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**‘Keeping to its clock’: Temporality and Ecology in
the Poetry of Alice Oswald**

Hazel Streeter

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts, School of Humanities.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how Alice Oswald presents time in a selection of her poetry, arguing that Oswald's temporalities are integral to her ecological poetics. Ecocritical scholars of time such as Barbara Adam, Michelle Bastian and Paul Huebener argue that industrial, Western perceptions of time impair humanity's ability to perceive and respond adequately to the climate and ecological crisis. Poetry is uniquely placed to help us to develop our temporal literacy in the Anthropocene, since multiplicity, iteration and resonance characterise its dense fabric and trouble simplistic representations of time. In this study, a selection of Oswald's poetry published between 2009-2016 has been chosen to provide diverse discussion of ecological temporalities. Opening with *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, I consider Oswald's use of embodied, material and planetary temporalities to present an ecocentric view of place brimming with more-than-human rhythms and times. Next, *Memorial* is investigated for its complex and multiple ecological temporalities. Drawing upon Carolin Hahneman's reading of the anti-heroic stance of the poem, I consider how Oswald replaces the heroic temporalities of the epic with the iterative and disjunctive times of loss grief and mourning. Reading these in the light of species extinction, I build upon David Farrier's work on this important poem to explore Oswald's use of 'ethical time'. Finally, I explore *Falling Awake's* preoccupations with decay, decomposition, and resonance alongside the temporal torsions of the Anthropocene. Multiple timescapes are examined to reveal complex scalar shifts and distortions in time which are characteristic of the Anthropocene's disjunctive temporalities. It is hoped that this dissertation will offer a fresh, time-focussed perspective on some of Alice Oswald's work, and further develop the potential for the study of eco-temporal poetics.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED:

DATE: 27.09.2021

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Introduction

‘To draw attention to time passing’ is one of Oswald’s poetic ambitions. In her poems she aims ‘to make a little structure like a moon dial or a water clock, by means of which time is visible but not arrested.’¹ From her wider concerns of decay, erosion, memory and the processes of the more-than-human world, to her precisely measured prosody and use of repetition, Oswald’s body of work as a whole displays a fascination with the many faces of time. This dissertation will read *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009), *Memorial* (2011) and *Falling Awake* (2016) through an ecocritical temporal lens, showing how Oswald troubles the dominant singularity of Western industrial clock time, offering alternative temporalities which are dynamic, multiple, embodied and deeply ecological. Some of the Anthropocene’s distinctive preoccupations can be seen to shape Oswald’s temporalities, and this dissertation argues that a critical reading of her work might help develop our understanding both of the climate and ecological crisis, and of our relationship with and responsibility to the more-than-human.

Scholarship of Oswald’s poetry has often focussed on her sensitivity towards the nonhuman world and she is frequently read as an ecological poet. Tom Bristow in particular has read Oswald’s work as an example of ‘Anthropocene lyric’, with a sense of more-than-human ‘worldliness.’² David Farrier also reads Oswald in the context of the Anthropocene: indeed, this dissertation takes as a starting place his exploration of temporality in the poetics of the

¹ Alice Oswald, ‘The Art of Erosion.’ *Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture*. <<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/art-erosion>> Delivered 09/12/2019. Accessed 12/08/2021.

² Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 6.

Anthropocene and in Oswald in particular, expanding outwards from his ecocritical reading of *Memorial* to consider further eco-temporalities and other works by Oswald. Oswald's uses of sound and prosody have been another focus for scholars such as Mary Pinard, Ben Smith, Jack Thacker and Tristram Wolff. However, there is a lack of research into the intimate relationship between the sonic features of Oswald's poetry and her exploration of temporality, as well as space for consideration of her eco-temporality at greater length. This dissertation aims to redress these gaps. Both Oswald's earlier lyric collections, where her consideration of these matters exists at the root of her work, as well as *Dart* (2002) and the most recent *Nobody* (2019) warrant exploration of their presentation of temporality and ecology in due course, but are outwith the restricted scope of this study.

Three initial questions form the basis of inquiry. Firstly, in what ways does Oswald trouble the dominant singularity of industrial Western clock time? Secondly, what temporalities are depicted in her poetry? And finally, how might these two impulses contribute to a better understanding of the place of humans in the ecosphere? These questions are braided through three chapters discussing a selection of Oswald's poetry in chronological order, beginning with *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, moving on to consider *Memorial* and finally *Falling Awake*. These three works allow a range of different focal points for discussion, pertaining each to different aspects of Oswald's temporality.

Temporal Ecocriticism

Of the many characteristics identified in the much-disputed era of the Anthropocene, arguably two of the most prominent are a growing awareness of anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity loss, coupled with a growing awareness of the inability of our ordinary scales and measurements of time to meaningfully equip us to perceive ecological

threats and change our behaviour in an attempt to mitigate for them. Temporal studies, a burgeoning field of scholarship which is bringing fresh insights into ecocriticism, attempts to understand some of the ways in which we live with and perceive time, and the effects this has on our relationships, both between humans and also between humans and nonhumans. Drawing connections between the dominant Western perception of time and the climate and ecological crisis, scholars such as Barbara Adam and Michelle Bastian have laid clear foundations to show what is limited and limiting about the way that we perceive time. Bastian describes numerous problems of temporal assumptions in Western philosophy: for example, the conflation of the passage of time and progress; the obfuscations of linearity; destructive hyper-acceleration, and the denial of coevalness. ‘Time needs to be more clearly understood,’ she writes, ‘not as a quantitative measurement, but as a powerful social tool for producing, managing, and/or undermining various understandings of who or what is in relation to other beings.’³ Bastian’s elaboration of the arbitrary nature of clock time is echoed by Paul Huebener, who writes that ‘Only by understanding how time operates socially as an immense but unstable tool of power can we productively investigate the ways in which the environmental crisis is also a crisis in the way we imagine time’⁴. Attending to temporality and developing a critical literacy of time is considered paramount by Huebener, who writes that ecocritical time studies ‘can help us read culture with a thoughtful and transformative awareness of the implications of temporal power as well as the need for temporal justice alongside social and environmental justice.’⁵ Huebener advocates for the development of a ‘critical literacy of time’ which will equip us ‘to articulate, question, resist, embrace and reshape the functioning of time as a form of power within our daily activities.’⁶ Adam also

³ Michelle Bastian. ‘Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises’, *Environmental Philosophy*, 9 (2012), 23–48 (p.25).

⁴ Paul Huebener, *Nature’s Broken Clocks* (Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2020), p.25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.25.

advocates for reading time critically, and introduces the concept of ‘timescapes’, an approach which she describes thus:

Where other scapes such as landscapes, cityscapes and seascapes mark the spatial features of past and present activities and interactions of organisms and matter, timescapes emphasise their rhythmicities, their timings and tempos, their changes and contingencies. A timescape perspective stresses the temporal features of living. Through timescapes, contextual temporal practices become tangible. Timescapes are thus the embodiment of practiced approaches to time.⁷

An approach to reading which is informed by critical temporal studies can help to assess the contributions of poetry to troubling dominant Western narratives of time and to re-imagining time as a means of re-imagining relationships within the ecosphere.

The Anthropocene

As a name for the geological era in which we now reside, ‘Anthropocene’ has stark and often troubling meanings. It has been criticized for compounding anthropocentrism, a root cause for humanity’s continued failure to change behaviours which are ecologically damaging.

Alternatively, it can be read as a sobering reminder that humans continue to have impacts and leave traces on the life of the whole planet, transformations that are big enough to be read on a geological scale. As with all denominations of power, the effect on our future actions and attitudes can be both exaggerated and narcissistic, and also humbling and terrifying.

Furthermore, despite the idea that humans have become a ‘geological force’, as Timothy

⁷ Barbara Adam, *Timescapes Of Modernity : The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998), p. 10.

Clark notes, that force ‘can seem as imperturbably closed to human direction as is a hurricane or the tilt of the planet’s orbit’: we have set in motion changes in the ecosphere that we cannot control.⁸ Further criticisms have been levelled at the term Anthropocene for the way it holds humanity universally responsible: the term masks the fact that it is almost exclusively Western lifestyles and industry that are responsible for the warming planet, and yet the effects of climate change are already being felt most devastatingly in non-Western, less industrialised places. As Kathryn Yusoff writes, ‘as the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life – *Anthropos* – through a universalist geologic commons, it neatly erases histories of racism.’⁹ Some scholars have argued for the replacement of the term with another, such as Jason Moore’s ‘Capitalocene’, Donna Haraway’s ‘Chthulucene’, Anna Tsing’s ‘Plantationocene’ and Kate Rigby’s ‘Ploutocene’. Each of these terms offer different perspectives and offer nuance to the ways in which we think about this era. However, while the accusations levelled at the term ‘Anthropocene’ are in many cases valid and deserve careful attention, there is not scope within this project to consider these issues at length, and so ‘Anthropocene’ has been used as a label to communicate some of the particular- often challenging- characteristics of this age.

The Problem With Clocks

Oswald’s poetry thrums with temporal reference: so many of her lyrics are explicitly set in time, from ‘at the joint of dawn’¹⁰ or ‘at the very lifting edge of evening’¹¹, to her precise, micro-seasonal locations, such as ‘Easternight, the mind’s midwinter’ in *Woods etc.*¹² The

⁸ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), p.16.

⁹ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.2.

¹⁰ Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.27.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.25.

world as depicted in Oswald's poetry is full of time, and yet many of these temporalities seem to be at odds with the time told by the clock. Ecocritical scholars of temporality have argued that industrial clock time prevents Western society from perceiving and responding adequately to environmental hazards. 'As the supreme icon of time,' Huebener writes, 'the clock has always been both elegant and broken.'¹³ From an environmental perspective, the time that is represented by clocks has many damaging effects. Like many reductive scientific apparatuses, clocks carry a perceived authority with which they assert their supposed objective truth. In fact, they tell only a partial story: the time on our watches, smartphones and screens is not a measure of a scientific truth but a creation by socio-political agreement. The time by which many of us live is a synthesis of the rhythms of the regular pulsing of a caesium atom inside an atomic clock and the erratic orbit of the Earth. Bastian defines a clock as 'a device that signals change in order for its users to maintain an awareness of, and thus be able to co-ordinate themselves with, what is significant to them.'¹⁴ Industrial clock time is standardised and singular in order to coordinate the transfer of capital around the globe.¹⁵ This clock, then, coordinates our lives with the life of capital – even purporting to transform time into money – and its regular pulsing creates the impression of continual forward motion and economic growth, projecting on into the future. We cannot see the climate crisis clearly because the clocks we use to tell the time only coordinate us with changes between one industrial moment and the next: an uncritical weddedness to Western industrial conceptions of time obfuscates our understanding of the problems that the ecosphere faces and prevents our access to tools appropriate to addressing the crisis.

¹³ Paul Huebener, *Nature's Broken Clocks* (Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2020), p.17.

¹⁴ Michelle Bastian, 'Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises', *Environmental Philosophy*, 9 (2012), 23–48 (p. 31).

¹⁵ For an outline of the ways in which time and money are connected under capitalist systems to the detriment of ecology see the second chapter of Barbara Adam, *Timescapes Of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1998), pp.61-100.

This way of perceiving time, argue multispecies scholars such as Elaine Gan, is uniquely human. Exploring the temporalities of rice production, Gan writes that ‘human clocks and calendars are insufficient apparatuses for more-than-human dynamics...Much is at stake in shifting our frameworks for analysing continuity and change from a singular time dominated by human production to a manifold of naturecultural coordinations.’¹⁶ Clock time is too limited, too progress-oriented, and too anthropocentric to enable humans to appreciate or relate effectively to non-humans. Furthermore, predicated as it is upon the principles of Newtonian physics, the Western industrial clock describes time as singular and regular, with a simple and reversible relationship between cause and effect. Barbara Adam writes that the assumptions of Newtonian temporality ‘have material consequences which stand in a problematic relationship to the contextual, irreversible temporalities of life and the multiple rhythmicities of nature.’¹⁷ This kind of temporality cannot express changes which are not reversible – such as extinction – and has no mechanism for understanding the often-latent effects of our actions upon the climate. Nor, in addition, can the regular pace of clock time keep up with the sudden and catastrophic accelerations of climate breakdown which scientists predict will occur as ‘tipping points’ in the process of global warming. Clock time does not communicate ecosystem change, as Bastian writes: ‘rather than representing the urgency and danger of these changes, clock time emphasizes continuity and similarity across all moments and projects an empty and unending future.’¹⁸ As long as time is considered in these terms, Adam continues, ‘it will continue to form a central part of the deep structure of environmental damage wrought by the industrial way of life.’¹⁹ Clocks create a false sense of

¹⁶ Gan, Elaine. ‘Timing Rice: An Inquiry Into More-Than-Human temporalities of the Anthropocene’, *New Formations*, 92 (2017). p. 100.

¹⁷ Barbara Adam, *Timescapes Of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998), p. 9.

¹⁸ Michelle Bastian, ‘Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises’, *Environmental Philosophy*, 9 (2012), 23–48, p.33.

¹⁹ Barbara Adam, p. 9.

security and simplicity, claiming that only one way of perceiving time exists and matters. In *Woods etc.*, Oswald writes of crickets ‘listening to the tiny slippage/ between real and technical time’: this slippage is a space which she investigates repeatedly in her subsequent works. Oswald’s poetry questions what ‘real’ time is, finding that there are as many answers to that question as there are creatures, beings and things that experience time.

Alternative Temporalities

In response to these issues, temporal scholars have identified various ways of thinking about time which enable human societies to perceive and respond to the non-human in healthier ways. This begins, as Huebener argues, with an acknowledgement of the complexities of time, the different ways in which it might be experienced by humans and non-humans, and its multiple nature. Deborah Bird Rose offers a reading of temporality from a multi-species perspective: she writes that we are ‘multi-species knots of ethical time,’²⁰ and, for Rose, the gift of life is a ‘multi-species offering at the intersection of sequential and synchronous time’.²¹ Singular and uni-directional industrial time has been replaced by multiplicity which looks backwards as well as forwards. Elaine Gan pushes this conception further in her reading of the timing of rice, writing that the ‘longue durée’ detectable in thinking through the temporalities of these plants is ‘not a single arrow of time, but a braiding of multiple temporalities.’²² Karen Barad’s reading of temporality also offers this idea of braiding, as she writes that ‘temporality is not merely multiple, but rather temporalities are specifically entangled and threaded through one another.’²³ Barad elaborates on this further,

²⁰ Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time’, *Environmental Philosophy* 9 (2012): 127-140, p. 128.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.128

²² Elaine Gan, ‘Timing Rice: An Inquiry Into More-Than-Human temporalities of the Anthropocene’, *New Formations*, 92 (2017), p.93.

²³ Karen Barad, ‘Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable’, *New Formations* 92 (2017), 56-86. p.68.

demonstrating the ways in which time is linear, indeterminate and consists of ‘superpositions’ of moments. This perception of temporality (which is based on developments in understanding from quantum physics) allows, she argues, for reconsideration of ethical and ecological responsibility. Conceiving of time as multiple, braided or entangled, and unevenly distributed removes one of the anthropocentric, industrial lenses which has interfaced between Western humans and the more-than-human, and enables us to better understand the extent to which our lives are entangled with all the other lives around us, the potential impacts of our actions, and some of the ways in which we need to change behaviours which risk environmental harm.

Poetry and Time

David Farrier identifies a kind of ‘thick time’ in lyric poetry of the Anthropocene, which, he writes, ‘refers to the lyric’s capacity to put multiple temporalities and scales within a single frame, to “thicken” the present with an awareness of other times and places.’²⁴ Building upon what Jonathan Culler has identified as lyric’s distinctive present tense temporality,²⁵ and also Deborah Bird Rose’s ideas regarding multi-species time, Farrier continues:

All of us are “dense knots of embodied time” braided from uncountable strands of cross-species actions and giftings. A poem is also a knot in time, a complex of matter and sensation and memory. It can both stretch and compress a moment of perception to reveal the flux of scales that enfold us in deep time. It can reveal the uneven grain beneath the apparently smooth surface of the world. It can conjure figures that concretize the Anthropocene’s provocations to what we imagine our future to hold.²⁶

²⁴ David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), p.9.

²⁵ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 283-295. Culler’s theory is explored in greater detail in Chapter 4.

²⁶David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, p.127.

Reading poetry, by extension, is also a way of reading these temporal complexities. Poetry can help us learn to read time differently, and equip us with a ‘critical literacy of time’, writes Paul Huebener: poetry encourages a broader form of awareness that crosses temporal scales, since it

revels in the slowness of interactions, teaching patience as well as alertness and requiring readers to cast their eyes back as well as forward...Poetry asks us to construct a new home of temporal consciousness, and it implicitly questions familiar visions of progress, pacing, productivity, linearity, and narrow temporal frames.²⁷

As Huebener argues, a poem is a kind of clock, and not only must we develop the ability to read time better, but also reading poetry can help us to read time.

It is hoped that this exploration may not only prove useful as it gathers together theoretical approaches to the temporality of poetry and of ecology, but also as it begins to dig into some of the details of Oswald’s eco-temporality, adding a novel dimension to existing criticism and opening the ground for further study. What follows explores the ways in which reading Oswald’s poetry can illuminate some of the various ways in which time is experienced, and offers consideration of how these temporalities can shape the relationships between humans and the more-than-human.

