

## TIME AND HUMAN FRAGILITY IN THE LANDSCAPE SIMILES OF THE *ILIAD*\*

### ABSTRACT

*This article explores the propensity of Iliadic landscape similes to encourage reflections on human fragility. Landscape in the similes is usually interpreted as a medium which conveys a consistent symbolic value (for example storms as the hostility of nature); however, landscape is often a more flexible medium. By offering close readings of three Iliadic similes (winter torrents at 4.452–6, snowfall at 12.279–89 and clear night at 8.555–9), this article argues that landscape allowed the poet to frame the main narrative in various ways, both helping the listener to imagine described events and interrupting the listener's immersion in the main narrative. While many have analysed how similes offer analogies to the main narrative, the ways in which the same simile can also disrupt and reframe the narrative are less understood. This article observes that shifts in narrative space and time played a key role in changing the perspective of the listener. Taking a broadly phenomenological approach, it proposes that embodied descriptions of space, which recreate the experience of the moving body in landscape, invite the listener to consider the temporal scale of the natural world. By looking at how landscape in select similes shifts the listener's spatial and temporal experience, this article argues that landscape contributes to the wider Iliadic theme of human fragility. In particular, it identifies the potential for landscape similes to minimize the scale of human experience, question the possibility of human agency, and reveal the limitations of human perspectives and knowledge.*

**Keywords:** landscape; Homer; *Iliad*; similes; temporality; embodiment; fragility; phenomenology; nature

It is not until halfway through Book 4 that the Greek and Trojan armies meet for the first time in the *Iliad*. This climactic event is described by a simile which helps the listener to imagine the clamour of the crowded battle, but also transports them to a distant, unpopulated mountainscape (4.452–6):

ὡς δ' ὅτε χεῖμαρροι ποταμοὶ κατ' ὄρεσφι ῥέοντες  
ἐς μισγάγκειαν συμβάλλετον ὄβριμον ὕδωρ  
κρουῶν ἐκ μεγάλων κοίλης ἔντοσθε χαράδρης,  
τῶν δέ τε τηλόσε δούπον ἐν οὔρεσιν ἔκλυε ποιμήν·  
ὡς τῶν μισγομένων γένετο ἰαχὴ τε πόνος τε.

As when two winter-flowing torrents rushing down the mountains  
From their great springs dash together the mighty water

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Into the meeting of two valleys inside a hollow ravine,  
 And in the distance a herdsman in the mountains hears their thundering:  
 In this way, from the joining of these [two armies] came shouting and toil.<sup>1</sup>

This simile whisks the listener away from the scene, first to a mountain landscape where two rivers clash violently together, and then to a herdsman who hears the rivers from a distance. It is a curious simile for the hot, close chaos of battle: the χεῖμαρροι, ‘winter-flowing’ torrents, are cold, the mountain landscape is unpopulated, and the presence of a single herdsman underlines the sense that these natural phenomena, unlike the battle described in the main narrative, are unwitnessed. Scholars have noted how nature similes create physical distance between the listener and the main narrative, providing a break from the action or casting events in a new aesthetic light.<sup>2</sup> But nature similes can also shift the listener’s experience of time. In the winter torrents simile, a seasonal phenomenon caused by the melting of snow invites the listener into the temporal scale of the natural world, where rivers swollen with snowmelt have always thundered in the spring and will continue to do so long after the Trojan War. Juxtaposed against this grand temporal scale, it can be argued that the scale of the battle is minimized, presenting the lives of the soldiers as transient and fragile.

This example draws attention to the capacity of landscape to shift the audience’s experience of narrative time as well as narrative space,<sup>3</sup> both of which must be acknowledged if we are to appreciate subtle layers of meaning in the *Iliad*. The link between space and time in Homeric imagery, recognized as early as Auerbach, has been taken up in recent decades by the ‘spatial turn’ in classics.<sup>4</sup> However, such studies rarely address similes, focussing instead on the audience’s ability to visualize the immediate space around Troy.<sup>5</sup> Studies of landscape in the similes, on the other hand,

<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> For the similes as breaks in the narrative, see S.E. Bassett, ‘The function of the Homeric simile’, *TAPhA* 52 (1921), 132–47; C.M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* (Oxford, 1930), 123; J.A. Scott, *The Unity of Homer* (Berkeley, 1921), 124; for contrasts between similes’ subject matter and narrative context, see D.H. Porter, ‘Violent juxtaposition in the similes of the *Iliad*’, *CJ* 68 (1972), 11–21; for similes as punctuating, transitional scenes which often mark emotional peaks, see R. Martin, *Mythologizing Performance* (Ithaca, NY and London, 2020), 47–71; for perspectival shifts that create aesthetic distance between listener and narrative context, see S. Halliwell, ‘Perspectivism and the Homeric simile’, *Martin West Memorial Lecture* (Oxford, 2019), <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/martin-west-memorial-lecture-2019-perspectivism-and-homeric-simile-prof-stephen-halliwell>.

<sup>3</sup> M. Caracciolo, ‘Narrative space and readers’ responses to stories: a phenomenological account’, *Style* 47 (2013), 425–44: ‘narrative space’ is often used broadly in narratological studies to refer to space as the ‘container of the events and existents represented by a story’ (428). In contrast, a phenomenological approach takes readers’ lived experience of narrative space into account. ‘Narrative time’ is closely linked, as the temporal setting of the same experiential qualities.

