

7. Truth & Epic

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Epic Minimalism, Lyric Redundancy : Deathly Intervals of the Name in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

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Leaving Lyric in the Age of the Novel

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“A man stands disarmed and naked with a weapon pointing at him. This person becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him.” Simone Weil, in her essay *Iliad, or the Poem of Force*, written during the terrors of World War II, meditates in this way on how human violence “turns man into a thing in the most literal sense.” Because of its transformative nature, however, violence’s “literal” force of transmutation cannot be separated cleanly from the figural. We might say that Weil’s reading of epic poetry’s violence locates a shape-shifting between-ness, an interval of being in which the literal and the figural disconcertingly overlap.

This paper will reexamine Weil’s poetic theory of violent reification through a twenty-first century rendition of Homer’s poem of force: Alice Oswald’s *Memorial* (2011). Oswald’s creative translation of Homer’s *Iliad* is a landmark in experimental translation practices. Her method is subtractive, redacting Homer’s 15,600 lines to only eighty-one pages. Vast deletions of events, battles, plot-points, and conversations leave nothing but the naming of the dead intact. Oswald counterbalances her epic minimalism with a supplemental technique of deliberate *lyric redundancy*. After eight pages listing all the names of the *Iliad*’s dead, Oswald repeats these names as *Homeric epithets*, translating these epithets into stanza-length, extended tropes. Minimizing the epic while redoubling its poetic epithets, Oswald connects naming with figural speech. Further, as I will argue, *Memorial* directs our attention to deep substructures in the lyric tradition, where this power of *naming* intersects with *metaphorization*.

Oswald experiments with a *poiesis* for what Weil diagnoses as war’s deathly interval. For Weil, as for Oswald, this deathly interval is also a *figural interval*, between terror and murder, translation and memorialization. Reading Oswald and Weil’s versions of anonymity and figuration together, I will suggest that Oswald’s lyric arrest amidst epic reduction speculates on how naming practices partake in *poiesis*—with linguistic acts of naming suspended between literal and figural. How might these practices of poetic naming lend themselves to a politics of nonviolence? Referring to our horrifying “ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is

still alive,” Weil assents, “Such is the empire of force, as extensive as the empire of nature.” Nonetheless, as I will argue, with Oswald, this figural interval is *not nature*: it is a feature of language, a totalizing aspiration that inflects the power of naming, in the vacuum between terror and oblivion. For this moment, too, there is a *poiesis*.

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The "twilight of the poets" that loomed over late nineteenth-century American verse culture has been debunked as a myth, but the fact that turn-of-the-century poets grappled with these doomsday projections offers a unique opportunity for examining the contours of the lyric as many questioned what, precisely, was declining. For some, fear of poetry's waning appeal pointed up the growing market for prose fiction: poets felt compelled to choose between poetry or prose, lyric or novel. Even as they left the lyric behind, writers turning from poems to prose forms often retained elements from their verse—characters and plot devices as well as lyric conventions like lineation, meter, and rhyme. In this presentation, I explore how one such writer, the African American poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, repurposes some of these very elements when she transforms an 1872 ballad cycle about a slave woman, "Aunt Chloe," into her 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy*, which features a version of Chloe now renamed "Linda." *Iola Leroy* has been read as the completion of the shorter, less detailed Chloe ballads, but I uncover how the novel diminishes Chloe and her narrative, challenging traditional notions of the lyric's limits and the novel's unbounded expansion.