This discussion begins in the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra. Here in the galleries devoted to the First World War we find a series of dioramas representing significant battles in which Australian forces have been involved, on the Western Front and on the Gallipoli Peninsula, not so distant from the plain of Troy across the strait. As we study these sculpted landscapes of war our attention is held by two aspects of these representations: by the topography itself and by the evidence of human presence, of life experienced. The battlefields represented here are, as we would expect, uniformly bleak and desolate: the terrain is irregular, eaten away by shelling; buildings have been reduced to rubble; instead of the trees and grasses that had once covered the land we see nothing but mud; and here in the mud our eyes linger for a moment on the bodies of the wounded and the dead. Our attention is drawn away, inevitably, to the figures of fighting men, arrested, as it were, in the midst of action: we see them, picked out by subtle lighting effects, moving around below ground level in the trenches (those trenches that characterise World War I operations) and, on the surface, hurling grenades, attending to their guns, striking out across no man’s land, or being overwhelmed by enemy fire (fig. 1).

When they were first displayed, in Melbourne and then Sydney in the 1920s, and eventually, in 1941, in the newly built Australian War Memorial in Canberra, these dioramas were on view in the hush of a museum gallery. Intended for silent contemplation they were devised to give the viewer a sense of what had actually occurred (this was the reality of war) and to have an emotional impact. More recently, however, in a rejection of stillness and silence, the experience has been extended beyond the visual. The galleries...

The Battleground of Troy in the Mind’s Eye: Homer’s Landscape of War

Elizabeth Minchin

(above) Montage using article figures and text.

(right) Fig. 1. Lone Pine diorama at the Australian War Memorial. Image: Australian War Memorial, Public Domain (CC BY-NC 3.0 AU)
in which these models are displayed were refurbished in 2015; they are now filled with recorded sound: the sharp shock of gunfire, the resonance of exploding shells. Each diorama is now accompanied too by interactive electronic displays, which contextualise the battle, evaluate its significance, and list casualty numbers. The experience of the diorama — the scene before one’s eyes, the sounds playing in one’s ears, and the signage — is now more than instructive; it is immersive, absorbing. This is as close as many of us will come to a landscape of war.

The first literary work that has survived to us in the Western tradition was also preoccupied with warfare, with its glory and its pathos, and with its consequences for the lives of those caught up in its wake. Like the creators of the AWM dioramas, the poet of the *Iliad* creates a grim and desolate terrain; unlike the creators of the dioramas, his principal tools are words. My aim in this essay is to analyse how a traditional poet succeeds in creating, in the minds of his audience members, a landscape as grim and as desolate as the small-scale representations we can see in a war museum — and how, using the poetic strategies at his disposal, he can evoke in his audiences powerful emotional responses to those representations of a landscape in which nature is denatured and men suffer and die.

For Homer, landscape is not simply a neutral backdrop to action; it assumes double significance. The poet recognised that one element of landscape is an essential *topography*, for example the series of landmarks that he marks out between the walls of Troy and the ships of the Achaeans. This ‘locative’ information, to use Holly Taylor and Barbara Tversky’s term, will give necessary order and coherence to his telling. The second element of landscape is its role as a *realm of experience*, in which his heroes will fight for glory — and die — as they engage in grim warfare and terrible fighting (πόλεμόν τε κακὸν καὶ φύλοπιν αἰνήν, IV. 15). This realm of experience is structured as a series of overlays, each of which offers images that assist us in visualising this landscape. In considering these two related aspects of the Iliadic landscape of war I draw on some useful insights from cognitive psychology on how we process, and how we generate, narratives that describe spatial environments: I am interested in what it is that we construct in our mind’s eye and how we transmit this image to others.

**THE TOPOGRAPHY OF THE TROJAN PLAIN: HOMER’S LOCATIVE INFORMATION**

Despite the fact that most of the action of the *Iliad* takes place on the battlefield, the epic itself is by no means a ‘one-scene’ tale, to use David Rubin’s phrase. The principal events in Homer’s battle-narrative occur in different locations within the confines of the plain — between strong-founded Ilion with its high walls and the beach, where we find the ships and the shelters. The plain itself, like the battlefields of World War I as they are represented in the AWM, is almost, but not entirely — and this is significant — not entirely, devoid of landmarks: in the expanse between the walls of Troy and the Achaean ditch there is, apart from the Scamander and its ford, a fig tree, an oak tree, a watching-post, and the grave of Troy’s founder, Ilos. This near-desolation is plausible, in the light of years of hand-to-hand fighting; and, by virtue of its economy, it is eminently functional.

