

Speech, Silence and Epic Performance: Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

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ABSTRACT

Alice Oswald's recitation of her 2011 poem *Memorial* is an intensely modest, self-effacing performance. Yet it is also one which invites us to consider key questions about the ancient practice, and modern re-performance, of epic poetry. Oswald explicitly cites the antiphonal lament of Homeric funerary ritual as an influence upon her re-inscription of the *Iliad* (Oswald 2011a: 1-2). Her own re-performance of the poem, however, draws on very different models of performance and spectatorship, creating a tension between ancient and modern modes of memorialisation, and changing relationships between the poet and her live audience.

This paper explores the complex interplay of speech and silence which characterizes Oswald's text, and the ways in which this interplay is manifested and heightened in live vocalisation of the poem. Drawing on recent debates and insights in the fields of oral poetics, theatre studies and classical performance reception, it explores the links between Oswald's ancient models of epic poetic performance, the modern poem on the page, and the complex dynamics of live vocal performance. It contends that even this least theatrical iteration of Homeric epic displays characteristics which highlight the poem's status as a text for performance, and which suggest new avenues for studying the mechanics and dynamics of an ancient epic's after-life in contemporary re-performance.