



## 'Like a Stone': Ecology, *Enargeia*, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

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**ABSTRACT** This article argues that the Anthropocene is marked by haunted time. As the 'geological agents' of climate change, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has put it, we both identify with 'deep time' processes and conjure the ghosts of those whose lives to come will be shaped in drastic ways by our actions in the present. This article explores a poetics of haunted time via readings of the work of artist/sculptor Ilana Halperin and poet Alice Oswald. Halperin's recent work with the "slow and fast time" of geological processes (calcification and lava flows), and also with the body's own capacity to generate geologic material (in the form of body stones), engages with the possibility of "geologic intimacy." From here, the article reads *Memorial*, Oswald's recent translation of the *Iliad* pared down to snapshot biographies of the soldiers killed in the Trojan wars interleaved with a series of astonishing similes of the natural world, as an example of a poetics of haunted time. Drawing on James Hatley's theory of ethical time and its ecocritical application by Deborah Bird Rose, I argue that Oswald's strategy of repeating similes creates a kind of spectral echo, giving expression to an enfolding of diachronic and synchronous time in which intergenerational responsibilities are realised. The haunted time of Oswald's poem thus represents a passage to the difficult intimacy of rethinking the relationship between past, present, and future actions and effects.

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What happens to us  
Is irrelevant to the world's geology  
But what happens to the world's geology  
Is not irrelevant to us.  
We must reconcile ourselves to the stones,  
Not the stones to us.<sup>1</sup>

'Welcome to the Anthropocene' has become a common formula with which to introduce ecocritical discussions. But it presents an odd sort of welcome, both belated (in that the Anthropocene is commonly considered to be coeval with the Industrial Revolution) and anticipatory (in that it is oriented to a future described in terms of trends and effects only partially realised). In this sense, to be welcomed to the Anthropocene is to be inducted into the

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh McDiarmid, *Selected Poems*, eds., Alan Riach and Michael Grieve (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1992), 183.

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temporal torsions of anthropogenic climate change, in which time and agency are both radically dispersed and decentred. Climate change lacks a centre or moment of origin; it unfolds erratically, in ways that are inconsistently distributed and more often discreet than spectacular (“slow violence” is Rob Nixon’s term);<sup>2</sup> readable both in apocalyptic teleologies and eonian data sets. These unfamiliar, *geologic* temporalities, coupled with the unprecedented scale of loss—oceanic desertification; habitat degradation; the sixth mass extinction event—preclude efforts to confront climate change even as they also insist upon it. Is it possible, then, to reconcile the simultaneously deep and urgent, slow and fast time of the Anthropocene?

The extraordinarily long view which thinking in terms of the Anthropocene demands has prompted widespread reflection on the conceptual value of geological processes. According to Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, “the geologic, both as a material dynamic and as a cultural preoccupation, shapes the ‘now’ in ever more direct and urgent ways.”<sup>3</sup> With the advent of the Anthropocene humanity has acquired, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, a geological agency in respect to the earth, exponentially expanded and accelerated across time and space.<sup>4</sup> Consumption of fossil fuels, the implication goes, has led to a new geological era; one in which the agent of change is us. The temporal dislocation that follows works both ways: forced to identify with such ‘deep time’ processes, we also conjure the ghosts of those whose lives to come will be shaped in drastic ways by our actions in the present. In a very real sense, a future we shrink from contemplating is haunted by a past we cannot imagine.

The urgency of addressing climate change is accompanied by a need to understand better the relations with time which underpin this urgency; as Michelle Bastian has put it, “time’s role in managing the intertwined relationality of daily life” and its potential as a “powerful social tool for producing, managing, and/or undermining various understandings of who or what is in relation with other beings or things.”<sup>5</sup> This is particularly pressing given that, as Chakrabarty has observed, the ascription of geological agency to human activity poses, among other things, a problem in thinking about the figure of the human. The two images which predominated in most critical discourse in the latter half of the twentieth century were those of Enlightenment humanism, which posited the human as potentially the same everywhere; and the view shared by many thinkers of globalisation, which overlaid Enlightenment humanism with a privileging of cultural difference. In the Anthropocene, they are joined by a figure of the human defined by a kind of supra-human influence. There is, consequently, a need to think about these two figures—“the human-human and the nonhuman-human”—simultaneously. They cannot be read in a teleological fashion; they do

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence and the Environmental Picaresque,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no.3 (2009): 445.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, “Evidence: Making a Geologic Turn in Cultural Awareness,” in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*, ed. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 Winter (2009): 197-222.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Bastian, “Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crisis,” *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no.1 (2012): 25.

not supercede one another: "they are simply disjunctive."<sup>6</sup> In effect, humanity has conjured the spectre of itself as a *hyperobject*, whose massive distribution in time and space forces a rethinking of the relation between objects and ontology.<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, then, the Anthropocene bears witness to a radical *cleaving* of the human and the nonhuman in the crucible of the "geologic now."<sup>8</sup>

