

“It’s Exactly Like That”: Bearing Resemblance in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*—A Response to Linne/Niederhoff and Hahnemann

CHLOE WHEATLEY

Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 33 (2024): 140-158.

DOI: [10.25623/conn033-wheatley-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn033-wheatley-1)

This response is a contribution to the debate on “The Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/the-poetics-alice-oswalds-memorial>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; please contact editors@connotations.de.

Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

Abstract

This article examines Alice Oswald’s use of simile in *Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad* (2011). While critical attention has tended to focus on the ways in which Oswald has cut apart and redistributed elements of her original, with particular emphasis on how she has adapted the *Iliad*’s epic similes, I argue that the shards of often anachronistic simile that Oswald has introduced into her descriptions of the dead invite the reader to discover new kinds of connection between ancient and contemporary experience. Building on work published in *Connotations* by Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff, as well as the response to their article by Carolin Hahnemann, I argue that *Memorial*’s paratactic poetics invite the reader to explore not only emotional but also deeply intellectual points of engagement with Oswald’s canny adaptation.

Since its initial publication, Alice Oswald’s *Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad* (2011) has inspired a variety of critical responses, testimony to just how much its structure invites and even demands continued engagement.¹ To date, two highly formative critical responses to Oswald’s poem have been published in this journal; in 2018 *Connotations* published an article by Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff,

which was followed by Carolin Hahnemann's 2019 development of their canny emphasis on Memorial's "paratactic poetics." I want to build upon the areas of inquiry carved out by Linne/Niederhoff and Hahnemann, especially their shared attention to how the "placement of similes in Memorial is meaningful and worthy of investigation" (Hahnemann 46), by drawing attention to the sharply focused figures of comparison found in the obituary stanzas which are located in the middle section of the poem. I will argue that, although their presence has tended to be either overlooked or oversimplified, the similes embedded within the obituary stanzas play a key role in Memorial, helping readers identify and then shift some of their most engrained cognitive tendencies.

Oswald's introduction to Memorial characterizes the poem as a "series of memories and similes laid side by side" (x), a structure Oswald has created by taking apart the *Iliad* and putting it together again. Most obviously, Oswald has removed what readers likely consider central to the epic poem: the story of Achilles and his vengeful response to the death of Patroclus, his ultimate compassion for his enemy's father, and the concluding burial rites for both Patroclus and Hector. Oswald casts her adaptive choices as an "excavation" of Homer's *Iliad*: her version sets aside the better part of the original poem's narrative focus on Achilles, and focuses instead on the deadly fates of the many other Greeks and Trojans whose stories are also present, if not foregrounded, in the *Iliad*.²

Oswald's three-part version of the *Iliad* is capped at beginning and end by more purely concentrated renderings of two different formal impulses. Part A of Memorial consists of a bare-boned litany of warriors' names that, in their columnar listing down the page in capitalized roman typeface, create the visual impression of a memorial inscription. Part C elaborates a sequence of eleven images, one stanza per page and each opening with the word "Like." Through their common use of this simile marker, the stanzas of Part C rhetorically proclaim their status as the first halves of extended comparisons, but then no further explicit signposting is provided to guide the reader in how exactly to connect

vehicle to tenor. As Linne and Niederhoff put it, “the simile marker at the end of the vehicle” in such stanzas is “conspicuous by its absence” (21). These ungrounded epic similes describe falling leaves and winnowed grain, gathering water birds and bees pouring out of the hive, “wandering tribes” of flies hovering over a pail of milk and “restless wolves” drinking “the whole surface off a pool” (*Memorial* 73, 78). Many of these images have been repurposed from parts of the *Iliad* that convey the sheer multitude of men involved in a grim and protracted war. Picking up on a pattern established in the middle section of the poem, the last image provided in Part C (“Like when god throws a star / And everyone looks up / To see that whip of sparks / And then it’s gone”) gets repeated twice (80-81).

