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# **“This is water’s world/And the works of men are vanishing”: Hydronymy & anonymity honour water in Alice Oswald’s *Dart & Memorial***

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## **“This is water’s world/And the works of men are vanishing”: Hydronymy & anonymity honour water in Alice Oswald’s *Dart & Memorial***

**Abstract:** Alice Oswald’s full-length poems *Dart* (2002) and *Memorial* (2013) draw attention to the ecology of water in the 21st century by excavating stories and myths around place names, specifically waterways. Hydronyms for the River Dart and the potamoi and naiads of Greco-Roman mythology re-envision history through narrative and its relationship to sites or places. While *Dart* underscores the human lore around the river by the same name, *Memorial* rejects human desire for immortality and glory with the remembrance of the *Iliad*’s dead who return to earth

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and life cycles with the aid of water. Poetry that focuses on place and history of place names inspires curiosity to rebuild human and non-human relationships.

**Keywords:** Rivers, hydronyms, poetry.

**«C'est le monde de l'eau/Et les œuvres des hommes disparaissent»:**

**L'hydronymie et l'anonymat honorent l'eau dans *Dart & Memorial* d'Alice Oswald**

**Résumé :** Les poèmes complets d'Alice Oswald Dart (2002) et *Memorial* (2013) attirent l'attention sur l'écologie de l'eau au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle en creusant des histoires et des mythes autour des noms de lieux, en particulier les voies navigables. Les hydronymes de la rivière Dart et les potamoi et naïades de la mythologie gréco-romaine réenvisagent l'histoire à travers le récit et sa relation avec des sites ou des lieux. Alors que Dart souligne la tradition humaine autour de la rivière du même nom, *Memorial* rejette le désir humain d'immortalité et de gloire avec le souvenir des morts de l'Iliade qui reviennent sur terre et les cycles de vie à l'aide de l'eau. La poésie qui se concentre sur le lieu et l'histoire des noms de lieux inspire la curiosité pour reconstruire les relations humaines et non-humaines.

**Mots-clés :** Fleuves, hydronymes, poésie.

**„Dies ist die Welt des Wassers/Und Menschenwerk vergeht“: Hydronymie und Anonymität ehren das Wasser in Alice Oswalds *Dart & Memorial***

**Zusammenfassung:** Alice Oswalds abendfüllende Gedichte *Dart* (2002) und *Memorial* (2013) lenken die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Ökologie des Wassers im 21. Jahrhundert, indem sie Geschichten und Mythen rund um geographische Namen, insbesondere von Wasserstraßen, aufdecken. Hydronyme für den Fluss Dart und die Potamoi und Najaden der griechisch-römischen Mythologie lassen die Geschichte durch Erzählungen und deren Beziehung zu Plätzen oder Orten in einem neuen Licht erscheinen. Während *Dart* die menschliche Überlieferung rund um den gleichnamigen Fluss hervorhebt, weist *Memorial* mit der Erinnerung an die Toten der Ilias, die mit Hilfe des Wassers auf die Erde zurückkehren, den menschlichen Wunsch nach Unsterblichkeit und Ruhm zurück. Poesie, die sich auf Orte und die Geschichte von geographischen Namen konzentriert, weckt die Neugier, menschliche und andere Beziehungen wieder aufzubauen.

