

‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy’: The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s *Dart*

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Abstract

In her long poem *Dart*, Alice Oswald focuses on the mutual relation between humankind and their natural environment, thus evoking a profound eco-consciousness through poetic means. By following the course of the river Dart from source to sea, the poem becomes a ‘songline’ in which the voices of various persons, who work and live with the river, merge into the all-embracing voice of the Dart. Strongly connected to the river’s song is its self that comes into being only through the other selves entering the stream and merging into one fluid identity that can express itself through others. As a result, landscape, animals and human beings are presented as fundamentally interdependent by constituting one self-contained ecosystem.

Hence, the aim of this paper will be to elucidate the coalescence of the human and the natural that is generated through the self-articulation of the river Dart. A theoretical context will be provided by discussing Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical approach to the relation between nature and language. Based on his concept of *adéquation*, a closer examination of the Dart’s voice will reveal the river’s animistic nature in which the anthropocentric and the ecocentric merge. The subsequent analysis of selected text passages will relate these ecocritical aspects to the river in terms of its depiction as a self-conscious spiritual being and a spatial entity that is experienced physically. In conclusion, the temporality of the Dart, exemplified through its mythological dimension, will be examined.

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The fact that the relation between humankind and nature is becoming increasingly precarious constitutes a predicament of which literature has been aware for quite some time now. In her long poem *Dart*, for example, the contemporary poet Alice Oswald draws on a highly imaginative way of presenting its relevancy. As her poem mirrors the course of the river Dart from source to sea, it becomes a ‘songline’ in which the voices of various persons living with the river coalesce into one single voice, namely that of the Dart itself. Strongly connected to the river’s song is its self that comes into being only through the other selves entering the stream and merging into one fluid identity. The result is a poetic portrayal of an ecosystem, in which landscape, animals and human beings are essentially interdependent and form one single whole. With this poetisation of the relation between humanity and nature, Oswald evokes a profound eco-consciousness within the reader. Therefore, the important question arises how the creation as well as the cultivation of such an awareness can be achieved through poetry in the first place. Hence, the aim of this paper will be to elucidate the coalescence of humankind and nature, which is generated through the self-articulation of the Dart. In a first step, some preliminary considerations regarding the relation between the anthropocentric and the ecocentric will be provided. The subsequent analysis of selected text passages will relate these ecocritical aspects

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to the river in terms of its depiction as a spiritual being, a physical place and the stream of time itself.

The intricate relation between language and nature is an issue particularly important for environmental writing whose principal object of representation consists in a nonconceptual entity different from and opposed to the intellect. In his ecocritical works, Lawrence Buell tries to offer a solution to the question how writing can approach the world and depict it adequately. On the one hand, he rejects classic realism and its dogma that a text has to accurately mirror the outside world because ‘even designedly “realistic” texts cannot avoid being heavily mediated refractions of the palpable world. ... Languages are culturally coded symbol systems.’¹ Every external phenomenon first perceived and then articulated is thus automatically filtered through the one’s cognitive apparatus and socially constructed language. On the other hand, Buell claims that certain mimetic and referential qualities are nonetheless indispensable for environmental writing.² As a result, he proposes a middle-way, which he designates the text’s ‘dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation.’³ This means that environmental writing is not supposed to just photographically mirror the outside world but that, while still referring to it, it should represent it in an imaginative and poetic discourse. Such a combination of mimesis and stylisation is summarised under the term ‘*adéquation*: verbalizations that are not replicas but equivalents of the world of objects, such that writing in some measure bridges the abyss that inevitably yawns between language and the object-world.’⁴

In contrast to rational and prosaic language, which tries to describe its object most accurately by creating a textual replica, an *adéquation* results from the use of figurative language and is thus aware of its own constructedness and intermediary role between subject and world. It does not define living nature as a fact or exhaust its meaning completely by attempting to force it into a fixed and constructed linguistic pattern. Instead, it only circumscribes and thereby approximates the object to which it refers by applying an image that, in its semantic relation to the phenomenon, remains flexible and never determinate. A metaphor does not depict something as it really is but imaginatively evokes an impression that correlates with the object to which it refers. Hence, Hubert Zapf aptly concludes that ‘the textual exploration of the relationship between conscious self and unconscious nature can therefore be performed only as a potentially endless process of analogy-building and figurative discovery.’⁵

This infinite approximation of poetic language concurrently signifies its going-beyond-itself. The image produced is an *adéquation* of nature’s liveliness as it denies to be pinpointed in its semantic content – like nature and life, which cannot be fully grasped because they are perpetually self-generating processes. The reader simply feels this vividness because the impression produced is itself alive. This somewhat emotional reaction results from the fact that the image does not merely address the intellect but also, and substantially, the imagination,

¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 33.