Memorial’s structure in some ways resembles a triptych, with Parts A and C framing a surprisingly complex central Part B that, among other things, alternates between obituary stanzas and repeated stanzas of ungrounded simile. This paratactic structure encourages the reader to take an active role in sorting out the relationship between the poem’s parts. To begin with one illustrative example, the following lines of poetry comprise the whole of page 42 in *Memorial*:

Like the war cries of cranes going south escaping the rain
 Every winter the clang of their wings going over us
 And the shock of their parachutes
 Landing on someone else’s fields

Like the war cries of cranes going south escaping the rain
 Every winter the clang of their wings going over us
 And the shock of their parachutes
 Landing on someone else’s fields

EPICLES a Southerner from sunlit Lycia
 Climbed the Greek wall remembering the river
 That winds between his wheatfields and his vineyards
 He was knocked backwards by a rock
 And sank like a diver
 The light in his face went out

Like the shine of a sea swell
 Lifting and flattening silently
 When water makes way for the wind
 And dreams of its storms
 Huge waves hang in a hush
 Uncertain which way to fall
 Until a breeze breaks them

Like the shine of a sea swell
 Lifting and flattening silently
 When water makes way for the wind [...] (42)

Linne and Niederhoff have emphasized how the poem's stanzas of ungrounded simile suggest unspecified but evocative points of comparison and contrast with the obituary stanzas that they follow, and in this way contribute to the poem's poetics of parataxis. For example, the description of a sea swell, represented in the above stanza at a moment of relative calm before it is impinged upon by outside forces (only "dream[ing] of its storms"), seems not unlike Epicles, who in Oswald's invention is "remembering" his farm right before getting "knocked down" by a rock.

Hahnemann observes that the relationship of name, obituary, and simile is even more dynamic and variable than a first glance might suggest, and that any given stanza of simile in *Memorial* can be connected to any number of stanzas that precede or follow it. This insight could be easily applied to the opening stanza on page 42 and its description of cranes in flight, an image that gets echoed and elaborated much later in Part C, when the narrator describes in even more detail "great gatherings of geese and cranes" that are "[f]laring and settling in those fields where the rain runs down to the Cayster," and, in a contribution to the poem's metapoetic moments, "[c]ontinually shuffling and lifting and loving the sound of their wings" (72).

In addition, this page stands as evidence of Hahnemann's key point that sometimes Linne and Niederhoff's model of recontextualization "does not apply": the stanza that precedes page 42 consists of a simple if stark list of seven names that does not elaborate on any biographical

details with which the following simile could be matched. As Hahnemann notes, Part B in this and other ways both resists summary, and draws attention to the challenges of commemoration.³ I too am interested in those ways in which Oswald makes it difficult to summarize what constitutes Part B of her poem. But while Hahnemann is interested in places where obituaries subside back into lists of names, and at times even into emptiness of a blank space on the page, I will focus on those places where the obituaries of *Memorial* get thickened through the inclusion of similes that enrich and complicate, from within, the stories that they tell.

In the obituary of Epicles, to take the case in point, one finds a very direct articulation of how the warrior falls “*like a diver*” (42; italics mine). Other examples of figurative language abound within the obituary stanzas. The commemoration of Euchenor, for example, characterizes him as “cold as a coin” in choosing to die “at Troy of a spearwound” instead of staying home to meet a prophesied death by sickness (47). Asius, who does not heed the life-saving directives of his commander, pitches himself in harm’s way as if “[s]itting “in god’s headlights trembling” (45). And Hector is described as “so boastful and anxious” that he “used to nip home deafened by weapons / To stand in full armour in the doorway / Like a man rushing in leaving his motorbike running” (69).

At times, such well-placed shards of contemporary reference simply help to clarify by conveying in vivid terms, say, how Euchenor views his own life with a kind of transactional logic; how Diomedes has about as much regard for the lost lives of his adversaries as we have for souls of tinned fish; or how Asius in the face of his imminent death stands stricken and immobilized by that which he was not built to comprehend.⁴ But at other times the comparisons drawn in the obituaries play a more complex role, drawing attention to the simile itself as a tool of cognition.

For example, early on in *Memorial* Oswald incorporates a pair of similes into an obituary in a way that first introduces and then dramatizes the challenges involved in using the simile as a heuristic tool. The

stanza in question focuses on the story of Phegeus and Idaeus. In the *Iliad's* version, Phegeus and Idaeus, sons of Dares, the rich priest of Hephaestus, are praised equally for their skill at fighting. In the end, however, they prove no match for Diomedes, who, when attacked by the brothers, kills Phegeus. Idaeus does not have the courage to stand down his brother's killer, but he is saved from death by Hephaestus, who wishes to prevent his priest from being overwhelmed wholly by grief.