²⁷ Paul Huebener, *Nature’s Broken Clocks*. p. 128.

‘Sometimes it’s the moon’: Embodied Temporalities in *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*

‘I will give you a glimpse / a glimpse of the moon’s grievance’ writes Oswald in ‘Moon Hymn’ from her 2005 collection *Woods etc.*²⁸ The moon, it seems, has always fascinated poets: at once a symbol of romance and a poetic muse, she is famous for her lure on lovers, her pull on poets and dreamers. Where ‘Moon Hymn’ attempts to show ‘a glimpse’ of the moon’s experience, and sees Oswald addressing the moon (invoking, praise-singing), *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* ‘aims to record what happens when the moon moves over us – its effect on water and its effect on voices’,²⁹ but also gives voice to the moon herself. The moon is a subject, a being in the ecosphere with her own gaze and her own voice within the orchestra of the estuary, but one who reigns over, and whose presence impacts dramatically on, the beings around her, pulling tides, eels, birds, and humans into her rhythm. In the Severn estuary, the moon is a powerful clock.

Many dominant cultural narratives conceive of nature as being ‘timeless’, or of nature’s time as fundamentally different to and separate from cultural time. To counter these misconceptions, it is powerful to consider the non-human timekeepers and planetary forces that exert an ineluctable influence over humans. Timelessness, slow time or ‘pristine’ time (which is untouched by and does not touch humans) abound in pastoral images, cultural movements like the ‘Slow Food’ movement, advertising and literature. An extension of the already deeply problematic nature/culture and human/non-human binaries, these depictions show time in rural, ‘natural’ or wild settings as fundamentally separate from the fast-paced,

²⁸ Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.* (London, Faber & Faber: 2005). p.51.

²⁹ Alice Oswald, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (London, Faber & Faber: 2009). p. 2. All further references are to this edition.

changeable and industrial time of urban settings or modern, Western human life. These perceptions contribute towards the frustration or foreclosure of abilities to respond adequately to ecological issues. If 'nature' is conceived as separate from 'human culture', and if its temporalities are also conceived as different from and separate to those of human culture, then it is difficult to perceive the effects of human actions on the ecosphere, since nature's unspoiled temporalities are insulated from human industry. As Paul Huebener argues,

one of the treacherous themes that occurs across many cultural texts...is the notion that nature is a place where time slows down, where the acceleration society does not intrude, where time maybe even stops, or perhaps never really existed at all. In this vision, nature's time belongs to the past. It is enclosed in the realm of fantasy or irrelevance where it can be safely depoliticized.³⁰

Conceiving of a 'natural' time emphasises the separation of human culture from the rest of life, perpetuating an idea that a wilderness exists which is untouched by human clocks, and is therefore also unchanging in response to human activities. This can be thought of as a kind of temporal wilderness, a concept Huebener develops when he quotes the following passage from William Cronon:

To the extent that we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our real home is in the wilderness, to just that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead... By

³⁰ Paul Huebener, *Nature's Broken Clocks*, p. 131.

imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit.³¹

Furthermore, as well as making the wider ecological system seem perpetually stable and invincible (therefore masking the impact of human actions on the environment), the perception that nature's time and human time are separate also obscures the ways in which humans, like other creatures, rely upon the temporalities that arise from the movement of other bodies: biologically, we are dependent upon circadian, lunar and seasonal rhythms. Huebener argues that 'Casting aside the notion that cultural time and natural time each pulses to its own independent beat is a vital step toward untangling the problems of the temporal imagination'.³² I would add that we need to begin to understand the many different forms of non-human temporality and our entanglement with these wider rhythms if we are to understand the deeper implications of our actions on the ecosphere and begin to conceive of ways to address them.

Set in the Severn estuary over the course of one lunar cycle, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* explores the potency of various non-human temporalities. Although the poem is concerned substantially with place, it differs from *Dart* in that the river is not the main voice or confluence of voices: instead, Oswald observes the ways in which subjectivities change over time and in response to one another, and the presence which looms largest in the poem is that of the Moon. The poem's dramatic form 'in several registers' means that there is no main voice, and the lyrical 'I' is given expression from various personal perspectives (2). By structuring the poem's sections in correspondence with the phase of the Moon, as if they were

³¹ William Cronon, in Paul Huebener, *Nature's Broken Clocks*, p. 137.

³² Paul Huebener, *Nature's Broken Clocks*. p. 45.

acts of a play, Oswald indicates how the Moon has a powerful influence over the estuary. Bristow notes that the landscape has an unfixed, non-specific quality – Oswald describes it as a ‘beautiful / Uncountry of an estuary’(3) – which contributes to ‘our training to witness subtle differences over time (during the moon’s phases), which complements the historical pay-off – the ability to track change – from the focus on the emotions.’³³ There is little in the estuary that is not marked by variation and change, like the ‘flat stone sometimes lit sometimes not’ which moves in concert with and is ‘moodswung’ by the Moon’s moods and movements (3).

In addition to what Bristow identifies as the poem’s ‘emotional framework’ and ‘affective register’, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* also expresses a poetics of embodied, or material, temporality.³⁴ The powerful force of the Moon and its dramatic effect on the place is introduced in the Prologue. Full of vertical, ‘up and down’ movements, the atmosphere in the Prologue is at once forcefully industrial and airily transcendent: swans land ‘in the reedy layby of a vacancy’, where there are weeds ‘whose workplace / is...a barren mudsite’, and the lexicon of building and industry is extended to angels who are ‘solar-powered’(3). The moon herself is also both possessed of dramatic power, ‘Like a huge repeating mechanism / Banging and banging the jetty’, and dramatic beauty, ‘close in kind / To the mighty angels of purgatory’(3). The Moon’s power here is expressed in strikingly physical terms, alerting us to how the material changeability of the Moon exerts forces which create tangible effects. Jeanette Winterson has described Oswald as ‘a kinetic poet’ who ‘moves us’, and Winterson

³³ Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place*, p. 86.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

means ‘move’ in a manner which is physical just as much as emotional; indeed, almost nothing in the poem stays still for long.³⁵

Lunar Time

Oswald’s focus on the moon allows the poem to explore an embodied temporality which is distinctly female. As the moon waxes and wanes over the course of the poem, references to the moon as female and references to women and wombs alert the reader that the lunar temporalities of *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* are associated not with industrial patriarchal time but the embodied, interactive time of women and other planetary forces. Menstruation’s traditional connection with the moon is well-known: Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove note that the word ‘menstruation’ is rooted in the Latin ‘mensis’ for month, and the word ‘month’ is rooted in the word ‘moon’.³⁶ The average menstrual cycle is the same length as the cycle of the moon, 29.5 days. Although there is no evidence that shows a conclusive link between the lunar cycle and the menstrual cycle, the idea of a lunar influence on female physiology is a powerful one. ‘The moon, at full or new, draws cycles,’ writes Jay Griffiths, ‘affecting the sea’s tides and woman’s alike; the ebb and flow of the ocean, the egg and flow of the woman... The menstrual cycle gives women a differing experience of time.’³⁷ Griffiths describes how stasis and continuity are either imposed on women (as in the taboo on aging women) or expected of women despite the hormonal variations which are part of female bodily experience. Since the publication of Griffith’s book in 1999, there have been further studies into how productivity in the workplace changes over the course of the menstrual cycle, which has led to campaigns for companies offering female employees ‘period leave’

³⁵ Jeanette Winterson, ‘Alice Oswald: A Sleepwalk on the Severn’ <<http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/journalism/alice-oswald-a-sleepwalk-on-the-severn/>> Accessed 11 February 2021.

³⁶ Penelope Shuttle & Peter Redgrove. *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and Everywoman*. 6th edn. (London & New York: Marion Boyers, 2019), p. 127.

³⁷ Jay Griffiths, *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 108.

during menstruation. Of course, it is important to state, as Ellen O'Loughlin does, that 'overemphasis on women's biological connectedness to nature and woman/female as a singular symbolic category can leave out the many important differences among women and the many ways women's various oppressions are related to the domination of nature'.³⁸

Natalie Rose Dyer also brings consideration of this idea alongside contemporary gender issues, as she writes,

Notwithstanding the obvious and varied differences among women that *should* be celebrated, menstruation also links women, connects them with trans men and non-binary people who menstruate, and further associates them with the animal and indeed the entire ecological system on planet earth in ways that can be deemed to be affirmative, rather than reductive.³⁹

A Sleepwalk on the Severn makes a case for variation over time, including that of human biology, and both the menstruating body and the changing moon can be seen as an example of a variable clock which interacts with all those around it.

The tidal range of the poem and the overwhelming influence of the moon's changing phases mean that the poem swings in a wide arc between two poles. Oswald writes, 'visible invisible visible invisible / There's no material as variable as moonlight' (18). The movement and phase of the moon affects the movement of all the other bodies in the estuary, not least of course the water, which vacillates between high tide and low tide. 'Wavering' between two states or poles is a movement which characterises this poem. Naturally, the moon's size

³⁸ Ellen O'Loughlin, 'Questioning Sour Grapes: Ecofeminism and the United Farm Workers Grape Boycott', in Greta Gaard (ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). pp. 146-166. 147.

³⁹ Natalie Rose Dyer, *The Menstrual Imaginary in Literature: Notes on a Wild Fluidity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020) p. 11.

changes over the course of the month, for example when the moon is new, she is ‘a little sleepless smallness’, and ‘A tiny thing / The sun’s unborn twin / Not wanting to be seen’(8); in the Half Moon phase she is ‘full of gas’ and ‘getting huge’(13), progressing to ‘huge’ when she is full (18). Her strength also fluctuates: ‘exhausted’ at New Moon, she is ‘tugging / Tied to the earth’ and ‘...always / Trying to lift [her] body off its hook’ (having to struggle to rise) (9); ‘stuck’ at Half Moon but eventually managing to ‘extricate...her foot’(13), but then having no difficulty rising during the Full Moon section. These physical changes are also marked by emotional changes and affect the Moon’s ability to recognise herself, in a way which recalls the disconcerting size fluctuations and resulting confused sense of self experienced by Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as in many other traditional fables of menarche and menstruation. At the New Moon, the moon moans ‘I keep being followed by a strip of light / I keep seeing the moon’, as she does not recognise herself (9). She seems unsure of her state in the Half Moon phase, saying ‘I’m asleep I think. Either that or dead’(13), which changes to the assertive ‘Looking round I remember who I am’ when she is at Full Moon (17), which changes again to ‘This is not I’ during the No Moon phase (24). The moon remarks, ‘it could happen to anyone / whose being both dims and widens’(26), and it is the ‘wavering’ between these two poles which creates the poem’s (and the place’s) dramatically variable atmosphere.

Considering what Bristow terms more-than-human ‘worldliness’, or the interactivity and interrelatedness of humans and the more-than-human, this emphasis on the connection between female human biology and the moon also stands as an example of how human time is informed by other kinds of planetary time.⁴⁰ All humans rely upon circadian rhythms for

⁴⁰ Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place*, p. 6.

the regulation of our biological systems. As Adams writes, a ‘timescapes’ approach troubles assumptions of human/nature or nature/culture binaries, since

internal and species-specific rhythms ...pulse in synchrony with the rhythms of the cosmos...physiology is tied to those periodicities...[the] multitude of coordinated environmental and internal rhythms gives a dynamic structure to our lives that permeates every level and facet of our existence...a symphony of rhythms and temporalities thus underpins our development as humans and as living organisms. It marks us as creatures of this earth, as beings that are constituted by a double temporality: rhythmically structured within and embedded in the rhythmic organisation of the cosmos. From a temporal perspective there is no nature-culture duality: we are nature, we constitute nature and we create nature through our actions in conditions that are largely pre-set for us by evolution and history.⁴¹

Abstract, mechanical clock time (more ‘accurate’ than the journey of the earth around the sun) is joined by embodied time, where human times are synchronised with more-than-human times. In further contrast to the anthropocentrism of human-measured clock time, the effect of lunar temporality on the inhabitants of the estuary, including the humans, is not matched by any ability of the humans to effect lunar temporality.

Generative Reflections

Oswald writes that water ‘has strictly speaking / No feature but a kind of counterlight call it insight’ (18). The moon shares water’s properties of reflection also; the moon’s illuminating power comes from the sun but is transformed in the process of reflection, becoming in turn

⁴¹ Barbara Adam, *Timescapes Of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards*, p. 13.

transformational for that which it illuminates. In the Full Moon section, the moon says ‘something needs to be said to describe my moonlight / Almost frost but softer almost ash but wholer’ (18). The distinctive quality of moonlight is numinous – it has a blurring quality like ‘frost’ and ‘ash’ but has ‘strictly speaking / No feature’ of its own, and it hovers just beyond language’s descriptive ability, as the words ‘almost’ and ‘not quite’ qualify the descriptions in this section (18). It functions as a metaphor for the act of poetry: the shedding of light on a subject in such a way as to transform it or see it anew. In a similar way to the resonances of echoes which often feature in Oswald’s poetry, the moon’s reflective light receives, and reflects, and subtly transforms. Often in the poem, reference to the moon is followed by reference to motherhood. She is ‘Mother of all grasses’(9), and she describes her light as ‘a little dish of milk to be offered to someone waking in the dark drinkless’(13), as nourishing as mother’s milk, and later the chorus tells of being the moon and ‘trying to hide my moonhood’, with the connotations of ‘motherhood’ echoing behind this neologism (18). Towards the end of the poem, there is a section entitled ‘Crowds lining the banks’, possibly about the Severn bore, in which Oswald writes:

It’s incredible when she chooses to push
The river right over without caring,
And there’s the earth dangling in emptiness
With its feet kicking the air, it’s incredible
When she floats along in her havoc not breathless at all (33)

Here Oswald uses imagery which brings to mind the act of giving birth. The enjambement in ‘push / the river right over’ (unusual for Oswald, who doesn’t often use it) both enacts the rolling over of the force of the water as the tidal bore travels up the Severn, but is also

resonant with the waves of pushing in the labour of childbirth, which is then extended in the ‘earth dangling in emptiness / with its feet kicking the air’, perhaps like a new-born child. The symbol of poetic creativity is also a symbol of motherhood and childbearing: the influence of the moon on women’s bodies affects the menstrual cycle, but this cycle also gives women’s bodies their generative possibilities. The iterative cyclicity of the menstrual cycle gives rise to the productive possibilities of new life. The moon’s repeated act of reflection, as it shifts and moves over the land, illuminates the world in new and creative ways. By keeping her ear to tradition, the poet can find her own voice. These are all examples of iterative-creative temporality.

Sleep and Dreaming

Sleep as a distinct form of temporal inhabitation haunts the whole poem. As a means of bodily entangling humans in the temporalities of the more-than-human, this emphasises the role of circadian rhythms. It also creates a less rational experience of time, in which the subconscious and the unconscious step to the fore in the poem’s dreamlike quality. In this there is a sense of the events taking place ‘night after night / the same night’, in which there is a random or wandering movement (9). For example, in the New Moon and Moon Reborn sections:

A little horse trots through, knowing its way.

Did you see that?

Shhh! (5)

The apparition of a horse is not further remarked upon; it merely surfaces as if in a dream and then it is gone. The characters of the Dream Secretary, the birdwatcher and the fisherman all seem to be waiting for the appearance of the ‘*New Moon not yet risen*’(5). Oswald’s subversive use of dramatic conventions further shows that this is a poem characterised by inaction, rather than action. The ‘stage directions’ just as often direct the audience as the characters in the play, and they direct us mostly to ‘notice’: ‘*Notice a fisherman walking home*’(5), or ‘*Notice everything noticing*’(13). We are attuned to waiting for something to happen. This sense of latency and waiting draws attention to the sometimes non-linear and unpredictable relationship between cause and effect, or action and response. Barbara Adam writes that anthropogenic changes to the climate are ‘characterised by invisibility and periods of latency.’⁴² Given that Western ‘habits of mind’ concerning time are founded upon Newtonian models that assume a predictable relationship between cause and effect, Western Industrial temporality cannot accommodate the fact that actions, such as carbon emissions, in the present will have unpredictable effects far into the future. Actions to mitigate climate change must occur before we can observe the worst of the changes happening. This, Adam argues, creates the ironic and damaging situation in which we find ourselves, whereby many products of industrial ways of life ‘are not graspable with the conceptual tools of their construction.’⁴³ Even before taking the vast unknown risks of climactic ‘tipping points’ into account, understanding latency is a crucial aspect of understanding and acting upon climate change. Oswald foregrounds the temporality of latency in this poem; the wind speaks of Florence Saunders as ‘One minute a child next minute / A thousand years old’ (6). Perhaps we could read this study of waiting and the erratic movement of cause and effect as providing a tool with which to understand the latent temporalities of change in the ecosphere.