² Buell, *Environmental Criticism* 36.

³ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 92.

⁴ Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 98.

⁵ Hubert Zapf, ‘Literature as Cultural Ecology: Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts with Examples from American Literature,’ *Literary History/Cultural History: Force-Fields and Tensions. REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 17 (2001) 88.

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through which an object can be apprehended on an aesthetic level. That the imagination thus constitutes the link between the human and the natural world has already been claimed by the Romantic poet S.T. Coleridge: the imagination is ‘essentially *vital*’⁶ since its rules ‘are themselves the very powers of growth and production.’⁷ Nature and imagination correspond in so far as they both constitute vibrant processes of creation, the former being material and the latter ideational.

Therefore, Buell states that ‘one has to imagine. ... Not in order to create an alternative reality but to see what without the aid of the imagination isn’t likely to be seen at all.’⁸ What lies irreconizable for rational language is humankind’s ‘environmental bonding’⁹, which can only be unveiled if one’s relation to the world becomes aesthetic. This union unfolds because poetic language engenders an emotional participation of the reader in the image which equals nature’s all-embracing vitality. In doing so, one realises that oneself is part of living nature. Concerning this matter, the literary critic Northrop Frye states something similar: the imagination allows humans to ‘recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of man, or something identical with the mind of man.’¹⁰ The fact that Frye mentions a ‘full consciousness’ confirms that this coalescence cannot occur on a merely intellectual level; rather, an individual’s whole being must be affected.

By endowing the Dart, a material object existing in the South West of Great Britain, with a voice that comprises many other voices, Oswald creates an *adéquation* that transcends literal mimesis through poetic means. As a result, the Dart becomes intuitively palpable because it is more than just a physical entity. Furthermore, the river’s voice can be viewed as a poetic instantiation of animism which implies ‘that all the phenomenal world is alive in the sense of being inspirited’ and ‘filled with articulate subjects, able to communicate with humans.’¹¹ In consequence, the muttering Dart is no mere reflector in which humanity beholds its own self; rather, it reveals that both, nature and human beings, share a spiritual basis.¹² Yet, in order to sense this all-pervading spirit, one’s understanding as well as imagination and emotion must be affected through the use of figurative language. Bestowing a voice on the river therefore functions as a kind of translation of the natural into the human, allowing for mutual communication that would be impossible without this common substructure.

This shift away from anthropocentrism to a more ecocentric perspective considers the world ‘an intrinsically dynamic interconnected web ... in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between ... the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman.’¹³ The poem thus challenges the view that ‘being a speaking subject is jealously

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions in Two Volumes*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) I.304.

⁷ Coleridge, *Biographia* II.84.

⁸ Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 102.

⁹ Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 98.

¹⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC, 1961) 9.

¹¹ Christopher Manes, ‘Nature and Silence,’ *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) 17-18.

¹² Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 192.

¹³ Robin Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Towards an Ecocentric Approach* (London: UCL Press, 1993) 49.

