

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

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INTRODUCTION

The poet stands behind a lectern, two microphones angling upwards towards her shadowed face. She wears a dark green jacket over a sombre-coloured blouse (or dress, her whole lower body is hidden). Her hands rest on the lectern's top, elbows bent, bracing some of her weight as she leans towards her listeners. The effect is carefully un-theatrical. She might be giving a press-conference, reading a prepared statement. This is Alice Oswald, about to perform *Memorial*.¹

Her voice, as she begins to recite, is measured, matter-of-fact. 'The first to die was PROTESILAUS' (Oswald 2011a: 13).² The published text of *Memorial* gives the dead man's name in monumental, funerary capital letters, but the poet's voice resists the implied drama of this typography. She speaks with assurance, purposefully, but softly. This is only the first death of many to be reported, and histrionics - her posture and pacing suggest - would be out of place. We're only just getting underway. This paper is a response to a specific live performance, a unique and unrepeatable vocalisation of ancient Homeric epic. It presents a series of reflections provoked by the complex, creative interplay of speech and silence in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, both on the page and in the poet's live re-performance of her own work. 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.

Oswald explicitly describes the poem as 'vocative', citing 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 her 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 begins by exploring this apparent contradiction, and considering related questions of poetic composition and performance genre. It then explores the idea of 'Voiced Text' as site of generic hybridity, and as a catalyst for the transformation of poetic text in performance, before moving on to consider how *Memorial*'s sophisticated literary interplay of sound and silence can be heightened, or even transformed, in live performance.

SPEECH, SILENCE AND REMEMBRANCE

As has already been noted, Oswald's Introduction explicitly invokes the *Iliad*'s origins in live oral performance, and vocalised funerary ritual. So while *Memorial* is a modern published text, it is also a composition which 'entextualizes' more ancient, and more performative, modes of lamentation and memorialisation (Wilce 2009: 32), a genealogy which profoundly informs the poem's structure and style.

Before beginning her performance, Oswald characterises the work we're about to hear as being 'like a village war memorial ... that extraordinary stone list of the dead' that stands at the centre of a community, suggesting an equivalence between her poetic and vocal acts and the marks engraved on funerary monuments. This is in part an acknowledgement of seasonal preoccupations, since this performance follows close after the sombre ceremonial of Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday. (As if to highlight this fact, a damp, crumpled poppy lies by my feet throughout the performance.)³ But this description also recalls Oswald's Introduction to *Memorial*, where she describes the *Iliad* as:

a kind of oral cemetery – in the aftermath of the Trojan War, an attempt to remember people's names and lives without the use of writing. (Oswald 2011a: 2)

The phrase 'oral cemetery' echoes Tatum's characterisation of the *Iliad* as 'a tomb in verse from a vanished civilization' (Tatum 2003: xv), both descriptions aligning the war-grief of Homeric epic with contemporary monuments of remembrance.⁴

Reviewers of *Memorial's* published text have been quick to note the correlations between the poem's distinctive typography and the iconography of war remembrance:

The opening pages list the names of more than 200 dead. Reading them is equivalent to the poignancy of skimming surnames on a war memorial. (Kellaway 2011)
When Oswald comes to the end – "AINIOS / OPHELESTES / HECTOR" – the blank page after those two final bold syllables is heartbreaking. The rest is silence. There is no need to know the epic or its use of similes – here are names, with their own magical resonance, side by side; it doesn't matter if they are Greek or Trojan, what matters is that they were men, and that they are dead. (Womack 2011)

This, then, is a poem profoundly responsive to modern iconographies of remembrance. But Oswald's emphasis on the *Iliad* as an 'oral cemetery' suggests that *Memorial* is also concerned with different modes of memorialisation, and specifically those which draw their authority from active processes of vocalisation.

