





Rivista di poesia comparata

Direttore responsabile: Francesco Stella

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PHILIP MORRE:

ALICE OSWALD, **Memorial**, London,Faber & Faber, 2011, pp. 90, £12.99

Even now when a classical education is not so easy to come by, the classics just won't go away. Their importance to poets ebbs and flows: Ted Hughes would have a go at 'translating' anything, whether he knew the language or not, but he was not what you'd call a classicist; Larkin and Amis you would imagine had some Latin beaten into them at school, but they seem to have shrugged it off; going further back, MacNeice did a version of Aeschylus's Agamemnon for radio and Day Lewis translated the Georgics, though Auden, of a more scientific bent at school, sought his inspiration elsewhere. But now, as I was saying, everywhere you look translations, adaptations, versions are bursting into flower. To name just a few I know of: in Australia, John Tranter and Hugh Tollerhurst, in the United States, Alicia Stallings, John Talbot, Dan Chiasson, Aaron Pochigian have been at, variously, Aeschylus, Aratus, Callimachus, Catullus, Horace, Lucretius, Sappho . . . No doubt there is an element in all this of a nostalgic longing for a time when a shared culture meant something more than Downton Abbey, but it surely also testifies to the apparently limitless capacity of these great works to reinvent themselves for every new generation.

Over in England Christopher Logue, one of the most lively reinventors of Homer (*War Music*, 1985 – *Cold Calls*, 2005) died in December last year. With curiously exact timing, as if to replace him, here comes Alice Oswald, with the handsomely produced *Memorial*.

The first to die was PROTESILAUS

A focused man who hurried to darkness . . .

Oswald has taken an entirely new approach, boldly, even recklessly, *leaving out the story*. What remains, as implied by the title, is a catalogue of deaths, interspersed by a series of repeated lyrical similes, not always, or even often, found in the same vicinity in the original. Here is an example from Book 8 Of the *Iliad* – in this case the simile belongs with the death:

And now the arrow flies through GORGYTHION

Somebody's darling son

As if it was June

A poppy being hammered by the rain

Sinks its head down

It's exactly like that

When a man's neck gives in

And the bronze calyx of his helmet

Sinks his head down

As if it was June

A poppy being hammered by the rain

Sinks its head down

It's exactly like that

When a man's neck gives in

And the bronze calyx of his helmet

Sinks his head down

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Laura Pugno alla Scuola di Semicerchio

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"Folla delle vene" di Iacuzzi a Semicerchio

In A.T. Murray's literal (Loeb) translation, this passage goes:

Him he missed, but incomparable Gorgythion he struck in the chest with his arrow, Priam's mighty son, whom a wedded mother from Aesyme had borne, fair Castianeira, in form like the goddesses. And his head bowed to one side like a poppy that in a garden is heavy with its fruit and the rains of spring, so his head bowed down to one side, weighed down by his helmet.

Generally, this is her procedure: she pares down the details of the deaths (often sanitising them to a degree; Homer, and Logue, are quite given to lurid detail: “A face split off/ sent skimming lidlike through the crunch./ still smiling, but its pupils dots on dice . . .” – Logue, *War Music*) and gives full rein to the similes. The one above is atypical not only in staying with the death it belongs to, but also in beginning with “As if”. Nearly all the others open with “Like”, even at the expense of a mild grammatical lurch: “Like a fish in the wind / Jumps right out of its knowledge / And lands on the sand”. This small sacrifice of rectitude is justified by the incantatory gain of the repeated “Like, like, like. . .” Presumably, in the example given, “Like it was June . . .” would have sounded a little too much like a teenager. Sometimes the paring reduces the catalogue of the dead to simply a litany of names: “And / DORYCLES / PANDOCCLUS / LYSANDER / PYRASUS / PYLARTES / APISAON / All vigorous men / All Vanished”. The cumulative effect is of great power, like a spelling out of Sorley's “When you see millions of the mouthless dead / Across your dreams in pale battalions go . . .” – an eighty-odd page funereal march-past (it's not a long book and benefits from being read in one sitting), with the similes providing the music. Their repetition, a choice that might easily have seemed a bit fancy, actually works well, emphasising the solemn pace. Oswald has eschewed punctuation throughout, but capitalises the names of the dead, though not of their killers, who in any case are rarely mentioned, as if War itself were the agency of death.

At the end, in keeping with the logic of the whole, nothing grand is made of Hector's demise: he is a man, and he dies.

And HECTOR died like everyone else

He was in charge of the Trojans

But a spear found out the little patch of white

Between his collarbone and his throat

There follow eleven more similes, sparsely arranged one to a page, with only the last repeated. All the dead have now marched out of sight and the music is dwindling after them.

Like when a god throws a star

And everyone looks up

To see that whip of sparks

And then it's gone

Like when a god throws a star

And everyone looks up

To see that whip of sparks

And then it's gone

A near faultless volume.

Philip Morre

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12 ottobre 2018
Inaugurazione XXX Corso di Poesia con Franco Buffoni

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Le Poete al Caff  Letterario

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9 giugno 2018
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19 maggio 2018
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8 maggio 2018
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di Siena viale Cittadini 33, 52100
Arezzo, tel. +39-0575.926314,
fax +39-0575.926312

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Semicerchio, piazza Leopoldo 9, 50134 Firenze - tel./fax +39 055 495398