⁴² Barbara Adam, *Timescapes*. p. 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Furthermore, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* inhabits the spectral temporalities of the Anthropocene. The ghosts of many victims of drowning in the Severn estuary appear several times (*Enter Florence Saunders paddling. Harry Kingscott and William George Montague, both with no shoes*) (20). The possibility of people resurfacing from the past is expressed by the wind, who says ‘In the beginning people didn’t die / They waxed and waned’ (21). Ghosts of the past which haunt the present give the lie to modern society’s ‘peculiar propensity’, identified by Bruno Latour, ‘for understanding time that passes as if it were abolishing the past behind it.’⁴⁴ The presence of ghosts in the poem disrupts ideas of unilinear temporality in ways such as those described by Anna Tsing et. al., who write:

The ghosts of multispecies landscapes disturb our conventional sense of time, where we measure and manage one thing leading to another... These temporal feats alert us that the time of modernity is not the only kind of time and that our metronomic synchrony is not the only time that matters⁴⁵

Ghosts seem to inhabit a place of unworldly temporality, which is one of the sources of their uncanniness, and yet in the poem they have the ability to accompany the living humans and the other denizens of the estuary. Tsing et.al argue that one of the Anthropocene’s characteristics is this spectrality, which is associated with the extinction crisis as well as an increasing awareness that we are haunted by emissions and consequences of human industry from the past, and that the threat of human extinction prompts us to consider ourselves as haunting a post-human earth. Tsing et. al. continue, writing that,

⁴⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.68.

⁴⁵ Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, & Nils Bubandt, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). G9

Admiring one landscape and its biological entanglements often entails forgetting many others. Forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others. Yet ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces.... Ghosts remind us that we live in an impossible present – a time of rupture.⁴⁶

Ghosts as ‘traces’ also fill Oswald’s work. The role of the poet, as well as the ‘Dream Secretary’ is to ‘record’, or to create a trace. Bagnall notes that Oswald is interested in both senses of the word ‘trace’ as defined by the OED: the word ‘trace’ as in ‘the track made by the passage of any person or thing’, but also the ‘vestiges or marks’ that indicate a ‘former presence’.⁴⁷ Traces, like ghosts, can constitute a rupture in time. They are also another way of thinking about writing.

Walking

‘A Sleepwalk on the Severn’ has a place alongside a tradition of walking in poetry, which extends from Wordsworth through Robert Frost to Simon Armitage. The reference to ‘sleepwalk’ in the title is accompanied by references to walking and feet throughout. Alive to the connection between the walking foot and the poetic foot, Bristow explores the connection between writing and walking in this poem, and argues that both are forms of

⁴⁶ Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, & Nils Bubandt, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). p. G6.

⁴⁷ Rowland Bagnall, ‘“That Whip of Sparks”: Some Notes on Alice Oswald’, *PN Review*, 45.4 (2019), 43-46. p. 46.

traversing the environment that is present to an experiencing subject. The Dream Secretary in *Sleepwalk* exemplifies the import of movement to experience while also enacting the process of the poem itself coming into being. Disclosure of this immersion onto the record of the location and its vocal and written enactments clearly registers our witness and interaction with things living in or moving through space.⁴⁸

Oswald's poetic voice is embedded and embodied in the landscape; there is no omnipotent voice in the poem, as even the moon demonstrates gaps in her self-knowledge in synch with her waxing and waning presence, since sometimes she is 'trying to find herself on a moonless night' (23), and sometimes she is unaware that she is the subject of somebody else's gaze:

There's the Moon poor thing looking for eels among the reeds. She's asleep apparently. She's been walking since Dusk. She looks exhausted. Don't touch her. Keep moving the stones out of her way (6).

The Dream Secretary confides in the reader, placing us in a position of privileged knowledge, but it is seemingly important that the moon, like a sleepwalker, is not disturbed, or 'touch[ed]', and, whereas the Dream Secretary addresses the reader directly, the moon is often unaware of our presence in the text.

Oswald has scattered references to feet and shoes throughout the poem, and here as in other places in her work, these function figuratively, expressing dynamic and static patterns of movement in response to the conditions of the estuary, and in the context of physical contact with the ground. Feet are parts of our bodies which are used both for walking and for

⁴⁸ Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place*. p.100.

standing still, and they are, of course, a physical point of contact with the ground. This physical contact is very important in the poem: as Oswald writes 'It's not so much what you see as what you are seeped in' (14). Becoming 'stuck' happens to many of the characters at various points in the poem, and is an inevitable consequence of ceasing to struggle against the force of gravity. For example, the fisherman who is 'tired out by dreams' consequently 'lets his feet sink in. He folds himself half shut with his legs gone dead'(17). Perhaps he then becomes one among the 'ordinary surface stuff' mentioned in the poem, 'a shoe sticking out of the mud with a leg in it'(6). The unfortunate fisherman may have become fatally stuck. The moon herself is presented as if she must struggle to free herself from the mud: 'There's the moon poor thing with her foot stuck trying to lift...Up! She extricates her foot and begins to rise' (13). Even bodies or presences without literal feet are given figurative feet in the poem, such as the moon and the wind, which emphasises the connection between the anatomical foot and the poetic foot, and how vital this unit of measurement is for the rhythm of movement.

Where Wordsworth famously composed his verse while walking and filled his poetry with great strides of iambic pentameter, Oswald's verse in this poem is rhythmically intermittent. There are sections of dramatic prose, sections of free verse, sections in ballad metre, and sections constructed of tercets; there are pauses and spaces on the page which provide stillness. This is somnambulance, after all, and sometimes we 'walk', but we also get 'stuck', 'fall over', and 'creep'. There is an emphasis on the irregular and on changeability: just before the 'Full Moon' section, the chorus remarks 'This night it's lovely to stroll out / On a moon walk sleepwatching on your feet' (14). To 'stroll' is to move in a leisurely fashion in order to absorb pleasant surroundings. In this section, each stanza begins with 'This night', to draw attention to the phasal nature of the moon's movements and the resulting effects on the

landscape. There is something particularly pleasant about the night in question, when the moon is almost full, which is not the case when the moon is new, and the ‘fisherman’ says, ‘It’s late. I don’t like it walking on the mud at night’ (5) This is not a regular, progressive temporality as might be suggested by strong iambic pentameter – this is moving irregularly within a place, where the emphasis on movement serves in part to emphasise embodiedness and participation instead of a single-minded traversal from A to B. The rhythm of this movement could be read as a contrast to the regular pulsing of clock time. Bastian argues that clock time ‘provide[s] support to the sense of a stable background’, which masks the climate emergency, since ‘rather than representing the urgency and danger of these changes, clock time emphasizes continuity and similarity across all moments and projects an empty and unending future.’⁴⁹ By contrast, pauses and inconstancy in the journey of the sleepwalker may indicate the possibility of loss, or the vulnerability of human industrial society, whose future is by no means guaranteed.

The Birdwatcher undergoes a transformation in his relationship with the estuary which is symbolised by the way that Oswald writes about his feet, as well as other bodily signs of his involvement in place, which changes after his experience of the estuary over the whole course of a lunar cycle . Oswald writes:

At last at low water he stands up,
Remembering his heavy feet....
And the doves in the woods
Clap awake when he walks (27)

⁴⁹ Michelle Bastian, ‘Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises’, p.33.

Spending all night out on the estuary under the full moon transforms the birdwatcher's relationship with the place. Where before he bicycled (avoiding the crucial footstep contact with the ground, and riding a vehicle of purposeful travel rather than inhabitation) and looked at things through his telescope, always missing the long billed dotterel, after his night under the full moon, the birdwatcher's experience of the place is transformed:

He sees everything:

The grebe's nest under the weed,

The waders resting on fold-up stools along the tideline.

Everything down to the lowest least whisper

Of ducks tucked in self-pillow

And meals wriggling under stones,

Even the shiver of an owl's wing

Moving through stars

He perfectly hears...(27)

From interacting with the estuary using predominantly his sense of sight, it is significant that the birdwatcher's transformation results in his sensual interaction with the place extending to hearing. Oswald's opinion that the sight is a surface-based sense, whereas ears enable one to 'hear into' things in a more interpenetrative and immersive manner, is enacted here as the birdwatcher belongs now to the sonic experience of place. After this experience, the birdwatcher's bodily movements are in conversation with the other bodies that inhabit the estuary. He is aware of his connection to the earth: ('Remembering his heavy feet') and 'the

doves in the woods / clap awake when he walks', almost as if responding to his movement with applause.

Immersion, Opportunism and Sound

The importance of sound as a method for immersing oneself in place is perhaps clearest in the 'articled clerk' section after 'Moon Reborn', in which the clerk describes 'the meal' which happens on the mudflats when the tide is out (30). Wading birds take advantage of the conditions of the moment to feed on invertebrates living in the exposed mud of the estuary. Descriptions of consumption and digestion are noisily rendered to evoke a very material and bodily involvement in the place. The articled clerk watches the birds and invertebrates feeding and being eaten, and the slimy texture of the mud and the worms is exquisitely rendered with delightfully disgusting sonic textures. Oswald writes of 'mucous mudglands' and 'such a suction of wet kisses', alliteratively rendering the oozing sound of the mud and the slipperiness of the invertebrates found there (30). The clerk seems to find this feeding time distasteful, describing what he sees with 'unease' and seeming to feel out of place or ill-equipped to belong, as he says 'I should have webbed feet / I should have white wings to walk here' (31). He says, with a pejorative tone arising from his gossipy deixis,

There goes that dunlin up to her chin in
The simmering dish of mush and
All night that seeping feeding sound
Of moistness digesting smallness (30)

The hissing of sibilance in this stanza further suggests an acidic whispered aside and a sense of disgust, as does the exaggerated 'up to her chin'. The articled clerk, whose job-title is

pointedly abstract in comparison with, for example, that of the fisherman, is also the butt of a comic passage earlier in the poem. He shoots a water-fowl and appears to drown in retrieving its body, but not before his pedantic attempt to have the last word in identifying the specimen, as he ‘shouts ‘Duck, actually!’ and disappears in the waves’(12). This passage in the ‘Half Moon’ section serves to demonstrate the clerk’s inability to correctly read the landscape, whilst also showing that, despite his dislike for the place (he complains about the cold) and his desire to only interact with the place and its inhabitants through the sights of his rifle, he is always already implicated in it, and if he is unable to learn how to skilfully navigate life as a denizen of it, then the place will overcome him in a very material way. His descriptions of the mudflats, with their emphasis on his separateness from the scene which so turns his stomach, contrast with the birdwatcher’s last section, which emphasises bodily involvement with place.

The conditions needed for the meal to happen are momentary, occurring only around the time of low tide, and it is possible that the opportunism of the birds is part of what the Articled Clerk finds distasteful: ‘This evening those very thin fence posts / Struggled up out of the mud again / And immediately the meal began.’ To the Clerk’s ‘unease’, the ‘meal went on and on’, until it is stopped by ‘that sly tide swiftly refilling’ (31). In an estuary, the opportunities for some species of birds to feed depends on the presence of exposed mudflats, and so is time-bound. The birds must take advantage of the right conditions, and this makes the timing of their feeding habits different from those of the Articled Clerk, which he struggles to understand. It is a meal of in-between matter in an in-between space which transforms with the tide and therefore with time.

Mingled Materiality

Materiality works throughout *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* to show the mingled indeterminacy of cohabiting in space. In the poem, mud in various forms and textures represents a site of Protean potential and contaminatory possibility. The moon in the 'New Moon' section describes:

Only the fresh cracked fat of the mud. ... This is wetlands. Full of wildfowl. Keep looking. This is sediment. This is ordinary surface stuff with a shoe sticking out of the mud with a leg in it. Or is that a heron standing out of bounds on the reservoir Wall. Which'll soon be twenty foot underwater (6).

Two more of the poles between which the poem wavers appear on analysis of the phrase, 'ordinary surface stuff.' At first glance glibly dismissive, the reader is alerted to the more complex implications of 'stuff': the shock of the phrase 'with a leg in it' creates a sense of absurdist dissonance, and then the element of indeterminacy is introduced in the subsequent sentence ('Or is that...'). Furthermore, in the prologue Oswald writes, 'This is not the ordinary surface river / this is not river at all this is something / Like a huge repeating mechanism'(3). Tim Ingold writes of the possibilities of 'haptic vision', asking, 'what if surfaces are the real sites for the generation of meaning?' Ingold argues that 'A theory of surfaces... must join with the texture of the world, with its materials and processes, answering to them as they to it.'⁵⁰ Oswald's estuary poem can be read as the practice of 'a theory of surfaces' which is 'a modality of habitation – a way of thinking and working with stuff', and in it there are surfaces and there are depths, things ordinary and things strange, and the estuary environment has the effect of mixing them all together. ⁵¹

⁵⁰ Tim Ingold, 'Surface Visions'. *Theory, Culture, & Society* (34: 7-8:2017). 99-108. p.101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Like so many of Oswald's environments, the Severn estuary is not a pure or pristine place free from the evidence of modern human life. It is contaminated, but in a way in which human traces and traces of other beings sit side-by-side, along with moments of weird beauty. The moon in the 'Half Moon' section says:

I can't remember what I'm looking for but I've found shoes and skirts and ribbons here. And old crab lines and fossils being wintered away and of course hundreds of half fish half human molluscs and marine worms doubled up in their undoing being slowly slipped out of the mud and made fat again (13)

The materiality of the estuary is mingled and therefore physically and bodily involves humans in the more-than-human space: 'half fish half human molluscs' also resonates with the Articled Clerk's stated need for 'wings' and 'webbed feet'. The estuary space is transformational, and both surfaces and depths, and matter itself, gets mixed up.

The manner and extent of the mixing is not consistent, however, and the force which dictates this is the clock of the moon. The moon dictates the movement of everything in the estuary between two poles, including the way in which matter wavers between being more intermingled and being more separate. In the 'New Moon' section, the use of 'Or is that a heron' creates a sense of two distinct ontological possibilities: the question is whether what we are seeing is one thing or the other (7). The Half Moon section brings things half-formed, or half-transformed, 'half fish half human', and the Dream Secretary says '*Beginning to sway. Beginning to see things. I'm asleep apparently. Keep going*' (13). The enticement to 'keep going, and the sense of the moon struggling 'with her foot stuck trying to lift',

encourages all inhabitants of the estuary that this is a phase through which one must keep moving because we are just ‘beginning to see’. The distinction between one thing and another – a sense of the separateness of things – has begun to loosen. The chorus sings:

This night de-mists the dreamworld
This night is born the half strength shadow
Still pooling under my feet still half transfused
It’s like I blot the world like on wet paper (14)

This smudging or blurring of the outlines of the world is reflected in the prosody of these lines: this stanza begins with a strongly defined sense of even iambic shape, but even by the end of the first line our expectations of the definite outlines of iambs are not met, and the edges of the end of ‘dreamworld’ drift. The subsequent lines get progressively longer, pressing up to and beyond the borders of the loose iambic pentameters of the poem: the rhythm itself becomes diffuse and representative of blurred boundaries between materials or states. This, perhaps, is part of the ‘dreamsight, moonstinct’ (themselves hybrid words) with which the poem will proceed, alert to permeability and porousness, and allowing the reader to be ‘seeped in’ the estuary (14). At the peak of the Full Moon, distinctions between things have become elided altogether. The fisherman ‘lets his feet sink in’, accepting his immersion into the mud of the estuary (17). Oswald’s figurative language extends this immersion and elision; one thing becomes another, as the moon describes how the Fisherman ‘folds himself half shut with his legs gone dead and his coat still awake. Which feels like a window curtain blowing at night in a seldom entered room and in one of its folds there’s a butterfly roosting’ (17) This dream-like, surreal passage slips from one image to another, creating a sense that the reader cannot be sure which parts of the passage are metaphorical and which are not –

what kind of reality is being presented here? The Fisherman ‘folds himself’ as if he has become part of the furniture of the estuary, with the metaphorical language overlaying this image on top of the image of the fisherman out checking his traps, which is then overlaid again by the strange specificity of the window curtain in an empty room. The reader is looking at multiple, mingled images at once, combined and shifting as if through a kaleidoscope.

Conclusion

The Severn estuary in the poem is a place animated by the movement of human and inhuman temporalities. It is a place of Protean transformation and also predictable, rhythmic change, where ‘the brilliant shimmer of the biosphere’ described by Deborah Bird Rose can be seen and felt.⁵² Lunar temporalities are examples of the potent influence of planetary temporalities on human and more-than-human bodies, demonstrating that the force of time is ubiquitous even in that which we call ‘nature’. The poem’s materials suggest ways of reading the possibilities of embodied and timely connection to place and the experience of change. Time in *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* is also various, cyclical, intermittent, latent and haunted; it forms patterns which allow spaces for the vulnerability of ecosystems and their changefulness to be noticed, and which communicate some of the particular and peculiar temporalities of the Anthropocene.

⁵² Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed’ in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). p. G51.

The Practice of Memory: Times of Loss in *Memorial*

In writing a version of *The Iliad*, Oswald performed an act of time-travel. It is easy to imagine this act as a retrieval from the past: a translation of this founding epic of the ancient Western world to render it accessible to modern audiences. A telling of an old tale. Yet, far from the comforting familiarity of that narrative, to read *Memorial* is deeply unsettling. Oswald describes her approach to translation as ‘irreverent’, adding that she aimed ‘for translucence rather than translation’.⁵³ As part of her ‘excavation’ of *The Iliad*, Oswald has omitted most of the narrative, retaining the obituaries which describe the deaths of the soldiers and placing these in new contexts alongside translations of Homer’s similes. *Memorial* exists as a kind of stratigraphic text, in which various temporalities exist, layered over one another. This chapter will explore how *Memorial* troubles the dominance of unilinear, ‘heroic’ and even uniquely human concepts of time, reading the temporalities of this text to open questions about how we inhabit and relate to the past, present, and future, and exploring how *Memorial* presses us to consider how our ethical and ecological responsibilities might inform the way that we dwell in time.