<sup>4</sup> Auerbach famously critiqued what he saw as Homer’s singular, present foreground which blots out any other sense of time: E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (transl. W.R. Trask) (Princeton, 2003 [1953]), 4. For the ‘spatial turn’—a term used to describe the confluence of interests across many disciplines regarding what it means to be situated in space—see K. Gilhuly and N. Worman (edd.), ‘Introduction’, *Space, Place and Landscape in Ancient Greek Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, 2014), 1–20, at 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> A. Purves, *Space and Time in Ancient Greek Narrative* (Cambridge, 2010) explores the ability of the poet or audience to envisage the *Iliad*’s plot in spatial terms; J.S. Clay, *Homer’s Trojan Theatre: Space, Vision, and Memory in the Iliad* (Cambridge, 2011) demonstrates Homer’s keen spatial awareness of the world he constructed, and that the audience’s ability to visualize this world is based partly on the movement of narrative time; I. de Jong has edited two volumes, *Time in Ancient Greek Literature* (Leiden, 2007) and *Space in Ancient Greek Literature* (Leiden, 2012), in which the relationship between the two is often apparent (e.g. [2007], 31–2, 34, 37; [2012], 18, 26–7); R. Xian, ‘Der chronotopos der Ziegeninsel (Hom. *Od.* 9.116–141)’, *Mnemosyne* 70 (2017),

tend to highlight peaceful/positive or violent/negative aspects of nature<sup>6</sup>—discussions of time have mostly concerned the question of whether the similes' subject matter belongs to the Bronze Age or the contemporary world of the poet.<sup>7</sup> The question of how and why representations of landscape encourage different experiences of time remains unclear. This article will establish landscape's special propensity to make a vivid, embodied experience of landscape available to the audience, which in turn could affect their experience of narrative time. Part one will return to the winter torrents simile quoted above, examining how the shift from fast-paced battle scene to the wide, slow perspective of rivers and mountains contrasts the scale of human experience with the scale of the natural world. Part two will examine the falling snow simile, which describes the flight of missiles between Greeks and Trojans in Book 12 (279–89). Encapsulating the entirety of a quiet snowstorm, this simile allows the audience to share Zeus's perspective of landscape and time, revealing the gulf between divine and mortal agency. Finally, part three will consider the clear night simile in Book 8 (555–9), which describes the Trojan watchfires. The visibility of an expansive nocturnal landscape expresses hope that sight across space will allow control over the future—but dissonance between the simile and the rest of Book 8, in which Zeus orchestrates the war and sends ambiguous signs from Mount Ida, casts unsettling reflections on the limitations of human perspective.

These examples reframe the main narrative, directing the listener's attention to the timelessness of landscape as a contrast to the fragility of humans. This nuances the traditional view of nature in Homer as a *model* for human fragility. Most famously, leaves stand for humans in Iliadic similes which depict the brevity of human life: Glaucus likens the generations of men to the burgeoning and falling of leaves in a forest (6.146–9) and Apollo compares the brief lives of humans and leaves (21.462–6).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, falling trees stand for young warriors in death scenes: Euphorbus falls like a blossoming olive sapling torn up by the wind, and the attention to the promise of the sapling underscores the prematurity and violence of his death (17.53–60).<sup>9</sup> However, any attempt to map these images as straightforward metaphors, with humans

899–919 discusses the description of the Goat Island in *Odyssey* Book 9 using Bakhtin's concept of the Chronotope, the fundamental, mutual relationship between time and space as represented in literature.

<sup>6</sup> M. Edwards, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume V: Books 17–20* (Cambridge, 1991), 35–6: three main categories of repeating similes (weather and natural phenomena; hunting and herding; human technology) depict mankind in a losing battle with nature; for nature in the similes as a dehumanizing force, see S. Weil, *War and the Iliad* (transl. M. McCarthy) (New York, 2005 [1939]), 3; W.C. Dimock, 'After Troy: Homer, Euripides, total war', in R. Felski (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore, 2008), 66–81; see also A. Bonnafé, *Poésie, nature et sacré* (Lyon, 1984), 86–8; D. Bouvier, 'La tempête de la guerre. Remarques sur l'heure et le lieu du combat dans l'*Iliade*', *Méris* 1 (1986), 237–57, especially at 246–52; J. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Durham, NC, 1994 [1975]), 189–92. Cf. Porter (n. 2), 18.

<sup>7</sup> While J.B. Hainsworth, *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* (London, 1989), 22 identifies similes with the poet's contemporary world, L. Muellner, 'The simile of the cranes and pygmies: a study of Homeric metaphor', *HSPH* 93 (1990), 59–101, at 97–8 argues for the traditionality of similes. W. Scott, *The Artistry of the Homeric Simile* (Hanover, 2009), 10, 17, 19, 25 also identifies traditional imagery in the similes.

<sup>8</sup> This was a conventional metaphor (e.g. Mimnermus, fr. 2 W.; Simon. *Eleg.* fr. 19 and 20).

<sup>9</sup> J. Grethlein, *Das Geschichtsbild der Ilias: eine untersuchung aus phänomenologischer und narratologischer perspektive* (Göttingen, 2006), 93. In another motif, heroes die like trees felled for ships or chariots (4.473–87, 16.477–92). Purves (n. 5), 226–7 links these deaths to shipbuilding, emphasizing the mobility of ships and the alienation of the warrior who falls, like an uprooted tree, far from home.

as tenor and nature as vehicle, are complicated by the wind, which offers a model for the unpredictability of human existence<sup>10</sup> but also a contrast between a powerful, invisible part of the natural world and other more fragile, perceptible parts such as leaves.<sup>11</sup> Even the image of leaves contrasts the recurrence of seasons with the brevity of human life. My readings of three landscape similes draw attention to these kinds of complexities. Rather than attempting to identify consistent symbolic values, I show that landscape was a flexible literary device, whose inherent spatial and temporal aspects made it well suited to reflections on human experience.

#### WINTER TORRENTS: LANDSCAPE AND THE SCALE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Above I sketched out the premise that the winter torrents simile of Book 4 sweeps the listener away from the narrative context of the battle to a spatially and temporally removed mountainside. From this new perspective, the battle is minimized, and the soldiers' lives appear brief and fragile. We can appreciate how jarring this shift might have been when we look back at the narrative context of the battle, and how the text encourages the listener to experience narrative space from an embodied perspective. Consider the lines directly preceding the simile (4.446–51):

οἱ δ' ὅτε δῆ ῥ' ἐς χῶρον ἕνα ξυνιόντες ἴκοντο,  
 σύν ῥ' ἔβαλον ρινούς, σύν δ' ἔγχεα καὶ μένε' ἀνδρῶν  
 χαλκροθωρήκων· ἀτὰρ ἀσπίδες ὀμφαλόεσσαι  
 ἔπληντ' ἀλλήλησι, πολὺς δ' ὄρυμαγδὸς ὀρώρει.  
 ἔνθα δ' ἄμ' οἰμωγὴ τε καὶ εὐχολὴ πέλεν ἀνδρῶν  
 ὀλλύντων τε καὶ ὀλλυμένων, ῥέε δ' αἵματα γαῖα.

