Linne and Niederhoff indicate in the title of their article, it is a defining characteristic of *Memorial* that its constituent elements are placed “side by side”, but it is equally important that they have been separated and chopped apart.<sup>3</sup>

Like that dog in the barn  
Lying in a darkless half-sleep guarding his sheep  
All night there's a lump of growl stuck in his throat  
So the fox tip-toeing through the woods  
Worries him awake

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All night there's a lump of growl stuck in his throat  
So the fox tip-toeing through the woods  
Worries him awake

And DEMUCHUS  
LAOGONUS  
DARDANUS

And TROS begging for his life  
But his life was over

Like when two animals have found a little luckiness  
Of clear-running water in the mountains  
One dies and the other drinks it

Like when two animals have found a little luckiness  
Of clear-running water in the mountains  
One dies and the other drinks it

And MULIUS and RHIGMOS

Like on a long beach the rustle of the sea  
Opening its multiple folds unfurling waves

Like on a long beach the rustle of the sea  
Opening its multiple folds unfurling waves

Laothoë 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  
He was the tall one the conscientious one  
Who stayed out late pruning his father's fig trees  
Who was kidnapped who was ransomed  
Who walked home barefoot from Arisbe  
And rested for twelve days and was killed  
LYCAON killed Lycaon unkilld Lycaon  
Bending down branches to make wheels  
Lycaon kidnapped Lycaon pruning by moonlight  
Lycaon naked in a river pleading for his life  
Being answered by Achilles No

Like when a lion comes back to a forest's secret rooms  
Too late

The hunter has taken her children  
She follows the tracks of that man  
Into every valley  
With her heart's darkness  
Growing darker

[ 68 ]

[ 69 ]

Image 1: Blank spaces turn each list, obituary, and simile in *Memorial* into a discrete chunk of text.

Oswald presents the chunks of texts in *Memorial* in such a way as to give all equal importance, but she helps the readers/listeners to rec-

ognize a pattern in their relationship to each other by means of two different connectors: “and” and “like.”<sup>4</sup> The fact that she uses “like” to introduce almost all of her similes has raised the eyebrows of Logan and other grammar mavens among her critics, because in many instances the correct connective would be “as.” But switching back and forth between “like” and “as” would have compromised the effect of the repetition, and moreover, as Oxford Professor of Poetry Simon Armitage demonstrates in a lecture on the similes of Elizabeth Bishop, a more flexible use of “like” has precedent not only in colloquial speech but also in modern poetry. Still, Linne and Niederhoff’s conclusion holds true: Oswald’s use of the word in *Memorial* is radical in its looseness. Picking up on Oswald’s own metaphor from her introduction, in which she calls *Memorial* a “bipolar” poem (in the sense the term is understood in physics rather than in psychology), we may think of the word “like” as establishing a kind of force field between the world of the battlefield on the one hand, and the world of nature and peacetime activity on the other.

In contrast to the syntactic and semantic looseness with which Oswald uses the word “like” at the beginning of the similes, she gives the connector “and” at the start of obituaries and lists of names a very specific function. Since “and” does not usually begin a sentence, its occurrence as the first word of a chunk of poetry no fewer than twenty-six times throughout *Memorial* is remarkable.<sup>5</sup> This special type of “and” occurs both at the start of obituaries (63) and of lists (61):

And IPHITUS who was born in the snow  
 Between two tumbling trout-stocked rivers  
 Died on the flat dust  
 Not far from DEMOLEON and HIPPODAMAS

And HIPPOTHOUS  
 SCHEDIUS  
 PHORCYS  
 LEOCRITUS

While translators of Homer will sometimes start a sentence with “and” in imitation of the ancient epic’s narrative style, which links

almost every sentence to the preceding one by means of a connecting particle, Oswald employs the word as a link not to what comes immediately before it, but as a bridge to the previous death across the intervening blank spaces and simile. This interpretation is confirmed by her even more unconventional use of “and” as the last word of a list (21), whereby she clearly signals to the readers/listeners that more entries are yet to follow. In this manner, then, she ties together the deaths on the battlefield into a continuous, albeit interrupted sequence.