Warfare’s Disjunction

Oswald’s temporal juxtapositions begin with her approach to this project of translating anew the history of an ancient war. The Trojan war of *Memorial* is both temporally remote from contemporary readers, writes Carolin Hahneman, and also very present: Oswald ‘firmly ties the poem to present-day life.’⁵⁴ Oswald writes that Protesilaus ‘has been in the black earth

⁵³ Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (London, Faber & Faber, 2011), p.2. All further references are to this edition.

⁵⁴ Carolin Hahneman, ‘Book of Paper, Book of Stone: An Exploration of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*’. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (22.1: 2014), pp.1-32.. p.27

now for thousands of years’(13), and yet Isos and Antiphos were ‘proud as astronauts’(36), and Phegeus and Idaeus die ‘like a lift door closing’(17). Some reviewers have criticised these anachronisms as ‘jarring modernisms’,⁵⁵ but Hahneman argues convincingly that they are indicative of the poem’s ‘curious relationship to time’, in which simple linear or discrete moments are made complex as Oswald presents disjunct moments as braided together in time to be experienced simultaneously.⁵⁶ Corinne Pache writes that *Memorial* ‘plays on the permeability of past and present’, and also invokes the future.⁵⁷ Oswald writes:

DAMASOS the Trojan
Running at a man thinking kill kill
In years to come someone will find his helmet
Shaped like a real head (44)

Pache describes Oswald’s use here of the ‘vivid progressive present’, which brings ‘the ancient warrior into both the present and the future when someone will find his head-shaped helmet.’⁵⁸ The juxtaposition of the startling vitality of ‘running at a man thinking kill kill’ with the distance created by the phrase ‘shaped like a real head’ leaves the reader occupying uncomfortably incompatible times and locations. Located in multiple times at once, the reader experiences time as radically unstable and dynamic.

In *Memorial*, the narrator occasionally addresses the reader/listener directly, and the use of apostrophes such as this troubles the reader’s situation in relation to the temporalities of the text and its encounter. For example, in Echepolus’ obituary, Oswald writes:

⁵⁵ Peter Green, ‘Homer Now’, *The New Republic*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/103920/homer-the-iliad-translations>. Accessed: 20th April 2021.

⁵⁶ Carolin Hahnemann, ‘Book of Paper, Book of Stone: An Exploration of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*’. p.27.

⁵⁷ Corinne Pache, ‘A word from another world’: mourning and similes in Homeric epic and Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*.’ *Classical Receptions Journal* (10.2: 2018). pp. 170–190, p.175.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.176.

You can see the hole in the helmet just under the ridge
Where the point of the blade passed through
And stuck in his forehead
Letting the darkness leak down over his eyes (14)

Through this startling use of the second person address, Pache writes, ‘past, present and future merge in the image of the hole in the helmet that is seen again every time the story is told...as if the poetry brought [the audience] directly into the world of the poem.’⁵⁹

However, these few lines do not do so wholesale. Rather, the reader/listener is invited to look at the helmet as if at an artefact, emphasising our role as audience and underlining our awareness of our own present vantage point, while simultaneously immersing us in the death of Echeplus, whose life also fades away before our eyes as we read of the ‘darkness leak[ing] down’. Apostrophe works to emphasise *Memorial*’s temporal dissonances, using this mode of address to enliven remembered events and undermine fixed ideas of history’s ability to remain in the past.⁶⁰

(Anti) Heroism

One of the major differences between *The Iliad* and *Memorial* is the treatment of heroes and heroism. The society from within which the Homeric narrator worked was founded upon the glorification of heroism, valour and honour, and the epic existed to reproduce and commemorate those values. As Elizabeth Minchin writes, ‘it was the ambition of every hero in this ‘epic’ world that, even though he might die an early death, his name and his heroic

⁵⁹ Corrine Pache, p.177

⁶⁰ Apostrophe is a technique with considerable potential for eco-temporal analysis. See Farrier (2019) and investigation into the kin-making power of the ‘Swerve’ or ‘clinamen’. pp. 89-123.

feats might nevertheless live on: he sought the *kleos*, the glory, the continuing fame, that an oral epic tradition could bestow.’⁶¹ Warriors hoped that they would be immortalised in poetry, so that even though they might meet their death in battle, the stories of their lives and deeds would continue to be reproduced into the future. However, Minchin writes that Oswald focuses not on the lives of the ‘heroes’, but on their deaths. *Memorial*’s narrator rarely mentions who killed whom, prioritising instead the record of who died: ‘eschewing any commitment to a narrative of victory, she keeps her focus firmly on the victim and his experience of death...Oswald’s silence confirms her distinctive agenda.’⁶² This agenda is an anti-heroic and grief-focussed one. As Judith Thurman wrote in her *New Yorker* review, ‘*Memorial* thinks radically about violence, and it has earned a place in the canon of great anti-war poems... in paying homage to Homer’s masterpiece with one of her own, [Oswald] tacitly reproaches his hero worship, a foundation of patriarchies.’⁶³ Pache writes that Oswald ‘resolutely rejects the possibility of heroism and privileges the arbitrariness and ultimate meaninglessness of death in war,’⁶⁴ and Hahneman writes: ‘*Memorial* portrays war not as a conflict waged for the attainment of a goal, but as a catalyst of death that affects both sides even without distinction...*Memorial* is ‘none-sided.’⁶⁵ The temporal implications of the removal of the possibility of *kleos* are significant, as Hahneman notes; ‘by stripping away the plot of *The Iliad*, Oswald has rendered such celebration impossible.’⁶⁶ Oswald has effectively extinguished the lives and deeds of these Homeric heroes, denying them immortality in poetry. Time itself is stripped of clear boundaries, and simple linear relationships between

⁶¹ Elizabeth Minchin, ‘Tradition and Transformation: Alice Oswald’s Excavation of *The Iliad*’. *Classical Receptions Journal* (7.2:2015), pp. 202-222. p.203.

⁶² Elizabeth Minchin, p.209.

⁶³ Judith Thurman, ‘Alice Oswald’s Homeric Mood’. *New Yorker*, August 17, 2020 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/24/alice-oswalds-homeric-mood>. Accessed 5th February 2021.

⁶⁴ Corinne Pache, p. 174

⁶⁵ Carolin Hahnemann, ‘Book of Paper, Book of Stone: An Exploration of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*’. p. 21

⁶⁶ Carolin Hahneman, ‘Feminist at Second Glance’, p.93.

past, present and future are replaced by an opened-out – indeed, ‘none-sided’ – temporality that echoes the ‘none-sided’ ethics of mourning in the poem.

Oswald is deeply concerned with the individual lives of the warriors, and with expressing how warfare renders these individual lives tragically meaningless. Pache writes that Oswald’s *Memorial* ‘strongly rejects the possibility of heroism on the battlefield, yet it paradoxically functions in the same way as its predecessor, immortalizing anew the ancient dead for twenty-first century audiences. By bringing Homeric poetry into the present, Oswald enjoins us to mourn the ancient dead.’⁶⁷ However, if *Memorial* does immortalize the dead, as in some ways memory must, it is a paradoxical immortalization which remembers most prominently the moment of their death. It is not that these soldiers will live forever in a state of valour, but that they will die over and over again in each encounter with the poem, and be mourned in perpetuum.

This perpetual mourning gives rise to a hybridity of form in *Memorial*, associated with a particular reading of the ‘excavation’ of the poem’s subtitle: Oswald believes that the similes and biographies of the soldiers in *The Iliad* ‘derive...from distinct poetic sources: the simile from pastoral lyric...; the biographies from the Greek tradition of lament poetry.’(1)

Oswald’s project is to dig down through ‘layers and layers from different ages’ to the strata below the version of *The Iliad* which is most widely read and reproduced today.⁶⁸ Perceiving the text of *The Iliad* as ‘a landscape that I wanted to dig things out of’, Oswald is travelling an inverse timeline to that of the soldiers in *The Iliad*, and these two directions tug at the text that she has created as traces from dissonant times.⁶⁹ Oswald reads *The Iliad* as a palimpsest,

⁶⁷ Corrine Pache, p. 189

⁶⁸ Alice Oswald, Interview with Fiona Cox. *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies*. <https://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/sites/www.open.ac.uk.arts.research.pvcrs/files/files/ecms/web-content/201311AliceOswald.pdf>. Accessed 05/06/2021.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

and has set out to erode the top layer of the text to reveal what is beneath. In this way, Oswald mingles the temporality of the epic – that proleptic, singular, heroic time – with the temporality of lament, which ‘provide[s] a counterpoint to the heroic code’ since ‘laments focus not on the heroes’ exploits on the battlefield, but on the consequence of their deaths for the living.’⁷⁰ The similes, which Oswald considers derive ‘from pastoral lyric’, also contribute a distinct temporality since most describe an action that is repeated as part of agricultural or domestic cycles or weather conditions and all are written strikingly in the present tense, which combine to develop a sense of continuity and the perpetual now. *Memorial* is shot through with the temporalities associated with multiple poetic forms and genres.

One striking example of the way in which Oswald recasts the poem to resonate with grief not glory can be seen in the death of Socus. Oswald writes:

Socus who was running by now

Felt the rude punch of a spear in his back

Push through his heart and out the other side poor Socus

Trying to get away from his own ending

Ran out of his last moments in fear of the next ones

But this is it now this is the mud of Troy

This is black wings coming down every evening

⁷⁰ Corinne Pache, p. 174.

Bird's feathers on your face

Unmaking you mouthful by mouthful

Eating your eyes your open eyes (43)

In contrast with *The Iliad*, in which much of this is spoken tauntingly by Odysseus, 'here the perspective expands to include that of the narrator, and by extension of the audience,' notes Pache. 'Instead of taunting, there is only pity ('Poor Socus'), and instead of boasting and victory there is statement of fact and regret in the face of death.'⁷¹ Addressing Socus directly also reframes this episode as a lament. Furthermore, the death of Socus is witnessed by the audience, and not just as a singular episode, but as an iterative moment that happens repeatedly upon encounter with the poem: 'This is black wings coming down every evening', 'unmaking you' and 'eating your eyes' in the iterative, gerundive present. Socus' obituary contains multiple and ambiguous temporalities, and multiple and ambiguous perspectives, increasing the pathos of the reader's experience of Socus' particular death at the same time as the use of the second person universalizes it. The audience are asked to imaginatively experience the death and the after-death of Socus, at the same time as our own similar deaths.

Lament & Women's time

In *Memorial*, Oswald emphasises timescapes pertaining to women, which is often absent from *The Iliad*, and stands in contrast with the timescapes of the male heroes in the poems. Where the temporality of the male hero is concerned with victory and immortal honour through fathering sons and featuring in songs – it is, one might say, progress-oriented and future-focussed - women's temporality in *Memorial* is commemorative, iterative, and grief-

⁷¹ Corrine Pache, p. 180.

rather than glory-focussed. Firstly, women are far more present in *Memorial* than in *The Iliad*, even if what Oswald renders visible is women's absence from memory. Hahneman writes, 'by drawing attention to this omission...Oswald makes the silhouette of a woman become visible, as it were, in negative space.'⁷² Where women are notably absent from Homer's poem, Oswald draws attention to this omission. In the obituary for Elephenor, Oswald writes that he is 'Son of Chalcodon nothing is known of his mother' (15), and she refers to Alcahous as 'somebody's husband somebody's daughter's husband'(48). Oswald thus frames the absence of attention that *The Iliad* places on the female characters in the Trojan war. Furthermore, as Hahneman notes, *Memorial* is structured so that women and the role that they play in the narrative frame the deaths that the poem recounts. The grief of mothers is emphasised in the third and the third-to-last obituary, drawing the reader to perceive all of the obituaries in the poem within the context of the grief of mothers who have lost their sons to war. This framing lends a cyclical feel to maternal grieving, which becomes far more prominent as Oswald writes:

Laothoë one of Priam's wives
Never saw her son again he was washed away
Now she can't look at the sea she can't think about
The bits unburied being eaten by fishes (69)

The shift between the past perfect 'he was washed away' and two instances of present tenses ('she can't look/being eaten'), emphasises the suggestion that Laothoë grieves again every time that she sees the sea: the loss of her son is re-iterated, and she mourns in perpetuum. This section continues:

⁷² Carolin Hahneman, 'Book of Paper, Book of Stone', p. 14.

LYCAON killed Lycaon unkilld Lycaon
Bending down branches to make wheels
Lycaon kidnapped Lycaon pruning by moonlight
Lycaon naked in a river pleading for his life
Being answered by Achilles No (69)

The death of Lycaon is recounted in a manner which may be described as cyclical also, or at least in which Lycaon's death is coeval with his life. It is as if Laithoë's memories of her son are experienced intermingled with the thoughts of his death, with 'killed Lycaon' and 'unkilled Lycaon' both haunting his mother. Pache writes that 'the past comes to life in the continuous present of a mother's grief'.⁷³ These memories are experienced as new each time they are encountered; hence in *Memorial*, the temporality of maternal grief is cyclical and iterative, and trauma and loss cannot be left behind in the past but must be continually remembered in the present.

Women's role as mourners and keepers of memory, and the iterative, often place-based timescape of women's grief culminates in the following passage from *Memorial*:

...now this whole river is a grave
Women at the washing pools
When they hear the river running
Crying like a human through its chambers
They remember ...

⁷³ Corrine Pache, p. 181.

All that beautiful armour underwater
All those white bones sunk in mud
And instead of a burial a wagtail
Sipping the desecration unaware (71)

Washing is an iterative process, conducted again and again in the same place, and each time is an occasion for a commemorative practice. Hahneman notes that this is evidence of the lasting trauma of war, in which ‘evidently, even when the fighting stops, the devastation lasts on, both in the minds of those who witnessed it and in the landscape because “now this whole river is a grave”...war, it seems, is never over.’⁷⁴ This section also resonates with Marianne Moore’s poem, ‘A Grave’, in which ‘the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave,’ and in which ‘men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave.’ Moore’s poem comments on the difficulty experienced as a woman encountering the presence of a man standing ‘in the middle of the thing’, ‘taking the view.’ Oswald’s writing here also obliquely comments on the difference that gender makes to people’s experience of this place: the men’s warfare has polluted the river Scamander with death, and women must live in the aftermath. In Moore’s poem it is the vastness of an ocean which ‘advances as usual’, and by extension the smallness of the poem’s individuals in time, in which the poet finds comfort. (‘There are others beside you who have worn that look...their bones have not lasted.’)⁷⁵ In Oswald’s work the ‘desecration’ is given succour by the ‘unaware’ wagtail: although the women must repeat the task of mourning, not all beings in this place carry that weight.

⁷⁴ Carolin Hahneman, ‘Feminist at Second Glance’, p. 103.

⁷⁵ Marianne Moore, ‘A Grave.’ *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems 1907-1924* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002.) p. 60.

The association between this iterative time of grief and housework supports Barbara Adam's assertion that the imaginative shift required to move away from neo-classical temporal habits of mind in order to better recognize the existence of environmental hazards

is lived already in the moonlight economy of environmental praxis: in the household and the garden.... Where the official economy with its principal assumptions of objectivity and abstract self-interest fails, the informal, ethical and temporally sensitive *oikos* economy is eminently suited to step into the breach.⁷⁶

The temporality of *oikos* repeats, as taking care of households and gardens requires repetitive labour. In childrearing, for example, much of the work is a daily, repetitive pattern, but these daily cycles exist along a timeline of gradually shifting needs as the child grows. In *Memorial*, household work is often undertaken by women, as was the 'work' of mourning: in classical Greece, women were responsible for lamenting the dead, repeatedly practicing communal remembrance and bringing memory into the lived experience of the everyday. The temporal tension of such iterative labour allows communities to perceive the persistent interaction of cyclical and linear rhythms in the more-than-human world, in which cycles of growth, harvest and decomposition exist alongside systemic change which does not always allow renewal or reversal, such as the wider arcs of climate change and ecological breakdown. There is an ethical dimension to forms of iterative temporal praxis such as caregiving and mourning, which in *Memorial* are often associated with women's time.

Queer time

⁷⁶ Barbara Adam, p. 14.