In the public ceremonies of contemporary war remembrance, we mutely contemplate ranks of unvoiced names. But by contrast, the kind of remembering to which Oswald appeals in her Introduction derives from a different ritual; an active process of recall and repetition in which the names and feats of the dead are vocalised and memorialised in a shared oral/aural experience:

There are accounts of Greek lament in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. When a corpse was laid out, a professional poet (someone like Homer) led the mourning and was antiphonally answered by women offering personal accounts of the deceased. I like to think that the stories of individual soldiers recorded in the *Iliad* might be recollections of these laments ... (Oswald 2011a: 1-2)

The type of antiphonal lamentation the poet describes is characterised by the collective vocalisation of grief for the fallen, with the labour of lamentation divided between specialist performers and the female relatives of the deceased. This formal funerary performance is represented within the *Iliad* itself in the epic poem's account of Hector's *prothesis* (Homer, *Iliad* 24.718-776), where the improvised lamentations of Andromache, Hecuba and Helen are supported by 'the singers / who were to lead the melody in the dirge', and who 'chanted the song of sorrow' (Homer, *Iliad* 24.720-22).⁵ Alexiou analyses the passage's performance-dynamics as follows:

There are two groups of mourners, professional singers and kinswomen. The singers begin with a musical *thrênos*, answered by a refrain of cries, and then the lament is taken up by the three next of kin, each singing a verse in turn and followed by another refrain of cries. Their verses are an answer to the lamentation of the professional singers. (Alexiou 2002: 12)

Even if, as Alexiou argues, the antiphonal element of this ritual 'is becoming obscured' and 'reduced to a perfunctory formula' by the time of the *Iliad's* writing (Alexiou 2002: 13),⁶ the call-and-response dynamic of antiphonal lamentation is deeply embedded within the structures and repetitions of this passage.

This, then, is the ancient tradition of vocal lamentation to which *Memorial's* Introduction appeals, and which clearly influences the poem's distinctive alternation of 'memories and similes laid side by side' (Oswald 2011a: 2). But equally clearly, this is not the tradition within which Oswald's poem is performed.⁷ While antiphonal lamentation may be one of *Memorial's* influences, it is not its performance-genre. The terms of Wilce's interrogation of Donald Hall's elegiac *Without* (1998) are relevant here:

Are his poems laments? Yes and no. They are entextualizations of grief (grief channelled into memorable discourse), yes; but they were not spontaneously improvised for tearful public performance. Hall wrote his poems in the privacy of his home for later circulation to a mass public readership. (Wilce 2009: 23)

Wilce reminds us that the performers of traditional lament 'sing/weep for or with a live audience', more accurately designated 'co-participants', and that 'as a genre performed in face-to-face settings, bodies play an important role in lamentation' (Wilce 2009: 23). This is very far from the process by which a modern poet's text is composed, transmitted and received. Oswald's voicing of her poem is a solo recitation of an individually-authored poetic text, a virtuoso feat of individual creativity, memory and concentration. The poem's audience are positioned as auditors, respectful listeners rather than participating voices.⁸ *Memorial's* structure and mood may be informed by traditions of antiphonal mourning, but the poem's composition and performance clearly align the poem with one half of lament's equation; the *threnōs*, the 'commissioned work of professional outsiders' and 'the kind of formal, enduring artwork that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* see their events as turning into' (Murnaghan 1999: 205).⁹ The poet writes and speaks as the latest in a long line of artists - 'someone like Homer' (Oswald 2011a: 1) - whose 'entextualizations' have re-presented the collective, participatory performance of lamentation through the medium of individually-authored texts.¹⁰ As Oswald has noted elsewhere: 'to create an oral poem in a literary tradition has been one of my driving impulses' (Oswald 2003).

Yet Wilce also warns us against assuming the existence of any absolute distinction between collectively performed and privately 'entextualised' versions of lamentation, since a privately composed poem may acquire a subsequent, public performance history (Wilce 2009: 23). Foley's explorations of slam poetry, a high-octane performance-genre in which competitors 'speak their poetry aloud, to give it living voice with all the power and bravado they can muster' (Foley 2002: 3-5), lend support to this flexible understanding of the multiple identities of a modern poem which may exist both on the printed page and in live performance, designating this type of work 'Voiced Texts': a 'type of oral poetry that begins life as written composition only to modulate to oral performance before a live audience' (Foley 2002: 43). This categorisation avoids conventional dichotomies between 'oral' and 'written' texts,¹¹ drawing on a recognition that:

... not only a given culture but even a single individual can manage an extensive repertoire of expressive styles and media, so that a person who uses literacy and texts ... may also harness the idiom of oral tradition. (Foley 2005: 206)

The category of 'Voiced Text' emphasises the fluidity and hybridity of poetic compositions which, like Homeric epic,¹² may have many lives both on the page and in live, spoken-word performance.¹³

This notion of the 'Voiced Text', as site of generic hybridity, and as a catalyst for the transformation of poetic text in performance, significantly informs the analysis that follows. The remainder of this paper examines the crucial symbolic role played by vocalisation, and its absence, in the text of Oswald's *Memorial*, before moving on to consider how this sophisticated literary interplay of sound and silence functions in, and can be heightened (or even transformed) by, the peculiar and unpredictable conditions of live performance.

WRITING SILENCE IN MEMORIAL

Throughout *Memorial*, the interplay of sound and silence plays a key role in shaping the poem's moods and meanings. As Womack (2011) notes, a moment's silence, marked by a sudden expanse of blank paper, is a dramatic feature of the poem's published text (Oswald 2011a: 55). *Memorial's* soldier protagonists are repeatedly forced into confrontation with the inefficacy of their own vocal acts, or suffer violent trauma to the sites of breath and speech. Pedarus is one such casualty, who:

Felt the hot shock in his neck of Meges' spear
Unswallowable sore throat of metal in his mouth
Right through his teeth
He died biting down on the spearhead (Oswald 2011a: 20)

Similarly, the blow that kills Pandarus 'Splintered his teeth cut through his tongue broke off his jaw', rendering futile his promises of what he'll do 'If ever I get home' (Oswald 2011a: 22-3). Such deaths are recurrently signified by 'a dull clang' or the sound of 'metal banging on the ground' (Oswald 2011a: 16, 31), the technologies of killing repeatedly subsuming human speech into clattering wordlessness.¹⁴

In the *Iliad*, this identification of the sites of breath and speech with violence is explicitly and pragmatically marked, as when Achilles considers where best to attack Hector:

He was eyeing Hektor's splendid body, to see where it might best
give way, but all the rest of the skin was held in the armor,
brazen and splendid, he stripped when he cut down the strength of Patroklos;
yet showed where the collar-bones hold the neck from the shoulders,
the throat, where death of the soul comes most swiftly ... (Homer, *Iliad* 22.321-5)

In *Memorial*, less concerned with the practicalities of killing than with the effects of Homeric violence, damage to the sites of vocalisation, and soldiers' loss of vocal efficacy, becomes a key signifier of oncoming death, with its transformation of a breathing, speaking man into an unspeaking object, a corpse.

This process is explicitly enacted in the death of Agelaos:

And AGELAOS in the act of turning
Noticed the death cloud Diomedes towering towards him
He was heaving his horses round swearing
When a spearshot pushed through his shout and out through his chest
He fell made of metal banging on the ground (Oswald 2011a: 31)

Here, Diomedes' spear moves faster (and more effectually) than speech, tearing through its victim's chest, ripping apart the muscle, breath and tissue that would have made the cry that might have hurried his horses and saved his life. What emerges is not human sound but the head of a spear 'out through his chest', and Agelaos' intended 'swearing' is translated into the noise of 'metal banging on the ground'. This emphasis upon speech and its loss is Oswald's own. The *Iliad*'s depiction of the same incident (Homer, *Iliad* 8.253-60) concludes with a description of how Agelaos 'fell from the chariot, and his armour clattered upon him' (Homer, *Iliad* 8.260). The distinction between the man who falls and his armour which clatters is marked. In *Memorial*, at the moment of death, the man and his arms become indistinguishable ('He fell made of metal'). The instant of death is marked by the transformation of fearful, practical human speech into the hollow clanging of a dead hero, recalling Simone Weil's definition of 'force' as that which 'turns man into a thing' (Weil 2005: 3). As Oswald remarks elsewhere of Iphidamas: 'now he is only iron / Sleeping its iron sleep' (Oswald 2011a: 38).