Oswald's adaptation of this story emphasizes how a simile can illuminate a character's most fundamental ideas about the larger order of things. In *Memorial*, this story begins with a focus on the father Dares, "priest of Hephaestus," who prays to the god asking him to protect his sons from harm (13). In imagining their deliverance, Dares uses a simile drawn directly from his experience staring "hot-faced" into the fire: "Calm down their horses," he prays, "*lift them / Out of the fight as light as ash*" (13; italics mine). The narrator then provides a corrective that turns on a very different use of the key term "lift." The god hears his priest but cannot fulfill his wish fully, for Hephaestus himself proves in the end less like a fire and more like a single component of much more complex mechanism: "*like a lift door closing / Inexplicable Hephaestus / Whisked one [of the sons] away / And the other died*" (13; italics mine).

In *Memorial*, the ultimate rescue of only one son is characterized not as a god's spontaneous act of compassion, but rather as an "inexplicable" half measure (13). Which son dies and which one survives is not even a matter of differentiation. What is more, the narrator organizes the description of the disappointment of Dares' desires and also presumptions as the brutal replacement of one simile (Hephaestus is like a fire, able to "lift" the warriors) with another simile (Hephaestus is really more like a "lift" or elevator door, bisecting and separating the sons' mortal trajectories in ways that follow the operations of a very different logic).

Similes work to clarify, of course. In this example, Oswald draws upon the contemporary reader's knowledge of a technology associated

with the infrastructure of the modern built environment, and she brings to mind a feat of engineering that enables the intense concentration of human bodies, not to mention capitalist economic systems. More particularly, readers are invited to draw on their own memories of times when the closing of an elevator door brought them up short, perhaps separating them from others with a brutal efficiency. It is apt that the first time when Oswald inserts a fully anachronistic shard of modernity into her poem it is connected to the figure of Hephaestus, who was associated with technology. My point, though, is not just that the second simile clarifies; the whole stanza is organized around a process of correction in which the reader not only is prompted to turn towards the more apt point of comparison but also to think about how the priest's initial ideas reflect his desires and delusions more clearly than the reality of his and his god's power.

Oswald not only draws attention to the relative potential of competing similes but also to how a single event or phenomenon can yield startlingly different terms of comparison. In this way, she shows her interest in developing contemporary literary counterparts to the larger systems of signification that underpin ancient epic. Drawing on the work of William C. Scott, Linne and Niederhoff explain that the similes of Homer "are based on a limited set of so-called similemes, complex patterns or events or situations (a lion hunting its prey, wind blowing on land or sea, trees falling or standing firm) which the poet adapts, more or less vigorously (often less) to a moment in his narrative" (Linne and Niederhoff 40). While some of the contemporary similes used by Oswald are simply stand-alone shards of reference inserted into the archaic material of the original, others have the potential to take on "a life of [their] own" (Linne and Niederhoff 41). As Oswald indicates in her recorded lecture "Interview with Water," she is deeply interested in simile's capacity to "proliferate," "reverberate," and "sprout," suggesting sometimes disturbing but always innovative terms of connection (00:32:30).

If in the story of Dares and his sons we find an example of one simile supplanting another, in other obituary stanzas we find something

closer to what Linne and Niederhoff discuss as an epic capacity to dip into the details of a single yet fairly complex simile to draw out multiple aspects of comparison. This capacity is fully in operation in the conceit that drives the story of Diomedes killing the Thracians in their sleep.

Diomedes is amply established in *Memorial* as an implacable and violent force, a “madman a terrible numbness / Turned inside-out” who sees “through everything to its inner emptiness” (17). The Thracians, in sharp contrast, are described as figures of elegance with “smooth hair” and marble-white horses. “[C]amping apart from everyone,” the Thracians prepare for the next day of combat and go to sleep with their “weapons cleaned and layed down like cutlery” (31). They are described, in other words, as preparing for combat as if it was for a dinner party. The bitter irony, of course, as the narrator soon enough reveals, is that Diomedes is making preparations for a “bloodfeast” of his own (31). “Red-faced” and as efficient as “a butcher keeping up with his order,” Diomedes kills the Thracians so quickly that their names are separated from their souls as the “raw meat smell of their bodies” wakes the dogs (31). The reader hardly needs the narrator’s direct interjection (“This is horrible”) to feel how this stanza enacts horror’s shocking plot twist (31). One might well be curious or even skeptical about the initial formulation, in which preparation for battle is likened to setting the table for a feast, but then the comparison proves brutally, manifestly accurate—only with the Thracians as the bill of fare rather than the hosts.

