

Alice Oswald, interviewed by Fiona Cox (11/11/2012)

FC: I know you read Classics at Oxford but could you outline your background in Classics both at school and university?

AO: I loved Latin at school and then I was lucky enough to be the only person doing Greek for A-Level. That really was very exciting because it meant that I could do what I wanted and I had a very broad-minded teacher who allowed me just to read Homer.

FC: That's fantastic.

AO: I just got very obsessed with the *Odyssey* and decided I wanted to finish the whole thing.

FC: Did you read the whole thing in Greek at school?

AO: I read the whole thing in Greek at school and I couldn't have done that unless she'd said "ok we'll just abandon the other texts", which was a little bit scary, but it was really lovely to be allowed just to read Homer.

FC: Yes, that's amazing. Was there not a syllabus..?

AO: Well, it was all different in those days. I mean there was, but I just caught up with it at the end and I do still feel that I've got huge gaps in my Greek. And then I went to Oxford and I carried on in that pattern. I actually mostly just read Homer throughout Oxford and rather skimmed on everything else. So at university I seemed to have done a lot on my own really.

FC: That's really very interesting. I was wondering if there were other authors you were drawn to as well as Homer.

AO: There was something very particular about Homer that I never found in any other author, which was to do with the freshness. I felt that by the time it became Classical, as opposed to Archaic, it lost some of that. I do love the playwrights and I'm very, very interested in drama and in performance, and I love Aeschylus. And I enjoyed the philosophy very much. I like Plato - I find that just very fascinating.

FC: Because the performative aspects very much come through into the way you respond to the *Iliad*.

AO: Well Peter, my husband, is a playwright, so drama is very much part of the way I think. I suppose what I responded to partly in Homer was the feeling that it was all very much in the present moment. There's something about the language that is both being made spontaneously in the present, because that's how it's composed, but also that has a very straightforward, luminous way of looking, which doesn't get bogged down in a sort of blurring and nostalgic way of seeing things. That's my impression - I'm sure it could be

contradicted. And so it became, for me, an aesthetic about trying to look at things directly in the present moment, which I think performance is also doing, because performance is bringing a text into the present moment, as opposed to reading it and studying it, accumulating ideas about it. So since reading Homer, all my ideas have been focused on this fascination with the present moment, and that's allowed me to explore drama a lot, and to read contemporary and recent poetry in the light of that.

FC: And does that correspond to the *energeia* you speak of in the Preface?

AO: It does, yes, and that's my reading of it. There are all sort of things that writing can do and it can be intellectual and it can be impressionistic and it can do lots of things, but the things that interest me most draw on that living energy, that is simply the way things manifest in their present moment. And that's what I took from Homer, right from the start, I think.

FC: You glossed that as a 'bright, unbearable reality', in the Preface. Would it be right to say that the unbearable realities of the contemporary world are fuelling memorials, not just...

AO: Certainly, yes. But when I say 'unbearable', I don't even necessarily mean all the horrors of war. I really mean that any sense impression, if you really take it on board, is a kind of trauma. You know, I think that the way the outer world inflicts itself on the inner world is traumatic, and I think that mostly the human mind is healing itself and trying to soften that blow. But I think one of the functions of poetry is to re-open that wound, and I think that's what Homer does so well. So in a way by 'unbearable' I really just mean the fact that the sensuous world is unbearable, that it's just so intense when you really focus on it.

FC: I see. And could you say something about why it's called 'An Excavation of the *Iliad*'?

AO: Well the American edition wouldn't put that in; they said it was too obscure.

FC: Oh, really?

AO: They call it a version, which I don't like actually because I don't see it as a version.

FC: An excavation is a much more resonant term. It's very odd because actually the people who are going to be drawn to it, I think, would find the 'excavation' really interesting.

AO: Well, I've already had lots of comments from people in America saying "why on earth did you change this?"

FC: Well yes, because the people who are going to be reading this are the people who will be reading Anne Carson and so on, and she's incredibly difficult to unpick.