Memorial adds further threads of temporality alongside *The Iliad*'s fundamentally patriarchal time. Hahneman calls *Memorial*'s 'obliteration' of the 'male ethos' its 'most fundamental feminist deviation'.⁷⁷ She cites the death of the young male warriors before they were able to father children as evidence that the part of the heroic code which places value on the ability to father sons and continue one's bloodline has been interrupted. 'The heroic hero hopes to live on in a progeny of equally heroic sons and grandsons,' but in *Memorial*, 'each casualty stands at the end of his bloodline.' Hahneman goes on to notice that Oswald also emphasises the youth of the warriors in a way which the Homeric narrator does not: they are referred to as 'boys', 'teenagers', 'at the age of eighteen'.⁷⁸ Not only does Oswald prevent these men from achieving glorious immortalization in poetry, but she also forecloses their ability to achieve glorious immortalization through their descendants. It can be argued that alongside maternal temporality, *Memorial* contains traces of queer temporality. E.L McCallum and Mikko Tukkanen write that 'queerness has always been marked by its untimely relation to socially shared temporal phases', giving the example of the absence of the temporality of biological reproduction, as well as the quotidian rhythms of family life with children.⁷⁹ The temporal implications of foreshortened lives - where there has not been time for any kind of legacy to be created - do suggest a lack of future-focus. In addition, since these young men died without daughters and sons to mourn for them, if they are to be remembered into the future then this must be a responsibility which exceeds the boundaries of the deceased's own nuclear families. *Memorial* emphasises memory as a mutual, societal responsibility and communicates an awareness that loss is experienced not only by individuals but also by a community as a whole, an idea which will be returned to in greater detail below.

⁷⁷ Carolin Hahneman, 'Feminist at Second Glance?', p. 93.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷⁹ E.L McCallum and Mikko Tukkanen, *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2011). p. 7.

Monument

As an ‘oral cemetery’, *Memorial* simultaneously emphasises its status as a physical monument and written text, and as a work of oral literature. Oswald has included aspects to the text which rely upon the physicality of the book: for example, the first section of the poem lists the names of the people whose deaths are recorded in the book, fully capitalised and in a typeface which resembles a list of casualties on a war memorial monument.

Hahneman adds that, in the US edition of the book, ‘the funerary connection is evident even on the book jacket, which Catherine Casalino designed to look like an inscription on a tomb stone.’⁸⁰ Hahneman offers an insightful discussion of the relationship which *Memorial* has with various war memorials, and, temporally, what is fascinating is *Memorial*’s intertextuality of reference: the inclusion of names without reference to which side they fought on or what their rank was (or even whether or not they were human – PEDASUS was a horse) means that *Memorial*’s monumental comparands range from Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial to ‘the casualty lists of ancient Athens’.⁸¹ Just as memorials are designed to be ‘permanent’, the concerns of commemoration and its ethics persist in these several fixed points across the centuries.

The physicality of the poem is also emphasised in the poem’s subtitle, ‘An Excavation of the Iliad’. Some reviewers, for example Logan, called Oswald’s version a ‘cheeky strip-mining of the ancient poem’, the removal of the narrative in Oswald’s self-confessed ‘reckless dismissal of seven-eighths of the poem’ being interpreted in the definition of ‘excavation’ from its Latin root, ‘a hollowing out’.⁸² However, as Hahneman argues, Oswald’s ‘treatment of *The Iliad* bears no resemblance to the devastation worked on a natural landscape by

⁸⁰ Carolin Hahneman, ‘Book of Paper, Book of Stone’, p. 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

commercial interests, but constitutes an act of creation by reduction'.⁸³ Oswald has described her preference for the poetry of erosion, and if we apply the archaeological meaning to 'excavation', we can instead imagine Oswald unearthing this artefact from classical times and 'wear[ing] some holes in it'.⁸⁴ However, Oswald's excavation entails careful curation also, as she presents the parts which have endured and discards those which have 'decayed', such as any glorification of warfare or the heroic code. Furthermore, *The Iliad* is not a relic which has been lost and recently rediscovered by Oswald, but rather a text which has stayed in circulation, stayed current, carried alongside Western European civilization and been subject to erosions, translations, and re-readings. Hahneman makes an interesting point about Oswald's transliteration of names, to this effect: Oswald spells the Greek names in the book inconsistently, with the same names appearing with different spellings, even when they belong to the same person, and regardless of whether the character was Greek or Trojan. 'Names in Memorial reflect... different archaeological strata in terms of their spelling,'⁸⁵ because the spelling conventions would have changed over time, making each spelling, once superseded, a fossil or a relic of the name. This 'can be seen as a signal that the poem is based not on one person's reading but on the collective encounter of the English readership with *The Iliad* that by now has lasted many decades.'⁸⁶ Therefore the fossil-names indicate both how the spelling changed over time in classical civilization, and also how the *Iliad* has been read and re-read in an iterative process of encounter. A feature of *Memorial* which exists only in the printed, textual aspects of the poem thus gestures towards the poem's oral history and emphasises the poem's mingled timescape.

⁸³ Carolin Hahneman, 'Book of Paper, Book of Stone', p. 28.

⁸⁴ Alice Oswald, 'The Art of Erosion.' *Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture*. <<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/art-erosion>> Delivered 09/12/2019. Accessed 12/08/2021.

⁸⁵ Carolin Hahneman, 'Book of Paper, Book of Stone', p. 28.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.29.

Orality and Lament

The tension between the textuality and orality of *Memorial* is productive of a range of effects with regards to temporality. Oswald wrote in 2003, ‘to create an oral poem in a literary tradition has been one of my driving impulses’, and this has arguably been achieved in *Memorial*, which carries multiple emphatically oral features alongside its emphatically textual ones. The litany of names described above as well as the repetition of the similes are both features which have frustrated readers but, as Hahneman argues, are experienced very differently by the audience of a live performance of the poem: ‘the litany is apt to produce quite the opposite effect on a live audience as on the reader: while the reader is likely to get distracted and speed up, the listener is likely to slow down and concentrate.’⁸⁷ Repetitions are experienced differently by listeners and by readers, one reason for which is simply practical: one can read a passage again to absorb a fuller range of resonances, but one cannot ‘rewind’ a live performance, and so repetition has always been used to give audiences time to absorb images and information. However, although Oswald has performed *Memorial* from memory, it is not primarily an oral poem. Stephe Harrop writes that *Memorial* “‘entextualizes” more ancient, and more performative, modes of lamentation and memorialisation’⁸⁸ and makes a strong case for considering *Memorial* as a ‘Voiced Text’⁸⁹, a ‘site of generic hybridity ... a catalyst for the transformation of poetic text in performance’.⁹⁰ To experience *Memorial* is to experience a text in which genre and form are layered over one another – from ancient oral epic to contemporary printed poem, and from the traditions of

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.4.

⁸⁸ Stephe Harrop, ‘Speech, Silence and Epic Performance: Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*’, *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies*, (8: 2013), 79-91. p.79.

⁸⁹ 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, 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), Stephe Harrop, p.79.

⁹⁰ Stephe Harrop, p.79.

lament to pastoral lyric. The reader, therefore, is asked to locate themselves in disjunct temporalities simultaneously.

Furthermore, the orality of the poem and its influences from lament emphasises a temporality of revisitation, return and reiteration. In the preface to *Memorial*, Oswald writes that '[w]hen a corpse was layed out [sic], a professional poet (someone like Homer) led the mourning and was antiphonally answered by women offering personal accounts of the deceased' (1). This process was highly formalised and repetitive, and in writing that the poet 'led the mourning', Oswald indicates that the act of mourning was also a practice, task, or performance, and we can thus think productively about mourning as a speech act along the lines of those described by J.L. Austin.⁹¹ Harrop argues that Oswald appeals to a kind of remembering '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.'⁹² Mourning is an iterative process enacted by the poet and the family of the deceased, but also enacted on the reader/audience's encounter with the poem: we become mourners, too, and *Memorial's* narrator enjoins us to remember the dead. Not only does the experience of reading a historic text mean that 'it continues to come alive again and again with some variations in every new encounter,' but the mourning process itself also belongs to such an iterative timescape.⁹³

'The living winds'⁹⁴: Temporalities of Wind and Breath

⁹¹ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). Michelle Bastian also argues that 'statements about time are not best understood as constative statements, but as performatives that enact particular forms of relationality.' Bastian discusses the relationship between speech act theory and time in Michelle Bastian, 'Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises.' p. 26.

⁹² Stephe Harrop, p.2.

⁹³ Carolin Hahneman, 'Book of Paper, Book of Stone', p.29.

⁹⁴ Alice Oswald, *Memorial*. p. 18.

The poet's breath is strikingly apparent in the performance of an oral poem, enabling the transmission of the poem and also imposing limitations on the poem, since '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.'⁹⁵ Movements of breath and of air create a material intimacy between the poet/performer, audience and environment, making strongly apparent the role of the audience in the communal act of poesis and, in this context, the communal action of mourning. The temporality of breath is one of immediate communication and communion in the context of a poem's performance, but also, in the context of the poem's concerns with breath and with wind, of broader timescapes of connectedness. Harrop argues that, in the biographies of the warriors, Oswald repeatedly focusses on 'damage to the sites of vocalisation, and soldiers' loss of vocal efficacy' which is a 'key signifier of oncoming death, with its transformation of a breathing, speaking man into an unspeaking object, a corpse.'⁹⁶ Describing the death of Agelaos, Oswald writes: 'When a spearshot pushed through his shout and out through his chest / He fell made of metal banging on the ground' (31). In describing Agelaos as 'made of metal', Oswald creates an equivalence with the 'spearshot pushed through his shout': alliterative sounds and end-rhyme function here to create two distinct sonic groupings (/m/ initial and the consonant groupings of 'banging' and 'ground' contrasting with the sibilance of 'spearshot', 'pushed' and 'shout'). Harrop perhaps overstates Oswald's focus on this, but the sense of complete and often unflinching finality that accompanies most of the deaths is strongest when the warrior falls silent and their name also vanishes, such as in this example:

⁹⁵ Stephe Harrop, p.7.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.4.

This is horrible this is some kind of bloodfeast
And beside each man his horses
Twelve anonymous Thracians were killed in their sleep
Before their ghosts had time to keep hold of their names
It was so sudden (34)

Without names, these warriors cannot be properly commemorated, because the connection between breath, word and the greater movement of the wind has been broken. The warriors are neither breathing themselves nor are their memories being invigorated by the breath of a poet/performer. As a result, the men became lifeless objects: Oswald writes of ‘the raw meat smell of their bodies’, and their killer is referred to as ‘like a butcher keeping up with his order’ who baldly ‘got rid of them’ (34). As a result, the timeline of these men has been brutally and finally severed.

Writing about *The Iliad*, Alex C. Purves also explores the relationship between wind and breath. Noting that the narrative passages of *The Iliad* lack any description of wind but are abundant in reference to breath, with the reverse being true for the similes, Purves argues that one of the effects of this is to express different timescales:

a tension exists between the time of the simile and the time of heroic action. The wind of the simile belongs to an unspecified place and time, while the act of breathing is crucially linked to the realm of the here and now. Breath is only noticeable when it is in short supply, meaning that when the act of breathing is highlighted on the

battlefield it focusses our attention on the physical aspect of the warrior's strenuous passage through present time.⁹⁷

Oswald's *Memorial*, however, with its focus on death and not on killing, lacks this focus on physical effort, substituting a stilling of the warrior's breath in death. Purves argues that the absence of wind and the ferocity of the fighting creates a 'stifling atmosphere' in *The Iliad's* battle books; Oswald recreates this stifling atmosphere with her attention to the moment of death -the last breath – of the fighters, for example:

Not even a great man not even a son of Zeus
Can buy or steal or borrow back his own last breath
Once he has hissed it out
Through the shutter of his teeth (61)

Here Oswald uses asyndeton, the repetition of 'not even' and line length to recreate the effect of running out of breath: the first two lines quoted are rhythmically so long that, when spoken aloud, they require a performer to speak to the very end of one breath. By contrast, Purves argues that 'the simile relieves this sense of scarcity of air and time by creating a pause within the furore of battle, a surplus of breath that stretches time out, allowing even the most rapid moments of action on the plain to expand for as long as it takes for the simile to come to an end.'⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Alex C. Purves, 'Wind and Time in Homeric Epic', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140 (2010), 323-350. p.331.

⁹⁸ Alex Purves, p.332.

In *Memorial*, too, time in the similes is different to time in the biographies, and one of the ways that this can be noticed is through the presence of wind. Oswald has claimed that the similes allow ‘time off from the grief,’ but, with large parts of the narrative of *The Iliad* not present in *Memorial*, it can also be argued that the presence of the similes reframes the timescale at which the events are read. Of the many dozens of extended similes in *Memorial*, approximately one third are ‘wind’ similes, making the wind a powerful and pervasive force in the poem. Where the biographies are expressed in a combination of past and occasionally present tenses, however, the similes are entirely in the present tense, which is also true of *The Iliad*, in which Oswald has noted that ‘similes operate on the narrative like Athene, interrupting time’s flow with an image of the present moment.’⁹⁹ In their article, Purves describes one of the first films ever produced, the 1895 film *Repas du bébé*, which Purves claims ‘dramatizes the moving picture’s ability to capture two registers of time at once’: the human time of the family tableau and also the ‘natural ongoing rhythms of the world outside’ represented by ‘the continuum of the wind that gusts and lulls.’¹⁰⁰ Purves reads the temporalities of wind in this film as supra-human in its ‘ever present’ nature and constantly various in its rhythmicities, in a way which contrast with the short moment of a family breakfast. Perhaps Oswald’s wind similes work to frame the human deaths in *Memorial* in a similar way, widening the reader’s temporal horizons and braiding disjunct temporalities alongside each other.¹⁰¹ For example,

Like the blue flower of the sea

Being bruised by the wind

⁹⁹ Alice Oswald, ‘The Art of Erosion.’ *Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture*. <<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/art-erosion>> Delivered 09/12/2019. Accessed 12/08/2021.

¹⁰⁰ Alex Purves, p. 325. (Emphasis in original.)

¹⁰¹ It is fascinating to note that there are close etymological links between the Greek word άνεμος (άνemos, “wind”), the Latin *animus* meaning breath, life, and soul, and the principle of animism.

Like when the rain-wind
Bullies the warm wind
Battering the great soft sunlit clouds
Deep scoops of wind
Work the sea into a wave
And foam follows wandering gusts
A thousand feet high (61)

This simile could be read as two, or even more, similes proliferating, with the first comparand beginning with 'like' and giving rise to another comparand two lines later. The repetition of the word 'wind', each with a different descriptor or quality, gives the impression of multiple wind 'events' occurring at multiple different times at sea, which are brought to mind within the frame of the simile. The simile overflows with winds, each with its own timescape and interaction, and the sense of movement and multiplicity contrasts starkly with the grim finality of the obituaries.

Similes, Gestationality, Proliferation

Oswald talks about the proliferative possibilities of simile in her lecture, 'Interview with Water'. She says:

I see metaphor as a kind of nutrition, whereby one idea gets eaten and digested by another...[Metaphor is] not the gift of similarity but the gift of communion. Simile moves in the other direction. Instead of reducing one thing to the other, it proliferates.

It reverberates. Wherever there is a simile it is as if the poem sprouts another whole poem. Much more like pregnancy than nutrition.¹⁰²

Similes in *Memorial* can be seen, therefore, as sites of generative possibility. Fittingly, Oswald uses water as a way of reading simile, expressing her idea of water's gift of 'agitated or animated reflection'. Not an exact replica, the reflections given by water subtly transform the original image, so that the image is multiplied and refracted and can be read in multiple ways. Thus water has similar properties of reflected and nuanced illumination to those of the Moon in *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. Water's multiplying possibilities are explored by Astrida Neimanis who, in her book *Bodies of Water* argues for the appreciation of water and bodies as sites of gestationality:

Water extends embodiment in time – body, to body, to body. Water in this sense is facilitative and directed towards the becoming of other bodies. Our own embodiment, as already noted, is never really autonomous. Nor is it autochthonous, nor autopoietic: we require other bodies of other waters (that in turn require other bodies and other waters) to bathe us into being. Watery bodies are gestational milieus for another – and for others often not at all like us.¹⁰³

In Oswald's work, the gestationality of water becomes further refracted in the gestationality of simile, which re-figures the poem as a site of dynamic, animate interplay and liveliness, capable of 'sprouting', or being 'pregnant'. Crucially, this gestational ability requires a

¹⁰² Alice Oswald, 'An Interview with Water'. *Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture*. <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/event/live-event-professor-of-poetry-lecture> Delivered: 25/06/2020, Accessed: 07/07/2020.

¹⁰³ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing: 2017). p. 3.

specific concept of the temporal configuration of water, simile, and poem. Proliferation implies a generational, as well as generative, temporal perspective: new forms descend from existing forms, which in turn have arisen from the forms before them. However, Neimanis emphasises that 'past and future bodies swim through our own', and that 'we are becoming all the time.'¹⁰⁴ Gestationality is not predicated upon a temporality in which discrete moments are only threaded together one after the other. There are instead multiple threads of succession, and each moment is haunted by - even contains - past and future moments, bodies, words, and images. In *Memorial*, the striking abundance of similes enables the reader to occupy a multi-dimensional field of temporality, as the poem proliferates with resonances and images.

The ethical implications for this way of inhabiting time in the context of death narratives- in which sequence is accompanied by other rhythms and patterns - has been explored by James Hatley and Deborah Bird Rose. James Hatley argues that death narratives engender a particular kind of ethical relationship to time. He writes that, in such narratives:

time is articulated as a differentiation across which and by means of which responsibilities are born. Precisely because one is not one's forebearers, one experiences one's time as a gift, the proffering of one's own existence from out of the bodies and lives of the beings who preceded one. One in turn offers this gift to those who come after one.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁰⁵ ¹⁰⁵ James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany, State University of New York Press: 2000). pp. 61-2.