According to Timothy Clark, the figure of the unborn haunts this scene as a strange figure of protest.<sup>9</sup> Similarly *Memorial* (2011), Alice Oswald's recent translation of the *Iliad*, is replete with ghosts, not all of whom hail from the past. In the poem's schedule of lament, "Earth's moment" comes with the "unborn ones."<sup>10</sup> As such, it offers a poetic account of Nick Mansfield's assertion that "the future politics is a politics of ghosts."<sup>11</sup> This article will argue that Oswald's translation, pared down to snapshot biographies of the soldiers killed in the Trojan wars interleaved with a series of astonishing similes of the natural world, presents a poetics of *haunted* time. While a return to the *Iliad* might appear a counter-intuitive move in attempting to address a poetic suited to the Anthropocene, Oswald's approach to her classical sources offers what I believe to be a realisation of the Anthropocene's peculiar temporal torsions. Oswald has called her poem "a translation of the *Iliad's* atmosphere, not its story"; that is, a recasting of its "'*enargeia*,' which means something like 'bright unbearable reality.'"<sup>12</sup> *Enargeia* is, she acknowledges, difficult to define. In general, it refers to the capacity to make something vividly real; in *Memorial* it takes on something of the quality of "dangerous ... brightness" and openness to the deep strangeness of the nonhuman world which Oswald values so much in the work of Ted Hughes. It is often associated with *ekphrasis*, and thus with sight; yet more properly *enargeia* involves all the senses, a point that is especially pertinent in my reading of its place in the work of a poet so "sound-centred" as Oswald.<sup>13</sup> Recent criticism has emphasised what Tom Bristow has called "a concept of building through sound and listening" in Oswald's poetry;<sup>14</sup> Mary Pinard has described her as the practitioner of an "echo-poetics," privileging the "acoustics of environment";<sup>15</sup> and Oswald herself has admitted, "I'd

<sup>6</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43 Winter (2012): 11, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Morton, "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19, no.2 (2011): 163-190.

<sup>8</sup> Ellsworth and Kruse, "Making a Geologic Turn," 23.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Clark, "Towards a Deconstructive Environmental Criticism," *Oxford Literary Review* 30 (2008): 46.

<sup>10</sup> Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (London: Faber, 2011), 19.

<sup>11</sup> Nick Mansfield, "'There is a Spectre Haunting ...': Ghosts, Their Bodies, Some Philosophers, a Novel and the Cultural Politics of Climate Change," *Borderlands* 7, no.1 (2007): §22. Accessed 11 December 2013. [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol7no1\\_2008/mansfield\\_climate.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol7no1_2008/mansfield_climate.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Pinard, "Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 10, no.2 (2009): 24.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Bristow, "'Contracted to an Eye-Quiet World': Sonic Census or Poetics of Place in Alice Oswald," *Symbiosis* 10, no.2 (2006): 175. See also Janne Stigen Drangsholt, "Sounding the Landscape: Dis-placement in the Poetry of Alice Oswald," in *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Anne Kahario, Seán Crosson and Charles I. Armstrong (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 167-179.

<sup>15</sup> Pinard, "Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener," 18.

rather listen than look.”<sup>16</sup> It is this auditory *enargeia* which, in *Memorial*, resonates with the hauntological politics of climate change. As Heinrich Plett has observed, *enargeia* also has a temporal dimension, bringing about “a time shift, in that something from the past or future is made present.”<sup>17</sup> In particular, I argue that Oswald’s strategy of repeated or doubled similes creates a kind of spectral echo (in Derrida’s sense of a moment that is both “repetition *and* first time”)<sup>18</sup> which gives expression to what James Hatley has called a “death narrative,” an enfolding of diachronic and synchronous time in which inter-generational responsibilities are realised.<sup>19</sup> In Oswald’s Homeric fusion of pastoral lyric and lament poetry, haunted time represents a passage to the difficult intimacy of rethinking the relationship between past, present, and future actions and effects.

### “We Form Geology”

Before approaching *Memorial*, and in order to better establish what is meant by *intimacy* in relation to past and future, I want first to consider another form of ‘deep time’ exploration. The difficulties of achieving intimacy with unimaginable tranches of time are the fundamental preoccupation of Glasgow-based artist Ilana Halperin. Her work examines unexpected connections between human and geologic experience, addressing, as Sara Barnes and Andrew Patrizio have put it, “the sublime challenge” of appreciating “what 300,000,000 years feels like.”<sup>20</sup> Frequently this takes the form of work that transposes seemingly incompatible temporal orders. Birthdays are a recurring theme: *Hand Held Lava* (2003), a pair of short films made in the year of her thirtieth birthday as part of her extended *Physical Geology* project, includes footage of volcanologists at work beneath Eldfell, a 200 metre volcanic cone formed during an eruption in Iceland in 1973, celebrating the coincidence of their ‘births’; and in 2009 Halperin chose her thirty-sixth birthday to crack open the last set of ‘cave casts’ in her *Physical Geology (cave cast/slow time)*. In the latter work she set out to create a “geological time diptych” of stalactite formation and lava flows: “slow time and fast time alongside each other.”<sup>21</sup> The first half of the diptych consists of limestone relief sculptures formed over ten months in the hyper-accelerated calcifying springs of Fontaines Petrifiantes in St Nectaire (where the growth rate is one centimetre per year, ten times the norm); in the second, Halperin created a set of lava stamps, magma pressed between steel plates to form a seal bearing the name of a volcano and

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<sup>16</sup> Alice Oswald, “Presiding Spirits,” *Magma Poetry* 26 Summer (2003), accessed 11 December 2013, <http://magma-poetry.com/archive/magma-26-questions-of-travel/articles/presiding-spirits/>.