**Schlüsselbegriffe:** Flüsse, Hydronyme, Poesie.

## 1. Introduction

Myths and legends, while celebrating the deeds and narratives of humans and deities, are deeply rooted in place. Through the medium of poetry, Oswald's full-length poems, *Dart* (2002) and *Memorial* (2013), allow for sites to speak through silence, water, and elements, which rhetorically counter human narrative dominance. The cyclical nature of myths insists that they do not ever end, but are retold, modified, and re-invented in human time. Narrative's conventions and contexts reveal both the temporal and universal traits of myths or legends. Oswald's poetry overturns the heroic power of myths and legends, like the epic, which have long played a role in historicizing national identity, expressing divine intervention, and celebrating the deeds of a protagonist. By contrast, her poetry, particularly *Memorial*, celebrates what the Greeks call *energeia* and the power of nature. In *Memorial*, the fallen warriors of the Trojan War are displaced by a pattern of repeated epic similes; these stanzas, following the deaths of Greeks and Trojans, call readers' attention to the power and continuity of the ecosphere, specifically bodies of water. The poem *Dart* heroizes, even deifies, the natural world by granting it a testimonial polyvocality whose poetic conventions shift along with the river's path and its locus in human history.<sup>1</sup> The river contains Whitmanian multitudes and its "I" is at once inside and outside of the construct of human time. Simultaneously acting as muse and bard, her poems celebrate the endurance and potency of the natural world and its roots in silence and mythos to define and transcend place.

Historically, poetry from the Western canon has something to teach us about a people's values and their sense of place. The poetry of conquerors and settlers attest to a mapping of acquisitions as well as a mapping of time and space. Toponyms and hydronyms communicate our ancestors' practice of naming the natural world as it has been claimed and tamed. So, place names underscore not just the humans' connections to nature, but how, over time, humans have lost touch with the stories behind these names.

*Memorial* and *Dart* are two lyric poems that have much to say about place and toponyms. These contemporary poems' geographical settings include the sites for the *Iliad* and Devon England, but their historical settings add layers of local lore and ancient myths. While *Memorial* calls itself a "version of the *Iliad*" and points to Homeric myths and the war between the ancient Greeks and Trojans, *Dart* accentuates the layers of human myths and narratives centred around the eponymous River running through southwestern England. Place names in Oswald's contemporary lyrical poems reveal a

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<sup>1</sup> See Drangsholt's article where she is interested in the "polyphonic point of intersection between river and other," setting up the poem's "[challenges] to the idea of self" (2011: 177).

palimpsest of earthly and human histories through language. *Dart* and *Memorial*, although different in their narrative content, invoke and challenge humans to confront their entwined ecological and onomastic legacies.

## 2. Revisiting myths and toponyms with an ecocritical lens

In her recent article, [Patsy Callaghan](#) makes a compelling argument to revisit Kenneth Burke's work as a framework for re-reading literature ecocritically, particularly myths (2015: 80). [Callaghan](#) recognizes literary criticism's anthropocentric relationships with nature, and, through Burke's notion of humility, she seeks to recognize the environment's "agency and identity and complexity" ([Callaghan 2015: 80](#)). Through a close reading of three myths, she responds to the question of "how we are a part of, rather than distinct from, the physical universe," which, through the Burkeian lens, fosters human humility to reconsider a more interrelated ecological dynamic ([Callaghan 2015: 96](#)).

Building on [Callaghan's](#) cry to read myths ecocritically, I am interested in examining how Oswald's poetry modernizes the myth and revises the epic to read the non-human, specifically water, as agents. Moreover, the practice of naming fallen soldiers and waterways in these poems repositions the human animal as part of the natural world rather than apart from it. Oswald's *Dart* signals itself as a text, a hydronym, and a river-turned-poet and exemplifies [Peter Berg's](#) definition of bioregionalism where the land is included, "the land must *speak* to us; we must stand in *relation* to it; it must *define* us, and not we it" ([Berg 1978: 218](#)). Oswald invents a new mythos that revises familiar narratives, or lore, with a distinctively polyvocal one, wherein the non-human gains agency in a chorus of voices to underscore the interrelationships between the voices of the bard, bodies of water, and its inhabitants to include silence. I envision this essay as an aperture for engaging an ecological lens with a literary geographer's onomastic reading. [Barbara Piatti et al.](#)'s emerging model for a more spatialized reading of literature affirms that literary mappings are "imprecise," but they do allow for readers and students of literature to reassess setting through multiple lenses, specifically of "projected spaces," which characters or narrators mentally occupy through fictional recollections ([Piatti et al. 2009: 184](#)). In these contemporary epic poems of *Dart* and *Memorial*, Oswald's writings also invite topographical readings; the staying power of myths linger in the toponyms found on contemporary maps and in reading the poems as narrative maps.