Rather than viewing temporal succession as one moment or one being following each other in a line, or viewing time as a ‘unified field’ of past, present and future all at once in such narratives, we live in a reflexive temporal relationship with our ancestors and our offspring. Farrier writes that *Memorial* is ‘a call to relationship that includes more than the present moment and present generations’ and also includes ‘the more-than-human world, bringing the death narrative of Homer in concert with multiple, iterative animal death narratives, giving rise to what Rose calls ‘multi-species knots of ethical time’”.¹⁰⁶

The repeated similes in *Memorial* are doubly generative, and their repetition heightens the sense of time itself being multiple, or haunted. As Farrier writes, each simile ‘offers a disjunctive perspective, both sequence and synchrony, mediated by a sense of the spectral’, which ‘requires the reader to occupy simultaneous but disjunct temporalities’. It can also be argued that the simile’s sometime non-sequential relationship with the biographies, their supposed comparands, emphasises this disjunction. Pache writes that the repetition of the similes ‘leads us to rethink the relationship between similes and the rest of the poem. Because most of the similes in *Memorial* are repeated twice, they can refer both to the passage that precedes as well as to the passage that follows them in a more explicit way than if we were dealing with a single simile.’¹⁰⁷ This argument lends further weight to the idea of a complex relationship between forebears and offspring, or cause and effect. Farrier describes ‘*Memorial*’s distinctive quality of ethical time,’¹⁰⁸ in which he sees *Memorial* as

an invocation of ‘now’ infused with the uncanny sense of other times. We read with an awareness of repetition to come: the effect is of an auditory energeia:

¹⁰⁶ David Farrier, ‘Like a Stone’: Ecology, Enargeia, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*, *Environmental Humanities* (4.1: 2014). 1-18. p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ Pache, 184

¹⁰⁸ David Farrier, ‘Like a Stone’, p. 10

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.¹⁰⁹

Farrier reads *Memorial's* timescape as particularly troubled by the ecological concerns of the Anthropocene. One of Oswald's similes in particular highlights climate and ecological breakdown as a focus:

Like in Autumn under the dripping wind
The earth's clothes grow heavy she can hardly stand
God rains on the roof hammering his fists down
He has had enough of violent smiling men
Now every one of us is being looked at
Under the rain's lens
Now the rivers are filling they are overflowing
There are streams sawing through hills
Cutting up the grass into islands
Everything is clattering to the sea
This is water's world
And the works of men are vanishing¹¹⁰

This simile, as with all of the similes in *Memorial*, is written in the present tense. The lines immediately before the simile are in the past perfect tense: 'all vigorous men / all vanished',

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.11.

¹¹⁰ Alice Oswald, *Memorial*, p.44.

and already the temporal relationships between reader and action have shifted from reading about past events to existing concurrently with the action described. The temporalities of this simile are resonant with still more temporalities: Pache identifies Oswald's use of the first person pronoun 'us' in this simile (not used here by Homer) which 'places the audience in a different temporal relationship to the entire poem, stressing our presence both in the present of the performance and the traditional past that is being brought back to life.'¹¹¹ The audience is directly implicated in the sense of ongoing cataclysm. Furthermore, the reference to 'Autumn' creates a temporal ambiguity, referring not just to one particular Autumn, but multiple Autumns or perhaps even every Autumn. The scene described echoes in the reader's mind with the Biblical flood, and also with floods related to climate change. Furthermore, the simile is framed by the entire poem's relationship with *The Iliad*, in which a version of this simile does appear.¹¹² Therefore, this simile echoes across multiple planes of time, and exemplifies what Farrier calls 'the troubling sense of concurrent past, present and future temporalities.'

Multi-species lives and deaths

In *Memorial*, the violent deaths of humans in warfare are placed side by side with the (often violent) lives and deaths of other animals. At times the depictions of the other animals in the similes create an equivalence or empathy between the deaths of the men and the deaths of the other animals. For example, in the biography for Axylus, Oswald writes,

Everyone knew that plump man

Sitting on the step with his door wide open

¹¹¹ Corinne Pache, p. 186.

¹¹² *The Iliad*. 16. 384-92. Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, transl. Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1961). p. 340.

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 clattering dove
She dips away but he follows he ripples
He hangs his black hooks over her
And snares her with a thin cry
In praise of her softness¹¹³

The 'softness' and vulnerability of the dove echo the openness of the 'plump man', in contrast with the ferocity of the alliteration of the 'hawk of the hills' who 'hangs his black hooks' and the internal rhyming of hill/killer. (Oswald's hooked hawk resonates here with Ted Hughes' 'Hawk Roosting', with 'hooked head and hooked feet.'¹¹⁴) This sense of equivalence between Axylus and the dove is further emphasised with the internal consistency marked by the half-rhyming, structural echo between 'In a daze of loneliness' and 'In praise of her softness'. However, nothing in the depiction of the hawk suggests cruelty - indeed, there is admiration of the hawk's skill ('the perfect killer') - and the killer of Axylus and Calesius is not even mentioned. The violence in *Memorial* is, at times, recounted in a bare and matter-of-fact tone, and rarely depicted as cruel or particularly calculated.¹¹⁵ Is violence

¹¹³ Alice Oswald, *Memorial*, p.26

¹¹⁴ Ted Hughes, 'Hawk Roosting.' *Lupercal* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), p.14.

¹¹⁵ Simone Weil writes that 'The true hero, the true subject, the center of *The Iliad* is force', which she defines as 'that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing.' Oswald's tone, in combination with her removal often of the perpetrator of violence, also gives the sense of violence as a kind of universal, depersonified power. (Simone Weil, 'The Iliad, or, The Poem of Force'. *Chicago Review* (1965: 18, 2), pp. 5-30. p. 6.)

among humans, then, as inevitable as predator-prey interactions? Other critics have observed these similarities, arguing that *Memorial* ‘raises the unsettling possibility that the urge to kill might be instinctive’,¹¹⁶ or that ‘life in the wild...parallels with the alien and menacing aspects of life on the battlefield.’¹¹⁷

It is tempting to argue that Oswald presents both death in battle and animal deaths as being equally meaningless; human lives and non-human lives without worth. Oswald writes (as Homer also did), ‘Dead bodies are their lineage / Which matter no more than the leaves.’¹¹⁸ However, what if we were to read this not as rendering human lives meaningless, but as rendering all lives – and deaths – meaningful? Hahneman writes that ‘at [*Memorial*’s] core stands...a vision of humanity inescapably embedded in the natural world.’¹¹⁹ Arguably, the important work of the poem is not the promotion of heroism and celebration of victory, nor the recounting of a founding narrative of Western civilization, but simply the commemoration of all of the dead, in service to the dead through the practice of memory. Through this practice, it can be argued, Oswald troubles the value-inflected binary classification between human and nonhuman lives, which is key to dwelling ethically in time. As Rose writes, ‘in this wider world of multispecies knots, ethics may be understood as an interface—a site of encounter and nourishment. ... in that multi-species knot of ethical time, sequential and synchronous temporal patterns nurture the flows that sustain the present and work for the future.’¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Carolin Hahneman, ‘Feminist at Second Glance?’, p.104.

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Minchin, p. 213.

¹¹⁸ Alice Oswald, *Memorial*. p.73.

¹¹⁹ Carolin Hahneman, ‘Feminist at Second Glance?’, p.104.

¹²⁰ Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time’. *Environmental Philosophy* (9.1: 2012). pp. 127-140. p.136.

Similarly to an ethical practice of memory, Judith Butler writes about the ‘task’ of mourning, claiming that when we mourn we become vulnerable, and ‘something other than “autonomous”.’ Butler claims that subsequently

we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me... but they also haunt the way I am...periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded.¹²¹

Oswald’s simile-biography structure creates a space in which the persons of the poem can become ‘unbounded’, across species, time, and space, to provocatively question assumptions of the values ascribed to lives and to create a place for the practice of grief and the work of mourning for (all of) the dead. Karen Barad also explores the ways that the ethics of grief interact with intra-human and inter-species difference, writing:

it is precisely the question of re-membling and just mourning that defines being human...What makes us human is not our alleged distinctiveness from – the nonhuman, the inhuman, the subhuman, the more-than-human, those who do not matter – but rather our relationship with and responsibility to the dead, to the ghosts of the past and the future.’¹²²

Crucially, ‘just mourning’ is here configured as entering a special temporal relationship with ‘ghosts’ and emphasises not difference but relationship. Oswald’s excavation of *The Iliad*

¹²¹ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2020). p. 28.

¹²² Karen Barad, ‘Troubling Time/S And Ecologies Of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membling, And Facing The Incalculable’, *New Formations*_(92: 2017).pp. 56-86. p. 86.

urges us to remember the particular named dead of the Trojan war, but also, in stripping away the narrative, Oswald universalises the practice of mourning for the dead and advocates for the practice of memory - an ethical, iterative task concerning past(s) and future(s) - as our responsibility to all victims of violence.

Conclusion

Oswald's treatment of *The Iliad* ruptures a singular, industrial version of time, troubling the forward-facing, patriarchal temporality of the epic and its hero and offering instead the iterative, enfolded temporality of grief and gestation. Through her omission of the details of victory or valiant deed, the possibilities of a heroic vision of time which is forward-facing and singular are foreclosed. Oswald reaches past the figure of the poet whose role is to cast the light of immortalising glorification over the heroes, and communes instead with the women mourning by the washing pools, the 'tribes of summer bees'¹²³ and the water which 'bleeds sideways into marshes.'¹²⁴ The poetic practice of memory is borne as a responsibility to mourn for all those who are lost, and to carry this beyond the lives and deaths of humans. The practice of memory 'excavates' the sedimented strata beneath our feet and brings us into dynamic relationship with multiple times.

¹²³ Alice Oswald, *Memorial*, p.79.

¹²⁴ Alice Oswald, *Memorial*, p.82.

‘My voice then speaks with / spaces’: More-than-human Temporalities in *Falling Awake*

Falling Awake is a collection which experiments with multiple ways of experiencing and representing time, and therefore multiple ways for humans to coordinate themselves with the more-than-human world. Oswald has described *Falling Awake* as ‘a rather neurotically measured and metered book’, and it is a collection preoccupied with measurement and marking of temporal patterns, with counting and ‘telling’ the time.¹²⁵ In part it is a collection with a geologic sensibility, concerned with the interactions between the scale of the moment and the scale of deep time, between the temporal scale of the human and the temporal scales of insects, plants, rain, stones, rivers and soil. It is also a collection in which Anthropocene temporal dislocations feature, such as summoning and haunting, to trouble singular representations of time. Exploring mechanical clock time, *Falling Awake* probes its inability to communicate essential life processes such as decay, dissipation, and erosion. This chapter will explore how some of the ways in which time can be perceived impact on how we frame the climate and ecological crisis.

Sundial and The Hours

Oswald’s concern with more-than-human time features in *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* and also in *Woods, etc.*, but in *Falling Awake* the interest in marking time with references that extend beyond the human, industrial clock to tangible phenomena, both human and inhuman, is more explicit. In some respects, parts of the collection resemble a book of hours: the Liturgy of Hours are the canonical hours, sometimes called the ‘breviary’, of the Latin rites of the

¹²⁵ Claire Armistead. ‘Alice Oswald: “I like the way that the death of something is the beginning of something else.”’ Guardian, 22 Jul 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/22/alice-oswald-interview-falling-awake>>, accessed 10 Oct 2020.

Catholic church. This official set of prayers marks the hours of each day and sanctifies each day with prayer. From Tithonus' dawn setting, via 'Shadow' and 'Looking Down', to 'Evening Poem', Oswald has marked all parts of the day with a poem, each carefully placed in time and functioning a little like a sundial. Marking the hours of the day is one part of the Liturgy, but celebrating or sanctifying is the other, which prompts the question: what is Oswald celebrating? Is there a worshipful or sanctifying impulse in *Falling Awake*?

It is not too far a leap to interpret part of the 'Falling' in *Falling Awake* as the Biblical fall; however, instead of being associated with sinfulness or disgrace, the consequence of being 'fallen', Earthly beings in this collection is that we are subject to the passage of time. This is perhaps clearest in 'Shadow', where the eponymous shadow 'descends' from the sky, until

...here it lies
my own impersonal pronoun
crumpled under me like a dead body

it is faint
it has been falling for a long time¹²⁶

The faint horror and detachment of 'dead body' resonates with the 'impersonal pronoun' – the shadow is an 'it' which is observed with curiosity but dispassionately. When Oswald writes 'look when I walk / it's like a pair of scissors thrown at me by the sun' her tone is innocent and childlike as she points out what she can see; there is no sense of danger. The poem's concluding stanza emphasizes a sense of passivity and detachment, since 'if I do

¹²⁶ Alice Oswald. *Falling Awake* (Jonathan Cape: London, 2016). p. 14. All further references are to this edition.

nothing' the shadow still travels and 'the ground gives up.' However, there is a movement in the poem from detachment and passivity to a sense of personal potency and then away again. The sense of potency is crystallised by Oswald's use of 'I' in the central section of the poem, which follows the dissociative 'flesh parachute of a human' and 'dead body', to a persona who seems 'amazed' by her own power. Oswald writes:

or if I stand

if I move one hand

I hear the hiss of flowers closing their eyelids (15)

The speaker, in an almost Adamic fashion, is amazed at the consequences of her actions on her surroundings. Oswald continues, 'it's as if I've interrupted something / that was falling in a straight line from the eye of God'(15). The sun's light is also 'falling' from Heaven here, and it is the relationship between the rotation of the Earth and the position of the sun which creates one of the most easily observable phenomena by which we can observe time: the sun's passage through the sky. In the poem, this movement causes the speaker's body to behave like a sundial, marking and measuring the movement of the sun. The timely aspect of this relationship is embodied, with anatomical references underpinning this, as 'flesh', 'dead body', 'skin' and 'hand' are points of shadowy contact (15). The interplay of light and shadow expresses an embodiedness and an embeddedness in time and in the world – a world of constant changefulness in which the sun's time (i.e. the changing position of the sun in the sky) has an observable effect on human, flowers, trees and birds alike, in a way that is similar to the Moon in *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. Time as related to daylight suggests the concept of 'light years', and rays of light from various heavenly bodies that reach Earth have, of course, been 'falling for a long time'.

In 'Evening Poem' Oswald returns to the idea of time as related to the sacred and Earth or Heaven. She writes:

they say the gods being so uplifted
can't really walk on feet but take tottering steps
and lean like this closer and closer to the ground

which gods?

it is the hours on bird-thin legs
the same old choirs of hours
returning their summer clothes to the earth (42)

Not only can the hours be seen as the Liturgy of Hours personified as gods, but we can also note that The Hours, or Horae, are the Greek goddesses of the seasons and earthly portions of time. Hours are personified as gods, who travel, like sunlight, from an 'uplifted' place towards the earth or ground. This vertical falling and lifting motion features in many of the collection's poems, sometimes as an aspect of the water cycle, and in this poem it is the hours - or daylight - and then night which is falling 'as if dropped from a great height.' The 'choirs of hours' (a more direct reference to the Liturgy of Hours, since when this is celebrated communally it is referred to as celebrating 'in choir') seem not to resist the pull of gravity, as they draw 'closer and closer to the ground' and return 'their summer clothes to the earth'. Instead, it is an inevitable pattern, 'the same old' circadian rhythm of 'the same old choirs'.

Micro-Seasonality

Observable or affective phenomena offer Oswald another way of writing about time. Many of the poems in *Falling Awake* are precisely located in time and seek to describe these moments meticulously. Bastian describes how

Telling the time can be understood as an act of faith that affirms that the data set provided by tracking the “before” and “after” of a particular material encounter (be it with tides, rocks, a star, or an atom) will provide us with the information required to coordinate and/or synchronize key activities, events, or relations.¹²⁷

Falling Awake tells the time (which literally means ‘counts’ the time) by the subtle changes that happen throughout the day, and also by these same tiny transformations which are noticeable as the seasons change throughout the course of a year. Sometimes, as in the poem ‘Alongside Beans’, these changes are successive, consisting of moments following each other in a cyclical pattern of change. The speaker in this poem undergoes a process of synchronising themselves with the beans (who are themselves ‘synchronised in rows’), coordinating themselves with plant-time as the poem seems to grow moment by moment:

covering first one place
and then another
and after a while another place
and then another place
and another

¹²⁷ Michelle Bastian, p.33.

and another (27)

The textual arrangement of the poem even mimics the way that the beans are covering one place after another; so is the poem covering the page. Furthermore, the length and spacing of the lines of the poem attempts to render the pace of the growth of the beans into poetry – a small shift followed by a pause followed by another small shift:

and then another

and after a while a flower

turning its head to the side like a bored emperor

and after a while a flower

singing out a faint line of scent (27)

The timing of the beans' growth is contrasted by the pace of the hoverfly's movements, as the hoverfly enters the poem 'as if a lock had gone and the Spring had broken loose', and whose rapid, darting speed is represented by the pattering rhythm of the following:

(and what a stomach bursting from its straps

what a nervous readiness attached to its lament and

using the sound as a guard rail over the drop) (27)

In 'Alongside Beans', as in *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, the non-human, rather than being 'outside of' time, is shown to be full of different temporalities. The quality which these poems suggest may be most important for perceiving these temporalities is a particular, careful attention. Oswald's use of the word 'alongside' in the title of this poem is important, communicating a movement of the poetic subjectivity to one of accompaniment, seeing things as oneself and yet from another's perspective. Bristow identifies this characteristic of Oswald's writing as 'witness thinking', described as 'to be involved in the place through working (writing) and to be susceptible, receptive, exposed and corporeal.'¹²⁸ A similar impulse can be seen in 'A Rushed Account of the Dew', in which the persona seeks to observe the minute and momentary shift between day and night which is represented by the dawn, a shift so fleeting that a 'blink' could 'break the spell of daylight' (13). This desire to really 'hear' the 'present' requires listening, and 'witness thinking', as Oswald writes,

in this tiny moment of reflexion
I want to work out what it's like to descend
out of the dawn's mind

and find a leaf and fasten the known to the unknown
with a liquid cufflink
and then unfasten (13)

The impulse of fastening (and then unfastening) is also characteristic of Oswald's poetics, as critics such as Jack Thacker, who refers to it as her 'dry-stone style'¹²⁹, and Linne and

¹²⁸ Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.) p.94.

