

The Metaphoric Coalescence of Multiple Voices in a River Poem: A Reading of Alice Oswald's *Dart*

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Abstract

Alice Oswald is a prominent British poet who has a remarkable skill of composing poetry. *Dart* is a poem woven out of the river Dart which flows through Devon in England. The poem was written after three years of research and interview with the people who live around the river. The poem is an assemblage of characters that are separated by time and space. Hence there is a play of myth, legend and contemporary features in the poem. The river has drawn into itself all their voices and allows them to speak through its 'self'. The multiplicity of the voices enriches the poem. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony approaches a work as containing different voices "merged into a single perspective." And the work is only a confluence of the ideologies of different characters representing different ages and regions to which the river belongs.

Key words: polyphony, confluence, plurality, cultural identity.

Alice Oswald is a prominent British poet who also holds the prestigious position of Oxford Professor of Poetry. Nature has been a perennial source of inspiration for her poetic art. As *The Poetry Archive* website dedicated to her acknowledges, hers is an "unusual, almost visionary style— personifying Nature and its birds, beasts and flowers; plumbing the historical and spiritual depths of the landscape...."

Water, of all the elements of nature, dominates her narratives. And *Dart* is a book-length poem which follows the river in England from its source to the sea. One is surprised by her familiarity with the life and breath of the river. The river comes to life, with multifarious voices that it had imbued itself with. Oswald herself has acknowledged the research she had done in a forward note before poeticizing the flow of the river. She writes,

This poem is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart. Over the past two years I have been recording conversations with people who know the river. I've used these records as life-models from which to sketch out a series of characters-- inking their voices into a sound map of the river, a song line from the source to the sea.

She concludes the note saying, "All voices should be read as the river's muttering." The river becomes the identity of the long cultural tradition of the land it flows through. It had been a silent but not dumb spectator of the generations of cultural evolution and a witness to the historical developments. The poet has blended the voices of the people who live around it and has made the river mutter their multifarious voices.

As the poem progresses with the flow of the river one could hear the remarkably varied voices of multiple personalities. The characters include a poacher, a sewage worker, a forester, a ferryman, swimmers and canoeists. An online review of the poem states that," Using these records and voices as a sort of poetic census, she creates a narrative of the river, tracking its life from source to sea. The voices are wonderfully varied and idiomatic ... and are interlinked with historic and mythic voices, dreaming voices and marginal notes which act as markers along the way."

Hence the poem had gained a structure that matches the pregnant flow of the river. She amalgamates prose and poetry with a variety of forms, figures of speech, alliteration, assonance etc. The flow of the poetry is contained by prose at times as would a check dam slow down the river current. In the very beginning of the poem we could hear the river speaking to an old man, a mountaineer— "Who is it?/ trying to summon itself by speaking ... "(1). And the poem catches the rhythm of the flowing water:

one step-width water
of linked stones
trills in the stones
glides in the trills
eels in the glides
in each eel a fingerwidth of sea.... (2)

The multiplicity of the voices enriches the narrative. Bhaktin, whose concept of polyphony approaches a work as containing different voices “merged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its perspective, its own validity, and its own narrative weight...”(Robinson). The river which runs from Dartmoor to Dartmouth in Devon seems to flow from a prehistoric mythical past to the vibrating present through the recorded history, overlooked by the passing time. Robert Baker comments that,

From the beginning her theme has been metamorphosis: the way things are transformed over time and by all they encounter.... *Dart* gathers the voices of dozens of people living along Dart from its source on a moor in Devon to a estuary in the English Channel. The voices of the river, telling of its mythic depths, and the voices of the people, telling of their everyday activities, come to permeate and translate one another. Everything, everyone is caught up in crossings and changes.