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guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.’¹⁴ Denying humankind’s predominant role, *Dart* rather suggests a kind of ontological humility that is founded on an equality in which the anthropocentric and the ecocentric reconcile in an environmental perspective. As a result, Oswald’s ‘making the inarticulate articulate ... emphasizes the need for the human and the natural worlds to be on respectful terms with one another.’¹⁵

The *adéquation* between voice and river is based on the fact that both entities are in constant flux; the one of streaming water, the other of flowing words. Indeed, the poem begins with the assertion that the Dart is ‘lying low in darkness ... trying to summon itself by speaking’¹⁶, which directly establishes a congruence between speech and river as their origin is based on a mutual evocation; the river begins to emanate as the voice starts to sound and vice versa. In addition, the murkiness in which the river lies corresponds to the indeterminable source of speech where a transformation occurs from the material organ into sound in the act of pronunciation. This vagueness is emphasised by the very first line of the poem: ‘Who’s this moving alive over the moor?’ (1) Beginning with a question, the Dart’s first mutterings reflect its obscure source from which both, voice and river, start to manifest themselves. Their dynamic and unfettered flow throughout the poem is mirrored by the almost complete absence of punctuation.¹⁷ Ben Smith appositely recapitulates these textual equivalents of the river: ‘Writing with total accuracy *about* water may prove impossible, but Oswald’s use of the songline affords her an alternative method, allowing her to write *with* water by replicating its movements and forms.’¹⁸

This apparent instance of *adéquation* is underscored by the fact that every human voice naturally possesses a unique rhythm and intonation which, according to Theodor Schwenk, can be observed in streams, too: ‘The rhythm of its meanders is a part of the individual nature of a river. In a wide valley a river will swing in far-flung curves, whereas a narrow valley will cause it to wind to and fro in a “faster” rhythm.’¹⁹ Connected to the energetic movement of the river, this rhythm is never static but constantly changes, which is reflected in the poem’s form. Instead of having one stable metre or shape, it alternates between ‘long and short lined verse, prose poetry, rhyming couplets, stanzas with repeated refrains and even the fixed forms of sonnets and ballads.’²⁰ In consequence, these textual equivalents of the river’s natural flux ‘give the impression that it [the poem] is constantly in motion, like the river itself, and impart a profoundly dynamic sense ... of collisions and confluences.’²¹

Moreover, an analogy can be established between the river and the stream of thought since speech is principally based on the conceptual structure of the understanding. Schwenk points out

¹⁴ Manes 15.

¹⁵ Andrew Motion, ‘The Poem and the Path,’ *The Hudson Review* 63.1 (2010) 19-54, 18 July 2016. 54.

¹⁶ Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 1. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

¹⁷ Janne Stigen Drangsholt, ‘Sounding the Landscape: Dis-placement in the Poetry of Alice Oswald,’ *Crisis in Contemporary Poetry* ed. Anne Karhio, Seán Crosson, and Charles I. Armstrong (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 170.

¹⁸ Ben Oliver Sebastian Smith, ‘Beating the Bounds: Exploring Borders and Scale in Contemporary British Environmental Poetry,’ diss., U of Exeter, 2012, 64.

¹⁹ Theodor Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water & Air* trans. Olive Whicher and Johanna Wrigley (London: Schocken Books, 1976) 15.

²⁰ Smith 66.

²¹ Neal Alexander, ‘Contemporary British Poetry and the Senses of Place,’ *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English* 2.1 (2014) 3-29, 18 July 2016. 8.

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that ‘the activity of thinking is essentially an expression of flowing movement. ... The capacity of water in the realm of substance to dissolve and bind together reappears in thinking as a spiritual activity.’²² Through the Dart’s lively flow corresponding to an incessant stream-of-consciousness, the river’s spiritual essence and the animistic principle in Oswald’s poem become even more apparent. In one passage, the Dart reflects on its own being as a constant stream, which illustrates the interconnectedness between flux, thought and voice:

why is this jostling procession of waters,
its many strands overclambering one another,
so many word-marks, momentary traces
in wind-script of the world’s voices

...

why is it so sedulously clattering
so like a man mechanically muttering
so sighing, so endlessly seeking
to hinge his fantasies to his speaking (42)

Evident at first sight is the constant use of progressive participles, which in the second half of the quote create a parallelism and two rhyming couplets, thus emphasising the incessant flow of the river. This flux is personified when the waters are said to scramble and climb over each other, which renders it more intuitively palpable as this personification reveals a subtle identification between nature and humanity. This is even more stressed in the following two lines when these movements are compared with a multitude of words read aloud by the voices of the world. Hence, one could argue that the liquid stream of the Dart, which simultaneously constitutes its voice, expresses these words by virtue of its flowing motion. That it does in fact speak is illustrated by a simile in the second half of the quote likening the river to a ‘man mechanically muttering’. The alliterative and onomatopoeic character of this line – as well as that of the accumulation of ‘s’-sounds in the subsequent one emphasising the river’s sighs – mirrors the audibility of the Dart’s speech. A few lines further on the Dart is

so caught in this dialogue that keeps
washing into the cracks of their lips
and spinning in the small hollows
of their ears and egos
this huge vascular structure (42)