AO: Yes, for me, there was the feeling of the huge text of the *Iliad* being a landscape that I wanted to dig things out of. Almost as if the real bodies of the real soldiers were lying there in the poem, and I was going to dig down and recover them. So it's a kind of admission that I'm extracting something, that I'm not including the whole of the *Iliad*, but it's also that feeling of digging down, digging down to get to the *actual* past, digging through these layers and accretions of other peoples' interpretations, trying actually to unearth some of the original poem. And also I feel that the *Iliad* itself is an accumulative poem. I don't feel it just happened at one moment. I feel it has layers and layers from different ages and actually I think that some of the bits that I'm more interested in possibly predate the Trojan War. You know I like the idea that perhaps the similes come from an even more ancient pastoral tradition, and that one might be dipping back into a very pre-classical culture.

FC: I remember one interview, maybe the one with Kate Kellaway, where you speak of your discomfort at the way in which the *Iliad* is presented in Western culture as this imperialistic, glorifying war poem, and your excavation seems to get rid of that aspect of it.

AO: Yes, I would hope so. I was struck by the fact that I think a lot of soldiers are given the *Iliad* to take into war nowadays...

FC: Still? Are they?

AO: I think so, certainly in the American army. And I do find most of the translations I know lose the strange freshness and discontinuity of the original. There's something beautifully fragmented, I think, about the feeling of the Greek in the original, which become smoothed into this much more classical feeling in the *Iliad*. It's got this white marble feeling about it. And so it's always seemed to me important to uncover that old *Iliad*.

FC: What's interesting is that Sarah Ruden's translation of the *Aeneid*...

AO: Which I don't know...

FC: She's a pacifist and a Quaker and I mean it's been very much hailed and has been called the finest translation in English since Dryden.

AO: When was that? When did it come out?

FC: 2008. And it's Yale University Press. It's lovely because it's so quiet.

AO: How beautiful.

FC: It is, it really is. But one of the criticisms that have been levelled at her is that she's stripped the *Aeneid* of epic grandeur, that it's an epic poem which has now lost that imperialist bombast. But I'm interested that you and she are responding to epic poems. I just wonder, is there a gendered response?

AO: Probably because I think that females obviously look at war in a very different way, particularly if they're mothers. But I would say that I think the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad* are very different poems. That by the time Virgil was writing the *Aeneid*, epic is a concept and so there literally actually is in Virgil a lot of sort of grand, noble military material which I feel just tastes very different in the *Iliad*. It's really hard to define how it feels, which is why I ended up just rewriting the poem, because it's hard to put your finger on what is actually different, but it doesn't seem to me so self-consciously noble as the *Aeneid*. But I also think that a translation only really works if it is its own new poem. And on the one hand it has to be in some way translucent to the original, but you can only really transmit what's alive about a poem if you write a whole new poem. So I'd love to read that version. It sounds really interesting.

FC: It is - it's lovely.

AO: I think it's great if women start taking on these texts.

FC: There's been a fantastic response really in the last ten years. There's Carol Ann Duffy and *The World's Wife* and Jo Shapcott had a lovely rewriting of Ovid's *Tristia* as a response to her breast cancer and that sense of being separated from the world. There seems to be a lot going on.

AO: That's really interesting. Mind you, I always feel that Homer isn't classical. And I get asked a lot about the Classics and why the Classics are being revived, but to me Homer predates that. To me the Classical era feels very male and Apollonian, and not really very me actually, and I always think of Homer as something quite different. I know he has a fit in that and begins to edge towards that but there is something incredibly female about Homer, I think. It's so soft, it's so beautifully soft.

FC: Yes, yes. And he does have a sort of have a sharp understanding of female psychology. I mean the women in the *Odyssey*,

AO: ...the women, in particular, are amazing.

FC: And you said that you'd be disappointed if readers of *Memorial* were exclusively Classicists or trained in Classics.

AO: Yes I would be.

FC: Do you think it might work the other way round: that you'll be sending readers back?

AO: Well that would be lovely if that could happen. I'm sure also that I'll be putting the classicists' backs up, and they won't go near it.

FC: I don't see any sign of that.

AO: But I would really like Homer to be allowed, in a true way, to have an impact on our culture, not in a filtered and noble way.

FC: Is there a translation that you favour?