<sup>17</sup> Heinrich F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [1994]), 10.

<sup>19</sup> James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility After the Irreparable* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000), 212.

<sup>20</sup> Sara Barnes and Andrew Patrizio, “A Curatorial Point in Time: Hand Held Lava and Steine,” in *Ilana Halperin. New Landmass/Neue Landmasse*, ed. Sara Barnes and Andrew Patrizio (Berlin: Berliner Medizinhistorischen Museums der Chartié / Shering Stiftung, 2012), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ilana Halperin, “Physical Geology (A Field Guide to New Landmass in Three Formations),” in *Ilana Halperin. New Landmass/Neue Landmasse*, ed. Sara Barnes and Andrew Patrizio (Berlin: Berliner Medizinhistorischen Museums der Chartié / Shering Stiftung, 2012), 52.

the year of its appearance, which she used to brand text-and-water-colour renderings of the emerging landscape (*Physical Geology (lava stamp/fast time)*, 2009-11). These works have their own *enargeia*, presenting the sense of deep time as peculiarly urgent, and available. The “geologic intimacy” they depict, for Halperin a vital part of the condition of being human, offers a series of imaginings of the identification with deep time processes which underpins Chakrabarty’s disjunctive framing of the human.<sup>22</sup>

Halperin’s work therefore can be thought of in terms of Val Plumwood’s concept of “the experiential framework of dead and silent matter.”<sup>23</sup> This is most evident in her use of body stones. In 2012, as a complement to her investigations in *Physical Geology*, Halperin exhibited stones formed in the body (gall stones, kidney stones, etc.) alongside other geologic material such as coral samples and a fragment of the Allende meteorite (thought to predate the formation of the Solar System, and thus the oldest object known to science). *Steine* displayed the same fascination with deep time as *Physical Geology*, but with an even greater emphasis on our intimacy with geologic processes. For Halperin, the body stones illustrated that “we as humans are also geological agents—we form geology.”<sup>24</sup> Recalling the way that coral is organic within water but calcifies out of it, body stones are organic matter within the body, but inorganic out of it. Elizabeth Kolbert has observed that one of the few markers of current climatic change likely to register in the geologic record is the ‘reef gap’ signifying the collapse of coral reef systems (predicted to occur within a generation; Kolbert also notes that reef gaps preceded each of the past five mass extinctions).<sup>25</sup> Blurring the boundary between the biological and geological in this way, Halperin has identified a compellingly intimate expression of our entanglement in what Ellsworth and Kruse call the “teeming assemblage” of the geologic moment:

Today, global flows create complex, moving entanglements of earth materials, geologic events, technologies, objects, chemicals, weather, information, people and other living and nonliving things ... [We] visualize “the geologic” as interwoven with the rise in global populations; nested within the challenges of nuclear waste storage; enfolded in carbon emissions; caught up in the rise of tsunami waves; orbiting the planet as space trash; stuck in the stagnant centre of the vortex that is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch; and fermenting in the hills of the Freshkills landfill. The geologic “now” is a teeming assemblage of exchange and interaction among the bio, geo, cosmo, socio, political, legal, economic, strategic, and imaginary.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ilana Halperin, “Autobiographical Trace Fossils,” in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*, ed. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013), 156.

<sup>23</sup> Val Plumwood, “Journey to the Heart of Stone,” in *Culture, Creativity, and Environment: New Environmentalist Perspectives*, ed. Fiona Beckett and Terry Gifford (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Halperin, “Physical Geology,” 52.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, “Enter the Anthropocene: Age of Man,” in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*, ed. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013), 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ellsworth and Kruse, “Making a Geologic Turn,” 23.

Drawing on Jane Bennett's theory of "vibrant materiality" ("the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metal—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own")<sup>27</sup> and the work of Bruno Latour, Ellsworth and Kruse describe the 'geologic' as "a vibrant force in contemporary life."<sup>28</sup> Consisting in both the slow time of calcium accumulation and the fast time of lava flows, the geologic now makes the unimaginable and unrelatable the basis for imaginative, relational connections between organic and inorganic, between vastly disparate polities in the matrix of global production, consumption, and disposal, and to the immense reaches of both the deep past and the unpredictable future. It is salient that, for Halperin, this is realised most forcefully in the body's own geologic processes.