The use of enjambements intricately connecting every line underscores the stream’s meandering and, metaphorically, its interweaving with the human voices. This process is illustrated with words from the semantic field of nature so that speaking is seen in natural terms like a liquid flow of words and phrases. The following lines describe human corporeality – the blood vessels – being permeated by the streams of water, thereby underlining the life-giving character of the river. Referring to this issue, Schwenk explains that water does indeed interconnect the environment and all living creatures in it because they ‘are vascular systems through which

²² Schwenk 96-97.

water, the blood of the earth, streams in living interplay with the atmosphere. Together earth, plant world and atmosphere form a single great organism, in which water streams like living blood.’²³ Apart from this physical dimension, the Dart also pervades everyone’s ego, which, on the one hand, equates the river’s fluidity with the human stream-of-consciousness and, on the other, portrays every single self as essentially being a part in this universal stream.

Since the river is portrayed as an animate and personified entity that can think and speak as it flows, one could go so far as to ascribe an inner self to it. According to the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, however, a self hidden beneath a surface remains a not fully realised one since its completion requires an act of becoming aware of itself. Applying Hegel’s general thoughts to the poem as a whole, one could argue that the river’s voice and the many individual voices it comprises are dialectically related, thus establishing a dynamic movement of self-reflection. The one cannot articulate itself without the other. The river, in expressing itself through the people’s voices, comes out of itself and finds itself in the other so that it can also recognise itself through the other. Its self-reflection is achieved because all human voices, which alternately emerge during its flow, constantly refer to the Dart so that the river is confronted with itself through the other. By this process of othering, the Dart simultaneously suspends its otherness and comes back to itself on a higher level of consciousness. Having incorporated the other in itself, it is no longer merely in itself but also for itself. It has attained self-awareness through a reciprocal and intersubjective movement.²⁴ Concurrently, this dialectic applies to the human speakers, too, because their self-consciousnesses can only be achieved when their voices partake in the river’s self-reflection and are dissolved in the all-embracing speech of the Dart. The result is an essentially interdependent relation between humans and river that is based on a mutual recognition of the other as the vital prerequisite for their full realisation. Hegel connects this interrelatedness with an underlying spirit:

With this, we already have before us the Notion of *Spirit*. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’.²⁵

Indeed, the Dart can only be an I or a self because it simultaneously is a We, meaning that intersubjectivity and subjectivity stand in a reciprocal relation. Coleridge aptly calls this holistic principle ‘unity in multitude,’²⁶ by which he does not maintain that oneness entails indifference and uniformity. Instead, this principle unifies the diversity of numerous elements striving for individuation under one living and perpetually expanding wholeness. This self-generation also pertains to the liquid self of the Dart, which is never stagnant. Instead, it is a continuous process, a ‘state of being-towards,’²⁷ constantly propelled by the dialectic mirroring between humans

²³ Schwenk 14.

²⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 111-112.

²⁵ Hegel 110.

²⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘On Poesy or Art,’ *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism* ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936) 215.

²⁷ Heather H. Yeung, ‘Affective Mapping: Voice, Space, and Contemporary British Lyric Poetry,’ *diss.*, Durham U, 2011, 203.

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and river. Otherwise, it would cease to be a complete self: 'For the real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.'²⁸ Wholeness must necessarily incorporate its own process of becoming, which signifies its vividness in the first place.