I have suggested that Oswald draws attention to the multiple ways in which a single figure can be applied. The examples from *Memorial* that I will consider next explore even more deeply the simile’s rhetorical potential, prompting the reader to consider those points of connection that, however much one might wish to disavow them, prove most important to confront. Oswald uses all of the rhetorical resources at her disposal to activate but also push the reader beyond the default response of simple sympathy either for the war dead or for the family members who grieve their loss, prompting readers to understand more deeply what actually links them to the long dead in this archaic war.

The following three examples adapt biographies found in Book 11 of the *Iliad*. This part of the original epic focuses on Agamemnon's success in the field, then Hector's; narrative suspense is built around the back-and-forth struggle of Greeks and Trojans for military dominance. In *Memorial*, the stanzas drawn from this part of the *Iliad* shift away from the original narrative focus, emphasizing instead the familial as well as broader communal relationships that have already begun to be warped by war, even before the death of the individual warriors in question. The narrator, in each instance I am looking at here, slips between different temporal moments and also points of view in order to convey the experience not just of traumatized parents but also, importantly, of bystanders and maybe even local neighbors or villagers, who I argue provide a bracingly critical attitude towards the doings of young would-be warriors. I am not the first to recognize the layered vocal and temporal complexity of these stanzas, but I differ from those critics who emphasize above all how this approach brings the reader close to the scene of grief.⁵ I want to suggest that Oswald's rhetorical choices bring the reader close, but not too close, to scenes of grief and mourning. Often, emphasis falls on the vexed webs of cause and effect that have helped to generate that grief. These stanzas, and their embedded similes in particular, play a crucial role in fostering in readers a stance of catalyzed critical attention.

Isos and Antiphos, for example, are characterized in *Memorial* as simple shepherds who, while they survive the misfortune of being kidnapped by Achilles, decide during their time in the custody of the Greeks that they do not want "to farm anymore" and ultimately go "riding out to be killed by Agamemnon" (32). Their folly in thinking they are up for the task is emphasized by a narrator who, like a bystander, receives their story as a matter of common knowledge: "Everyone whispered listen / [t]hat was Isos and Antiphos / They used to be shepherds they were hill people / Working out of reach of the world" (32). Their gullibility is especially evident, as the narrator of *Me-*

morial emphasizes with anaphoric repetition that conveys some measure of exasperation in how the boys themselves have been taken in by fantastical hearsay:

They said it was wonderful to be tied in creepers
And taken to the other side by [Achilles] that gypsy
They said he could talk to horses
They said his mother was a seal or mermaid
And he introduced them to Agamemnon
The great king of Mycenae [...] (32)

In other words, even after they have been ransomed and returned home, these warriors remain at least imaginatively within the Greeks' thrall.

Into a narrative stance that is unstable and, I want to suggest, not fully compassionate, Oswald inserts shards of modern reference that intensify the distanced if not critical attitude. Isos and Antiphos are characterized initially as "[t]wo more metal ornaments / Knocked down anonymous in their helmets" (32). The reference to "metal ornaments" seems an apt enough way to figure men in armor, especially men who have been reduced to baubles that enhance Agamemnon's decorated reputation as a fearsome killer. When the narrator goes on to describe Isos and Antiphos as coming away from their time with the Greeks "as proud as astronauts," the image of a metal ornament also brings to mind an unexpected but thought-provoking link between the conditions of war and the simile of space travel. In their mental anticipation of war, Isos and Antiphos are as far away from home as the moon is from the earth. Fully out of their element, they are nonetheless filled with fantasies about how their own participation in the war will adorn their society with both credit and glory.