## 3. Fallen deities and waterways

Homeric poetry's polytheism exalts the power of the gods as actors and diminishes the power of the natural world where human agents reside. For the non-polytheists or monotheists, divine intervention would be read as human

poets' efforts to personify and anthropomorphize the non-human to demystify what science can now explain. Gods in Oswald's *Memorial* have distinct functions as toponyms that point to an origin myth involving the divine and as a poetic device to express human awe in language. For instance, in *Memorial*, Oswald celebrates the warriors' roots and origins in the natural world. In the case of two brothers, Orsilochus and Crethon, the poem highlights their family ties to the Arcadian River that flows into the Ionian Sea:

And they were the grandsons of a river  
Famous to Alpheus whose muscular waters  
Wind round Pylos  
But those cold blue arms couldn't keep them  
As soon as they were old enough  
They took a ship to Troy [...]. (Oswald 2013: 20)

Linked to Arcadia, the home of pastoral poetry, the brothers' identities originate in the patronymic tradition, which includes a river-god. After crossing another body of water, Alpheus' grandsons, Ortilochus and Crethon, die in Troy. Oswald's rendition of the river is not god-like but akin to a once-strong mortal whose embrace the young men have outgrown and out-muscled in their Arcadian home on the Peloponnesian peninsula. In another reference to twins born of water, a Trojan mortal named *Bucolion* and a naiad Abarbarea share a "quick fling"; although the human prince is unnamed in this poem, Abarbarea is "a clear-eyed" "blue pool" whose maternal grief underscores the absence of glory in death (Oswald 2013: 23). While god-like, she is rendered speechless in grief; she is not a fearsome divinity in *Memorial* but humanized as a grieving mother.

*Memorial*, as a contemporary commentary on the *Iliad*, memorializes the dead warriors without the veneer of glory or *kleos*. It echoes of contemporary practices of reading the names of the dead as a communal ritual of remembrance. In print form, Oswald opens with a listing of the dead. These warrior names, on the printed page, act as eponyms that stand in for the individual beings who once breathed *and* for the corpses that pollute the landscape and its waterways. The cataloguing of names precedes the brief bios, which humanize or reanimate the fallen fighters with twice repeated epic similes. In these fleeting obituaries, the dead men's birthplaces, and their roles as sons of mortals and immortals are noted in passing. For instance, Amphimachos is from Elis and "related to Poseidon/You would think the sea could do something" (Oswald 2013: 43). Here, the deceased's name invokes his birthplace in the western part of the Peloponnese [Pelopónnisos] peninsula of Greece; Oswald retains the Homeric astionyms and choronyms that define the fallen men of Agamemnon's and Priam's armies. This passage does something else. Contrary to the Homeric epic's commemoration of divine intervention and the gods' role in the fates of mortal warriors, this "excavation of the *Iliad*" reduces Poseidon's name to an

expression of kinship, not power. The god Poseidon becomes synonymous with the ocean here and non-intervention. Oswald uses Poseidon as a metaphor for place not as a god. A shift to the informal second person “You” further displaces Poseidon’s status as a deity and into the realm of metonymy: he becomes “the sea.”

Stripping the *Iliad* of its valiant battle scenes and the gods’ interventions, Oswald uses names of the potamoi, or gods and rivers, and hydronyms, to strip war of its glory and gods of their omnipotence. Her version of the *Iliad* in *Memorial* reinstates the emphasis on mortals who return to the earth or the source of their myths through their painful and brutal deaths. While Achilles’ prowess is celebrated in the *Iliad*, it gives the river cause to speak to him and urge him to do his killing on the plain. From Richmond Lattimore’s translation, the Scamander River [Kamanderes] admonishes Achilles (2011: 218–219), “For the loveliness of my waters is crammed with corpses, I cannot/ find a channel to cast my waters into the bright sea.” By contrast *Memorial* draws attention to the polluted state of the largest Troad river, the Scamander. Instead of granting the river voice, Oswald’s contemporary poem silences the river god as it has been dammed with the corpses of Trojans. In this waterway, Achilles