AO: I like Richard Lattimore's version of the *Odyssey*. I don't so much like his *Iliad*. There aren't really any translations of the *Iliad* I like. I don't really like that Fagles one that everyone else likes. But I think he's pretty good in the *Odyssey* - I don't know why he gets it differently there. I think the Americans are very good at that longish line actually. And of course I love Chapman, but that's very mannered. It's not really Homer. I would say the best translation of the *Iliad* is David Jones' *In Parenthesis*. It's not a translation, it's its own thing, but to me it's got something of the feeling of real people and a real world and I really love that poem.

FC: When did that come out?

AO: Well, it came out in the 1940s, but it was about his experience in the First World War and it's the most incredible war poem. And the poem he quotes a lot is called *The Gododdin*. It's a Celtic Old English poem. And you can feel a lot of Homer in it, I think. So I tend to think it's those people who've caught the spirit of Homer rather than being too slavish towards him. But while saying that, I like the thought of the moral of a translation rather than a new poem. I like the idea that you can, if you focus hard enough, just make a window through which the poem can shine. So it was important to me while I was doing it actually to look very closely to the Greek, not just to do my own thing.

FC: You have quite disturbing and graphic accounts of the physical injuries and the ways in which the soldiers died. How much of that was you?

AO: I'm a very squeamish person, so mostly I simply reported what Homer said. I didn't want it to be gratuitous or voyeuristic, but I just thought well, there's something very frank and direct about the way Homer does it, I'm just going to do the same. And some people have objected. I've quite often had people stand up and walk out of readings saying "I don't like violence", which I didn't either but you know, it is quite strong, it's quite horrible. There is such a clarity in Homer that I didn't want to pick and choose what I took, well apart from the fact of getting rid of the narrative, I just wanted to report what's there.

FC: Well....yes, and of course the impact of war is horrible.

AO: Exactly. And that's really important to look at, I think.

FC: I was thinking about your other works as well, I mean there's *Dart* of course. The idea of rivers seems really important. And I was wondering how much of an Ovidian influence there was?

AO: Oh, I love Ovid, I really love Ovid. I worked for a long time as a gardener and I read a lot of Ovid then, it somehow felt really appropriate to watching things grow. And I don't just love Ovid, I just believe it. I do somehow think of humans and animals and plants as interchangeable and sharing each other's consciousness.

FC: So the rivers are gods. As in Book 8 of the *Metamorphoses* you have the personification of the rivers as gods.

AO: But I wouldn't even use the word 'personification'. I think it's natural if you want to look at something in a way that takes on board what it is rather than just projecting what you think it is. It's not that you personify it, it's that you come halfway to meet it, and the meeting ground might be a water nymph, as it were, but that doesn't really mean you're personifying the river. That means that you're just finding a common place where you and the river can communicate. I think there's a real difference. People tend to feel that it's very literary, this idea of metamorphosis, or gods, or nymphs or whatever, but actually I think if you spend a lot of time outside you just do encounter things in a way that's somewhere between the human and what they are. And it feels very real, it's not something that's problematic, or literary or self-conscious.

FC: That's really interesting because what comes through *Dart* is that sort of fluidity of the rhythm which is such a feature of Ovid's writing as well, that kind of change within permanence.

AO: That's right, I mean Ovid has been so beautifully translated by Arthur Golding the Elizabethan that it's, you know, it's a joy to read that and read the original. In fact I loved Ovid before I loved Homer.

FC: Oh, did you? And through Latin lessons or through having...

AO: Through Latin lessons. I do remember reading him at school and being completely entranced, just because it felt very true – it just felt like what it feels like to be outdoors.

FC: Yes. And they're great stories.

AO: They're brilliant stories. I like Ted Hughes' introduction to his *Metamorphoses* that he did, he's very good about the moment of... he talks about the moment of passion, where someone is brought to a point where they simply have to change. I think that's very good.

FC: In *Dart* you make quite a number of direct references to ancient myth. It ends with Proteus...

AO: Yes I suppose I do...

FC: ...and there are references to the Oceanides and...

AO: ...the water nymphs, different names of water nymphs...

FC: ...and Proserpina, which I think is there as well. It's just really interesting because you've got this river haunted by classical myth and flowing through contemporary Devon with all the speech patterns overlaying it.