¹²⁹ Jack Thacker, 'The Thing in the Gap Stone Stile: Alice Oswald's Acoustic Arrangements', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 44.2 (2015), 103-118. p.109.

Neiderhoff, who refer to it as ‘paratactic poetics’¹³⁰, have noted. Capturing this transformation requires minute attention but also is itself transitory, reversible. To ‘unfasten’ and to ‘cancel’ are crucial for what makes the dew’s power a ‘pristine example / of claiming a place on the earth’(13).

Tracking transitory changes in the seasons is also part of Oswald’s hunt for noticing ‘tiny moment[s]’ of transformation (13). Her poem, ‘Sz’, describes the ‘mere punctuation between seasons / whom the Chinese call / Sz’ (40). Inheriting the tradition of the ode addressing a god who personifies a season, such as in Keats’ ‘To Autumn’, Oswald addresses her poem to the personification of a precise moment in time. This personification is only observable through its effect on its surroundings, as someone ‘by whom the fruit has small frost-marks’ (40). Oswald’s attempts to capture the change between seasons are futile: Sz is so ‘soft-spoken’ it is ‘no louder than the sound of the ear unzipping’, and when the poet ‘stepped outside’ the season was ‘moving on’ (40). Oswald makes playful use of the fact that the name ‘Sz’ is an onomatopoeia of these quiet effects, pronounced as a ‘shh’ sound. This micro-season steals through the poem with a sense of subterfuge, a ‘leaf-thief’ who conducts a ‘soft-spoken / head-in-the-clouds / seizure of another and yet another and yet another hour’ (40). Observation so precise as to see Sz is impossible, since it is ‘bodiless’ and ‘barely there’, and yet the potency of the passage of time at this precise moment in the year is ineluctable, and results in changes that affect the whole ecosystem.

The Geologic and the Anthropocene

¹³⁰ Lena Linne & Burkhard Neiderhoff, “[M]emories and similes laid side by side”: The Paratactic Poetics of Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*, *Connotations*, 27 (2018), 19-47. p.23.

Geological timescapes in Oswald’s poetry demonstrate a keen awareness of the vastness of deep time and the complex histories of minerals, and her poetry works both to widen the reader’s temporal horizons and to interrupt, fold or twist the time that we inhabit. Oswald’s poetry often speaks from the perspective of beings, such as stones, or rivers, who inhabit much wider temporal scales, which could prompt reconsideration of the place of humans within the ecosphere. Ellsworth and Kruse make the case for a geologic ‘turn’ in culture, arguing that reframing our perspectives in terms of the geologic would prompt reconsideration of the place of humans within the world, and may give rise to a ‘new human relationship to time – one in which we no longer see time only or primarily in relation to humanity’s place in it.’¹³¹ In part, this is about adjusting our temporal frame to include geological, or ‘deep’ time, which is characteristic of the demands and opportunities presented by the Anthropocene.

‘Deep time’ as a fascination is not new: in 1789 the first treatise of geological science was published, showing the presence of an awareness (albeit disputed by the church) of the Earth’s long history. However, there is new attention on the ways in which the effects of human actions will be felt far into the future.¹³² In 1981, John McPhee coined the phrase ‘Deep Time’ to mean ‘the prehistorical, prearchaeological past’, and not, as it has been used more recently in Anthropocene discourse, the vast possible range of the future.¹³³ ‘Thinking about the deep past and the deep future,’ writes Paul Huebener, ‘can open up a vision of the deep present...in which our own time must be understood in relation to untold ages.’¹³⁴ This

¹³¹ Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (eds.), *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012). p. 24.

¹³² Marcia Bjornerud cites Hutton’s observation of ‘the vastness of geologic time’ at Siccar Point, near Dunbar, and his subsequent publication of his 1789 treatise *Theory of the Earth* as a notable first step towards the science of geology. Marcia Bjornerud, *Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). p.25.

¹³³ *ibid.*, p., 22.

¹³⁴ Paul Huebener, *Nature’s Broken Clocks* (Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2020), p.172.

prompts a shift in relationship, and it is perhaps the ‘deep present’ that David Farrier refers to when he writes that ‘one of the most striking and unsettling aspects of the Anthropocene is the newly poignant sense that our present is in fact accompanied by deep pasts and deep futures.’¹³⁵ It is as if the distance we might perceive between us and these moments from the far past and into the far future has collapsed: the particular character of deep time in the Anthropocene is a disordering of temporal distance – a twisting of temporal relationships.¹³⁶ Oswald’s poetry can be read as a productive troubling or overlapping of temporal scales that draws attention to the significance of scale as a frame for meaning, while simultaneously exploring how singular, progressive, and mechanical conceptions of time are limited, and presenting some alternative temporalities.

Presenting complex and multiple temporalities, ‘Dunt: A Poem for A Dried-Up River’ depicts a Roman nymph figurine which was excavated from a now-extinct river and which ‘tries to summon a river out of limestone’ (31). As the word ‘limestone’ repeats and resonates through the poem, attending to the materiality of the poem’s geology invites the question, to what extent can Oswald’s poem be said to express the complex temporalities of a ‘geologic subjectivity’, or ‘Geologic Life’ in the Anthropocene, as outlined by Kathryn Yusoff?¹³⁷ Reading the temporality of geological materials troubles a purely sequential (or ‘genealogical’) understanding of time. Limestone’s particular mineral qualities resonate across time scales, in a similar way to coal’s ‘different material temporal signatures’ (as ‘fossil’ and ‘fuel’) as identified by Yusoff, which she argues makes ‘the inhuman an

¹³⁵ David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. p.6.

¹³⁶ The temporalities of fossil fuels exemplify this, as we begin to realise that our rapid consumption of materials which formed millions of years ago will continue to leave material traces and affect the ecosphere far into the future. Ironically, of course, these materials which formed over millennia have been almost completely consumed in a few brief centuries, as Adam writes: ‘the time-scale of their reproduction thus stands in an inverse relation to the time-scale of their use, degradation, depletion and destruction.’ Barbara Adam, *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards*. p.14.

¹³⁷ Kathryn Yusoff, ‘Queer Coal: Genealogies in/of the Blood.’ *philoSOPHIA*, 5.2 (2015), 203-229. p.204.

ontologically divided and turbulent force.’¹³⁸ The ‘bone’ of Dunt’s figurine – which is embedded in several layers of history, being the remains of a body and a relic from a fallen Empire – calls to the limestone of the river bed, which is also composed of the same minerals, in the form of the compressed, fossilised skeletons of prehistoric creatures. Bone (preserved in a museum, in a ‘sealed glass case’) and stone are repositories for two distant and distinct pasts (33). The museum’s case, it could be argued, is a way of deciding the temporal scale in which the object is read, since it is framed as ‘Roman’; Oswald, however, alerts us to the fact that this is just one of the histories of this thing, which gives rise to a sense of ‘turbulent’ temporalities.

Scars and Interruptive time

Considering the nymph of this poem as a body yields further interruptive temporalities embedded in her materiality. The bone relic is described as a ‘very speechless very broken old woman / her left arm missing and both legs from the knee down’ (34). The nymph figurine is physically scarred, and we can read her scars as an embodied history of trauma which refuses to remain in the past, because it manifests continuously in the present in the body. The dry riverbed we can also imagine as a scar on the landscape, ‘hobbling tripping... having had the gleam taken out of it’ (34). The evidence of what used to be, or what used to be different, is plain to see. Scars and wounds have the potential to trouble a linear narrative of time, because they bring past events to live alongside the present. Although the initial trauma may have healed, it is still visible, encountered constantly as a reminder of the event, and so in some way it can never be entirely ‘left behind’ in the past. Conventional ideas about the simple linearity of time and the progression from past to present are belied by scars, and the experience that the scars communicate resonates in the lived experience of the future.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p.206.

Dunt: Genius Loci and Kairological Time

The nymph in Dunt can be said to inhabit a particular kind of time. She is the ‘genius loci’ – the spirit of the place. Her attachment to place is very clear, and is shown in the echoing lines used to describe them:

little shuffling sound as of a nearly dried-up woman
not really moving through the fields
having had the gleam taken out of her
to the point where she resembles twilight (33)

The description of the nymph is repeated in the description of the river:

little hobbling tripping of a nearly dried-up river
not really moving through the fields,
having had the gleam taken out of it
to the point where it resembles twilight (34)

In associating the place and the nymph figurine so closely, Oswald has placed them in kairological time. The Greeks had two gods governing two different kinds of time which they identified. Chronos was the god of linear and quantifiable time – a god who kept and marked time. Kairos was the god of timing, the god of chance and mischance, auspicious and inauspicious time – the god of what we might call qualitative time. Jay Griffiths argues that chronological time is universal and progressive; living in this kind of time, one moves into the future, ‘progressing through the day like an arrow while the day itself stays still for time

is not given by the day but is man-made, culturally-given.¹³⁹ She contrasts this with kairological time, in which ‘the future comes towards you...and recedes behind you while you may well stay still, standing in the present...kairological time is the *genius loci*, the spirit of that particular moment...time enlivened and various.’¹⁴⁰ Time in ‘Dunt’ is local time, governed by the local temporal manipulations of its nymph. Concurrently, it is also geological or planetary time, shaped by earth-wide processes of formation and erosion, and hence can be considered another temporal disjunction.

Preservation and Resisting Temporal Transformation

Oswald’s *Falling Awake* issues a warning about the perils of preservation that comes at the expense of life, of static memory which becomes trapped and deadening. Oswald attempts to enact a rebalancing of what she has described in her lecture ‘The Art of Erosion’ as poetry’s leaning too far towards lastingness and away from livingness. *Falling Awake* seeks to tilt the scale back towards livingness and therefore towards the possibility of revelation. Throughout the collection, Oswald presents situations where preservation has become a form of imprisonment, because the poem’s subjects have been held separate from the passage of time and are static within its movements. In ‘Dunt’, Oswald writes:

Roman bone figurine
year after year in a sealed glass case
having lost the hearing of her surroundings
she struggles to summon a river out of limestone (33)

¹³⁹ Jay Griffiths, *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look At Time* (London: Harper Collins, 2000). p.22.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.22.

The nymph has been shut away from the landscape with which she is connected. Throughout the poem, the atmosphere is of a suffocating dryness, one that has been created by Oswald's expert use of sibilance and clicking sounds, and the 'little distant sound as of dry grass' (31). For a river nymph, she has become desiccated and unable to flow like the water which is her native element. She is also described as a 'nearly dried-up woman / not really moving' (33). Dryness and stasis are in stark contrast to the liquid flow of a river. As an object from the past, 'sealed' away from the floods and tides of time, the nymph has 'lost the hearing of her surroundings' (both unable to hear the surroundings and her surroundings no longer able to attend to her) and she is unable to 'summon a river' (33).

Reverberation and Renewal

Another dried-up landscape, the Aral Sea, features in the music of Galya Bisengalieva. Situated between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan this was once the fourth-largest lake in the world but dried up after the rivers which fed it were diverted in the 1960s for Soviet irrigation projects. Like Oswald's susurrant sounds and dry-throated clicks and rustles, Bisengalieva uses clock-like ticking and repeated sounds to communicate the dryness of the landscape she depicts, for example in the track 'Barsa-Kelmes'. Here, the percussive sounds are reverberated and fed back upon one another, and it is the interplay of these sounds echoing one another which creates the space for melodic motion to arise. At the end of this track, the ghost of a sea-bird cries, and it is this sound that flows into the more hopeful track 'Zhalanash', where watery plinking sounds represent the water returning to this part of the lake following regenerative work.

Bisengalieva's use of reverberation and echo is similar to Oswald's use of echoes in 'Dunt', where the refrain 'try again' eventually feeds back onto itself enough to release the trickle of

metaphor which grows into a flood, bursting even temporal banks as it is ‘struggling to keep up with what’s already gone’. Pinard describes Oswald’s practice as ‘echo-poetic’, writing that echoes ‘in their insistent, though increasingly muted and nuanced return, model renewal.’

¹⁴¹ Sonically, echoes entail repetition but also transformation; a sound which bounces back to the listener but which, in the process of reverberation, is transformed, never stable and never an exact replica of the original sound. The echoes of ‘try again’, as well as the other repeated phrases in this poem, eventually reverberate upon themselves enough to re-imagine, remember or re-story the past and the present together, in a messy, creative jumble of images and sounds:

slum of over-greened foot-churn and pats
whose crayfish are cheap tool-kits
made of the mud stirred up when a stone’s lifted (34)

Syntactically, this transformation or escape is expressed through the use of subjunctive tenses, which inhabit multiple times at once. Oswald writes:

it would flood through five valleys
there’d be cows and milking stools
washed over the garden walls
and when it froze you could skate for five miles (35)

¹⁴¹ Mary Pinard. ‘Voices of the Poet Gardener: Alice Oswald and The Poetry of Acoustic Encounter’, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 10.2 (2009), 17-32. p. 30.

Although referring to a time in the past, the mood here is mythical, almost future anterior, with a sense of continuous action: past, present, and future temporalities are enfolded. Both nostalgia for the past and yearning for or summoning the future can be felt here, folding up the distances between these temporalities. The imprisonment in a timescape which was statically in ‘the past’ gives way to a living, multifaceted now.

Clock Time and Processes of Decay, Dissipation and Erosion

This living now, Oswald emphasises, relies upon the processes of death, decay, dissipation, and erosion. Arrested death is also arrested life, and imprisoned time arises from an excess of preservation. The unrelenting tick-tock of clock time masks the important processes of death and decay. In the poem ‘Cold Streak’, Oswald writes, ‘all that dazzling stubbornness / of keeping to its clock’ has caused a ‘cold streak’ in the sun (11). Throughout the poem, metre and line length work to stubbornly keep hold of time. For example,

I notice the fatigue of flowers
weighed down by light
I notice the lark has a needle
pulled through its throat (11)

The alternate patterns of dactylic and spondaic rhythms are wearing, enacting the ‘fatigue’ and the feeling of being ‘weighed down’. Like the ‘lark’ and the ‘flowers’ in the poem, ‘they never pause’. Flowers, lark and even the sun are worn-out by keeping to mechanistic clock time. Reference to ‘cold’ and ‘surgical gloves’, as well as the ‘needle’ in the lark’s throat suggest that there is something calculatingly adjusted about these phenomena. Furthermore, the ‘gloves’ and clinical allusions gesture towards aloofness, of holding separate from, as

clock time can be accused of. This is at once exhausting and deadening, emphasising discrete-ness and isolation rather than connection and entanglement. Compare the ‘fatigue of flowers’ with the flowers in ‘A Short Story of Falling’ that ‘from the ground flow...green and momentary.’ Incessance is problematic for a poet who sets much store by pauses and the spaces or gaps in between things. She writes:

why don't they put down their instruments?
I notice they never pause
I notice the dark sediment of their singing
covers the moors like soot blown under a doorway (11)

Singing does not naturally form sediment, and this uncanny image, in which the landscape of the moors is covered over, perhaps shows the unsettling impact of what happens when the by-nature ephemeral is preserved, and when the sonic becomes seen. A lark's song dissipates, unless it is rendered material and preserved against decay, in which case the effect is like that of soot: polluting, contaminatory. The word ‘instruments’ corresponds to the musicality of ‘singing’, but it also resonates with the ‘surgical gloves’ worn by the wind, and the mechanical structures of the clock. We might also read lark, flowers and wind as sharing some characteristics with automata, whose ‘weight’ has the effect of ‘flatten[ing]’, and whose activity becomes robotic in its ceaselessness.

