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

Farrier, David

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

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