As Elizabeth Minchin reminds us, lists are an important element in the *Iliad* as well as in *Memorial* (204-07). The most notable example is the so-called Catalog of Ships, a survey of the contingents of the Greek and Trojan forces along with their leaders early on in the epic, which, according to the late novelist Umberto Eco, constitutes the prototype for one of two fundamental artistic principles. As he outlines in the book accompanying his 2009 exhibit, *The Infinity of Lists*, at the Louvre, the description of Achilles’ shield near the end of the *Iliad* exemplifies a “closed system” or “form”, used to depict “a thing understood” by means of a “poetics of the everything included.” By contrast, a list or catalog establishes an “open system” by means of a “poetics of the *etcetera*,” in an attempt to grapple with the unknown by listing its (always infinite) attributes (7-18). The reason why Eco sees the Catalog of Ships as an instance of this latter group lies in the fact that only the number of the leaders listed is finite, whereas the number of the implied followers is unknown. Although it seems doubtful that an ancient reader would have shared Eco’s perception of the Catalog of Ships in the *Iliad* as incomplete because it does not list the common soldiers, it raises an interesting question in regard to *Memorial*.

Since the sequence of deaths starts with Protesilaus, who is said to have been “the first to die” (9), and ends with Hector, whose death and funeral are widely known to conclude the *Iliad*, readers/listeners may well come away with the impression that *Memorial* reflects the evidence contained in its ancient model completely and correctly. It takes a meticulous, not to say pedantic juxtaposition of the two works

to reveal some subtle deviations (Hahnemann, “Book” 29). More importantly though, Oswald pursues a strategy of including persons in her poem who are not mentioned in the *Iliad* by making their absence conspicuous. For example, by saying about a dead man that “nothing is known of his mother” (10), she draws attention to the fact that in the epic the account of this hero’s family, like that of most others, makes reference to his father but keeps silent about his mother. Thus, “under Oswald’s gaze, apparent absence takes on the quality of presence” (Farrier 7). Arguing along similar lines, in the remainder of this article I suggest that the blank spaces in *Memorial* serve not only to create “little separated blocks,” but also to leave room in the interstices for casualties who cannot be mentioned by name.



Image 2: Like *Memorial*, contemporary monuments often make use of conspicuous absences; here the subterranean set of empty shelves commemorating the Nazi book burning on Bebelplatz in Berlin. © Carolin Hahnemann

## 6. The Nameless Dead

In all there are three groups of nameless dead whom Oswald conjures by means of clues in the surrounding text to become part of the poem in this negative way. The first group consists of the very men whom Eco had in mind when he pronounced the Iliadic Catalog of Ships incomplete: the warriors of lower social status as opposed to the heroic leaders. Oswald makes oblique reference to them when she mentions that Protesilaus commanded a contingent of “forty black ships” (9). At first, one might pass over this detail as a gratuitous embellishment intended to lend the modern poem a bit of Homeric flavor, but the fact that it occurs a second time only one page later in the obituary for Elephenor (10) argues against such an easy dismissal. If we follow Thucydides’ famous estimate regarding the average number of warriors per Greek ship in the Trojan War, each of these leaders had no fewer than 3400 men under his command. Evidently, then, the conventional label that dubs Protesilaus and Elephenor “minor warriors,” for example in the title of Gisela Strasburger’s important study, is misleading; although they occupy only a handful of verses in the *Iliad*, they are nevertheless members of the privileged class with high social status. Even if we assume that these leaders, fighting in the front row as the heroic code demanded, died in disproportionately greater numbers than their followers, the double mention of the forty ships at the start of *Memorial* leads the readers/listeners to suspect that, besides the named leaders, many of their nameless followers must have died as well. This inference is confirmed later in the poem in the obituary for the Thracian King Rhesus, where we learn that “[t]welve anonymous Thracians were killed in their sleep / Before their ghosts had time to keep hold of their names” (31). The pointed reference to the dead men’s namelessness draws attention to, and thereby transcends, a limitation to the feasibility of *Memorial* as a commemorative endeavor: the roll call of the dead presented in the modern poem cannot be complete because in many, even most, cases the dead man’s name is not recorded in its ancient source.

Close attention to the way Oswald has shaped the first two obituaries also reveals a second group of dead that are conspicuously absent from the poem. The number of casualties listed in the *Iliad* is restricted both in terms of the narrative lens, which always focuses on just one or two areas of the battlefield while making it clear that much killing is going on simultaneously elsewhere, and of narrated time, since the epic covers only a brief period near the end of the Trojan War. Oswald goes beyond the chronological boundaries of the plot of the *Iliad* when she includes, exceptionally, an obituary for Protesilaus, whose death took place when the Greek fleet first landed at Troy at the onset of the war. Already in the next pair of obituaries, however, she specifies that Elephenor was killed “in the ninth year of the war” (10) and, resorting again to her strategy of emphasizing a detail through quick verbatim repetition, she reiterates the phrase in the obituary of Simoisius (11). Obviously, in the intervening years of continuous warfare many Greeks and Trojans must have died, and although we can learn nothing about them from the *Iliad*, their absence is made palpable and thus becomes a kind of presence in *Memorial*.