The inefficacy of speech is marked, too, in the death of Iphidamas' brother, Coon:

First he wounded Agamemnon
Then he grabbed his brother's stiffened foot
And tries to drag him home shouting
Help for god's sake please this is Iphidamas
Someone please help but Agamemnon
Cut off his head and that was that (Oswald 2011a: 37)

Here, the poem's absence of punctuation invests its narrative voice with a note of flat inexorability ('Someone please help but Agamemnon') making the failure of Coon's yelling a foregone conclusion. Agamemnon might be as 'deaf and dumb' as the dehumanised killer of Weil's analysis: 'over him, too, words are as powerless as over matter itself' (Weil 2005: 26). The poem's brief, urgent and perhaps hopeful swerve into the present tense ('tries to drag him home') ends with a bald re-assertion of the primacy of violent action over persuasive speech, and of epic necessity over imaginative empathy: 'Agamemnon / Cut off his head and that was that'.

SPEECH, SILENCE, AND THE POET'S VOICE

Repeatedly, Oswald's Homeric fighters die bereft of speech, or despite unheeded pleas for life. They are unheard, silenced, becoming like lifeless blocks of falling metal. And so the process of speaking or hearing the poem is crucially informed by this distinction between the voiceless dead and the vocal liveness of a present performance. The muteness of the poem's slain contrasts painfully with the eloquent speech which reports and commemorates their deeds and deaths. As the poet's skilled, self-possessed vocalisation progresses, the violently enforced speechlessness of her poem's subjects acquires a bleak, bitter undertone of irony. The conspicuous liveness of the poet's performance interacts provocatively with the poem's recurring depictions of lives ending, and voices falling into silence.

Oswald's performance is also capable of commenting more explicitly, yet with eloquent economy, upon the *Iliad's* catalogued carnage. The death of Hector is the last of those recounted in *Memorial*, coming in performance almost as a surprise, an unexpectedly familiar landmark in an imaginative landscape where each passing name and death has come to acquire its own weight, each briefly functioning as its own centre of narrative gravity. 'And HECTOR died like everyone else' Oswald announces, declining to distinguish between the heroic and the obscure dead:

He was in charge of the Trojans
But a spear found out a little patch of white
Between his collarbone and his throat
Just exactly where a man's soul sits
Waiting for the mouth to open (Oswald 2011a: 71)

Here again, death is represented as an act of silencing, with the killing spear expertly finding the site of potential speech, as it has done for so many of the poem's casualties. Oswald shifts the *Iliad's* pragmatic emphasis on the throat as the spot 'where death of the soul comes most quickly' (Homer, *Iliad* 22.325), instead stressing the intimate connection between soul and speech ('Just exactly where a man's soul sits / Waiting for the mouth to open').¹⁵ She also excises the dying hero's extended converse with his killer (Homer, *Iliad* 22, 328-360),¹⁶ making Hector's death as powerlessly mute as any obscure soldier's.

However, the poet's live performance is capable of subtly subverting her text's apparent even-handedness, with the ghost of a sigh following the word 'spear' lending the line a miniature caesura, a marked moment of weariness and grief, holding Hector's approaching death in momentary suspension. For a moment, a tiny exhalation threatens to undo the whole work of the poem, to hold back the final death that will complete the pattern of Oswald's *Iliad*. For an instant the poet seems to hesitate. To consider the pain and the difficulty and perhaps even the futility of a recitation that cannot, after all, undo a single act of violence.

The poet's almost-sigh may be unintended, accidental, unnoticed. It may be the consequence of tiredness (she's been reciting, uninterrupted, for over an hour at this point), or a pragmatic expulsion of air in advance of a necessary new breath. It may be that it has never occurred before at this juncture in the poem, and never will again.¹⁷ But it is an element of performance which, in context, can acquire a significance out of all proportion to its volume and duration. In a post-mortem flashback, we hear Hector tersely acknowledging his own future - 'I know what will happen' - before lapsing into a silence that will prove to be terminal, returning to Andromache:

Asking only to be washed and burned
And his bones wrapped in soft cloths
And returned to the ground. (Oswald 2011a: 72)

The marital exchange depicted is almost wordless. Hector speaks once. Andromache says nothing. And in this context a sound as small as the poet's almost-sigh can become invested with epic significance. The sigh may mark the poet's weariness, reluctance to progress, but it also marks the

inevitability of what is to follow. The poet looks forward and sighs, and the sigh eloquently signals the nature of its sequel.