An economical representation of landscape is what we should expect of a practising oral poet, who makes it his task to hold in memory all the locations that he identifies in his song. He should be able to recall each location independently and, more importantly, place it in relation to the others on what is referred to in popular parlance as a mental ‘map’ or, as Taylor and Tversky prefer...
to describe it, a ‘spatial mental model’. Each of these locations serves a double purpose: each one in some way represents a narrative ‘staging post’, the appropriate setting in which some element of the action unfolds; and each one operates as a retrieval cue for the material of his tale, in the same way that Cicero used loci and imagines as a mnemonic system. I shall address these points separately.

Although exact spatial references, so critical to the fabricant of a diorama, are not important to the poet, or to his audience, it is clear that the poet knows the Trojan plain well. He knows it so well that he can lead his audience in a linear fashion along a variety of routes, crossing it back and forth from Troy to the ships of the Achaeans, and from side to side: we can follow the short route taken by the Embassy, as they walk along the shore from Agamemnon’s hut to Achilles’ ships and his shelter (IX. 177–85), Priam and Idaeus’s longer journey from the city to that same shelter (XXIV. 322–447), or the movement of the opposing forces, and even of individual heroes, back and forth across the battlefield at any one point in time.

A route description, as outlined above, offers one perspective on landscape. But the poet asks us to adopt as well a bird’s eye, or survey, perspective, as he does when Priam and the Trojan elders sit on the tower at the Scaean gates, overlooking the Trojan plain, and ask Helen to identify individual Achaean heroes assembled there (III. 146–244); or when Menelaus, responding to Ajax’s suggestion, goes in search of Antilochus, who will bear the news of Patroclus’ death to Achilles (XVII. 651–81). The poet compares Menelaus to an eagle, who hovers in the air, seeking his prey: indeed a bird’s eye view. Later in the poem, Priam takes his place again on the walls (XXII. 25) and watches as the Trojans retreat in flight to the safety of the city, with Achilles behind them, sweeping across the plain. Priam is joined by Hecuba, and together they beseech their son from above to leave his position outside the walls in front of the gates (38–91); and from here they watch as Hector meets his death. Later still Andromache hurries to the wall, full of foreboding (447–61). She too stands and gazes out over the plain, only to see the body of her husband now being dragged away behind Achilles’ chariot and out towards the ships (463–65).

The long-range, even telescopic, perspective of the gods completes the mental model. They view the contest from the lofty vantage point on Olympus (XXIV. 23), or come down to earth to watch from Mount Ida, behind Troy (Zeus, at VIII. 47–52, XI. 181–84), or from the island of Samothrace (Poseidon, at XIII. 10–14):

Neither did the powerful earthshaker keep a blind watch; for he sat and admired the fighting and the run of battle, aloft on top of the highest summit of timbered Samos, the Thracian place; and from there all Ida appeared before him, and the city of Priam was plain to see, and the ships of the Achaeans.

And, indeed, we must include in our model the depths of the sea, Poseidon’s realm, where Achilles’ mother Thetis also dwells (I. 357–8). Thus, through both route and survey information, the poet enables us to do more than develop a two-dimensional ‘map’ of the Trojan plain; we slowly build something like the poet’s own three-dimensional spatial mental model, which enables us to follow with relative ease the story he tells.

As for the features of the landscape identified by the poet, they serve as the bases for the organisation of his narrative. Unlike many storytellers who compose in writing, the oral poet takes pains to establish a setting, minimal as it may be, for each episode; he notes each change of scene. It is by these means that he counters the potential for confusion, for himself, as he tells his tale, and for his audience, as they follow him.

Thus, for example, the tomb of Ilos serves as a focus for action: the Trojan elders, according to Dolon, hold council here on the battlefield by night (X. 414–16); the tomb serves as the waymark as the Trojans flee in panic back to the safety of the city walls (XI. 166–68), and, in the other direction, as Priam sets out on his night-time journey to Achilles (XXIV. 349). The ford on the Scamander is another such site: when Hector is struck by the rock Ajax hurls he collapses (XIV. 409–13). He is carried from the
fighting in his chariot. Only when the horses are stopped at the ford on the Scamander does the hero regain consciousness (433–39). It is here that Apollo later finds him and restores his strength (XV. 239–42); it is here too that Priam and Idaeus encounter Hermes (XXIV. 350–53) and where Hermes, next morning, leaves them (692–94). In each case, the landmark not only serves to keep the story in good order; it also prompts the poet’s memory for the episode itself.