And now when they came together in one place,  
 Then they dashed together their ox-hide shields and spears  
 And the fury of bronze-mailed men: and the bossed shields  
 Closed with one another, and a great din arose.  
 Then came the wailing and triumph cries of men  
 Slaying and slain, and the earth flowed with blood.

The phenomenological concept of 'embodiment'—the immersive experience of the sensing, moving body in landscape—is useful here because it helps us to move away from the traditional idea that we experience or imagine space as something static and disconnected, as though we were looking at a painting or a screen.<sup>12</sup> By looking at cues which encourage an embodied experience of space, such as references to the senses or movement, we can understand how an engaged audience member could experience narrative space as an atmosphere of 'infinitely diverse phenomena that simultaneously

<sup>10</sup> Grethlein (n. 9), 90.

<sup>11</sup> Euphorbus' death also contrasts personal and impersonal—while the individuality of the tree draws the listener closer to the warrior, the wind is unpredictable, without intelligible purpose.

<sup>12</sup> M. Rose and J. Wylie, 'Landscape: part two', in J. Agnew and J.S. Duncan (edd.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Human Geography* (Oxford, 2011), 221–34, especially 222–4, 228–9. For a phenomenological approach to tragic landscape, see C. Bray, 'Mountains of memory: a phenomenological approach to mountains in fifth-century BCE tragedy', in D. Hollis and J. König (edd.), *Mountain Dialogues from Antiquity to Modernity* (London, 2021), 185–97.

affect all our senses and emotions'.<sup>13</sup> The battle scene here activates several aspects of embodied experience. The dynamism between sound and movement is striking: shields, spears and armour are thrown together (ἔβαλον), and a great din arises (ὄρυμαγδὸς ὀρόρει). Triumphant cries and the wailing of the slain, delineated by the repetition of ὄλλυμι, 'I destroy', in its active and passive forms (ὄλλύντων τε καὶ ὄλλυμένων), are heard together, with ὅμα emphasizing the simultaneity of countless sounds and actions.<sup>14</sup> We do not see an individual death or an individual victor, but we are surrounded by them, in such numbers that they are heard as one multitude. Even verbs for the appearance of sound—ὄρυμι (4.449) and πέλω (4.450)—have a sense of motion about them.<sup>15</sup> The multiplicity of sources of sound and movement positions the listener somewhere just above or in the midst of the battle, surrounded by whirling violence.

This sense of position and movement helps listeners to imagine the experience of being present within space more vividly. Part of this vividness comes from the way in which movement within space evokes movement within time—phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty observes that 'at each successive instant of a movement, the preceding instant is not lost sight of. ... [Movement draws] together, on the basis of one's present position, the succession of previous positions, which envelop each other.'<sup>16</sup> Here, successive instants of movement—the armies assembling, the clash of their meeting, the killing and dying—rush the listener from moment to moment, sweeping them into the adrenaline-spiked urgency of battle. It stands to reason that, when the listener can more clearly imagine themselves occupying the same space and time as narrated events, they feel more closely connected to those events.<sup>17</sup> In this case, the listener might feel more emotionally invested in the battle, and more captivated by the scale of the war as a whole. The deaths of the soldiers are terrible but also necessary and heroic in the context of this historic undertaking.

Having foregrounded the way in which the poet positions his listener within the space and time of the battle, we can now appreciate the imaginative whiplash that the listener might experience when the poet suddenly transports them to an isolated winter

<sup>13</sup> H. Fränkel, 'The interpretation of individual similes: (A) elemental forces' (transl. C. Krojzl and S. van der Mije), in I. de Jong (ed.), *Homer: Critical Assessments* (London, 1999), 3.301–21, at 302: this is a translation of Fränkel's analysis of similes, in which he dismisses attempts to reduce similes to a single point of comparison. But Fränkel's description of Homeric landscape corresponds with phenomenologist Tim Ingold's understanding of the experience of space as an 'all-enveloping' awareness of light, sound and feeling: *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London, 2011), 134. This agreement highlights the compatibility between philological and phenomenological approaches to literary landscape.

<sup>14</sup> LSJ: ὅμα can be 'at once, at the same time' or 'together, at once, both without direct reference to time' (*Lfgre*: 'zusammen mit, in Gemeinschaft von, mitsamt, zugleich'). In a forthcoming piece, F. Budelmann observes that Homer uses simultaneity to present events as closely connected (e.g. *Il.* 7.255–6, 13.235–6). Here too the cries of the slain and the slayers are closely connected, suggesting that a warrior can easily move from slayer to slain.

<sup>15</sup> *Lfgre* s.v. ὄρυμι: ὄρυμι is frequently used of bodily movement (ὄρω δ' ἐπ' αὐτοὺς [*Ἔκτωρ*], *Il.* 5.590, 11.343) or of things and people set in motion by gods (Ζεὺς ὄρσε μάχεσθαι, *Il.* 13.794). *Lfgre* s.v. πέλωμαι: πέλω can mean 'to be', but in the sense that every movement in a place presupposes a 'being there', and differing from εἶναι in its sense of continued presence.

<sup>16</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (transl. C. Smith) (London, 1962 [1945]), 140. For the experience of falling as a division between mortal and divine experience, see A. Purves, 'Falling into time in Homer's *Iliad*', *CA* 25 (2006), 179–209—here too, movement in space is movement in time.