The obituary of Iphidamas also, like that of Isos and Antiphos, is conveyed by a narrator who appears to know this young man in the way in which one might know a neighbor or fellow inhabitant of a small community. The narrator is thus able to convey with sorrow mixed with general disapproval just how much the boy's parents have spent

in the vain attempt to procure things (first a flute, and a wife) that will appease the very “restlessness” that leads to their son’s death:

[...] all that money wasted
 A hundred cattle he gave [his wife, now widow]
 A thousand sheep and goats
 All that hard work feeding them wasted (35)

The narrator also has access to the sentiments of Iphidamas’ widow, who “said even on his wedding night / [Iphidamas] seemed to be wearing armour / He kept yawning and looking far away” (34). At first glance this seems a straightforward enough figure for how Iphidamas proved emotionally unavailable to his new bride. But as the stanza proceeds, the associations between armor and amour prove even more resonant. This warrior’s ultimate downfall comes down to a failure to kill Agamemnon, even though he has invested all of his “crazy impatience” into an effort to push his spear into “the soft bit under the breastplate” of Agamemnon’s armour. His spear tip, the narrator specifies, “simply bent like lead” (35). The image of a lead arrow echoes the depiction by Ovid of Cupid, and the comparison thus casts Iphidamas as a misdirected version of the capricious love god. Iphidamas is figured as shooting his spear at the heart of his enemy and yet misunderstanding the more local erotics that he has thrown over in order to fight “for Helen” (35). It is not just his “crazy impatience” that is on trial in this stanza; there is also much implied about how his parents have been so busy trying to provide him ways to “amuse himself” that they have “crippled him with love” (34). These stanzas, replete with extended similes of Oswald’s own devising, render devastatingly clear what confusions in their own domestic and filial situations have motivated these young men to “set out together” to Troy even though “Death / [is] already walking to meet them” (37).

The obituary focused on the fate of Socus and Charops seems to me a culminating example of how the impulse to feel sympathy for these warriors gets activated but also then undercut by the workings of both voice and figure. The narrator first takes the emotional register up a

pitch by appealing to the young warrior directly in the second person: “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,” exclaims the narrator in the first lines of the stanza (39). And when Socus and his brother fail to listen, the stanza concludes by adapting what in the *Iliad* serves as a taunt by their killer:

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 (39)

Pache argues that in using such language Memorial’s narrator “recreates and activates the Homeric tradition, mourning Socus ‘now’ and making the audience share in the grief for him and for the other victims of the Trojan war” (181). Streeter acknowledges, particularly in the abrupt shift mid-stanza to a third-person commentary detailing the brothers’ fatal encounter with Odysseus, that this biography contains “multiple and ambiguous perspectives” (44). But she too argues ultimately that these choices in sum intensify the “pathos” of the individual reader’s experience “at the same time as the use of the second person address universalizes it” (44). I want to acknowledge the undoubted pathos of this stanza while also emphasizing how its embedded simile confronts the reader with the conditions that have precipitated its tragedy.

Specifically, we find comparison of the brothers to “men on wire walking over the underworld” (39). This turn of phrase invokes *Man on Wire*, the title of the 2008 documentary about Philippe Petit and his 1974 high wire act in which he walked back and forth across a 440-pound cable that he and his team had strung between the Twin Towers. In Oswald’s rendering, then, the simile’s vehicle lends a figurative precision to the daredevil nature of the young warriors and their disregard of the opening appeal that they stay grounded in their exceedingly comfortable home with its “deep decorated baths and long passages”

(39). More attracted to height than depth, and interested in proving their terrible powers of concentration, they “weren’t listening” (39) in the ways that high-wire artists will not, and really cannot, listen to those below them. What is more, in this stanza the embedded simile performs what Oswald has termed in other contexts as a swing-door effect, illuminating aspects of the lines that both precede and follow it (see Jaffa 19). The phrase “like men on wire walking over the underworld” not only makes a clarifying comment about how the sons seek out high-wire thrills; it also sheds light on the predicament of their parents, who now must understand the space that they inhabit as a potential “underworld,” a space of both acute consciousness and loss.