LANDSCAPE AS A REALM OF EXPERIENCE: HOMER’S NONLOCATIVE INFORMATION

George Miller, the cognitive psychologist, tells us that, as he reads a detailed description of a landscape, the ‘image’ (as he calls it) that he conjures up in his mind’s eye cannot correspond in all its details to what is set out in the text; according to Miller, what he ‘sees’ is in many respects a generic representation of landscape; he doesn’t fill in all the details. We all recognise Miller’s impatience with prolonged description. It seems to me that the poet of the Iliad also recognised this, although intuitively. He has not invested poetic energy in locating and generating detailed material of a purely descriptive kind. His landscape is, we conclude, bleak and bare. He gives us only a little explicit nonlocative information about the Trojan plain. At several points the poet tells us that the plain is dusty (no rain, we notice, falls during the fighting). So, as the Achaeans rush to the ships in response to Agamemnon’s test of their will (II. 149–51), they raise the dust (150); they are white with dust (V. 503) as their horses wheel about on the plain; Asios in death claws at the bloody dust (XIII. 393); Sarpedon falls and claws the bloody dust (XVI. 486); and, finally, Hector drops in the dust (XXII. 330); and, as he is dragged behind the hero’s chariot, his whole head is covered in dust (405). During the days of fighting this dusty surface at times runs with the blood of the wounded (IV. 451). The only natural feature here, apart from the landmark trees I noted above, are the stones that serve as useful missiles: see, for example, III. 79–80; IV. 518–19; XII. 154–55.

All descriptive material is presented incidentally; each descriptor is built into the narrative: a dying hero claws at the bloody dust; another is felled by a stone casually taken up from the ground; as Hector’s body is dragged to the ships it stirs up the dust. As is the case with the dioramas of the AWM, however, the landscape assumes a more complex — and grimmer — character when the poet includes the presence of the Achaean and Trojan heroes. As the army of the Achaeans hastens to assemble, the bronze of their armour gleams (II. 457–58; IV. 431–2; XX. 156). In the press of fighting we see in our mind’s eye the tangled knot of men (XVII. 679–80); we see weapons hurled (for example, IV. 459–62), horses brought down (16.467–9), men falling (for example, IV. 462); we see...
shocking wounds (for example, XI. 97–8), and contests over the dead (IV. 403–72), whose bodies are pulled and tugged in all directions (XVII. 380–95). And, at some points of the narrative, we see the terrain strewn (XXI. 344) with the corpses of the fallen.

These images of action in the landscape are intensified by the poet’s similes that compare the gathering of the fighting men to swarms of bees (II. 87–90), or of wasps by the roadside (XVI. 259–62), or that compare the force of the attack of one or the other side to a blazing fire (XI. 596; XVII. 736–39). At some moments Achaeans and Trojans are evenly matched: a comparison with the battle between the east and south wind (XVI. 765–69) allows us to envisage the closeness of the contests. At other moments it is one side that carries the day: Hector comes on against the Achaeans like a rolling stone on a rock face (XIII. 137–42). As battle rages, we observe the lust for slaughter, as a hero moves through the throng like a wolf amongst lambs (XVI. 352–55) or a lion amongst cattle (XI. 172–76; XV. 630–36). These similes, by virtue of their readily picturable images of the destructive force of nature, and by virtue of repetition (the essential repetition of the central narrative idea), assist us in building up a more complex mental representation of the Trojan plain under siege.

In discussing how an individual builds a scene in his or her mind’s eye using nonlocative information, Tversky proposes the metaphor of a ‘cognitive collage’; she describes such a collage as a sequence of ‘thematic overlays of multimedia from different points of view.’ Like the elements of a collage, this information may be multiform and partial, representing the focalisation now of the narrator, now of one of his characters; it is unlikely, Tversky notes, that it could be organised into a single coherent maplike cognitive structure. I propose that Homer’s accounts of action in the landscape of the Trojan plain (such as we have seen above) and the similes that describe them could be viewed as separate overlays of just such a cognitive collage. Thus the poet counters his audience’s unwillingness to process and to work with detailed description. These multimedia overlays in their variety invite us to create our own mental representation of this landscape of war.