<sup>17</sup> In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, sufferings are most pitiable when near at hand, while those far in the past or future either do not cause pity or cause a lesser degree of pity (1385b13–33, 1386a25–9).

mountainside. Indisputably, there are analogies between the battle and the simile—between the violence of the armies and the torrents meeting, emphasized by the verbal echo of *μισγάγκειαν* (453) and *μισγομένων* (456), and between the roar of the battle and the water which can be heard from afar. However, the disanalogies are more arresting.<sup>18</sup> The simile shifts first from the battlefield to the rivers, and then from the rivers to a herdsman who hears the thundering, and the details of these two shifts highlight the difference in experience rather than the similarity. Let us consider the first shift in more detail. The first three lines of the simile compare the clashing of the armies to the meeting of two rivers (4.452–4):

ὥς δ' ὅτε χεῖμαρροι ποταμοὶ κατ' ὄρεσφι ῥέοντες  
 ἐς μισγάγκειαν συμβάλλετον ὄβριμον ὕδωρ  
 κρουνῶν ἐκ μεγάλων κοίλης ἔντοσθε χαράδρης ...

As when two winter-flowing torrents rushing down the mountains  
 From their great springs dash together the mighty water  
 Into the meeting of two valleys inside a hollow ravine ...

After immersion in the battle, the listener is immediately spirited away to a mountain scene which is cold, distant and unwitnessed. Like the battle scene, the description of the mountain landscape encourages an embodied perspective; while no one watches the crashing of the rivers, and there is no description of bodily movement, the movement of the rivers allows the listener to imagine the landscape from a traveller's perspective. Linguistic and cognitive studies indicate that our ability to visualize space is improved when movement through space is described as a journey rather than as, for example, a map or a floorplan.<sup>19</sup> This is called a 'hodological perspective'.<sup>20</sup> The simile follows the journey of the torrents, guiding the mind's eye from a broad view of the rivers rushing down the mountains (4.446), briefly encompassing the springs from which the rivers flow (4.447), and then to a closer view of the hollow ravine where the rivers meet (4.448). The evocation of swift passage through landscape encourages the listener to experience the mountain scene as vividly as they had experienced the battlefield. This level of embodiment in two vastly different spaces and situations introduces subtle dissonance to what might otherwise have been a straightforward comparison between violent sounds.<sup>21</sup>

The second shift provides a human perspective for the listener to take up: *τῶν δέ τε τηλόσε δοῦπον ἐν οὔρεσιν ἔκλυε ποιμήν*, 'And in the distance a herdsman in the mountains hears their thundering' (4.455). The listener might now imagine themselves distant from the rivers, in the position of the herdsman standing, sitting, or walking with

<sup>18</sup> There is also a verbal echo between the flowing (*ῥέε*, 4.451) blood on the battlefield and the flowing (*ῥέοντες*, 4.452) rivers, but there is dissonance too—the hot, horizontal movement of blood on the ground can hardly match the swift, vertical rush of the cold torrents.

<sup>19</sup> C. Linde and W. Labov, 'Spatial networks as a site for the study of language and thought', *Language* 51 (1975), 924–39, at 929–31: 97% of participants in this study used the 'tour' strategy when asked to describe the layouts of their own homes from memory, suggesting that the tour or route perspective is linked to a clear imagination of space.

<sup>20</sup> P. Janni, *La mappa e il periplo: cartografia antica e spazio odologico* (Rome, 1984), 79–90. De Jong (n. 5 [2012]), 44: Hera's journey from Olympus to Ida across mountaintops, coasts and islands (*Il.* 14.281–93) is described hodologically.

<sup>21</sup> For another example of movement between narrative levels and their corresponding temporalities, see T. Myers, *Homer's Divine Audience: The Iliad's Reception on Mount Olympus* (Oxford, 2019), 38–40 on 13.344–5.

his flocks.<sup>22</sup> There are also analogies between this new space and the narrative context—the comparison to a sound heard from a distance magnifies the sound of the armies meeting, and if we were to take the ancient vulgate reading of φόβος, ‘panicked flight’, in place of Aristarchus’ πόνος, ‘toil’, (4.456), then we could link the army’s panic to the subtle fear that a herdsman might feel, hearing the distant roaring.<sup>23</sup> Again, however, the embodied aspects of the scene reveal that striking disanalogies are also at play. The herdsman’s surroundings are described in a single line, but it evokes a vivid impression of his position within an extensive landscape—τηλόσε invites the imagination to travel across the mountains from the rivers to the herdsman, and ἐν οὐρεσιν evokes the mountain where the herdsman is situated as well as a surrounding mountain vista. The resulting image is a marked contrast from the battle scene—after the crowded position in the middle of a battlefield, the audience now hears a distant sound from the perspective of a herdsman in a vast, wild landscape.

But the spatial contrasts between narrative context and simile only account for part of the dissonance which an engaged listener might feel.<sup>24</sup> There is an additional shift in the experience of time, which casts the narrative context of the battle in a more poignant light. In the reading of the battle scene above, I established that the swift sequence of movements and sounds as the armies meet emulates the fast-paced frenzy of battle. The embodied elements of the simile have the opposite effect. While there is swift, violent movement in both the meeting of the army and the meeting of the rivers, there is a temporal contrast between the two which affects the atmosphere of the scene. While the meeting of the armies is a singular event, occurring across a few moments, the movement of the rivers is a continuous event, occupying hours, days, perhaps even months. As a scene in narrative, it is naturally drawn out. The spatial view of the landscape facilitates this open-ended experience of time. The journey-perspective of the rivers rushing down the mountains from their springs to the ravine encourages a view of landscape not at a particular instant but as a space which exists continually.

The traditional opening of the simile contributes to this sense of continuity: ὥς δ’ ὄτε, ‘and just as when ...’, indicates a timeless, recurrent event. The reference to the torrents as χεῖμαρροι, ‘winter-flowing’, implies that the rivers are swollen every spring by snowmelt, emphasizing the seasonal recurrence of natural events. The scene might occur deep in the past, or far into the future, but the sense is that this event has always happened and always will. This opens up a range of possible reflections. The limitlessness of natural time contrasts with the instantaneousness of battle. From the cyclical perspective of time which the rivers and the mountains evoke, the battle might suddenly seem fleeting. The lives of the soldiers might seem brief and fragile, and this reflection might momentarily eclipse the sense of glory. The Trojan War, in

<sup>22</sup> Compare 19.373–80, which likens the gleam of Achilles’ shield to a fire burning in the mountains, seen by sailors at sea. As Halliwell (n. 2) observes, this simile inverts the direction from which the light is imagined. Both similes move the mind’s eye away from the narrative context, creating new space for reflection.