The stories of these ambitious yet doomed young men gain their power and impact from Oswald’s development of wildly different terms of figurative comparison, but they all include an adjectival interjection that has a productively double connotation. “Poor fools,” the narrator says of Isos and Antiphos (32); “Poor Iphidamas,” the narrator exclaims, “now he is only iron / Sleepings its iron sleep poor boy” (35); and the narrator also repeats this phrasing in a wry comment about how “Poor Socus,” in his effort “get away from his own ending / Ran out his last moments in fear of the next ones” (39). These boys are “poor,” as in afflicted in ways that prompt the reader’s compassion; and surely, they deserve our pity for the way their deaths have been precipitated and sped by war. Read one after the other, though, their stories also intimate that they are “poor” in another sense as well: the conditions of protected privilege seem to have made them feel, however foolishly, that war will compensate for a vital thing they believe their lives to lack. Their poverty, in this second sense, consists in their lack of any awareness of how they are already a valuable part of a greater social whole.

In the obituaries that have been my particular focus in this essay, Oswald has taken pains to make her readers stand witness to the grief of those close to the war dead, but, perhaps even more importantly, to participate in a process of reflection that is adjacent to but not fully congruent with that grieving process. We may even come to recognize in

ourselves what is so carefully dramatized through these obituaries: a short-sighted but deeply held desire to exempt our children from hardship, which may well foster the conditions for an even worse fate. If we do acknowledge this as an uncomfortable yet resonant point of kinship, we will have connected to this archaic time and ancient war in a powerfully ethical way.

Memorial is built upon the premise that the job of epic is to push readers beyond received ways of knowing and being in the world. In order to achieve this important end, the poem must somehow captivate and redirect basic tendencies of human thought. Oswald has reached back into Greek epic tradition and stripped it of the consolations of heroic narrative and its attendant projection of *kleos* or future fame; but she has hardly erased from her poem an emphasis on human agency. While contemporary criticism has emphasized Oswald's transfer of attention to the extraordinary agency of natural elements like water, I want to draw equal attention to the interpretive agency she trusts to be present in her readers. We are invited to recognize in the grotesque ironies of ancient Greek warfare some uncomfortable parallels to the grotesque ironies of our own moment: our blend of arrogance and naiveté; hyper-focused attention coupled with a lack of fundamental awareness; and sense of exceptionalism brought up short by acute mortal vulnerability. Memorial adapts the conventions of epic in order to bring the reader not only into emotional connection but also, perhaps less comfortably, into intellectual engagement with some of the fundamental flaws of human thinking that make war a perpetual possibility.

Having read across selected obituaries with attention to how their sometimes odd but always apt similes invite the reader to engage with those paradoxes built into our most basic ways of being in the world, I now want to point out how Part C contains subtle but important points of connection to Part B.⁶ First, it is worth noting that while the obituary stanzas drop out of Part C, we are still invited to carry forward all that they have taught us, to exercise a certain basic humility and also be open to seeing our likenesses with the more-than-human world on new terms.⁷ Some of the startling details in this final section of the poem

include the appositive renaming of animals using references to human beings: crickets are likened to “tiny dried up men” (74); summer bees are compared to “[a] billion factory women flying to their flower work” (76). In examples like this, it is not precise enough to say that the human drops out—rather, references to the human become the vehicle in an elaborating simile, not the tenor.

It seems fitting to conclude with consideration of the sixth ungrounded simile of Part C, which is set so resonantly among a whole series of stanzas that invoke the actions of breathing, flying, gathering, and shimmering. Significantly, it interjects reference to the kind of mental perturbation that this essay has tracked in great detail:

Like strobe-lit wasps
That have built their nest on a footpath
Never give up their hollow house
But hang about the walls
Worrying for their children (75)

Here the reader finds a sharply refocalized adaptation of a simile originally used in the *Iliad* by a Trojan warrior to describe the way the Argives fiercely defend the path to their ships. Oswald has modified it to create a neat summing up of precisely the contradictions that I have traced through key stanzas of Part B: these small insects, having built their “hollow house” too near that which will surely endanger it, have created the inbuilt conditions for their own worried vigilance. Here the impulse to seek out similitudes is both rewarded and refined, as the reader is invited one last time to reckon with how humanity’s most defining and self-damaging quality may very well be our tendency to think of ourselves as exceptions to the rules governing both the human and the more-than-human world.