AO: It's simply because I am haunted by classical myth and here I am in Devon. So it doesn't feel out of place for me to think about Artemis, if I see a snowdrop. I do regard them as inhabiting the same landscape.

FC: It provides a lovely image for the unexpected ways perhaps the ancient world still colours our contemporary experiences and outlook.

AO: Yes.

FC: And that sense of loss perhaps if people aren't given any access to the classics that their experience is just that much less rich.

AO: Yes I suppose so. Although I am a great one for not believing that you should just keep things for the sake of keeping them. But I do think that the Greek gods are very accurate portraits of recognisable aspects of the natural human world. I can't do without them. I just think about them a lot really. From the way you're talking, there must be such an anxiety amongst classical circles that people don't learn it at school anymore.

FC: There is a paradox in that I think once it started going out of schools there seems to have been a real resurgence in the literature and in popular culture.

AO: That's really interesting.

FC: It is and it's great.

AO: I wonder why?

FC: I wonder if it is a sort of...

AO: ...a sort of panic?

FC: Yes, and a recognition that actually these myths mean a lot to us culturally, and we need to keep them. What I'm discovering is that when I'm teaching reception to final year students who haven't done Latin or Greek at all, they very often know the stories from things like *Percy Jackson* or even *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or they'll have read retellings of the myths. So it's there but people aren't always aware of how they've got hold of the stories, I think. There's a sense of loss in wanting people to be able to look at the literature in the original and I think there's a loss in how beautiful the Greek and the Latin languages are.

AO: The actual texture of the language is so different from English.

FC: And that's going. I think there aren't going to be that many who will be so fired that they'll want to...

AO: I'm very sad that it becomes a sort of precinct of the public schools, because I think that if you go to public school, you can only read it in a certain way. And therefore, you know, the classics won't be read in such a healthy way.

FC: I know, absolutely! But there are initiatives: there's a lovely organisation called Iris which has as its sort of motivation to bring classics into state schools and I think they run events like 'Classics in the Park' which teaches Greek and Latin to sort of ordinary people who just want to turn up to do it.

AO: But you still need to be motivated, so people like my children won't get it. You know, it won't just be part of their mental furniture. But do you ever read Emerson, the American philosopher? I just think he's very good at saying you should never lament anything because it turns into something else. Actually that form of energy will have transferred into something else, I think.

FC: I'm sure it will. And I'm always taken aback with actually how much my children know about things that I know very little about. They know far more about world religions than I ever did at their age.

AO: Right - that's amazing.

AO: I agree. And my children are far more informed about politics than I ever was, so maybe, maybe there are some advantages with not burying yourself in eighth century BC.

FC: Going back to the version of classics that's promoted in the public school ethos. You're not very happy with the presentation of pastoral as an image of the natural world.

AO: No, I'm not. And that's partly because of having worked as a gardener. When I worked as a gardener I felt very impatient with romantic or pastoral views of the natural world, because it just felt so different. I particularly remember when I was working when there was the hurricane in 1987. I was working at the RHS and I remember going out the next day and there was just devastation. Every tree was down and I can remember just staring up at a birch tree, and suddenly seeing the catkins on the tree. It was close up because it was on the ground, and there were the male and female catkins. I remember just suddenly thinking this is much stranger than pastoral poetry presents. You've got these little kind of weddings on the end of each branch, this little male and female, and I remember thinking this is, this is odder than the poets have given it credit for.

FC: It's been smoothed in the same way as the tree?

AO: Yes, pictorialised. And when you actually work up close with things there's a certain uncanniness that doesn't come through in the pastoral. I can't help loving the *Eclogues* and

the *Georgics* and the *Idylls*, but they're not quite enough for me. But they're still very lovely. It annoys me that I just love them, because in theory I don't. But I think that the way Homer talks about the natural world, to me that's not pastoral at all, that's incredibly energetic.

FC: And Ovid is differently...

AO: Different again, yes. Because he somehow gets through to the spirit of it - there's something animated. I think pastoral tends to distance things, to make them safe. Whereas in Ovid I don't get that. I was talking to Peter about it this morning. I've always suffered from claustrophobia, so I'm always looking for something that is powerful enough to get me out of my own head. I don't like the feeling of being locked in my own head, and so I always need a poem or any work of art to be equivalent to a creature really, to be something other than myself, to be an actual other living creature, and for me pastoral poetry is descriptive rather than embodying, so it doesn't actually get me out of my own head. Does that make sense, or is that too obscure?