For a knowledgeable, alert audience, the poet's sigh might even recall the passage in book six of the *Iliad*, in which Andromache addresses her husband using the forms of lamentation, 'as if he had already been killed' (Foley 1999: 43), before stirring her servants into collective grief for the as-yet-unfallen Hector:

And as she came in speed into the well-settled household
of Hektor the slayer of men, she found numbers of handmaidens
within, and her coming stirred all of them into lamentation.
So they mourned in the house of Hektor though he was living ... (Homer, *Iliad* 6.497-500)

Andromache's premature lamentation fatally blurs the line between her husband alive and her husband dead. The effect of Oswald's sigh might be considered in comparable terms: 'her very speech-act pronounces him already a dead man' (Foley 1999: 122). Thus, under the specific conditions of a singular live performance, a tiny, voiceless exhalation may come to bear the weight of epic lament. Even for a listener with no classical expertise, and no knowledge of Andromache's pre-emptive lamentation, the poet's smallest rhythmic shift or hesitation can have a dramatic effect upon the aural texture and meaning of her live performance, and may make 'eloquence out of silence' (Womack 2012).¹⁸

However unintentional or ephemeral such a speech-act might be, the conditions of epic performance mean that it is always a potentially meaningful signal. The poet's vocalisation can never be a completely neutral representation (or reproduction) of a printed text, and live performance inevitably opens a space in which accident, interpolation and interpretation come into creative play. This liveness of the poet's performance opens the way for her own 'Voiced Text' to participate in the complexity and reciprocity of oral, epic performance.

MEMORIAL AS EPIC PERFORMANCE

Of course, any such interpretation is dependent upon the developing relationship between the poet and her audience. Epic in performance is a demanding process, in which the physical co-presence and shared imaginative endeavour of poet and auditors provides the enabling context for a meaningful re-negotiation of ancient myth.¹⁹ In 'the insistent present of the spoken-word event' vocalised texts, especially texts of the *Iliad*'s extent and complexity, 'demand attention and inspire participation' (Foley 2002: 88).

Fischer-Lichte reminds us that performance can only take place 'in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators', and that '[a] performance arises out of their encounter and interaction' (Fischer-Lichte 2010: 29). She describes this interaction as 'an *autopoietic* process, which is characterised by a high degree of contingency' (Fischer-Lichte 2010: 30). This emphasis upon 'encounter' and 'interaction' recalls the reciprocal nature of traditional, improvisatory epic performance:

It is direct; addresser and addressee are face to face. They can see hear, smell and touch each other, and they mutually influence each other as the performance proceeds. The experience is shared, and joy, melancholy, fear, or aggression is contagious among the participants. The success of a singer depends on his ability to catch the interest of his audience and keep it. He is intent on meeting their demands and is all the time attentive to their reactions. If they show signs of being bored, he introduces something exciting or, on the contrary, abbreviates his narrative and hastens to the end. (Jensen 2005: 46-7)

Oswald's performance of *Memorial* does not obviously match this highly flexible and responsive model of oral epic performance. The poet stands, shielded from her audience, behind the conventional academic bastion of podium and microphone. She speaks a pre-fixed text, whose words and images will not (accidental mis-speakings, slips of the tongue, excepted) vary in performance and

re-performance. Yet even within the narrow parameters of this most self-effacing and controlled of recitations, some symptoms of epic orality, and the intense *autopoiesis* of epic spectatorship, begin to emerge in and through Oswald's performance.