<sup>23</sup> G. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume I: Books 1–4* (Cambridge, 1985), 385: Aristarchus (Did/A) reads πόνος, as φόβος means ‘panicked retreat’ in Homer and the armies are meeting, not retreating. This is accepted by the manuscript tradition.

<sup>24</sup> Porter (n. 2) identifies other types of contrast in the similes, e.g. between the beauty of treasure and the ugliness of a wound (4.141–7); between the productivity of agriculture and the destructiveness of death (13.389–93, 17.740–6); see Scott (n. 7), 42–93 for contrasts between similes and audience’s expectations based on oral tradition.

which listeners were immersed on an immediate, personal level in the previous lines, might now seem long ago and far away, with little impact on the world of rivers, mountains and herdsmen.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, or perhaps even simultaneously, the battle might be elevated to the level of the natural world, with the implication that war is inevitable and eternal. Both reflections rely on spatial and temporal distance to frame emotional distance. This is not to suggest that the simile presents the battle or the soldiers' deaths as irrelevant but that the new distance adds poignance to the chaos of battle, in what might otherwise be little more than an action scene. Different listeners would doubtlessly have responded to this web of possible associations on different levels, but the text contains sufficiently prominent cues for a shift in the experience of narrative space and time that it is reasonable to suggest that this shift was intended to have an emotional and thematic effect on its audience.

#### SNOWFALL: LANDSCAPE BETWEEN HUMAN AND DIVINE AGENCY

The winter torrents simile of Book 4 is not the only simile which manipulates spatial and temporal perspective in order to colour the emotional undertones of the main narrative. In Book 12, the flight of missiles as the Trojans threaten the Greek wall is likened to Zeus sending a snowfall which covers mountains, plains and seashores (12.279–89):

τῶν δ' ὡς τε νιφάδες χιόνος πίπτωσι θαμειαί  
 ἤματι χειμερίῳ, ὅτε τ' ὄρετο μητίετα Ζεὺς  
 νιφέμεν ἀνθρώποισι πιφασκόμενος τὰ ἄ κῆλα·  
 κοιμήσας δ' ἀνέμους χέει ἔμπεδον, ὄφρα καλύψῃ  
 ὑψηλῶν ὄρέων κορυφάς καὶ πρόνας ἄκρους  
 καὶ πεδία λωτοῦντα καὶ ἀνδρῶν πίονα ἔργα,  
 καὶ τ' ἐφ' ἄλός πολιῆς κέχυται λιμέσιν τε καὶ ἄκταϊς,  
 κύμα δέ μιν προσπλάζον ἐρύκεται· ἄλλὰ τε πάντα  
 εἴλυται καθύπερθ', ὅτ' ἐπιβρίση Διὸς ὄμβρος·  
 ὡς τῶν ἀμφοτέρωσθε λίθοι πωτῶντο θαμειαί,  
 αἱ μὲν ἄρ' ἐς Τρώας, αἱ δ' ἐκ Τρώων ἐς Ἀχαιοὺς,  
 βαλλομένων· τὸ δὲ τεῖχος ὑπερ πάν δοῦπος ὀρώρει.

And just as flakes of snow fall thickly  
 On a wintry day, when Zeus the Counsellor sets about to snow,  
 Showing to men these arrows of his,  
 And lulling the winds he sheds continuous flakes,  
 Until he has covered the heads of the lofty mountains and the highest headlands  
 And the lotus-covered plains and the rich fields of men,  
 And even on the grey sea it lies, poured on the harbours and the shores,  
 And the beating wave is warded off; but all else is enfolded from above,  
 When the storm of Zeus falls heavily upon it.  
 Even so to both sides of them stones were flying thickly,  
 Some upon the Trojans, and some from the Trojans upon the Achaeans,  
 Throwing at one another; and over the whole wall a din arose.

<sup>25</sup> See B. Holmes, 'Situating Scamander: "natureculture" in the *Iliad*', *Ramus* 44 (2016), 29–51, especially at 32–6 for the river Scamander as natural force which can override mortal claims to lasting memory, e.g. threatening to whisk Achilles away to death without hope of burial (21.316–23), and washing away the Greek wall (12.13–33).



Like the winter torrents simile, this scene zooms in on a vast, quiet landscape to describe a crowded, noisy battle scene.<sup>26</sup> The analogy here is between the density and speed of the snowflakes falling and the missiles flying across the battle for the Achaean wall. But, as in the case of the winter torrents simile, a closer look at the sensory and perspectival details reveals powerful contrasts. A straightforward comparison between missiles and weather might stress the violence and force of snowfall, agreeing with the narrative context on the level of the *δοῦπος*, ‘din’, that arises from the battle. Instead, this scene is silent and soft. Zeus lulls the winds (*κοιμήσας ... ἀνέμους*), the waves are warded off (*κῦμα ... ἐρύκεται*), prevented from breaking by the snow.<sup>27</sup> Hainsworth specifies that this is not a blizzard but a steady snowfall, ‘diverg[ing] ... remarkably from the narrative’.<sup>28</sup> Like the winter torrents simile, the cold, wintry scene does not quite recall the furious heat of battle.