Finally, the series of casualties in *Memorial* transcends the confines of the *Iliad* also in the other direction, namely by reaching into the future. Admittedly, the *Iliad*, too, foreshadows future events, most importantly Achilles’ imminent death, which comes into view with ever greater precision as the epic progresses. In *Memorial*, thanks to Oswald’s omission of the Homeric plot, the narrative never turns away from the battlefield, so that the inexorably mounting death count eventually threatens to overwhelm not only the audience but the narrator as well. Toward the end of Part B, in the midst of a sequence of obituaries that get increasingly shorter until they are whittled down to a list of names, the narrator exclaims meta-poetically: “And LYKOPHRON / And KLEITOS it goes on and on” (53). Once again, Oswald repeats the key phrase soon after, in this case on the very same page, now embedded into the subsequent simile: “every living twig / Is wiped out white with snow it goes on and on.” It seems that, just as it is impossible to make out the features of a land-

scape covered by snow, so also the narrator can no longer keep up with the killings. In light of this exclamation, it is not surprising that after sixty pages chronicling 215 deaths in Part B, in Part C the fabric of the poem thins into a sequence of uninterrupted similes, printed one to a page, and then ceases altogether.

Just prior to this final vanishing act, however, the poem contains a pregnant pause in the form of a large blank space: after the obituary for Hector, the rest of the page is left empty both in the English and in the American edition. Linne and Niederhoff mask this fact when they state that the simile of the generation of leaves “accompanies” Hector’s obituary (35). But the empty space deserves to be taken seriously, and all the more so since it has a counterpart at the end of the litany of names in Part A, after the final entry “HECTOR”: “[T]he blank page after those two final bold syllables is heartbreaking,” comments Womack (“*Memorial*”), “The rest is silence.” Indeed, Hamlet’s last words capture well the impression of the blank space on the audience at a recitation of *Memorial*, who will experience it as a pause. For the readers, however, who encounter the blank space visually, it may bring to mind the uninscribed surfaces on a new kind of war memorial that has emerged lately in the United States in response to the War on Terror.

Monuments like the Middle East Conflicts Wall in Marseilles, IL (permanent version dedicated in 2004), the Hillcrest War on Terror Memorial in Hermitage, PA (dedicated in 2005), and the Middle East Northwood Gratitude and Honor Memorial in Irvine, CA (permanent version dedicated in 2010) share several features in common: they all originated through private initiatives, they list the US soldiers who have died in the conflict in the Middle East, and, most importantly, they leave room for ongoing updates with new names to be added. This last feature in particular sets them apart from the countless monuments containing casualty lists that dot cities and cemeteries all over the Western world; as a rule, those war memorials were erected not during the conflict in question but after it had been concluded. In fact, in the United States the law specifically mandates a ten-year wait



period after the end of a military conflict before it can be commemorated in a monument on the National Mall. It is all the more remarkable, then, that in August of 2017, Congress decided to waive this requirement in the case of a proposed national memorial for the Global War on Terror, thereby allowing planning and preparations to commence immediately. The implication of this decision is clear. What might once have been regarded as a series of several separate wars is now being viewed as a single drawn-out conflict flaring up again and again in different locations. Thus the smooth surfaces waiting to receive the names of future casualties on this new kind of memorial bear grim testimony to the conviction that, as far as the War on Terror is concerned, there is no end in sight.



Image 3: Inscribed stela of the Northwood Gratitude and Honor Memorial in Irvine, CA, with space left blank for the names of future casualties to be added.

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Can we draw a similar conclusion about the Trojan War from Oswald's choice to leave a bigger-than-usual blank space at the end of Part B of *Memorial*? We know from the mythological record that many more Greeks and Trojans were killed after Hector, and it is only rea-

sonable to think of the later victims as a third group of nameless casualties in analogy to the two groups proposed above. But maybe that is not enough. More radically, the phrase that the killing “just goes on and on” can be taken as an invitation to think of the blank space at the end of Part B as a place-holder for the names of every man killed in war since that first mythical conflict, the Trojan War, until today.

The idea that Oswald might have intended the blank space at the end of Part B as a way to connect the Trojan War to later military conflicts down to our own time fits well with other aspects of her poetic practice. For example, she injects splinters of the modern world into the obituaries and similes by using anachronisms such as a “lift door” (13), “tin-open[ing]” (17), astronauts (32), parachutes (42), and a motorbike (69). Moreover, as we saw in the discussion of the women by the washing-pools above, Oswald’s presentation of time is kaleidoscopic. Pache sensitively explores the poet’s technique of connecting the dead from the past to the audience in the present, including her use of narrative tenses and instances in which the narrator addresses the audience (175-78). For example, Protesilaus’ death happened in a distant past “thousands of years” ago (9), while “the stump of Hypsenor’s hand [that] lies somewhere on the battlefield” (16) seems frozen in time. Above we encountered the latter as the perspective of the traumatized relatives, townspeople, and the local landscape, but it even extends to the reader, who becomes a vicarious witness to the violence when being told that “you can see” the hole in Echeopolus’ helmet where the fatal weapon entered his skull (10). Cumulatively, these techniques add to the poem’s overwhelming emotional effect; by bringing the deaths from the mythical past into the present in this way, Oswald renders it impossible for the readers/listeners to keep their distance.