One of *Memorial's* most striking characteristics on the printed page is its repetition of the epic similes which mark, and implicitly reflect upon, each fighter's death. Oswald describes this distinctive structure as 'a series of memories and similes laid side by side: an antiphonal account of man in his world' (Oswald 2011a: 2). Each simile, then, provides its own answer or response, direct or oblique, to the depiction of death that it succeeds:

AXYLUS son of Teuthras
Lived all his life in the lovely harbour of Arisbe
Looking down at the Hellespont
Everyone knew that plump man
Sitting on the step with his door wide open
He who so loved his friends
Died side by side with CALESIUS
In a daze of loneliness
Their conversation unfinished

Like the hawk of the hills the perfect killer
Easily outflies the chattering dove
She slips away but he follows he ripples
He hangs his black hooks over her
And snares her with a thin cry
In praise of her softness

Like the hawk of the hills the perfect killer
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And snares her with a thin cry
In praise of her softness (Oswald 2011a: 26-7)

In this example, a logical connection between the 'chattering' dove and the poignantly 'unfinished' conversation of the gregarious Axylus is evident,²⁰ but this is not always the case. In private reading, we may linger for as long as we wish over a perplexing poetic image:

The text seems to be a mere passive given for the reader to handle at will, choosing when, how, where and in what order to activate it ... (Taplin 1992: 2)

By contrast, the live vocalisation of epic verse imposes a temporal limit upon each successive phrase. The poet speaks a line that lasts only as long as her breath and, once spoken, is unrecoverable. Under these conditions, the challenge of correctly receiving and appropriately evaluating and interpreting the poet's similes becomes increasingly urgent, and a simile's repetition provides a crucial opportunity for an audience unused to the rigours of epic spectatorship to process the connections between *Memorial's* narratives of death, and each answering simile. At times, Oswald's vocal delivery of *Memorial's* similes even seems to acknowledge, and respond to, the ephemerality of the spoken poetic phrase. Often, a simile's second iteration is slower, pitched lower, coaxing listeners into a second attempt at comprehension, and with a downward intonation in its closing syllables that suggests achievement and completion. In her exploration of Homeric simile from the perspective of cognitive theory, Minchin identifies a major function of the simile as being 'the *cultivation of intimacy*' (Minchin 2001: 138):

When we as an audience are processing the simple analogies ... we are set a task by the storyteller: to evaluate the point of the simile for ourselves ... Homer's brief similes, therefore, as minor exercises in internal evaluation, draw us into the story. (Minchin 2001: 143)

Viewed from this angle, each simile which we satisfactorily evaluate and interpret draws us closer into the story being woven, making us actively engaged participants in the epic poet's creation of meaning.²¹

This phenomenon is further heightened by the physical co-presence of the reciting poet. Oswald's performance physicality is modest, restrained. She rests her hands upon the lectern in front of her, avoiding dramatic gesture. Yet her presence is authoritative, compelling, intense. She scans the room as she speaks, catches your eye, tilts her chin interrogatively, as if to ask 'do you see, do you understand?' Both singly and collectively, we're being challenged to acknowledge our cognitive participation in the unfolding of the epic poem. In the shared light of a makeshift performance-space, the poet observes us observing her, modifying her vocal and physical signals in response to the levels of understanding we register, in an increasingly intense feedback loop.

This effect is profoundly contingent, shaped by accidents of context and circumstance. Womack evokes an earlier performance of the same poem, in a very different environment, in which the presence of the poet, and her relationship to her listening audience, is figured in very different ways:

The lights were darkened (save for some eerie blue glowing in the ceiling); her figure appeared gaunt and small behind a vast spotlight lectern. It was a very 21st century version of the Homeric bard sitting by the fire, the flames flickering on his face while his listeners dream in darkness. (Womack 2012)

In this iteration of the poem's performance, the upholstered isolation of a darkened auditorium represents a space for individual imagining, even dreaming - perhaps provoking Oswald's reported disclaimer that, 'I won't mind ... if you drift in and out of sleep. You can even snore.' (Womack 2012). This too is symptomatic of epic performance, which shape-shifts and transforms depending upon occasion, audience, environment: 'oral poems are made and remade over a wide variety of geographical and chronological contexts' (Foley 2002 :116).

None of this is to claim that the modern recitation of a poem like *Memorial* is an authentic or accurate re-performance of ancient epic practices. Rather, reading modern performances deriving from epic verse in the light of their ancient counterparts may provide us with new insights into their distinctive mechanics, dynamics and effects. A roomful of contemporary academics and students, gathered in a soggy lecture-theatre (it's raining outside) to listen to a poet reciting her work, does not begin to approximate the collective, participating, perhaps even actively-vocalising, community implied by ancient practices of lamentation and epic. However, reading this inescapably modern performance-event in the light of ancient practices challenges the construction of simple binaries between then/now, them/us, oral/literate, participant/spectator, presenting the opportunity to construct more subtle and flexible analyses of the contemporary performance, re-performance and reception of ancient epic.