In her "participatory" approach to the non-human,<sup>29</sup> Alice Oswald shares some of Bennett's desire to interrogate what Jacques Rancière called the partition of the sensible, "parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)"; as Bennett observes, human agency relies upon "a vast entourage of nonhumans,"<sup>30</sup> and a similar willingness to attend to the testimony of the nonhuman seems to inform Oswald's approach to composition. "When I'm writing a poem," she says, "the first thing I hear is its shape somewhere among all the noise ... I can hear sentences, distinct grammatical waves coming off things like waves of energy."<sup>31</sup> Oswald's attentiveness to the unique presencing of the nonhuman, her willingness to enter an "eye-quiet world" of concentration, gives her entry to a realm of vibrant matter.<sup>32</sup> Much of her poetry can be seen as acts of, to borrow from Bennett, "giving voice to ... a shimmering, potentially violent vitality intrinsic to matter."<sup>33</sup> Her third book, *Woods etc.*, opens (in "Sea poem") with a characteristic question, "what is water in the eyes of water," from which follows a series of reflections interrogating the poet's capacity to convey water's 'thingness':

what does it taste of

water deep in its own world  
steep shafts warm streams  
coal salt cod weed  
dispersed outflows and flytipping<sup>34</sup>

The bonding effect of internal rhyme (deep/steep/streams/weed) contrasts with the alternation between hard palatal and alveolar stops, and sibilants and liquids ("coal salt cod weed"),

<sup>27</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

<sup>28</sup> Ellsworth and Kruse, "Making a Geologic Turn," 17.

<sup>29</sup> Oswald, "Presiding Spirits," n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii, 108. See also Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Alice Oswald, "The Universe in Time of Rain Makes the World Alive With Noise," in *A Green Thought in a Green Shade: Poetry in the Garden*, ed. Sarah Maguire (The Poetry Society, 2000), 36.

<sup>32</sup> Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber, 2002), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.* (London: Faber, 2005), 3.

conjuring on the tongue a sense of “oscillation” with the strength to “break glass or sink steel.” The ‘thingness’ of water is not predicated on purity, as the sibilant cadencing of “dispersed outflows and flytipping” indicates, contrasting the pollution of the natural world with the harmonising effects of Oswald’s sound world and thus querying the assumption that some forms of matter are abject. As with Halperin, Oswald presents a sensibility in which the boundary between organic and inorganic is routinely breached, in pursuit of an intimacy with and presencing of matter “deep in its own world.”

This attention to giving shape to the ‘distinct grammatical waves’ unique to every object is particularly evident in those poems which describe something like a geologic sensibility. In “Autobiography for a Stone,” we hear of the patience of deep time: “I, Stone, ... /... am moving only very slowly, / lasting out earth and / keeping my gift under darkness.”<sup>35</sup> In “Mountains,” from her first collection *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Style* (1996), Oswald meditates on the material world’s extra-linguistic presence:

Something is in the line and air along edges,  
which is in wood when the leaf changes,  
and in the leaf-pattern’s gives and gauges,  
the water’s tension upon ledges.

...

Look through a holey stone. Now put it down.  
Something is twice as different. Something gone  
Accumulates a queerness. Be alone.  
Something is side by side with anyone.<sup>36</sup>

‘Something’—unnamed, possibly unnameable—exists in this landscape beyond the direct treatment of language or line of sight, trembling in the surface tension of water, in gaps, and on the cusp of things. Under Oswald’s gaze, apparent absence takes on the quality of presence; the hole in the stone (like the titular gap in the stone stile, “the pass between two kingdoms / ... my cavity the chord”) is a passage to a sense of accumulating difference, of alterity held in common (“Something is side by side with anyone”), through which “you can feel by instinct in the distance / the bigger mountains hidden by the mountains, / like intentions among suggestions.”<sup>37</sup> In her lyric poetry Oswald demonstrates the same sense of generosity towards the nonhuman world as Bennett and Halperin. In *Memorial* this vibrant materialism opens out onto a landscape of slaughter and grief in which her sense of being enfolded within the nonhuman is coupled with an awareness of *other times* which, I propose, resonates with the haunted temporalities of the Anthropocene.

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<sup>35</sup> Oswald, *Woods etc.*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Alice Oswald, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1996]), 34.

<sup>37</sup> Oswald, *Gap-Stone Stile*, 32, 34.

**Enargeia and ethical time**

As noted above, *Memorial* can be read in terms of James Hatley's concept of the death narrative. Death narratives give place to the dead in the continuity of human history. They are, as Hatley says, "vocative"; an exhortation to "experience one's time as a gift" in a trans-generational sequence, received from one's forebears and offered to one's descendants.<sup>38</sup> Oswald's vocative (even, as she says, "invocative")<sup>39</sup> poem is, similarly, a call to relationship that includes more than the present moment and present generations; but Oswald also extends Hatley's concept to include the more-than-human world, bringing the death narrative of Homer in concert with multiple, iterative animal death narratives, giving rise to what Deborah Bird Rose calls "multispecies knots of ethical time."<sup>40</sup> Rose has extended the possibilities of Hatley's inter-generational ethical sequencing to encompass the catastrophe of ecocide, by drawing attention to the role of synchrony in ethical time: the fact that lives are not only gifted through sequence but also by uncountable coeval others which nourish each living creature throughout its life,<sup>41</sup> and seen in the cycles of predation which recur in Oswald's similes. I propose that this sequence and synchrony find their formal equivalent in the similes' "dense knots of embodied time."