This incessant mutability furthermore denies the river a stable identity that can be entirely determined.²⁹ Rather, its identity consists in the very fact that it perpetually transforms itself. These observations lead Smith to the assertion that the river functions 'as a creative border space where the boundaries between self, voice and environment become blurred. ... the river Dart becomes a space of transformation, where Oswald draws on the classical theme of metamorphosis.'³⁰ The principle of metamorphosis becomes more apparent with regard to the poem's persona. Although the first-person pronoun continuously emerges throughout the songline, it does not signify one single and stable persona; instead, it constitutes a variable that can stand for different subjectivities as they come and go with the river's flow.³¹ Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between the speaking subjects because they always reveal their individuality through their idiosyncratic use of language including rhythm, vocabulary and grammar. An example of this can be observed at the beginning of the poem when the walker's voice merges into the river's:

An old man, fifty years a mountaineer, until my heart gave out,
so now I've taken to the moors. I've done all the walks, the Two
Moors Way, the Tors, this long winding line the Dart

this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound I
won't let go of man, under
his soakaway ears and his eye ledges working
into the drift of his thinking, wanting his heart (1)

While the walker thematises the river by referring to its meandering movement, he himself becomes a part of its stream when the first-person pronoun changes into that of the Dart speaking. As soon as the river slips into the role of the speaker, it rises from the reeds and becomes alive through self-articulation, the beginning of sound. Moreover, the Dart underscores its fusion with the walker when explaining that it enters his mind, which again links it to the stream of thought. Yet, not only do they coalesce on a spiritual level but on an emotional one as well. In the first line of the quote, the walker states that 'his heart gave out', meaning that he himself offers his heart to the river, which, as the latter maintains in the last line, is what it basically intends. Thus, the greater self that results from the interrelation between Dart and walker can be seen as an entity that preserves each of its elements even beyond death. The lack of punctuation, the use of enjambements and participles textually mirror the dynamic flow of the river and its fluid, hence almost unnoticeable, metamorphosis. Notwithstanding these unifying elements, the singularity of both, walker and river, can be perceived, too. The former's speech is

²⁸ Hegel 2.

²⁹ Drangsholt 174.

³⁰ Smith 59.

³¹ Yeung 204.

quite prosaic, easily comprehensible and possesses a clearly structured syntax whereas the latter's voice is much more poetic and grammatically intricate. Every individual is incorporated into the Dart's process of becoming when the river itself makes this the theme of its self-reflexive speech on the poem's last page:

This is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy,

all names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,
whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,
driving my many selves from cave to cave ... (48)

Even though the Dart defies a precise self-designation, it does not reject identity. Rather, these lines illustrate 'an affirmation of identity as a process of becoming.'³² By referring to the Greek god Proteus, who is capable of assuming various shapes, the river identifies its own changeability as the vital prerequisite for creating a self in the first place. It is crucial that this insight occurs at the end of the poem because the dialectical progress has now passed through every speaker, thus culminating in the attainment of self-consciousness. This self is necessarily intersubjective because it comprises many selves between which it must alternate in order to dynamically reflect on itself. Hence, the Dart's speech is a soliloquy because it is spoken by a unity in multiteity, one voice comprising all the other voices. Moreover, animals are included in this interaction since they are inspirited as well. By asserting that it represents the 'shepherd' of the seals and selves, the Dart further stresses its essential role in the process of creating an interdependent organism.

In addition, this polymorphous character is emphasised by the three dots at the end that 'manifest the mobility and mutability of a poetic discourse' so that 'instead of confirming its own ending and finality, it is subtly altered into the otherness of the page's blankness.'³³ Words such as 'anonymous' and 'whoever' highlight the river's elusive character transcending even the poem's ending. Although the Dart dissolves into the sea, this does not mark the end of the river as there are still masses of water emanating from its source and people living with the river, thus rendering the Dart's generation of self-consciousness an endlessly circulating process.

In addition to its spiritual dimension, the river's physicality constitutes an essential feature because 'the establishment of self is impossible without the context of place.'³⁴ The Dart can only interact with human beings as it is a spatial and material entity. Here, it is important to draw on Buell's general distinction between 'space' and 'place'. The former is defined as being neutral and objective; the latter, in contrast, possesses 'both an objective and a subjective face, pointing outward toward the tangible world and inward to the perceptions one brings to it.'³⁵ As a result, exteriority, materiality and objectivity are fused with their opposites interiority, spirituality and subjectivity in a sense of place.³⁶ This also means that the mimetic element merges with the

³² Drangsholt 175.