To return to the title of this paper, the silence of the contemporary audience, while marking our distance from the ancient oral communities and practices invoked in the Introduction to *Memorial*, need not necessarily imply total passivity.²² Oswald's performance is fuelled by a controlled ferocity. Her delivery is distinct, deliberate. The self-imposed labour of enunciating each name, reporting each end, echoes in each syllable and in each angle of her body,²³ and the direct interrogative reciprocity of her delivery and gaze challenges her audience to do the Homeric dead an equal honour, through their participation in the demanding, unfamiliar process of epic spectatorship.²⁴ Perhaps it is in this way that the antiphony evoked in Oswald's own analysis of *Memorial* (Oswald 2011a: 1-2), ostensibly absent from the poet's single-voiced recitation of the poem, becomes most palpable in the poem's live re-performance.

CONCLUSIONS

In her study of the acoustics of Logue's *War Music* (1959-2005), Greenwood proposes a parallel between the 'oral-derived, traditional status' of Homeric epic and 'the significance of the spoken word

in Logue's poetry', contending that neither represents an instance of simple orality, 'but rather the tradition of poetry as collaboration between text and voice':

Logue's Homer circulates as a written text and the written word is fundamental to the process of poetic creation. However, without sound the potential of his Homer is unvoiced. (Greenwood 2009: 507)

This analysis points towards the work of other scholars of epic and oral performance, who have increasingly identified the live re-performance of epic poetry as a site of hybrid orality, in which a literary document may acquire some of the characteristics and performance dynamics of orally-composed and –performed verse. Simultaneously, the insights of theatre and classical reception scholars have heightened our awareness of the *autopoiesis* of live performance, and its complex, interactive dynamics. Even when the audience is silent, they are none the less active participants in the creation of a unique, unrepeatable performance-event. Viewed (or perhaps listened to) in this way, a text like *War Music* or *Memorial* becomes a complex aggregate of literary composition, print and recording technologies, and the unpredictable interactions and ephemera of live re-performance.

This analysis draws on all of these perspectives to consider the contemporary vocalisation of a poem derived from the *Iliad* as a 'Voiced Text', and to begin to consider some of the major insights, challenges and opportunities arising from such a categorisation. It contends that Oswald's remarkable feat of memory and articulation, her intense and demanding re-vocalisation of the *Iliad*,²⁵ opens a new site for exploring the distinctive processes of speaking and hearing Homeric epic, and re-making ancient oral performance practice for, and with, a contemporary audience. In Oswald's vocalisation of *Memorial*, formerly 'entextualized' fragments of the *Iliad*'s performance ancestry begin to assume new identities and emphases. And to reverse Foley's "proverb", if tradition is the context for this endeavour, then 'performance is the enabling event' (Foley 2002: 130-33).

Memorial is a poem which is profoundly engaged with speech and silence; particularly with the loss of speech as a symptom of war's de-humanising effects, and a concomitant of violent death. These preoccupations are ironically emphasised in the poem's live vocalisation, the poet's own mastery of verbal eloquence contrasting bleakly with the enforced muteness of her soldier-dead, while Oswald's virtuosic recitation simultaneously highlights the ancient *Iliad*'s status as a poem created through and for performance, suggesting new perspectives for studying the complex mechanics and dynamics of Homeric epic's after-life in contemporary re-performance.²⁶

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¹ This piece was written in response to Alice Oswald's performance at The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (University of Oxford), on 12 November 2012, though it is also informed by an earlier encounter with the same piece at The Southbank Centre, London on 8 February 2012. For a review of the latter see Womack (2012).

² In the poem's published text, the names of the war-dead are always presented in capitals, while the names of survivors are printed conventionally.

³ The poster for this event also depicted a modern icon of remembrance, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with flowers placed beside it. For a discussion of this monument, and its relationship with Homeric epic, see Tatum (2003).