[stands] downstream with his rude sword  
 Hacking off heads until the water  
 Burst out in anger lifting up a ridge of waves  
 That now this whole river is a grave. (Oswald 2013: 67)

No longer a deity, the river expresses its human-like ire to produce a wave in response to the vulgar slaughter. There is no place for *kleos* in a disapproving landscape, where a god loses its voice, as Oswald re-imagines the toll of the dead on the land and its waters. A dammed river cannot course to the sea as it is meant to, and a dammed river is personified as a voiceless actor. *Memorial* underscores the impact of death not only on the survivors but in relation to the fragile ecosystem of all life forms.

What follows the description of the Scamander as a watery grave is the list of the men hacked to death by Achilles, polluting the river with their blood. Again, this contemporary version of the Greek and Trojan war does not celebrate Achilles’ demi-god prowess or attend to *kleos*. However, toponyms and hydronyms create tributaries in their allusions to other stories or myths. The river’s name lives on in languages informed by Greek and Latin, i.e., English. Scamander and the river Maeander (or Maeandros, now Menderes in Caria, western Turkey), both gift the English language with verbs meander and scamander.

As an eponymous litany of names to signal the dead, *Memorial* highlights the names of the men over the places where they fall; names and the repeating epic similes slow down time to underscore the finality of death. “Like a stone/ Stands by a grave and says nothing” is repeated twice to close out Amphimachos’ eulogy before moving on to the next corpse (Oswald 2013: 43). An ordinary,

ubiquitous rock from the natural landscape becomes a site for marking a burial ground but also underscores humans' relationship to the natural world. This image of the stone is personified as a silent mourner. Stones in their natural and human hewn states bear witness and outlive countless generations of *homo sapiens*.

#### 4. Fallen bodies as place names

*Memorial* then underscores the dead as mortals who return to and become part of the earth. Sarpedon, a son of Zeus and brother of Minos, is introduced by his fertile homeland – he “Came to this ungreen ungrowing ground/Came from his cornfields from his leafy river” (Oswald 2013: 58) to meet a spear. The warrior's patronymic lineage does not save him from dying far from home. The negative prefixes describing his final resting place will nevertheless take him in. Like Sarpedon, Iphitus will also die on the hard, dusty earth.

IPHITUS who was born in the snow  
Between two tumbling trout-stocked rivers  
Died on the flat dust  
Not far from DEMOLEON and HIPPODAMAS. (Oswald 2013: 63)

Iphitus' death-site is marked by the names of two more corpses. Names become places. Although Greek and Trojan warriors' moments of death are given time and space on the printed page of the poem, the names of the dead are not always left behind in the places of their last breath. There are no markers, no trail of names left behind on the earth where the men die. Bodies bear names and these named bodies stand in for 'place' in the poem as a site for naming and memorializing.

As *Memorial*'s title suggests, Oswald's text pays homage to the dead, but more so to the fleeting moments of the natural world's “foaming mouth of a wave” than it does to human corpses (Oswald 2013: 32). Forms of water are the ekphrastic imagery of the poem's epic similes. In a landscape strewn with dead warriors, rain, river, and sea act as baptismal, purifying sources, cleansing the earth of human destruction: “As if it was June/A poppy being hammered by the rain/Sinks its head down [...]” (Oswald 2013: 29). The sacred springtime rain, indifferent to the horrific deaths of the soldiers, aids in the decomposition of corpses, which return to the ground to become life in another form: poppies, leaves, or chaff.