Oswald has suggested that *Memorial's* similes were intended as a form of respite from the "trance of war":<sup>42</sup>

One of the reasons I repeat the similes is that you need time off from the grief. My hope is that the similes will repair what gets broken by the biographies, in the same way that the natural world does. I think of simile as a healing art.<sup>43</sup>

The assertion that the similes offer 'time off' would seem to contradict any effort to link them to an exploration of ethical time. Yet they are also characterised by a recurring sense of vulnerability and (latent or actual) violence—in the "deer always moving on and looking back", or the lion confronted by "a line of huntsmen" who "stares himself stronger / Clenching his whole face fistlike / Around the stones of his eyes"<sup>44</sup>—from which emerges a sense of life sustained by the dual gifts of sequence and synchrony. The similes offer healing in that they

<sup>38</sup> Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, 212, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time," *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no.1 (2012): 127. Rose is careful to locate Hatley's philosophical dynamic of life's indebtedness to death in necrogenic biological reality: "Margulis and Sagan tell us that while accidental death has always been a contingent factor for life, many bacteria can survive more or less forever as copies are made again and again through cell division. In contrast, 'programmed death,' in which cells age and die as a part of the life of the individual, came into the world with reproduction." Rose, "Multispecies Knots," 127.

<sup>41</sup> Rose, "Multispecies Knots," 130-131.

<sup>42</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 53.

<sup>43</sup> Alice Oswald, in Sarah Crown "Alice Oswald: Haunted by Homer," *Observer*, 9 October 2011, accessed 1 February 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/09/alice-oswald-homer-iliad-interview>.

<sup>44</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 50, 67.



indicate what Judith Butler calls “other passages” out of the cycles of violence in which ethical relations are ruptured:<sup>45</sup>

Like when a man dives off a boat  
 Into wind-blackened water  
 He vanishes then surfaces  
 With his thoughts the other way up  
 And his hand full of oysters<sup>46</sup>

The diver resurfaces in the ethical time of sequence and synchrony, of life enfolded in the lives and deaths of others. To borrow Giorgio Agamben’s phrase, he emerges in “the time that we ourselves are, ... the only time we have left”;<sup>47</sup> that is, in the ‘teeming assemblage’ of the geologic moment, a realisation of ourselves in the non-human which is fundamental to the dense knots of multi-species time Rose describes. ‘Time off’ stands, then, for a revised understanding of the temporalities that underpin ecological thinking in the Anthropocene.

The traditional poetic expression of grief is, of course, the elegy. Ecological elegies, however, depart from convention in two important ways. First, in terms of reference: by refusing the conventional, antiphonal arrangement in which a speaker declares their grief, which the landscape then instantiates and echoes.<sup>48</sup> Secondly, in terms of time: by performing what critics such as Bonnie Costello and Clifton Spargo have called an act of “anticipatory mourning”: mourning for something not yet completely passed.<sup>49</sup> This sense of future loss present in the time of reading is central to the spectral time of the poem. With a few exceptions, each simile is given twice without variation, and the reading effect of this repetition is such that the second simile produces a kind of spectral presencing of the first:

Like a stone  
 Stands by a grave and says nothing

Like a stone  
 Stands by a grave and says nothing<sup>50</sup>

The second stanza is, as Derrida says of the spectre, revenant: it “*begins by coming back*.”<sup>51</sup> Its force is not reliant upon the first; yet the immediate repetition produces at the same time a

<sup>45</sup> Judith Butler, *Prekarious life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), xii.

<sup>46</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 71.

<sup>47</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy Morton, “The Dark Ecology of Elegy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 254.

<sup>49</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore and London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 4; Bonnie Costello, “Fresh Woods: Elegy and Ecology Among the Ruins,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 330.

<sup>50</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 47.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 11. Italics in the original.

curious sense of the spectral, of a past voice shadowing a present one; or a future presence somehow coeval with the here and now. *Memorial* refuses the conventional consolations of elegy. It refuses, that is, to dictate the terms of a reconciliation with the more-than-human world. The stones—monuments to deep time—will not be reconciled to us; rather, to borrow from Hugh McDiarmid, “we must reconcile ourselves to the stones.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Oswald explores the ethical value in resisting the fallacy of an easy reconciliation. This is not to say that the poem eschews unity. Pattern is discovered, however, in the play of presence and absence, which is to say, in the force of the spectral. The repetition of similes overlays the frequently internally rhymed stanzas with the ghost of end-rhyme, articulating a sense of the spectral also in the poem’s carefully constructed sound world:

Like when they’re cutting ash poles in the hills  
The treetops fall as soft as cloth

Like when they’re cutting ash poles in the hills  
The treetops fall as soft as cloth<sup>53</sup>

Although effectively the paired stanzas share identical end-rhymes when read in sequence (“hills” / “cloth” // “hills” / “cloth”), this particular effect is curiously hollowed out by the reader’s awareness of the repetition of the whole, and the more compelling music of internal consonant and vowel rhymes (“ash poles in the hills”; “treetops” / “soft as cloth”) in each stanza. That is, the effect is not heard as end-rhyme although the rhyme is present. Each repeated simile in *Memorial* thus offers a disjunctive perspective, both sequence and synchrony, mediated by a sense of the spectral. This uncanny aspect of the similes, so oddly dispersed in time, requires the reader to occupy simultaneous but disjunct temporalities. It is this strategy which gives *Memorial* its distinctive quality of ethical time.