But the poet does not rely on visual effects alone. He presents us also with a soundscape. We hear the thunder (XIX. 363–4) of an army on the move; the thunder of horses on the run (XVI. 393; XVII. 740–41); the ‘unearthly clamour’ of men (VIII. 150=II. 252=XIII. 834=XV. 590); the calling of man to man in the thick of battle (8.346–7; 15.424, 658), their appeals to the gods (VIII. 346–347); shouts and threats and vaunts in the thick of the contest (IV. 450; XVI. 565–66); the notes of terror in their voices (XVI. 737–74; XVII. 756, 759); the battering and clashing of shields by spears, swords, arrows, and stones (IV. 447; XII. 338; XVI. 774); the screams of horses — and men — as they are killed (IV. 450; XVI. 468–69); and the crash of armour as a great hero falls (IV. 504=V. 42=XIII. 187). A certain amount of onomatopoeia — in expressions that capture the battering and clattering, the shrieking and shouting (οἰμωγή, IV. 450; ομερδόν βοῶν, XV. 732), the whistling of arrows and the thump of spears (διστῶν τε ῥοῖζον καὶ δοῦπον ἀκόντων, XVI. 361), and the impact of battle action on the earth beneath — ensures that the din of battle resonates, automatically, in our senses. The soundtrack of the Iliad is as important to our engagement with this landscape of war as are the poet’s visual effects. This was brought home to me quite emphatically after I had viewed the dioramas of the AWM — allowing the recorded sounds of combat to play in my ear — and then re-read Homer’s descriptions of battle.

Was the landscape of the Trojan plain always like this? What was it like before the Achaeans came? Although the poet on one occasion refers to the plain of Troy as ‘bountiful earth’ (III. 89), it is hard to reconcile this descriptor with that trampled terrain. The Trojan plain, rather than a source of life, is now in its tenth year a witness to death. And the poet plays with this idea. Just...
as he builds pathos into the lives and fates of the heroes, so, through a range of strategies, he builds pathos into the landscape itself.  

Let me take you to a critical moment late in the poem. When Achilles pursues Hector around the city, the two men run a little way out from the wall, past the watch-post, past the fig tree (XXII. 145–46), and, now away from the plain, past the two springs—one hot, one cold—that feed the city’s washing pools (147–56):

> There there are double springs of water that jet up, the springs of whirling Skamandros.
> One of these runs hot water and the steam on all sides
> of it rises as if from a fire that was burning inside it.
> But the other in the summer-time runs water that is like hail or chill snow or ice that forms from water.
> Besides these is this place, and close to them, are the washing-hollows
> of stone, and magnificent, where the wives of the Trojans and their lovely daughters washed the clothes to shining, in the old days when there was peace, before the coming of the Achaians.

The narrator, remarkably, lingers first over a description of these springs, and, then, over a description of the pools, insisting on their proximity to the marvellous springs. Now introducing human action into the scene, to fix it in our minds, he goes on to tell us that the wives and daughters of the Trojans used to come here to wash their garments. But that was in the past, when there was peace, before the Achaians came. This is the pathos of contrasts: the natural wonder of the setting and the memory of the orderly and companionable activities once carried out here in carefree security are overlaid on the scene before our eyes, a vision of desperation in what is now a hostile environment. And, soon in the telling, the poet will bring Hector once more to this very spot, for the last time (208), to meet his death.

But, even in a time of war, there are moments when the landscape of the Trojan plain takes on a kinder guise. On an earlier day of fighting, when the Trojans have pursued the Achaians back to their ships at nightfall, Hector pauses by the river and calls an assembly in a place relatively clear of the fallen (VIII. 491). He proposes to his men that they make camp right there, on the open ground. The Trojans free their horses from their harness, tethering each one to his chariot, and throw down fodder (543–44). For themselves, they bring out from the city oxen and fat sheep, and, from their houses, they bring...
wine and provisions (545–47). They light their fires, make sacrifice, and prepare their meal. And, comparing the blaze of their many watch-fires to the numberless stars in the night sky, when ‘endless bright air spills from the heavens and all the stars are seen’ (558–59), the poet creates a scene poignant in its serenity. We imagine the crackling of flames, the sound of flutes and pipes, and the companionable murmur of voices (X. 13), and the rustle of men as they move about (X. 189). This break in the chaotic routines of battle offers respite to the Trojans, and a brief but wary glimpse of a different way of living. But even as we take in the grandeur of this nocturnal landscape and its gentler soundscape, we understand that this is temporary respite for the Trojan heroes; the din of battle, we know, will inevitably resume.