*Memorial*, however, elevates ordinary watery elements from the natural world in recognizing their power to nourish and to startle in the form of rivers, waves, snow, rain, and sea. One of the poem's longest duplicated epic similes describes autumn rains caused by an angry nameless god who no longer tolerates the violence of men; the rains drench a personified earth, which finds itself unsteady and at the mercy of gods' and men's ferocity. The simile concludes

with these three lines: “Everything is clattering to the sea/This is water’s world/ And the works of men are vanishing” (Oswald 2013: 40–41). Here, the “everything” of the autumnal rains gathers the jangle of non-human and human lives before emptying or merging into the sea. In excess, waters “saw” and “cut” the hills and grasses. The works and lives of men are indeed vanishing, but so are the personalities of the gods who aided and thwarted them. Nature and its awe-inspiring power replace the Homeric convention of divine intervention.

A 21st century poem, *Memorial* chronicles the poet’s re-visioning of the natural world polluted by the corpses of war, but a regenerative landscape that re-absorbs death to produce life. *Dart* attests to the human animal’s continued relationship with the landscape, specifically the River Dart. Unlike *Memorial*’s roots in the Greco-Trojan conflict, the river-poem flows through the Devon landscape and the history of its settlers. *Dart* excavates the layers of human history and the role of conquests behind naming places. While *Dart* is what Oswald calls a sound map of the river and “all the voices should be read as the river’s mutterings,” the eponymous River and poem map settler heritages through naming. Centring a poem like *Dart* on water subverts the importance of the hero’s and land’s leading roles in nation-building in an epic. However, life requires water. Without water there would be no communities or civilizations. The River Dart as a river-poem acts as a newly imagined omniscient bard who has borne witness to seasons and human history. And when it speaks, it does not sing of heroic deeds but chronicles its origins, pathways, and intersections with humans who meet it and even drown in it.

## 5. Hidden springs: Origin narratives

*Dart* opens with the river’s disclosure of its source-self as a kind of secret, which is an absence of narrative and sound. In silence, the river originates as “this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound I/ won’t let go of man” (Oswald 2002: 1). Here, the reeds conceal the underground origin of sound and its instrument, water. The enjambment mimics the river’s continuity as well as its speaking voice that breaks the secret’s silence; the confluence of voices and subjectivities are joined in the hinged “I.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the emerging “trickle” is aligned with primordial sounds before birthing speech or narration. Existing in the realm of the unspoken, unheard, and unearthed, secrets entice, point to a hidden narrative, and to be revealed, require a listener. While Kym Martindale argues for the River Dart’s personification as both poet and muse (Martindale 2010: 310), I would urge us to include the river’s multifaceted role of poet and poem and narrator and narrative; it is the creator joined with its narrative creations.

<sup>2</sup> See Kym Martindale’s reading of this enjambment as the river’s “[tussle] with the walker for the “I” of the poem and for ownership of itself” (Martindale 2010: 316). Martindale, like Drangsholt, focuses on Dart’s notions of self.



As the trickling water emerges and gains power, the river frequently alludes to its history in human narrative, specifically mythos. Oswald's river-poem refers to transformative feminine entities in Greco-Roman traditions such as "Syrinx and Ligea" (Oswald 2002: 18). Linked to music, Syrinx becomes the reeds of the Ladon riverbank to escape Pan; Ligea is one of three sea nymphs who comprises the Sirens known for their lyrical seductions. Alluvium silences the deities. The paradox of hearing sounds and hearing silence is characteristic of myths whose beginnings are rooted in the silence of not knowing, and a silence that precedes shared language. Yet the poem breaks that silence through explaining or imagining an order. The River Dart and the river poem bear witness to an England when it was inhabited by the Celts and Saxons and conquered by Romans who named the island *Britannia*.