FC: No, no it does. Absolutely. Because I was slightly surprised with your background as a gardener and your interest in classics that there wasn't more Virgil, but that accounts for it.

AO: Virgil's very fashionable at the moment, isn't he? It seems like all the poets are going back to Virgil.

FC: Yes, especially Seamus Heaney.

AO: Yes, well I'm glad that you can get that without me having to explain it. But Ovid is different, isn't he? There's something mischievous and energetic about Ovid.

FC: Yes and actually I think there's a big turning towards Ovid as well at the moment, but it tends to be different people and working in a quite different way. I think it's people who are quite excited by the fantastic. But you've got everything in Ovid. You've got the fantastic but you've also got that poignancy of the exile.

AO: Yes, and the love.

FC: And he is very contemporary.

AO: He is, yes.

FC: Do you think Homer is?

AO: Entirely, yes. Even more than Ovid. It's just about the texture of the language. It's not something about his content or anything like that, there is just something about the language that is very lasting and I think it's to do with a lack of mediation. I think mediation is something that ages, but it's almost as if he simply transposes the living world into language with no screen in between. So it's as if you look at the poem and you've actually got an actual tree and an actual person and an actual hill, but they're just in their language

form rather than their material form. So to me it's full of actuality in Homer - it's almost sculptural.

FC: Which is really interesting, because that's the feel of *Memorial*.

AO: Is it? Well I think that's what I was really striving for. A solidity, and I think that's to do with an oral culture. To me, there's something very different when poetry becomes literary. There's a piece of paper between you and the world. There's something eclipsing things.

FC: There's that unmediated sense as well. I don't think there's the sense of your Homer having gone through Chapman or Arnold or...

AO: No...

FC: It's just more direct.

AO: Yes, that was what I wanted, I think. Just to put a little box there, and for Homer to walk into it, and to present that to the reader. What do you think of Christopher Logue's version, because I think it's very alive.

FC: Yes, I like it.

AO: It's amazingly alive, but not very Homeric. They're just their own thing, which I like.

FC: Yes, I do like it. Could we just go back a little bit to the pastoral element? There's quite an ecological move at the moment - there's Jeanette Winterson who rewrites the myth of Atlas in *Weight* and Carol Ann Duffy wrote a poem called *Atlas* and Janet Lembke's 2005 translation of the *Georgics*. All of them are drawing on classical myth as a way of issuing a warning about the perils to which we're putting the environment. So there's classical myth fuelling these ecological concerns.

AO: I think that's very interesting. I think it is the great problem of our generation really, but I always believe and hope that poetry works best by magic, rather than by logic and that there are a hell of a lot of things we have to do to cope with the crisis that we're in. But actually one of the first things we have to do is to transform the imagination, and I think it's magic that does that, rather than preaching and explanation and allegory. I think it's just straightforward, dramatic magic. And that's what I think poetry can do without necessarily needing to be worthy and worried and...

FC:didactic.

AO: Yes. So I would say Homer is a completely ecological poet, despite the fact that he lived in the eighth century and wasn't trying to transmit that message. But he just transforms your mind because, in such a democratic way, he allows everything its energy. He is not dominating his subject matter - there's a spaciousness that allows an olive tree on

a hill to be a *real* olive tree on a hill, to such an extraordinary extent you cannot believe how he's done it. And that, I think, is the magical way that language can be helpful, rather than saying: "we must be worried about this olive tree". Although I think you have to do everything.

FC: Yes. And what you're saying about the democracy of Homer is interesting. I think you're right that our response, certainly within Britain, is very much filtered through this public school version of Homer and a lot of the big poets responding to Homer are products of that system.

AO: Or they're getting it from translations which are products of that system. So it seems that that system is always in there. But the texture of Homer's language is, I would say, democratic. There's something about the way he orders his phrases, and it's very unhierarchical, I think because it was being composed in blocks which were interchangeable. It's as if each phrase has its own centre of gravity, so even his syntax seems to me to have a democracy about it that I think dictates how you then should read the poem. I think it makes you focus on the minor characters and the little sort of characters who come into the similes, because it's got a democratic atmosphere, I think.