³³ Drangsholt 175.

³⁴ Neil Evernden, 'Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy,' *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* ed. Harold Fromm Cheryll Glotfelty (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996) 101.

³⁵ Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) 59.

³⁶ Alexander 7.

poetic as only the combination of both is able to reveal humankind's environmental bonding with nature. The person that ascribes certain emotions and memories to a particular location does not remain outside this place but shares its identity, the process of which can be seen as a metaphorical coalescence. In consequence, the distinction between humankind and nature becomes blurred again because their relation is not static but nascent. With regard to the Dart, this spiritual coalescence is only possible because every individual engages with the river via his or her body. Hence, Smith claims that 'linguistic interaction can only take place because of the physical interactions of the speakers with their environment.'³⁷ One instance in which the corporeal union of human and nature can be observed is when the swimmer illustrates his diving into the Dart:

Then I jumped in a rush of gold to the head,
through black and cold, red and cold, brown and warm,
giving water the weight and size of myself in order to
 imagine it,
water with my bones, water with my mouth and my
 understanding
when my body was in some way a wave to swim in,
one continuous fin from head to tail
...
He dives, he shuts himself in a deep soft-bottomed
 silence
which underwater is all nectarine, nacreous. (22-23)

The swimmer experiences his immersion into water synaesthetically as it first provides visual as well as tactile and later also auditory and gustatory stimuli resulting in a 'perceptual blurring' in which all elements 'conflate.'³⁸ Through these mixed sensations, his whole body becomes one with the water around him, thus exhibiting 'a nuanced awareness of the crucial role played by the body in mediating experiences of place, and of the human senses as interfaces between any notional inner self and the world outside.'³⁹ The swimmer himself reflects on this role of corporeal sensation when he considers the contact with water as a transfer of his own weight onto the river that is necessary in order to imagine the Dart. In doing so, he establishes an essential connection between sensuality and imagination because the former stimulates the latter, the combination of which subsequently entails a fusion of both.⁴⁰

The distinction between internal self and external world dissolves, which results in the creation of a greater entity. This is stressed by the following parallelism in which the swimmer compares water with his bones, mouth and understanding, thus taking up the idea of a correlation between stream and thought. Moreover, the poem enhances the sensation of the river on an onomatopoeic level. First, the sharp sounds of 'black' and 'cold' underscore the sudden

³⁷ Smith 61.

³⁸ Yeung 218.

³⁹ Alexander 11.

⁴⁰ Tom Bristow, "'Contracted to an eye-quiet world": Sonic Census and Poetics of Place in Alice Oswald,' *SYMBIOSIS* 10.2 (2006) 167-185, 18 July 2016. 177. Here, one could again argue that the mimetic and the poetic element merge.

chilly feeling when plunging into the water, whereas the following ‘w’- and ‘m’-sounds evoke a sense of warmth and softness mirroring the swimmer merging with the embracing river. In addition, the swimmer emphasises his entering the stream by the metaphorical transformation of his own body into a wave in which he can swim, meaning that he is at the same time in and out of himself so that the river becomes an extension of him in which he can find himself.⁴¹ This metamorphosis is fully achieved when the persona shifts again from the human into the Dart as pointed out in the last two lines spoken by the river. Hence, the Dart functions as a means for humans to leave their anthropocentric perspective and enter their fluid environment, thus fully becoming one with it. This also entails a different view on oneself since it incorporates the other in humankind’s sublated self-consciousness.

Even though the Dart can be viewed as a topographical presence experienced through human corporeality, place is not merely static but always subject to time as well. A place might remain one location in space but constantly changes as it ‘is not entitative – as a foundation has to be – but eventmental, something in process.’⁴² This observation becomes particularly apparent when viewing it in relation to the river. Due to its characteristic fluidity, mobility and mutability, one could even claim that ‘water becomes an image of the stream of time itself, permeated with the rhythms of the starry world. All the creatures of the earth live in this stream of time, it flows within them, and, as long as it flows, sustains them in the stream of life.’⁴³ The Dart circulates through each person that appears in the poem and preserves their selves through time in its vivifying waters. By embodying the stream of time itself, the river transcends its limits and becomes eternal because it is not a single and separated segment in time but duration itself. The connection between temporality, life and the infinite becomes evident when examining the many deaths that are presented in the poem. The first one mentioned is known as the folkloristic legend of Jan Coo:

Next morning it came home to us that he was drowned.
He should never have swum on his own.
Now he’s so thin you can see the light
through his skin, you can see the filth in his midriff.