Trinity College
Hartford, CT

NOTES

¹Many thanks to Jennifer Buehler, LaDawn Haglund, Marianne Montgomery, and Suzanne Gottschang for their support; and to colleagues at Trinity as well as the readers for *Connotations* for their feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

Carolin Hahnemann has appended to her 2019 *Connotations* article an "Appendix: On *Memorial* in the News Media and Scholarship." I have included as an addition to this resource an appendix of critical material published since 2019. To sum up the dominant strands of critical interest since the publication of Hahnemann's article: critics have continued to excavate the relationship between *Memorial* and the *Iliad* with ever-more nuanced attention to Oswald's stanzas of extended simile and the poem's engagement with a contemporary readership, as essays/chapters by Jan Haywood, Elizabeth Minchin, Corinne Pache, Leah Middlebrook, and Catherine Mary Simmerer attest. Sarah Kennedy and Hazel Streeter build on Hahnemann's feminist scholarship as well. For more on recent English translations and adaptations of Homeric texts by women, see Richard Hughes Gibson. Since the 2019 publication of *Nobody*, Oswald's adaptation of *The Odyssey* (characterized in its promotional material as a "collage of water stories"), critics have been particularly drawn to the water imagery of *Memorial*. See the works cited below by Dianne Chisholm, Sarah Kennedy, and Pamela Rader. These and other critics, including Yvonne Reddick, Hazel Streeter, and Helen H. Yeung, have worked to further lines of critical inquiry explored by David Farrier, bringing together lyric studies and the concept of the Anthropocene to address how *Memorial* represents the relationship between the human and more-than-human world.

²As the colophon of the American edition notes, this poem was first published in Great Britain under the title *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*.

³Because of her interest in how the title of this poem connects it to other types of memorialization, Hahnemann focuses as well on how the blank spaces on the page serve as place holders for the names of all of the other soldiers (from past and present) who have been killed since that "first mythical conflict, the Trojan war, until today" (59).

⁴I have found Hahnemann's own figurative language critically interesting. She notes (as a supplementary side note to her broader discussion) how Oswald often "injects splinters of the modern world into the obituaries [...] by using anachronisms" (13).

⁵See for example Streeter. Haywood reads many of these same obituaries as fully sympathetic.

⁶Hahnemann conjectures that the obituaries thin out by Part C because the sheer effort of relating the names of the war dead has become overwhelming. The power of the images in Part C has inspired critics to argue that the poem's adapted epic similes sweep the reader into an environment in which human struggles and concerns simply get washed away; see Chisholm, for example, who argues that the "greater-than-human" images "clear" *Memorial* of "war-wracked" grief (5). Linne and Niederhoff focus on how the first stanza of Part C, in its emphasis on the wind that "blows [the leaves'] ghosts to the ground," can be connected meaningfully not

only back to the burial of Hector which immediately precedes it but also, in its query regarding “who could write the history of leaves,” metapoetically and self-reflexively to the poem as a whole. To their mind, the stanzas of the last section, in their eschewal of the individual and emphasis instead on entities in aggregate (groups of birds, wolves, bees, locusts), reflect a deep skepticism about the capacity of writing to serve as an antidote to mortality and time. Farrier, too, sees the last section of *Memorial* as marked by a “sense of exuberance” and yet “off-set by a lingering anxiety” (15). He calls the section “a series of envoi” that provides “reflections on the interconnectedness which informs the entire poem” and that invokes both “fragility and wonder” (15).

⁷Rader emphasizes how Oswald “repositions the human animal as part of the natural world, rather than apart from it” (82) and invokes Patsy Callahan’s call for a return to Kenneth Burke’s concept of humility as a means to remind us of our small part in a greater physical universe.