FC: And what's interesting is that the minor characters have fallen out of the receptions.

AO: I don't know why they have, because they're so 'there' in the text and anyone who looks at the text, even in Fagles or Lattimore, can see them there. I think people rush over it because they have this idea that it's about the wrath of Achilles and the pathos, so they do get lost in the mind even if they're there.

FC: They do. One of the things I found really shocking when Margaret Atwood wrote *The Penelopiad* was being able to forget the hanging of the serving girls. There's this whole story of this grotesque retaliation against these innocent women who are all just hung, and then we move on. And she's right, no one really does give them a second thought.

AO: It's chilling. Actually, I get a shiver when you remind me. It's a horrible moment, isn't it?

FC: It is a horrible moment. Maybe that's why you just don't want to think about it too much. But it is shocking that they suffered that fate, just to be forgotten as well. And it's the same as the characters that you have brought back to our minds, to name them and to say "this is what happened to them".

AO: I think there is a flavour of that in the David Jones that I was talking about. It's got a lovely epigraph at the beginning which just says 'in memory of all common and hidden men'. I was very influenced by that and also there was a book I picked up in a second-hand bookshop. I can't remember what it was called, but it was just about war from the point of view of the ordinary soldier and how chaotic it is, and how there isn't a narrative, there are

just thousands and thousands of people dying. And that's what the story of war is for anyone who's actually going through it. Chaos. No storyline. The storyline is written by the generals or the historians later, but what actually goes on the ground is just death after death after death.

FC: Yes, that's fascinating.

AO: I can't remember what it's called, *The Unknown Soldier* perhaps.

FC: And you do get that in Homer.

AO: You do, you really do.

FC: In a way that, you're right, I don't think you do in Virgil. Because in Virgil, it's got its telos.

AO: Absolutely, it's being all made coherent around Aeneas and the story of Rome.

FC: Although he does remember his minor characters as well.

AO: Yes he does, yes. I do love Virgil, but...

FC: But it does have coherent narrative to it, holding those war episodes together.

AO: The narrative of the *Iliad* is extraordinary. It's amazing, you know. It's beautiful, but the trouble is it's not the only thing, and I think people have forgotten about the other strands.

FC: But it's interesting that I think there is a more democratic wave of receptions at the moment, so that women are, for the first time really, responding in significant numbers to the poems. And you've also got postcolonial responses as well, so there's much more of a response from marginalised groups who are fashioning Homer for themselves.

AO: Well that's really good, because they've been used as male dominated canons of western literature in the wrong way for so long.

FC: As these people are turning to him we're actually seeing these stories that have been...

AO: Glossed over, yes. It's very interesting.

FC: It's much richer and more vivid.

AO: And it's amazing that it's all there in Homer.

FC: Yes, it is, right there from the start. I had no memory at all of the servant girls. It's quite quick, but even so...

AO: I do remember it. And then there's also Thersites who, because he doesn't die, didn't come into *Memorial*, but that is a horrible story about Diomedes and Odysseus who beat him up. Is it them? I'm getting muddled with Dolon. But he's one of the only ugly people in the *Iliad* and he gets beaten up because he tries to answer back to Agamemnon, I think. Anyway, he didn't die so he didn't come into *Memorial*, but there are these little characters who suddenly appear on the edges.

FC: What are you working on at the moment?

AO: Well, I always try and have two projects on the go because I always find one strand doesn't ever serve me, so I'm writing short lyric poems and I'm also writing what I'm calling 'An Inventory of Everything'. It's partly a way of experimenting with forms. It started out as a dictionary, and then I got bored of the alphabet, so it's become an inventory. They're like miniature essays in a way. I'm not quite sure what it is so I'm allowed to be vague about it because it hasn't really developed into a whatever it is. It's not classical really.

FC: I bet the classics will find their way in...

AO: They probably will. It's quite classifying. It's lifting things in and out of their definitions.

FC: Alice Oswald, thank you ever so much.

AO: Not at all.