Now he’s the groom of the Dart - I’ve seen him
taking the shape of the sky, a bird, a blade,
a fallen leaf, a stone – may he lie long
in the inexplicable knot of the river’s body (4)

While, in the first two lines, Jan Coo’s death is described in a quite prosaic and matter-of-fact way clearly stressing the elimination of life, the subsequent lines are more poetic and present it in the light of natural regeneration. His corporeal dissolution is emphasised through his skin’s increasing transparency, an indication of organic decay. The mentioning of light shining through his suspending body, however, can be read as a spiritual form of celestial light permeating his essence. The following lines underscore this thought since they illustrate the drowning of Jan

⁴¹ Bristow 178.

⁴² Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 337.

⁴³ Schwenk 68.

Coo as a marriage. The focus on his physicality is superseded by his spirituality which is sublated in its communion with the river.⁴⁴ This also allows for Jan Coo's shape-shifting character through which he is able to re-emerge as various natural phenomena. The enumeration of these elements takes place on a perpendicular axis, slowly descending from the sky to the bed of the river, thus creating a vertical connection between the Dart and the celestial realm.

In the light of these assertions, Jan Coo seems to personify the animistic spirit that pervades all nature and, in doing so, functions as the link between humans and their environment. In consequence, his death and natural resurrection can be perceived as a cyclical movement that is inherent in the natural stream of the river. It starts from its obscure source, flows towards the sea, is transported into the air through evaporation and comes down to earth as rain, thus completing its perpetual cycle before it starts anew. Through this infinite movement, the river is elevated beyond time and gives eternal life to the beings it permeates. These ideas gain more importance with regard to the Dart's mythological dimension, which becomes obvious when the water nymph – itself a mythical being – speaks to the forester:

woodman working in the twilight
you should see me in the moonlight
comb my cataract of hair,
at work all night on my desire

oh I could sing a song of Hylas,
how the water wooed him senseless,
I could sing the welded kiss
continuous of Salmacis (12)

Similar to the legend of Jan Coo, this section presents the river as a female – personified through the water nymph – whose relation to the human is still passionate but not marital as above. The nymph's seductive playing with her hair, the torrents of the river, merges into an allusion to the mythological Hylas in the following stanza.⁴⁵ According to Theocritus, the beautiful Hylas is tempted by water nymphs, who finally succeed in dragging him down into their pond so that he is never seen again. Even though this myth illustrates the disintegration of Hylas' worldly existence, it does not signify the end of his spiritual self because his soul becomes one with the fountain and therefore immortal like the nymphs inhabiting it.⁴⁶

In *Dart*, the erotic atmosphere continues as it tells of the water's wooing and the fusing kiss of Salmacis. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes how Hermaphroditus by chance encounters the fertile and pure fountain of the Naiad Salmacis who, again due to the male's beauty, instantly falls in love with him. As he eventually enters her stream, she entwines his body and, 'piercing each the other's flesh, they run / Together, and incorporate in one' so that 'both bodies in a single body mix, / A single body with a double sex.'⁴⁷

In consequence, one could argue that these two instances underscore the general topos of

⁴⁴ Yeung 209.

⁴⁵ One could further argue that the constant trochaic tetrameter creates a melody and rhythm which are as mesmerising as the wooing nymph.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Mauerofer, *Der Hylas-Mythos in der Antiken Literatur* (München: K.G. Saur Verlag, 2004) 44-48.