⁴ Oswald's preoccupation with this theme is also evident in the layout of *Memorial* on the printed page, where its blocks of text resemble the neatly-ordered rows and columns of a cemetery's funerary stones. The mournful eloquence of mute stone is also explicitly evoked in the poem, in the simile 'Like a stone / Stands by a grave and says nothing' (Oswald 2011a: 47). On the ways in which material objects evoke the past in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* see Grethlein (2008).

⁵ All quotations from the *Iliad* taken from Lattimore (2011).

⁶ On the balance of voices in this passage see Macintosh (1994: 34).

⁷ Oswald's poem does, however, retain some of traditional lament's subversive perspective on the unheroic consequences of war-making. 'Lamentation threatens to undermine the *kleos*-conferring function of epic because it stresses the suffering caused by heroic death rather than the glory won by it': Murnaghan (1999: 204).

⁸ Though, as will be discussed later in this paper, different environments and spatial configurations may significantly alter this relationship.

⁹ On antiquity's objectification and attempted control of lament see Wilce (2009: 57-70).

¹⁰ On this phenomenon in modern Irish drama see Macintosh (1994: 158-182).

¹¹ For a discussion of the 'Great Divide' see Foley (2002: 36-8). Ong (2002) offers a classic account of the disjunction between oral and literary technologies and psychologies.

¹² Foley addresses the contested orality of Homer in *Homer's Traditional Art* (1999: xiv): 'Scholars on both sides of the critical fence have quite often assumed too much, from one extreme arguing for direct transmission of oral performance to surviving text and from the other extreme insisting that Homer's poems as we have them are too polished, too monumental to be anything except literate and textual. Both viewpoints obscure the real complexity of the situation by forcing a reductive "solution" that ignores some of the evidence and some of the logical interpretations of that evidence'. On modern analogues see Foley (2005).

¹³ An audio CD of *Memorial*, read by the author, was released in the same year as the poem's publication. See Oswald (2011b). On the comparable multimedia lives of Logue's *War Music* see Greenwood (2009).

¹⁴ The same term appears in Oswald's earlier poem 'The mud-spattered recollections of a woman who lived her life backwards' where it is similarly associated with separation and grief: 'and a feeling fell on me with a dull clang / that I'd never see my darling daughter again.' Oswald (2005: 49-51).

¹⁵ In a strikingly parallel construction, in 'True ghosts, a *ballad with footnotes*' Oswald describes 'the varying shapes / made by the cavities of the mouth and throat / so that the soul is squeezed and shaken into VOICE'. Oswald (2005: 42-45).

¹⁶ On the process of Hector's death, and the specificity of his wound, in the *Iliad* see Macintosh (1994: 47-49).

¹⁷ It does not occur, for instance, in the poet's 2011 recording of *Memorial* (Oswald 2011b: 23).

¹⁸ In a different context, Oswald has revealed herself to be an attentive and sensitive reader of the poetic pause, both on the page and in vocalised performance (Oswald 2008: xii-xvi). I am grateful to Jack Thacker for introducing me to this essay.

¹⁹ On the role of audience in epic performance see Jensen (2005).

²⁰ Again, the emphasis upon speech and its silencing in this passage is Oswald's own. Compare Homer, *Iliad* 6.12-19.

²¹ Foley argues that 'pivot-words' associated with epic simile (like 'as' and 'so') can 'key performance even in text-bound forms of oral poetry, provided the readership can "hear" the signal' (Foley 2002: 88). For a less performance-based reading of the function of Oswald's similes see Crown (2011).

²² On the representation of silent audiences within Homeric epic see Peponi (2012: 29-32).

²³ On physically difficult articulation and tragic performance see Harrop and Wiles (2008: 57-8), and Harrop (2010: 233-36). For an instance in Logue's *War Music* see Greenwood (2009: 506).

²⁴ Peponi explores 'the peculiar mixture of pain with pleasure in the audience's response to Homeric poetry' (2012: 55, 51-58).

²⁵ Though not, of course, the complete *Iliad*. The poet writes of her 'reckless dismissal of seven-eighths of the poem' (Oswald 2011a: 2). On the traditional practice of presenting fragments rather than a 'whole' epic see Foley (2005: 204).

²⁶ I am grateful to Rosie Wyles, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this article.