Finally, the poet, throughout the *Iliad*, suggests alternatives to the landscape of war that confronts us on the Trojan plain. He achieves this by two means, the first of which is a particular selection of similes. These are not the similes that I discussed above, which recreate scenes of violence and terror. I am referring here to similes that remind us of the productive aspects of nature and of the men and women who harness it. Through their pointed contrast with warfare these glimpses of what is not allow us to see what once was or what might have been; they highlight the tragic consequences of making war. In the sheep pens in spring, as the pails froth with milk, thousands of insects swarm around them (so the Achaeans gather in their thousands to take up the fight once more, II. 469–73); a donkey who has strayed into a field of grain cannot be shifted by a cluster of young boys — not until it has eaten its fill (so Ajax retreats very reluctantly in the face of the Trojans, XI. 558–62); on the threshing floor the wind scatters the chaff and separates it from the grain, and the piles of chaff mount up, all white (so the Achaeans are whitened by the dust as their horses drive across the plain, V. 499–502). These images open a window, for a brief moment, onto a landscape of productive activity, a landscape that observes cycles of seasons, and that works with, not against, nature. Through a telling juxtaposition, of the worlds of peace and war, the narrator, with no further commentary, makes his point: war has the capacity to destroy the land that supports us.

*Fig. 5. Heinrich Schliemann, ‘Troy as seen from the Hellenic theatre’ (1881)*
These images of nature’s bountiful landscapes are drawn together and recapitulated with a certain unique intensity in the tightly focussed series of images the god Hephaestus works on the shield of Achilles (XVIII. 541–89): the image of the triple-ploughed field, where teams of ploughmen work, of men reaping, and of the binding of sheaves; of the vineyard with its cluster of grapes ready for the harvest; of cattle at pasture by the river and of sheep flocks in their meadow.

CONCLUSIONS: LANGUAGE AS A SURROGATE FOR EXPERIENCE

What has interested me as I have compared my immersive experience of landscapes of war as represented at the AWM and as represented in the text of the Iliad is the remarkable capacity of the poet to generate information that allows listeners or readers to recreate in their own mind’s eye a three-dimensional topographical model. If we audience members are to follow the narrative in all its detail, it is essential that we have such a model in mind. As for the terrain, the poet remarks on it only too briefly. And yet he leaves us with a vivid impression. Just as the fabricant of a diorama brings his scenes to life through the depiction of human action, so the poet offers an account of action in the landscape. And he intensifies his scene through a strategic use of vivid comparisons, especially with phenomena of the natural world. Like the curators in the diorama galleries at the AWM, the poet of the Iliad ensures that the soundscape of warfare rings in our ears. But he can offer more. He has devised strategies for conveying affect: through the comparisons, the images and the memories that he evokes he encourages us to observe for ourselves what happens to a landscape subjected to the destructive power of war; he invites us to register the pathos, the poignancy, and the pain of loss. Responding to the multiform cues that the poet has offered us, we create our own ‘cognitive collage’, which represents that Iliadic landscape of war in all its complexity. Herein lies the special power of this immersive experience.

1. These dioramas of distant fields of war represent the vision of Charles Bean, the Australian official war correspondent for World War I and subsequently the founder of the Australian War Memorial: Laura Back and Laura Webster, Moments in Time: Dioramas at the Australian War Memorial (Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2008), pp. 7–8.

2. This is not surprising. Psychology tells us that human figures (and their faces) are given special and sustained perceptual attention by viewers of scenes of all kinds: Sue Fletcher-Watson, John M. Findlay, Susan R. Leekam and Valerie Benson, ‘Rapid Detection of Person Information in a Naturalistic Scene’, Perception, 37 (2008), 580–82.


4. I thank Ryan Johnston, then Head of Art at the AWM, for giving up time to talk to me about the World War I dioramas from a curatorial perspective.

5. The poet, in performance, would have used gesture and facial expression to add weight to his words.

6. For the terms ‘locative’ and ‘nonlocative’, see Holly A. Taylor and Barbara Tversky, ‘Spatial Mental Models Derived from Survey and Route Descriptions’, Journal of Memory and Language, 31 (1992), 263: locative information refers to spatial relationships; elaborative details about the environment are classified as nonlocative information.


8. Taylor and Tversky, ‘Spatial Mental Models’, p. 289: this more nuanced term captures spatial relations and allows for different perspectives.


15. Jane Austen, for example, feels no need to be precise about location (cf. the first memorable — but unlocated — conversation in *Pride and Prejudice*, between Mr and Mrs Bennet).