Unlike the winter torrents simile, there is no human perspective from which the audience might visualize the scene. The phrase *ἀνθρώποισι πικρῶσκέμενος τὰ ἄ κῆλα*, ‘showing forth to men these arrows of his’ (12.281), hints at human witnesses, but only hypothetically. Zeus, conversely, is not only able to see the sweep of mountains, fields and shores which he covers with snow; he is active in causing and controlling the snow. Zeus ‘calls forth’ or ‘bestirs’ the snow (*ὄρνυμι*), and the following verbs continue to refer to Zeus’s action—*πικρῶσκω*, *κοιμάω*, *χέει*, *κολύπτω*. These verbs express agency but not bodily action. For Zeus, thought is immediately motion, as closely connected as thought and bodily motion are to mortals, but played out on a cosmic scale. This scale becomes visible as the simile sweeps over the mountains, headlands, plains and seashores, all visible as one vast, unpopulated landscape from the perspective of Zeus. Mapping onto the narrative context, the battle scene of flying missiles is framed from a great distance above. Again, from the middle of a chaotic battle scene, the audience is suddenly whisked away to view the action from a great, cold distance. From this vantage point, the audience’s attention is redirected towards the gulf between the agency of Zeus, who covers the world in snow with a thought, and the agency of humans, who risk their lives in a hail of missiles.

As well as divine agency, the simile emulates a divine experience of time. This temporal perspective, with which the audience has, of course, no personal familiarity, is made available by spatial perspective. It moves across mountains, plains and seashores in a single sweep—encompassing space which would take hours or days for humans to cross—and encapsulates in a few sentences the process of snow falling from its beginning until (*ὄφρα*) the whole landscape is covered. The effect is a pause in the narrative, from the rush of battle to a quiet contemplation of an open temporal space. Zooming out to this wider spatial and temporal world, a world governed by the thought of Zeus, might remind the audience of the divine machinations behind the Trojan War, and the limited ability of humans to effect meaningful changes. This troubling theme is present throughout the *Iliad*,<sup>29</sup> and here landscape creates a subtle

<sup>26</sup> Martin (n. 2), 50 draws attention to the performative aspect of this simile, in which, as the bT scholia remark, the poet seems to be competing against his own use of a similar, shorter snowfall simile at 12.156. There is no mention of Zeus in this earlier example.

<sup>27</sup> J.B. Hainsworth, *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume III: Books 9–12* (Cambridge, 1993), 348 identifies *ἐρύκεται* as passive.

<sup>28</sup> Hainsworth (n. 27), 347.

<sup>29</sup> As is evident in e.g. the countless divine quarrels with fatal consequences for humans. See Scott (n. 7), 64 for the gap between the plans of gods and of humans as the main theme of Book 2.

tension in the narrative by reminding its audience of human limitations in the middle of a scene centred on human action.

### MOUNTAINTOPS: LANDSCAPE AND THE LIMITATIONS OF HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

The previous sections have explored the way in which landscape similes can interrupt the main narrative, reminding the audience of the precariousness of human lives and the limitations of human agency. This final example will demonstrate a closely related theme: the potential for landscape to reflect the limitations of human perspective. The theme of disparity between divine and human perspectives is clear in direct addresses to the Muses or to the audience, where the poet reminds his listeners that the *Iliad*'s comprehensive view is only available thanks to his artistic skill and divine assistance.<sup>30</sup> But landscape can offer a more concrete image of the differences between divine and human perspectives. At the end of Book 8, after the Trojans have gained ground during the day's fighting, Hector gathers the Trojans in an open space by the river (8.485–96). Contrasting elements of light and darkness draw the listener into this limited space: the light of the sun falls into the ocean (8.485), black night is drawn across the earth (8.486), and Hector's bronze spearpoint blazes (8.493–6). Nightfall and the suspense of waiting for morning also draw the audience into the Trojans' experience of time. Here, they cannot know what will happen the next day—they can only reflect, hope and plan.<sup>31</sup> Hector instructs the Trojans to burn fires to guard their position, and they spend the watchful night with high spirits (μέγα φρονέοντες, 8.554), believing that the Greeks may flee in the night (8.510–11).<sup>32</sup> The following simile describes the Trojan fires (8.555–9):

ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἐν οὐρανῷ ἄστρα φαεινὴν ἀμφὶ σελήνην  
φαίνεται ἄρπυρέα, ὅτε τ' ἔπλετο νήνεμος αἰθήρ·  
ἔκ τ' ἔφανε πᾶσαι σκοπιαὶ καὶ πρόονες ἄκροι  
καὶ νάπαι· οὐρανόθεν δ' ἄρ' ὑπερράγη ἄσπετος αἰθήρ,  
πάντα δὲ εἶδεται ἄστρα, γέγηθε δέ τε φρένα ποιμήν.

And just as when in heaven stars shine bright  
Around the radiant moon, when the ether becomes calm:  
And all the lookout places and the furthest headlands and the glens

<sup>30</sup> Clay (n. 5), 16 and Myers (n. 21), 22–3 observe that Homer attributes the Muses' omniscience to their omnipresence and their ability to see everything at once, while humans see and therefore know little.

<sup>31</sup> As emphasized in Hector's speech by three conditional clauses: εἴσομαι εἴ κέ μ' ὁ Τυδείδης κρατερὸς Διομήδης | πῶρ νηῶν πρὸς τεῖχος ἀπώσεται, 'I shall know if mighty Diomedes son of Tydeus will thrust me away from the ships to the walls' (8.432–3); αὐρίον ἦν ἀρετὴν διαείσεται, εἴ κ' ἐμὸν ἔγχος | μεῖνῃ ἐπερχόμενον, 'tomorrow he shall discern his valour, if he might avoid my advancing spear' (8.535–6); εἰ γὰρ ἐγὼν ὡς | εἶην ἀθάνατος καὶ ἀγήραος ἡματα πάντα ... | ὡς νῦν ἡμέρη ἦδε κακὸν φέρεει Ἀργείοισιν, 'would that I myself might be immortal and ageless all my days ... just as surely as now this day brings evil to the Argives' (8.538–41).

<sup>32</sup> *Il.* 8.548–52, quoted as Homeric by Pl. [?] *Alc.* II, 149D, elaborate that the gods rejected the Trojans' sacrifice on account of their hatred for Troy. These lines have been rejected mostly because the extremity of the gods' position is inconsistent with the rest of the *Iliad* (Kirk [n. 23], 340). However, this addition may indicate ancient and modern commentators' sensitivity to the tragic ignorance of the Trojans.