WORKS CITED

- Chisholm, Dianne. “Sounds Like the Anthropocene: Alice Oswald’s Water-Stressed, Homeric Verse.” *Textual Practice* 37 (2023): 68-89.
- Farrier, David. “‘Like a Stone’: Ecology, *Enargeia*, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.” *Environmental Humanities* 4 (2014): 1-18.
- Hahnemann, Carolin. “More Context and Less: A Response to Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff.” *Connotations* 28 (2019): 42-64. <https://www.connotations.de/article/hahnemann-more-context-and-less-a-response-to-lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff/>
- Haywood, Jan. “Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*: A New *Iliad*.” *A Special Model of Classical Reception: Summaries and Short Narratives*. Ed. Maria de Fátima Silva, David Bouverier, and Maria das Graças Augusto. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2020): 73-90.
- Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.
- Jaffa, Naomi. “A Conversation with Alice Oswald.” *Brick* 90 (2013): 17-20.
- Linne, Lena, and Burkhard Niederhoff. “[M]emories and similes laid side by side’: The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.” *Connotations* 27 (2018): 19-47. www.connotations.de/article/lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff-the-paratactic-poetics-of-alice-oswalds-memorial
- Oswald, Alice. “Interview with Water.” Oxford Professor of Poetry Lectures. U of Oxford Podcasts. 7 August 2020. <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/interview-water>
- Oswald, Alice. *Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad*. New York: Norton, 2012. [First published as *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*. London: Faber and Faber, 2011.]
- Pache, Corinne. “A Word from Another World: Mourning and Similes in Homeric Epic and Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.” *Classical Receptions Journal* 10 (2018): 170-90.

- Rader, Pamela J. "'This is water's world/ And the works of men are vanishing'": Hydronymy & Anonymity Honour Water in Alice Oswald's *Dart & Memorial*." *Onoma* 58 (2023): 79-92.
- Scott, William C. *The Artistry of the Homeric Simile*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2008.
- Streeter, Hazel. "'Keeping to Its Clock': Temporality and Ecology in the Poetry of Alice Oswald." Dissertation. University of Bristol, 2022.

APPENDIX: MEMORIAL IN SCHOLARSHIP (2019-2024)

For scholarship published prior to 2019, see the Appendix to Hahnemann's article in issue 28 of *Connotations*: www.connotations.de/article/hahnemann-more-context-and-less-a-response-to-lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff.

- Chisholm, Dianne. "Sounds Like the Anthropocene: Alice Oswald's Water-Stressed, Homeric Verse." *Textual Practice* 37 (2023): 68-89.
- Gibson, Richard Hughes. "On Women Englishing Homer." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 26 (2019): 35-68.
- Hahnemann, Carolin. "More Context and Less: A Response to Lena Linne and Burkhard Niederhoff." *Connotations* 28 (2019): 42-64. <https://www.connotations.de/article/hahnemann-more-context-and-less-a-response-to-lena-linne-and-burkhard-niederhoff/>
- Haywood, Jan. "Alice Oswald's *Memorial*: A New *Iliad*." *A Special Model of Classical Reception: Summaries and Short Narratives*. Ed. Maria de Fátima Silva, David Bouverier, and Maria das Graças Augusto. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2020): 73-90.
- Kennedy, Sarah. "'The Water Is in My Thinking Now': Alice Oswald, Poikiloméisis and Classical Presences." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 51 (2021): 139-61.
- Middlebrook, Leah. "Amphionic Translation." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 138.3 (May 2023): 775-81.
- Minchin, Elizabeth. "The Creation of a Storyrealm: The Role of Repetition in Homeric Epic and Alice Oswald's *Memorial*." *Repetition, Communication, and Meaning in the Ancient World*. Ed. Deborah Beck. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 373-92.
- Minchin, Elizabeth. "'Translation' and Transformation: Alice Oswald's Excavation of the *Iliad*." *Classical Receptions Journal* 7 (2015): 202-22.
- Rader, Pamela J. "'This is water's world/ And the works of men are vanishing'": Hydronymy & Anonymity Honour Water in Alice Oswald's *Dart & Memorial*." *Onoma* 58 (2023): 79-92.
- Reddick, Yvonne. *Anthropocene Poetry: Place, Environment, and Planet*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
- Simmerer, Catherine Mary. "Memory, Nature, and the Futility of War in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*." *Humanities Bulletin* 3 (2020): 201-08.

Streeter, Hazel. "‘Keeping to Its Clock’: Temporality and Ecology in the Poetry of Alice Oswald." Dissertation. University of Bristol, 2022.

Yeung, Heather H. "Of Lyric Temporality and Materiality: Alice Oswald’s Environmental Poetics." *Modern Ecopoetry: Reading the Palimpsests of the More-than-Human World*. Ed. Leonor Martínez Serrano Leonor and Cristina Gámez-Fernández. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 91-110.