It is worth observing that, recalling Hatley, Ellsworth and Kruse explicitly describe the geologic in terms of the inter-generational sequence of the gift: “The geologic passes through our time as the materials and forces that compose us, and that we take up and transform to compose our world.”<sup>54</sup> This same gift sensibility also informs Halperin’s work. In a recent watercolour based on the body stone exhibition, *Physical Geology (new landmass)* 1 (2011), she labelled a painting of each body stone with the first name of the individual who generated it. The stones are recomposed, and encountered (as Plumwood says) “as individuals, as makers of meaning and metaphor.”<sup>55</sup> Barnes and Patrizio have identified Halperin’s preoccupation with “the transformative properties of geology and biology” as a form of memorialisation to former states: ‘The Library’, an exhibition of Halperin’s work at the National Museum of Scotland in 2013, included a display of ‘ghost minerals,’ crystals which carry “an echo of the

<sup>52</sup> McDiarmid, *Selected Poems*, 183.

<sup>53</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ellsworth and Kruse, “Making a Geologic Turn,” 23.

<sup>55</sup> Plumwood, “Journey to the Heart of Stone,” 21.

past history of the stone."<sup>56</sup> In the same manner, Oswald's doubled similes conjure alterity from repetition, representing an invocation of 'now' infused with the uncanny sense of other times:

Like bird families feeding by a river  
 Hundreds of geese and herons and long-necked swans  
 When an ember of eagle a red hot coal of hunger  
 Falls out of the sky and bursts into wings

Like bird families feeding by a river  
 Hundreds of geese and herons and long-necked swans  
 When an ember of eagle a red hot coal of hunger  
 Falls out of the sky and bursts into wings<sup>57</sup>

Each crisis of violence, when doubled, is made to also account for multiple similar crises, each singular in their deadly effect but also echoing other (past and future) emergencies. Reading the second simile, we recall the ghost of the first; yet as the poem progresses we begin to read the first with an awareness of the repetition to come. The effect is of an auditory *enargeia*: our ear becomes attuned to a future frequency. *Memorial's* spectral similes, therefore, convey via the split temporality of ecological elegy the troubling sense of concurrent past, present, and future catastrophes.

Here it is useful to return to Pinard's concept of Oswald's "echo-poetic." Echoes, Pinard explains, "in their insistent, though increasingly muted and nuanced return, model renewal."<sup>58</sup> Yet, while it is radically disruptive to what Rose has called the secular messianic time of modernity,<sup>59</sup> as Mansfield observes, the future echo of the "Absolute Other of climate change," does not bring the promise of renewal but rather "abolishes and does not make new."<sup>60</sup> Mansfield also makes the forceful, and deeply significant observation that in the Anthropocene "we are haunted by a very material ghost,"<sup>61</sup> whose manifestations include population displacement, resource scarcity, and physical violence. Thus we must be mindful of how, in *Memorial*, the echoes created by Oswald's repeated similes do not simply mediate an awareness of the regenerative temporalities of the natural world (what Barbara Adam has

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<sup>56</sup> Barnes and Patrizio, "A Curatorial Point in Time," 12; Ilana Halperin, *The Library: Gallery Guide* (Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 2013), 15. Halperin explains the process thus: "Crystals grow from liquids. They will continue to grow until all the chemicals they need to build the crystal are used up. On special occasions after the crystal has stopped, new liquid is introduced and the crystal will begin growing again. When this happens, the original crystal remains visible through the new crystal and a 'ghost' image appears. Sometimes the old crystal is surrounded by a crystal of a completely different mineral." Halperin, *The Library*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Pinard, "Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener," 30.

<sup>59</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, "Anthropocene Noir," *People and the Planet: Transforming the Future Conference*, Global Cities Research Institute, RMIT University (2-4 July 2013), accessed 10 December 2013, <http://global-cities.info/news-events/conferences-forums/keynote-speakers>.

<sup>60</sup> Mansfield, "There is a Spectre Haunting," §6, 9.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, §6.

called “time ecology”),<sup>62</sup> but also of violence and rupture. This does not preclude making “other passages” out of cycles of violence, but rather opens the second resonance Pinard finds in the echo, the empathy acquired through repeated contact with an other.<sup>63</sup> As Hatley says, “time as it is given to humans to live is not only determined but also creative, not only necessity but also gift.”<sup>64</sup> The “geologic now” thus emerges through Oswald’s spectral similes as a time of intimacy and alterity; of violence and gift.