As is clear from the above analysis, Oswald’s process of creation in *Memorial* at times constitutes “an act of creation by decontextualization and recontextualization,” as Linne and Niederhoff suggest (22), but at other times it remains an act of creation by decontextualization

without recontextualization. Unquestionably, the most important instance of the latter strategy lies in the poet's omission of the epic plot. Confronted with a series of unconnected biographical vignettes instead of a continuous narrative, the readers/listeners are no longer able to tell what the war is about or even, in most cases, which side a dead man was fighting on. This omission sets *Memorial* apart as an act of commemoration, calling into question its very status as a war memorial, because it erases the boundary on which any war is based, the boundary between friend and foe. Recently for the first time, a public monument was erected that entails a similar act of posthumous reconciliation. *L'Anneau de la Mémoire*, which was unveiled in 2014 near one of the WW1 cemeteries in the Somme department of France, provides an alphabetical tally of the names of the 579,606 soldiers from both sides of the conflict that lost their lives in this region without any reference to their nationality. They are carved on an enormous ellipse, placed precariously on sloped ground as if to show that the peaceful unity between the countries formerly at war, which it took so long to achieve, could break apart again in a moment.



Image 4: *L'Anneau de la Mémoire*:  
The monumental ellipse  
on sloping ground.  
© Carolin Hahnemann



Image 5: *L'Anneau de la Mémoire*:  
Names of casualties without  
any indication of nationality  
© Carolin Hahnemann

At the end of his famous poem “The Young Dead Soldiers” Archibald MacLeish has the dead tell this to posterity: “We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning. / We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us” (9-10). Amid the current memorial boom in

western countries, including the United States, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, Oswald's *Memorial* and *L'Anneau de la Mémoire* stand out as examples of a radically new way of remembering the casualties of war. Whether they can also help us to find new ways of giving meaning to their deaths remains to be seen.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>My page numbers for *Memorial* differ from those provided by Linne and Niederhoff because theirs refer to the original English edition (2011) and mine to the American one (2012). However, the text and use of blank space is the same in both.

<sup>2</sup>Out of a total of sixty-five similes in Part B, only five are not repeated: the simile about the traveler and the simile about the farm boy that comes after it, which however are so similar to one another as to appear like close siblings albeit not identical twins (38); the simile about a deer being devoured by predators, which is only partially repeated (44); the simile about a donkey glutting himself in a cornfield (51-52), which instead of a second iteration is followed by a blank space; and the very short simile about a whirlwind unleashed in the sky (54).

<sup>3</sup>Oswald's phrase for Homer's narrative style bears a striking resemblance to the one Proust used to describe Flaubert's—"les choses [...] sont venues se ranger les unes à côté des autres"—which Annegret Maack quotes in her contribution to the debate of A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects* in this journal (286). More broadly, Maack's observations regarding the differences between analogy and metaphor also resemble the ones drawn by Linne and Niederhoff between Homer's and Oswald's use of simile. However, it is important to note that in *Memorial* the chunks of poetry are *not* contiguous, either literally or figuratively.

<sup>4</sup>Comparison with W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" may be helpful here. Like *Memorial*, this poem constitutes an antiphonal response to the *Iliad* in which each of two strands of materials is marked by a repeated phrase. The images of a civilization at peace amid an unspoiled natural landscape that Thetis expects Hephaestus to put on the shield (and which he does put on it according to the *Iliad*) begin with "She looked over his shoulder / For [...]," while the bleak scenes of a world bereft of all beauty and sense by the degradations of modern warfare which he actually has put there start with "But there on the shining metal" or "But there on the shining shield." Thus, the relationship between the two strands of material, so elusive in Oswald, could not be clearer in Auden.

<sup>5</sup>11x2, 16, 21, 27x2, 28, 38x3, 40, 41, 48x2, 52, 53x3, 56, 61, 63x2, 65x3, 68. In addition, there are three instances of obituaries recounting more than one death in which initial “and” opens the account of the second one, but without an intervening blank space (12, 20, 24).

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### Appendix: *Memorial* in the News Media and Scholarship

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