Are revealed, and the infinite ether is cleft from beneath the sky,  
And all the stars are visible, and the herdsman rejoices in his heart.<sup>33</sup>

Here, the Trojans believe that the fires and the nocturnal sight they afford will allow them to secure their advantage. This image of nocturnal sight over a distance illustrates their hope for security and control over the future, linking sight across time with sight across space.<sup>34</sup> The description offers access to the embodied experience of space as atmosphere—it evokes a phenomenon *in progress*.<sup>35</sup> The ether *becomes* (πέλω) calm, inviting the listener to imagine the wind dropping; the distant places *are revealed* (φαίνω) and the ether is *cleft from beneath* (ὑπορρήγνυμι), inviting the image of clouds parting and revealing the clear sky, rather than a static sky which is already clear. ὑπορρήγνυμι also directs the listener to imagine themselves below the parting ether, just as the surrounding features of lookout places, headlands and glens place the listener at the centre of the landscape. Finally, the poet allows his audience to experience the sense of security more vividly by providing another herdsman as an embodied witness, and prompting them to rejoice alongside him. The dynamism of this scene, as an atmosphere revealing itself around its subject, demonstrates the role that an embodied description of landscape can play in projecting possible outcomes. Embodiment involves the imagination of how we or others might move within or interact with an environment<sup>36</sup>—in the context of war, landscape is a space across which enemies might approach, particularly at night. The palpable openness of the simile’s nocturnal landscape emphasizes the security which comes with sight across a great distance, as does the term σκοπιά which casts the mountaintops specifically as places from which one can look out for danger.<sup>37</sup> While the winter torrents simile of Book 4 and the snowfall simile of Book 12 used spatial perspective to change the flow of narrative time, the clear night simile uses the visibility of landscape to frame the characters’ and the audience’s imagination of the narrative future, encapsulating the hope that sight across space will allow control across time.

<sup>33</sup> These lines may be interpolated from 16.297–302, where Patroclus’ arrival grants the Greeks a reprieve (Kirk [n. 23], 340–1). M.L. West, *Studies in the Text and Transmission of the Iliad* (Munich and Leipzig, 2001), 205 considers the punctual aorists ἔκ τ’ ἔφαθεν and ὑπερρήγη (8.557–8) inappropriate, as the simile refers to a night that is already clear, not in the process of clearing. However, as I show below, there is movement in the scene which encourages the imagination of a clearing in progress. The simile’s depiction of different perspectives and levels of knowledge, building on the contrast in light and darkness in the previous lines, appears fitting here.

<sup>34</sup> I. de Jong, ‘The view from the mountain (*oroskopia*) in Greek and Latin literature’, *CCJ* 64 (2018), 23–48: the view from mountains is a common topos in Greek literature, which is temporal as well as spatial—in Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica*, when the nymphs look down from Pelion on the departure of the Argo, phrases such as ἦματι κείνῳ, ‘on that day (in the past)’, and ἡμιθέων ἀνδρῶν γένος, ‘the generation of demi-gods’, place the scene in the distant past (1.544–52).

<sup>35</sup> Clay (n. 5), 7–8: this bird’s-eye view, rarely available to human characters, transforms a brief moment of human joy into timeless, cosmic beauty.

<sup>36</sup> J. Gibson, *Reasons for Realism: Selected Essays of James J. Gibson*, edd. E. Reed and R. Jones (Hillsdale, NJ, 1982), xiii, 409–11: the environment provides us with *affordances*, e.g. ‘To perceive that a surface is level and solid is also to perceive that it is walk-on-able [i.e. that it “affords” walking]’. Gibson’s observations echo Heidegger’s concept of ‘readiness-to-hand’—the idea that we do not contemplate physical objects in our environments as things but as potential actions which they allow us to perform: M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (transl. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson) (New York, 1968 [1927]), 101. From this perspective, the headlands in the clear night simile are possible pathways of attack or retreat, whose visibility affords a warning system and security.

<sup>37</sup> Consider e.g. prospect-refuge theory, which posits that unobstructed views with multiple vantage points offer humans a sense of security: J. Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London, 1975).

However, the dissonance between this scene and the larger context of Book 8 prompts the listener once again to consider the vulnerability of human characters. At the beginning of Book 8, Zeus goes to Mount Ida to oversee the war (8.47–52). From this vantage point, the audience can share Zeus's long-distance view, taking in Troy and the Greek ships at once. As Zeus watches the battle, the narrative quickens: both sides prepare for battle (8.53–7), the gates open and the Trojans flow from the city with a great din (8.59–60). The meeting of the armies is described again with the line ἔνθα δ' ἄμ' οἰμωγή τε καὶ εὐχολή πέλεν ἀνδρῶν | ὀλλύντων τε καὶ ὀλλυμένων, ῥέε δ' αἷματι γαῖα, 'and then at once arose the wailing and the triumph-cry of men, the slaying and the slain, and the earth flowed with blood' (8.64–5).<sup>38</sup> Hours of fighting and falling are compressed into three lines, with the sun rising from morning to midday with an effect comparable to watching a clock sped up in a film (8.66–8).<sup>39</sup> Like Zeus's perspective in the snowfall simile, this view from the mountain makes a divine perception of space and time available to the audience, and the gulf between divine and human perception prompts the question of whether humans are capable of fully comprehending their situations. Furthermore, Zeus does not only *see* from the mountain—he *controls* from the mountain.<sup>40</sup> At midday, Zeus lifts a pair of scales to weigh the fates of the armies: the Greek side falls to the earth, while the Trojan side rises to heaven (8.73–4), spanning the vertical limits of the world.<sup>41</sup> While the audience know that Zeus is supporting the Trojans because of his oath to Thetis, the scales cast Zeus's support more prominently as the result of chance. This provides a concrete image of the powers at work behind the scenes of mortal experience, and suggests that these powers can have arbitrary motivations. From this perspective, the optimism of the clear night simile for the Trojan fires rings false.