This emphasis on the aural does not exclude the visual. *Enlargeia* also features in *Memorial* as “unmasked light,”<sup>65</sup> conveying something of the clarity of revelation, particularly into the deep nature of things where the understanding that follows includes a degree of difficulty, or incomprehension:

Like leaves  
Sometimes they light their green flames  
And are fed by the earth  
And sometimes it snuffs them out

Like leaves  
Sometimes they light their green flames  
And are fed by the earth  
And sometimes it snuffs them out<sup>66</sup>

A similar moment of “unbearable brightness” giving rise to an awareness of ecological vulnerability can also be found in Edward Wilson’s account of an Amazonian lightning storm:

In the midst of chaos something to the side caught my attention. The lightning bolts were acting like strobe flashes to illuminate the wall of the rainforest. At intervals I glimpsed the storied structure: top canopy thirty metres off the ground, middle trees spread raggedly below that, and a lowermost scattering of shrubs and small trees. The forest was framed for a few moments in this theatrical setting. Its image turned surreal, projected into the unbounded wildness of the human imagination, thrown back 10,000 years. Sometimes, I knew, spear-nosed bats flew through the tree crowns in search of fruit, palm vipers coiled in ambush in the roots of orchids, jaguars walked the river’s edge; around them eight hundred species of trees stood, more than are native to all of North America; a thousand species of butterflies, 6% of the entire world fauna, waited for the dawn.<sup>67</sup>

Wilson’s goes on to speculate upon a quasi-Conradian fantasy of total access to the scene as wilderness, “in the sixteenth-century sense as it appeared to Portuguese explorers”; this

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<sup>62</sup> Barbara Adam, *et al.*, “Time for the Environment: the Tutzing Time Ecology Project,” *Time Society* 6 (1997): 73.

<sup>63</sup> Pinard, “Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener,” 30.

<sup>64</sup> James Hatley, “The Virtue of Temporal Discernment: Rethinking the Extent and Coherence of the Good in a Time of Mass Species Extinction,” *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no.1 (2012): 19.

<sup>65</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 33.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 6-7.

problematic association does not, however, elide the manner in which the *enargeia* of this moment of spectral brightening illuminates a moment of much longer memory (albeit modest in geologic terms), and of appreciating both the rich biodiversity of the scene and its vulnerability: "how much force," he asks rhetorically, "does it take to break the crucible of evolution?"<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere he answers his own question: "human impact, from prehistory to the present time and projected into the next several decades, threatens to be the greatest extinction spasm since the end of the Mesozoic era 65 million years ago." The unbearable brightness of Wilson's revelation is the profound rupture in ethical time which this spasm represents: "The five previous major spasms of the past 550 million years, including the end-Mesozoic, each required about 10 million years of natural evolution to restore. What humanity is doing now in a single lifetime will impoverish our descendants for all time to come."<sup>69</sup>

The visual *enargeia* of Oswald's poem illuminates our intimacy with the forces urging this rupture in ethical time. For example: the account of the death of Pandarus, killed by a spear between his eyes, is followed by a doubled moment of uncanny strangeness:

Like an oak tree struck by lightning  
 Throws up its arms and burns  
 Terrifying for a man out walking  
 To smell that sulphur smell  
 And see the fields flickering ahead of him  
 Lit up blue by the strangeness of god

Like an oak tree struck by lightning  
 Throws up its arms and burns  
 Terrifying for a man out walking  
 To smell that sulphur smell  
 And see the fields flickering ahead of him  
 Lit up blue by the strangeness of god<sup>70</sup>

The difficult brightness of this scene is doubled, its *enargeia* activated by the repetition. The doubling of the simile asks the reader to look again, to see within the anthropomorphised tree, what Oswald calls "thickness, uncanniness, variability": because (as she has said elsewhere) whereas "trees look like human excitement," they also "look like nothing at all," providing access to "something infinitely distant from myself."<sup>71</sup> The strangeness which lights the burning tree blue enters into the man, doubling the human with the destructive power of the more-than-human. "[*Enargeia* is] the word used," Oswald says, "when gods come to earth not in disguise but as themselves," and thus apt for reflecting on the supra-human agency which characterises so much ruinous human activity in the Anthropocene; but this needs to be read in conjunction with the spectre of violence that stalks the poem, where "thin shapes ...

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Edward O. Wilson, "Biophilia and the Conservation Ethic," in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, ed. Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson (Washington, D.C. and Covelo, California: Island Press / Shearwater Books, 1993), 37.

<sup>70</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Oswald, "The Universe in Time of Rain," 38-39.

work ... the hills."<sup>72</sup> Rose has described how, rather than conforming to the promises of modernity (the triumph of reason and progress), the species of agency represented by the Anthropocene is characterised by a gross *un-reason*: "The Anthropocene is something of a mirror, and the image it is giving of human agency is actually grotesque. An agency that outstrips its capacity to manage itself; wrecks, pillages, loots, and destroys, and has very little idea of what it is doing; and that carries with it, in contradiction of all reason, an expectation of immunity."<sup>73</sup> Counter-intuitively, then, being released from this fallacious expectation can be considered the great gain of the Anthropocene. As Don McKay has suggested, the nomination of the Anthropocene "puts a crimp in ... anthropocentrism ... On the one hand, we lose our special status as Master Species; on the other, we become members of deep time ... We gain the gift of de-familiarization, becoming other to ourselves, one expression of the ever-evolving planet. Inhabiting deep time imaginatively, we give up mastery and gain mutuality."<sup>74</sup> Just as violence in the Anthropocene represents as much an intimation of human vulnerability as god-like power (each unevenly distributed and experienced), in *Memorial* we are invited to see, by the strange light of our 'doubling' with the supra-human agent of anthropogenic climate change, our greater interconnectedness with the more-than-human world into which we are inextricably woven.