⁴⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* ed. Garth Tissol (London: Wordsworth Edition, 1998) 114.

metamorphosis in the poem since the Dart as well as its inhabitants perpetually have to transform themselves in their dialectical interrelatedness in order to generate a greater whole. Charles Tomlinson further highlights this thought by arguing that ‘the wisdom of *The Metamorphoses* inheres in it an imaginative vision of a world where all things are interrelated, where flesh and blood are near kin to soil and river.’⁴⁸ Thus, the sense of nature’s animistic essence is implied through these two allusions, which entails a transcending of physical death because the person’s spirit, fused with the river, continues to live and to speak.⁴⁹ Moreover, these references enhance the idea of immortality because myths, even though they take place in a transient world, are regarded as stories whose contents are elevated beyond the temporal dimension since they illustrate archetypal patterns.

After the voice of the water nymph has changed into that of the forester and then back again, it prays to such mythical figures as the ‘Rex Nemorensis’ and the ‘Flumen Dialis’⁵⁰, which can indeed be regarded as an allusion to James George Frazer’s seminal work *The Golden Bough*. In this comparative study of various religions, Frazer explains that the Rex Nemorensis is a priest and a king who leads a cult worshipping the goddess Diana in a sacred grove of oaks at the lake of Nemi. There, he has to defend a sacred tree from which no branch is allowed to be broken. If, however, a runaway slave succeeds in doing so, he is entitled to kill the current King of the Wood and hold his office instead until he is slain by another one and so on.⁵¹ Due to the cyclical nature of this office, Frazer associates it with pre-ancient fertility rites in which sacred kings like the Rex Nemorensis represent worldly incarnations of certain deities who have to be sacrificed in autumn and resurrected in spring in order to regain the vegetative fertility essential for the people to survive. These religious rites are not only connected with the cyclical processes of nature but also with spiritual fertility as each resurrection means a spiritual elevation of the cult’s members as well. In addition, Oswald’s ‘Flumen Dialis’ alludes to the Roman priest of Jupiter, the Flamen Dialis, who celebrates the sacred marriage of Jupiter and Juno by personifying the god while his bride embodies the goddess.⁵² Frazer further points out that, because Juno and Jupiter are both oak-gods, this ritual takes place in a grove of oaks, which establishes a connection between sexual and vegetative fertility.⁵³

Relating these two examples to the Dart, it becomes apparent that ‘this part of the poem is a prayer for renewal and resurrection, for continued circularity and the eternal return of everything. While the river takes life, it also gives it back.’⁵⁴ The fact that Oswald replaces the word ‘Flamen’ with ‘Flumen’, which is Latin for ‘river’, underscores the river’s mythological character and its inherent fertility. Like the office of the Rex Nemorensis, the poem’s first-person pronoun remains constant but the speaker who fills it continually changes. These metamorphoses transcend death because the river provides every being with eternal life. This theme can also be regarded from a less spiritual point of view since, ‘in *Dart*, death is figured as just another stage in the interplay of self and environment seen at an ecological scale. It is another everyday

⁴⁸ Charles Tomlinson, *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 2.

⁴⁹ Smith 70.

⁵⁰ Oswald 13.

⁵¹ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* ed. Robert Fraser (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 10-14.

⁵² Frazer 360.

⁵³ Frazer 380-382.

⁵⁴ Drangsholt 12-13.

transformation.’⁵⁵ From an ecological perspective, the death of a human being does not signify a tragedy as it would from the anthropocentric view. Instead, life and death are both merely seen as phases in the natural cycle of the universe, which sublates all lives and deaths in its perpetual stream. Recalling the incessant flow of the Dart as a metaphor of this movement, the relativity of a human being’s death becomes even more apparent as the river has been in existence before humanity and will continue to exist.

In conclusion, Oswald’s imaginative poetisation of the Dart through its self-articulation functions as a vivid *adéquation* of the river that reveals the animistic essence it fundamentally shares with humankind. She unveils this environmental bonding by portraying the stream as a spiritual, physical and temporal entity which achieves its full realisation only in constant interaction with humans. Likewise, this interrelatedness constitutes the vital prerequisite for the completion of any human being that lives with the river because otherwise, every person would be deprived of self-consciousness, an identity as well as a sense of place. As a result, the self-articulation of the Dart reveals that neither an anthropocentric nor an ecocentric view can guarantee the future sustainability of either element. Both must have their voice and they must coalesce into one so that the whole can be greater than the mere sum of its parts.

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⁵⁵ Smith 70.

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