It is not difficult to imagine why such a consideration might increase the foreboding in the *Iliad's* narrative. Greek literature and religion evidence a desire to be able to understand the will of the gods, and to use physical phenomena as a means of insight.<sup>42</sup> Book 8 gains much of its emotional power from this desire, and often questions whether insight is possible: the signs which Zeus sends from Ida during the battle are sometimes helpful, allowing the Greeks to avoid risky encounters, but sometimes misleading,

<sup>38</sup> When this line appeared before the winter torrents simile (4.450–1), the previous lines had positioned the listener among the soldiers—this time, the action is seen from the distant perspective of Zeus on Ida.

<sup>39</sup> The imperfects ἦπτετο and πῖπτε indicate continuous action.

<sup>40</sup> J. Gregory, 'Some aspects of seeing in Euripides' *Bacchae*', *G&R* 32 (1985), 23–31, at 27: the connection between seeing and knowing in ancient Greek thought is demonstrated even in language (εἶδον/οἶδον), as well as the common sentiment in Greek literature that it is better to see something than to rely on reports, e.g. Aesch. *Pers.* 266; Soph. *OT* 6; Eur. *Supp.* 684; Hdt. 1.7.2; Heraclitus DK B 101a. Clay (n. 5), 4: when Zeus goes to Mount Ida to oversee the war in Book 8, the poet goes a step further and links divine sight with control—in Book 13, Zeus relinquishes control by looking away.

<sup>41</sup> Landscape features depict the scale of similar 'behind the scenes' operations in later passages: at 13.350–60 Zeus, still on Mount Ida, supports the Trojans, while Poseidon, λάθρη ὑπεξαναδύς πολιῆς ὀλόγς, 'stealing forth secretly from the grey sea' (13.352), supports the Greeks. The two gods draw the πείρωρ of war over the armies so that neither can gain the advantage. While πείρωρ is a highly *abstract* term referring to the conceptual boundary between mortal and divine experience (C. Bray, 'Limits of dread: ἐσχατιά, πείρωρ, and dangerous edge-space in Homeric formulae', in D. Felton [ed.], *Landscapes of Dread in Classical Antiquity* [London, 2018], 43–54), Mount Ida and the sea provide a *concrete* image of Zeus and Poseidon engaged in a tug-of-war across the whole landscape.

<sup>42</sup> E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford, 2013).

allowing the Trojans to believe that Zeus's support will be lasting.<sup>43</sup> Such signs in the *Iliad* often function more as an ominous signal to the audience than as intelligible information for characters.<sup>44</sup> This tension between the world of human perception and the unknowability of divine purpose culminates in the clear night simile. The dynamic, open atmosphere invites the audience into an embodied experience of Trojan optimism—but it is a tragic experience. Having borrowed Zeus's perspective earlier in Book 8, the audience know what the Trojans cannot know: that their advantage is temporary, and that their city will still fall. Zeus on Ida controlled all that he saw, and the Trojans falsely believe that they might do the same.

## CONCLUSION

Informed by a broadly phenomenological perspective, I have demonstrated that the winter torrents simile, the snowfall simile and the clear night simile contain numerous prompts which invite the listener into an embodied experience of landscape. I have explored how this embodied experience, in turn, opens up a new experience of narrative time. The route perspective of the rivers and their seasonal aspect encourage the audience to spatially and temporally zoom out, framing the battle against the vast scale of nature; Zeus's perspective of a quiet snowstorm covering a wide landscape reveals the ease with which the gods can encapsulate time; and the importance of seeing across a great distance intensifies the impossible human desire to anticipate events and gain control over an uncertain future. These examples are by no means comprehensive—rather, I offer these close readings as a model by which others might identify further examples. Nor do these conclusions relate solely to the similes—the role of landscape in these similes is closely tied to the representation of space in the narrative context. My readings of the battle scene preceding the simile in Book 4 and the episodes of Zeus on Mount Ida earlier in Book 8 suggest that descriptions of landscape in the main narrative could also invite an embodied perspective of narrative space and shifts in narrative time.

Through these readings, I have shown that landscape is an imaginative medium which puts a variety of spatial and temporal information at the poet's disposal. Embodied descriptions of landscape could introduce reflective pauses, considerations of wider scales, and resonance/dissonance between the current scene and other parts of the narrative. In the examples addressed here, I have identified cues in the description of landscape which prompt reflection on human fragility: landscape minimizes the scale of human experience in comparison to nature, decreases the power of human agency in comparison to Zeus, and accentuates the inability of humans to fully comprehend their environment. This is not to suggest that *all* landscapes or all landscape similes in the

<sup>43</sup> When Diomedes considers facing Hector, Zeus sends thunder and lightning, causing Nestor to remark: ἦ οὐ γινώσκεις ὃ τοι ἐκ Διὸς οὐχ ἔπειτ' ἀλκή; 'Do you not perceive that support from Zeus is not with you?' (8.140). As Diomedes continues to deliberate, τρις δ' ἄρ' ἀπ' Ἰδαίων ὄρέων κτύπε μητίετα Ζεὺς, 'three times from the mountains of Ida thundered Zeus the counsellor' (8.170), this time specifically described as a σῆμα ... νίκην for the Trojans (8.171). Hector concludes that the signs mean that Zeus has granted the Trojans victory (8.175–6).

<sup>44</sup> Myers (n. 21), 30–1: Zeus sends blood raining from the sky, οὐνεκ' ἔμελλε | πολλὰς ἰθίμους κεφαλὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν, 'because he was about to hurl many noble men [lit. "heads"] to Hades' (*Il.* 11.52–5), but there is no mention of the soldiers' reaction to this portent—the blood rain is a signal to the audience that this battle will be particularly terrible.

*Iliad* incite contemplation on human fragility, but that a common thread can be identified, whereby landscape offers a powerful, concrete image for the abstract theme of human fragility. As well as offering a new understanding of *how* landscape contributes to this theme, these readings open up new perspectives on Homer's mastery of a rich imaginative device.

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