Oswald seems thus to concur with Butler's observation that "grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am":<sup>75</sup> "Bereavement," Oswald says, "begins with the smudging of the body's separateness."<sup>76</sup> She has observed that, in Homer's similes, "it is as if the eyes of the clauses are looking outwards, elsewhere."<sup>77</sup> Inclined, we might say, towards the incandescent strangeness of the more-than-human world. In the ethical time of the simile, Oswald's recasting of Homer's *enargeia* performs a *clinamen*—a turning away and towards—not only in Harold Bloom's sense of creative revisionism, but also Jean-Luc Nancy's sense of the individual subject inclining outside itself and towards the community.<sup>78</sup> For Nancy, as for Hatley, this passage occurs most forcefully in death, i.e. via the presentation of mortal truth. Thus it is that in *Memorial* dispossession gives rise to connection, as death gives rise to life in Hatley and Rose's ethical time. For instance, see Oswald's account of the death of Hector:

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<sup>72</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 1, 35.

<sup>73</sup> Rose, "Anthropocene Noir," n.p.

<sup>74</sup> Don McKay, "Ediacaran and Anthropocene: Poetry as a Reader of Deep Time," in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*, ed. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013), 53.

<sup>75</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

<sup>76</sup> Alice Oswald, "Notes from Underground: Burial, Bodies, and Going Back to the Beginning," *New Statesman*, 28 February 2012, accessed 1 February 2013, <http://www.newstatesman.com/2012/02/earth-8220-soil-grave-feet>.

<sup>77</sup> Oswald, "Unbearable Brightness," n.p.

<sup>78</sup> Harold Bloom, "Clinamen, or Poetic Misprision," *New Literary History* 3 no.2, (1972): 389; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 12.

His wife was Andromache  
 One day he looked at her quietly  
 He said I know what will happen  
 And an image stared at him of himself dead<sup>79</sup>

We have here a curious inversion of the gaze: it is both Hector's and not Hector's. His vision of his future demise casts him as the object looked upon by his spectral self. Like Dolops, who lost his helmet and "saw his own eye-holes / Staring up at him from the ground," Hector knows himself Othered; yet in death he is also "returned to the ground,"<sup>80</sup> to what Robert Pogue Harrison calls "the humic foundation ... whose contents have been buried so that they may be reclaimed by the future."<sup>81</sup> Likewise, the subject who contemplates anthropogenic climate change finds their subjectivity split by the massive distribution of human agency in space and time: their own image staring back, in effect, from images of calving icebergs, or the Pacific trash island. But this haunting by a future which also inhabits the present can act as a passage to experiencing the dense knottedness of ethical time.

Oswald closes the poem with a short sequence of similes and a final paired simile. The former are characterised by a sense of exuberance, "chaff flying everywhere at threshing time"; massed water birds as "a valleyful of voices"; crickets "speaking pure light"; off-set by a lingering anxiety: of wasps "worrying for their children" and "restless wolves" whose insatiable appetite means they "go on killing and killing."<sup>82</sup> They present a series of envoi, reflections on the interconnectedness which informs the entire poem, which is encapsulated in the fragility and wonder of the final simile:

Like when god throws a star  
 And everyone looks up  
 To see that whip of sparks  
 And then it's gone

Like when god throws a star  
 And everyone looks up  
 To see that whip of sparks  
 And then it's gone<sup>83</sup>

In the whip of sparks, the 'bright unbearable reality' of *enargeia* flares one last time, asserting a mode of ecological responsibility, discovered in vulnerability and dispossession, that makes ethical time possible in the split temporalities of the Anthropocene. Echoing Halperin's negotiation of slow and fast time processes, in this moment the poem finally and most deliberately reaches into mythic / geologic time: the long, deep time of creation and the accelerated time of ecological destruction and loss collapse into one another in this image,

<sup>79</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 72 [emphasis added].

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 57, 72.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), x. For Harrison, "the human is bound up with the humic." Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, xi.

<sup>82</sup> Oswald, *Memorial*, 74, 75, 77, 78, 81.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84.

presenting a geologic poetics of ethical time as one of coeval or haunted temporalities; but it is also, nonetheless, a poetics of hope. In the address across generations which constitutes the death narrative, Hatley explains, “one’s death is given a future” via the survival of responsibility.<sup>84</sup> The ethical time of Oswald’s poem does not, therefore, only lament the future passing of ecological diversity but also issues a deeply-felt call not to turn away from the responsibility expressed in this difficult brightness.

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<sup>84</sup> Hatley, *Suffering Witness*, 62.



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