Repetition, Metronomes and Machines

‘Tithonus’ is perhaps Oswald's most direct exploration of the interaction between lastingness and livingness. A figure from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the dawn fell in love with mortal Tithonus and asked Zeus to keep Tithonus from dying, but she did not ask that he should not

grow old. Tithonus is imprisoned in perpetual aging, unable to die and therefore participate fully in the decomposition and rejuvenation phases of the organic cycle of life. The poem is precisely timed, perhaps torturously so: it is set at 4.17 am at midsummer, ‘when the sun is six degrees below the horizon, and stops 46 minutes later, at sunrise.’¹⁴² Each page is printed with a metronomic series of dots and dashes appearing like a spine down the centre of the page, and functioning, I imagine, like bar lines in sheet music, indicating when each line is to be read. However, since these time marks are vertical on the page and the words run horizontally, the metronome does not allow for time to actually speak the words: Oswald’s prosody exists alongside the mechanical pulse, but the contrasting pattern of the verse creates cross-rhythms which highlight tensions between spoken and written language, and by extension between things fixed and things ephemeral. The metronomic marks represent unrelenting, mechanical marking of time passing, and counterpoint the stasis of Tithonus’ immortality. Tithonus is ‘very nearly anonymous now / having recently turned five thousand’ and, as Oswald writes, he:

...cracking
his joints with excitement goes on
goes on babbling to himself
draped to the chin in a dust-sheet
like a ghost’s napkin and takes his
teaspoon of meat-juice

¹⁴² There are no page numbers provided for the long poem ‘Tithonus’. All further references are to the edition given above.

The babbling of Tithonus is like the mechanical repetition of his cycle through the days. Meaningless sounds, repeated, are little different from the ticking of a clock. Oswald describes Tithonus' voice as follows:

as soon as a voice goes on arguing
in its sleep like a file going to and
corrosively fro
doesn't sound like a man sounds
more like an instrument's voice very
small
so the thought goes on recycling
itself...

Here, repetition is mechanised, or deadened, like a 'file' or an 'instrument'. The meaningless sounds in the poem also include mention of the clock time: 'it's 4:25', 'now 4:32 now 4:33'. At this point in the poem, the inability to make meaningful sound is endemic: a seagull's cry is a 'non-sequitur', a rook 'say[s] nothing', Tithonus and the dawn are 'not on talking terms'. Tithonus' babbling is an example of where sounds made over and over again lose their meaning, just as the same man greeting the same dawn for five thousand years risks losing meaning. However, when Tithonus' focus shifts outwards from himself and into the dawn, following (crucially for Oswald's poetry) a double page spread of silence, his voice takes on a different power.

Summoning

Repetition in Oswald is by no means always meaningless babble. Sometimes, repetition ruptures linear temporality by enacting a summoning force, bringing phenomena from the future or past into the present. Tithonus' voice changes on encounter with the transient, bittersweet beauty of the dawn (as the dawn 'never fully completes a sentence', the light arriving fully in the landscape also signals the dawn's departure) to contribute to the summoning of the light. Tithonus begins to sing the praises of the world as it appears in the first light: he says 'willows I want to pause and praise/ you.... grasses I'm going to speak your / names' and this naming seems to work like a summoning spell, because the hedge begins to make sounds 'like an inner working turning this /way and that' and the beetle's

fingers...begin to chafe they begin to
click they begin to blur they begin to
braille.

And so the dots on the page, like the repeated beetle sounds begin to suggest the possibility of meaning, like braille dots, and Tithonus' 'voice then speaks with / spaces'. Like the echo in 'Dunt', repeated sounds and the silences between them have the power in initiate new meaning-making possibilities and almost bring the future into being through an incantatory, summoning power.

Slowed-Down Blackbird: Dissipation, Pauses

Such speaking with spaces also allows for the transience and dissipation which is so important for Oswald. Repetition which ceases and waits and begins again enacts a living soundscape and a timescape in which we are aligned with wider and more complex temporality than that of the clock: this is the timescape of birdsong. The poem 'Slowed-

Down Blackbird' hangs in the air seemingly adrift from progression through time. Oswald writes,

Three people in the snow
getting rid of themselves
breath by breath

and every six seconds a blackbird (29)

The verb 'are' is elided from this phrase, and all verbs are in the gerundive form, creating an impression of a suspended present, while the short lines and centrally-placed 'breath by breath' intensify a feeling of dangling with their irregular, hesitant rhythm.

The blackbird in 'Slowed-Down Blackbird' is described as

trying over and over its broken line
trying over and over its broken line (29)

The tentative and 'broken' nature of the blackbird's song is part of what makes it a vital force, in motion from nothing to expression, to fading away and then beginning again. Oswald describes this form of repetition as 'phrases outlined by pauses.'¹⁴³ It is inconstant, in contrast to Tithonus' babbling voice and more mechanical repetitive noises, like a clock ticking. The perpetual consistency of a ticking clock creates a presumption that time passes consistently, and is reliable, constant and even. All that is will ever be, it says. But not a

¹⁴³ Alice Oswald. 'Lines'. *Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture*. <<https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/event/live-event-professor-of-poetry-lecture-november-2020>> Delivered 12 Nov 2020. Accessed 12 Nov 2020.

blackbird. The repeated lines of blackbird song contain pauses, still points, which open out to the possibilities 'beyond'. There is space in between the phrases in blackbird song, which is an apt image for Oswald's poetry too, which contains spaces between: it is both visually surrounded by space on the page and also rhythmically inconstant, full of pauses and re-iterations.

Iterativity

The poetic timescape of blackbird song in Oswald's work also resonates with the particular temporality of lyric poetry itself, which has the potential to rupture teleological, progress-oriented ways of perceiving time. Jonathan Culler identifies a tense which is specific to lyric poetry, which he calls the 'lyric present'.¹⁴⁴ This is a particular kind of simple present tense without temporal specification, which is rarely found outside of poetry, as in 'I wander thro each charter'd street', from William Blake's 'London'. Culler argues that this tense carries 'the implication, if not of repetition, at least of iterability...one effect of the lyric present is to make what is reported something more than what I am doing at a particular moment ... It happens now, in time, but in an iterable *now* of lyric enunciation, rather than in a now of linear time.'¹⁴⁵ Oswald uses this simple present in *Falling Awake*, perhaps most powerfully in 'Dunt' (in which the nymph 'tries to summon' the river on each reading of the poem). However, more often she uses the gerund to express actions in the present, as in 'getting rid', 'losing', 'walking' and 'trying'. This even more emphatically creates an 'iterative now' in the poems: the process of the action of the poem is emphasised, and sometimes enacted, by the reader's encounter with the poem. When we read, for example, 'a rotted swan / is hurrying away' the swan is once again hurrying in the moment of reading (2). An event is not a

¹⁴⁴ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*. p.9.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

singular occurrence that passes and becomes history; instead, Oswald's poetry functions as a portal through which the same event can be encountered over and over again, revisited and re-read. Time in Oswald is a living, dynamic, often iterative field of experience.

Haunting

Sometimes, this field of experience is also sonically haunted, home to echoes. Echoes, as noted above, function powerfully in several places in *Falling Awake*, and one such timescape in which they feature is that of birdsong. Blackbird song might seem to our ears to be consistent across time and space. However, birds have local accents and dialects, and the re-iterative nature of birdsong leads to variations over time, as well as variations arising from the chorus of birds listening to and singing with each other. Musician Cosmo Sheldrake, who works with birdsong, describes how 'everything that happens in a woodland is like a stone dropping into a pond. It sends out these ripples as those birds respond and then respond to those responses.'¹⁴⁶ Birdsong reverberates and gives rise to other birdsong, and so, adjusting slightly the way that Pinard uses the phrase, can be described as echo-poetic. It is also temporally distinctive, not only because individual birds and their voices evolve over time, but also because the soundscapes of ecosystems are always changing too. A woodland now, given the loss of birdlife over recent decades, will probably have less acoustic diversity and overall birdsong volume than it would have had in previous centuries. The recording of an ecosystem's soundscape to monitor soundscape ecologies is a valuable tool for monitoring biodiversity, a technique pioneered by musicologists such as Bernie Krause and R. Murray Schafer.¹⁴⁷ The repeated sounds of a blackbird singing, whether the ground 'bursts into

146 Phoebe Weston, '“A Conversation Across Time and Space”: The Power of Birdsong,' *Guardian*, 15 Dec 2020. Accessed 20 Dec 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/15/cosmo-sheldrake-the-power-of-birdsong-aoe>>

¹⁴⁷ See Bernie Krause, *Wild Soundscapes: Discovering the Voice of the Natural World* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2016), and R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Vermont, Destiny Books: 1994).

crickets’, or if the river is a ‘fish path with nearly no fish in’ can all be witnessed by the ear, leaving only echoes when they go. Moreover, the silences between the sounds are just as meaningful as the sounds themselves, suggesting the possibility of absence and the precarity of presence. When we confuse the constant ticking of a clock with this transient, iterative timescape, we risk being oblivious to biodiversity loss and the deadly quietening of the world.

Poetic Genealogy

In reviews of *Falling Awake*, critics have sought to trace Oswald’s poetic genealogy in ways which speak revealingly about time and tradition. Colette Bryce wrote that ‘the lyrics...have a timeless quality in their engagement with the natural world and its processes’, and (somewhat paradoxically), that due to ‘a pervading atmosphere of mid-twentieth century diction’ in the collection, ‘a reader could forget that Oswald is a successor, rather than contemporary, to Ted Hughes.’¹⁴⁸ Dan Chiasson writes of Oswald, her collaborators and readers existing in a ‘timeless continuum.’¹⁴⁹ Although perhaps Chiasson means that Oswald’s poetry favours non-mechanical time, the prominence of time – of its various rhythms, tempos and methods of measurement – in the collection makes this claim feel inaccurate, and potentially a problematic relative to the charge of ‘timelessness’ which is associated with nature and discussed earlier. However, the ways in which Oswald revises earlier poets’ work does demonstrate, as Chiasson writes, ‘a deeper urge to collaborate with the dead.’ Oswald’s detectable influences in *Falling Awake* include many diverse voices. Bryce notes that ‘Hughes is invoked in ‘Fox’’, Orpheus’ head ‘sound[s] a Beckettian note’ (which she also detects in ‘Village’) and ‘Flies’ ‘raises the ghost’ of Dickinson.¹⁵⁰ Bryce also

¹⁴⁸ Colette Bryce, ‘Review: In Different Voices’, *Poetry Ireland Review*, 120 (2016), 40-43. p. 40.

¹⁴⁹ Dan Chiasson, ‘Alice Oswald’s Natural Terrors’, *New Yorker*, 5 September 2016, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/12/alice-oswalds-falling-awake>>. Accessed 10 April 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Colette Bryce, p.41.

notes that the origins of 'Aside' may be traced to Elizabeth Bishop's 'Waiting Room'.¹⁵¹

Chiasson adds that 'John Clare's "Badger" has become "Body,"' and that 'Andrew Marvell's "On a Drop of Dew" bequeaths to Oswald "A Rushed Account of the Dew".'¹⁵² To this list we might add William Blake, whose 'Auguries of Innocence' resonates with Oswald's attempts to render the contradictory experiences of time found in the drop of rain, the cloud, the shadow and the puddle; John Donne and fellow metaphysical poets whose concerns can also be felt in the shifting scales at which Oswald pays attention; and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the focus on transcendental vision.

It is part of Oswald's dynamic treatment of temporality that she does not settle for joining a long and illustrious line of forebears, but seeks to 'collaborate' – to revisit and revise, even to 'excavate' the work of others. In her Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, 'Sidelong Glances: Oblique Comments on the Poetry of Marianne Moore', Oswald said:

the poet, especially the female poet, must labour to hear the voices not just of the literate...but by leaning in and hushing and listening beyond listening to hear the marginal voices of rhapsody...Literature has a front door and a back door, and the labour of moving through poems, opening the back doors to let in the fresh air of the unwritten...if you do it for long enough it finally compels you to leave the house altogether, since the tradition goes right back to birdsong, windsong, heartbeats, footsteps, rivers and thickets...

¹⁵¹ Colette Bryce, p.40.

¹⁵² Dan Chiasson.

In Oswald's version of rhapsody, inheritance of a tradition involves travelling backwards; it is an act of attention, selective resurrection and interplay. It is also an act of remembering and collaborating with the non-human. Instead of a linear, successive genealogy, Oswald's inheritance is a queering of temporalities, in the sense described by Yusoff when she writes that it has 'innumerable sites of origins and an *untimely* disposition that interrupts the possibility of genealogical account.'¹⁵³ The idea of being a 'good ancestor', to use Jonas Salk's phrase, relies upon the ethical ramifications of shifting our perspective of time beyond our current human selves to include those living in centuries and even millennia to come. Oswald's rhapsodic attitude to tradition blurs the boundaries between ancestor and descendant, and asks us to consider the ways in which we inherit the past. It is geologic, nurturing the same potential as the 'timefulness' that geology can inspire, as Bjornerud describes:

stranded on the island of Now, we are lonely...People would treat each other, and the planet, better if we embraced our shared past and common destiny, seeing ourselves more as lucky inheritors and eventual bequeathers rather than permanent residents of the Earth estate. In short, we need a new relationship with time.¹⁵⁴

The way that we choose to inherit or inhabit tradition then informs what future there will be for those who follow us. The present moment in *Falling Awake* is haunted by the past and asks us to remember the future, or to live, as Bjornerud would describe it, 'timefully'.

¹⁵³ Kathryn Yusoff. 'Queer Coal.' p.205.

¹⁵⁴ Maria Bjornerud, p. 162

In *Falling Awake*, Oswald experiments with temporal measurement and rhythm, asking what clock time shows us and what it also conceals or does not allow us to perceive. She continues to notice the multiplicity of more-than-human temporalities, and to show how time moves and pulses differently at different scales. This troubling of unilinear, industrial clock time allows us to inhabit the ecosystem with a greater temporal literacy. It encourages us to notice that humans exist, as Tim Ingold writes, ‘within the movement of becoming of the world as a whole,’ and that this movement shimmers with temporal interruption, folding, and distortion.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Dwelling, Livelihood, and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 168.

Conclusion

Oswald's poetry opens narrow perceptions of industrial time into wider and more various experiences of temporality. Troubling purely linear or purely mechanical clock time, Oswald presents different temporal rhythms and patterns more resonant with the sometimes dynamic, disjunct, or iterative temporalities of the ecosphere. I have argued that the temporalities whose over-dominance Oswald questions are connected with the inability of industrialised Western humans to clearly perceive and appropriately react to anthropogenic changes in climate and ecosystems, and that the temporalities which Oswald emphasises as alternatives to the singularity of industrial clock time better communicate these changes.

In *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, Oswald demonstrates how vital and influential time is for more-than-human bodies and processes, thereby unpicking the problematic, binary-enforcing idea that nature, unlike human culture, is devoid of time. She explores embodied temporalities and mingled materialities to demonstrate the liveliness of entanglements throughout the ecosphere. In line with Bastian's recommendation that we need new and different kinds of clocks to coordinate with our Anthropocene context, Oswald's writing describes the clocks of the tide and the moon, and those of human bodies' interactions with our local and our planetary surroundings.

Temporalities of trace, memory and rupture haunt *Memorial*, in which Oswald extends her eco-temporal explorations to the translation of a founding Western epic. Time in *Memorial* is multiple. It shimmers; past, present, and future braided together and alive in resonant

moments of memory, experiences of place or artefact. Loss and mourning are shown to have the power to distort industrial ideas of time, and *Memorial* can be read as a call to just mourning and an exploration of the iterative patterns of grief embedded within this age of mass extinction. The formal innovations of this poem have also been shown to demonstrate that time can be perceived as multiple, since the time of epic is different to the time of lament and the pastoral, which undermines the singularity of industrial clock time.

Reading *Falling Awake*'s explorations of various and multiple temporalities has revealed that Oswald continues to map and mark time at the nexus between human bodies and the more-than-human. Anthropocene presentations of deep time and temporal torsion also characterise these poems, with the geologic constituting a troubling, twisting force on industrial clock time, haunting temporalities with the spectres of environmental degradation and species loss at the same time as widening the scale at which time is perceived to allow us to see mineralogical metamorphosis and atmospheric change more clearly. Oswald also explores the rhythms and resonances of erosion and decay through her use of repetition and echo, to demonstrate the importance of decomposition and death in the ecosphere.

This dissertation has attempted to demonstrate how an analysis of poetic temporality can serve as a useful ecocritical tool, revealing how Western industrial clock time obscures many crucial aspects to the interactions between humans and the more-than-human, and how alternative clocks and depictions of temporality can better reveal both the harmful effects of human action upon ecosystems and the extent to which humans are entangled with other forms of life. Taking inspiration from former studies of Oswald's ecological poetry, this dissertation has found that temporality can also be considered as a device in her work that

demonstrates human connectedness to the more-than-human. Framing Oswald's poetry within its Anthropocene context highlights these aspects.

In this dissertation I have looked at work by Oswald which was published between 2009-2016, which was selected to demonstrate a breadth of Oswald's temporal explorations across three very different texts. However, this study of Oswald's eco-temporality is incomplete. It can be argued that evidence of Oswald's fascination with time and its representations is seeded within her earliest collections, both her collections of lyrics, *The Thing in the Gap* *Stone Stile* and *Woods etc.*, and her book-length poem, *Dart*. Temporality, especially within the context of Oswald's re-casting of classical literature, would also constitute a fascinating lens through which to look at her most recent collection, *Nobody*. Critical eco-temporal analysis of these texts falls outwith the limited scope of this dissertation, but I believe that extended study would yield further insights into how potent temporality can be as a tool for ecocriticism, which can then also be extended to the work of other poets. I hope that this dissertation can provoke thought and has opened questions for further, deeper studies of eco-temporality.

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