The river even expresses the voices of those characters that were drawn to their fatal end by its water. One among them is a local deity, King of Oakwoods, “who had to be sacrificed to a goddess”(13). The readers are pulled back to the mythical days of origin to refer to Brutus-- ‘It happened when oak trees were men / when water was still water.’ He killed his parents, “shut his heart and sailed away / with a gang of exiled Trojans”(30-31). The river’s mythological breadth is optimized by the presence of the waternymph which tells the forester

woodman working in the twilight
you should see me in the moonlight
comb my cataract hail,
at work all night on my desire(12)

And the local bogeyman John Choogot drowned in the river, and “Now he is 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).Bastien Gaursaud, in his analysis of the poem comments that, “local memory is also subtly articulated to a sense of national history, albeit in a largely critical approach. Despite the hyper localism of the enterprise and the influence of the very locally oriented common ground project(more or that later), the poem also demonstrates the national myths associated with the Devon landscape and it’s river.”

It was fatal for the canoeist too who says, “In the water it’s another matter, we’re just shells and arms, / keeping ourselves in a fluid relation with danger”(14). He was “pinioned by the pressure” against the “whole river power of Dartmoor”(15). The dead tanners too speak out “Where is Ernie? / Where is Redver’s Webb? Likewise.” (10). He adds “Some are photos, others dust”(10). And the little river creatures out there struggle to hold themselves from being carried away by the water current. They seem to symbolise the underprivileged lot of the society, who struggle to survive against the unexpected challenges of life. Oswald writes that “upriver creatures born into this struggle against / water out of balance being swept away / mouthparts clinging to mosses”(7). The trout, the fresh water shrimps and the spider are “thrown into the agony of being swept away”(7). Then we have a forester who argues that “felling small sections give the forest some structure”(11). He takes the liberty to intrude upon the wide nature of the forest in the name of modernization.

A swimmer who plunges in to the river gets his body connected to the flowing water.

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
I steered through rapids like a canoe,
digging my hands in, keeping just ahead of the pace of the river,
thinking God I’m going fast enough already, what am I,
spelling the shapes of the letters with legs and arms? (22-23)

Man’s desire to be in physical union with nature, in spite of the several tragic consequences, is found all over the poem in the man-nature interaction.

Bhaktin reiterates that a book is a confluence of the ideas and ideologies of different characters only brought together by the author who does not interfere much between the characters and the readers. So there is a “plurality of consciousness, each with its own world. The reader does not present a single reality presented by the author, but rather, how reality appears to each other”(Robinson). The voices of the varied characters are brought together into the flowing river by the poet who has done a thorough research on the mythical as well as the historical past and the contemporary happenings associated with the modern times.

The voices of the river, which coalesce many utterings into an organized entity, opens up to the reader, a wider knowledge of the associated cultural and historical features. As Reimann comments,

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 *adequation* that transcends literal mimesis through poetic means. As a result, 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....

Oswald has personified the river with shades of gray. Laura Marris warns that “the danger of falling in and drowning if you stare too intently into the water.... since those that identify with it too closely are in danger of being consumed.” And who among these characters is closer to the author. There is a water abstractor whose job is to take water from the river and test if it is safe for human consumption. He says, “Everything is measured twice and we have stand-bys and shut-offs. This is what keeps you and me alive...”(25). His service is very vital for the survival of the people who live on the water of Dart. Hence he reiterates,

This is the thirst that draws the soul, beginning
at these three boreholes and radial collectors.
Whatever pumps and gravitates and gather
in town reservoirs can you secretly follow it rushing
under manhole in the straggle of the streets.... (25)

Of all the characters the water extractor is one of contemporary relevance. He is responsible for the wellbeing of a community that depends on the river. Marris compare him with the poet stating that, “Like the water abstractor, Alice Oswald has made herself the custodial of a wild and dangerous force, but unlike him she doesn't have to tame it. She abstracts the river into poetry without sanitizing it....” With her remarkable poetic skill the poet has converged the varied voices that are divided by time and space into a harmonious melody and hence the river sings “this is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy, / all names, all voices...”(48).

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