The river-poem reminds its audience that observations may be topographical, visual, auditory, and non-human. Trickling water is preceded by the lark's six single-word lines of "one/note/splitting/and/mending/it" to disclose other speaking agents in the landscape (Oswald 2002: 2). The river acknowledges its role as an auditor for other animals, relinquishing and merging its speech to these other agents. For David Abram (1996: 80) "[l]anguage as a bodily phenomenon accrues to all expressive bodies, not just to the human." Oswald's poem achieves a kind of gathering of living voices (e.g., water, bird, human). Contrary to Abram's central argument that human language has ruptured our relationship with the natural, sensory world, Oswald's poem *Dart* imagines the eponymous river as the less ego-centric river-poet; as a river-poem, it models the interplay of language between species and its playful prosody offers metrical variations to signal vocative shifts.

Once the river's silence is broken and it emerges from its source, the waterway courses through the landscape and human history to reveal other speakers and another crucial origin tale. For instance, the lore around Brutus of Troy as the founder of Britain is joined to the lore of the River Dart that facilitated inland travel. This segment, comprised of eighteen quatrains in an abcb rhyme scheme, is sandwiched between the more contemporary human perspectives of the sewage worker and stonewaller. Here, the first four lines introduce Brutus the grandson of Aeneas and mythical time by way of "when":

It happened when oak trees were men  
when water was still water.  
There was a man, Trojan born,  
a footpad, a fighter. (Oswald 2002: 30)

The first two lines measure time in a mythical scope to reveal human origins in the ubiquitous oak; in the poetic realm of myths, humans are the descendants of trees. In a marginal note, we are told that Dart is Devon for Oak (Oswald 2002: 11). Moreover, "when water was still water" poses an ecological and ontological quandary: isn't water *still* water? Yet mythical time makes the

water of an indeterminate “then” other to the water of the poem’s now. These lines not only show river’s existence throughout time, but it acknowledges interrelationships that occur within the structuring of the poem’s voices; the sewage worker, whose section precedes this one, offers evidence that the water of now is a different water from the era of Aeneas’ descendant. It brings us to how the river bears witness to mythical and human time, when it narrates its version of the Brutus lore. Totnes, repeated twice, indicates the topographical specificity of the myth on Britain’s soil and its waterways.<sup>3</sup> Advised by a goddess, Brutus and his fellow Trojan exiles ascend the Dart and settle in Totnes.

## 6. Mapping lore

A river named *Oak* suggests trees indigenous to that water way or around segments of the river. If we meander into Gaelic-Celtic language roots, we find that *dare* means tree. It may also hint at the Druidic history of the region where oak trees, according to the Roman historians, play a crucial role in druid rites. Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus are among our first ethnographers of the inhabitants of the isle they would call *Britannia*.

While the poem excavates the region’s and nation’s Roman roots as *Britannia* – derived from the Greek *Prettanike* or *Brettaniai* – and the river’s place in that history, it also merges human with non-human. A water nymph, one of the Naiads, addresses and aims to seduce the woodsman with her rhyming couplets:

when the lithe water turns  
and its tongue flatters the ferns  
do you speak this kind of sound:  
whirlpool whisking round?

Listen, I can clap and slide  
my hollow hands along my side.  
imagine the bare feel of water,  
woodman, to the wrinkled timber. (Oswald 2002: 11)

The water nymph joins with the voice of the River Dart, suggesting the song in a waterway’s flowing currents and chiding the woodsman for not noticing her waters. But, while his tree work is his livelihood, the woodsman, as John Parham (2012: 121) observes, is connected to his environs in his observations about the returning birds (Oswald 2002: 121). In textual dialogue with the contemporary forester, the nymph’s playful rhyming efforts peel back a layer from the ancient world, where nymphs populated the lore. The poem and river then become sites for engaging regional histories in tensions with each other. And, through the

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<sup>3</sup> Totnes tourism touts the town’s Brutus stone to attract visitors and to commemorate its lore with a site.

chiding of the Naiad's voice, this section underscores the tensions of humans meddling with the natural world. The woodsman figure represents a pragmatic conservationist, not easily swayed by human lusts or old beliefs but attuned to the ecology of multiple species. "I'll orange tape what I want to keep," he describes his culling process; "I'll find a fine one, a maiden oak, well-formed with a good crop of acorns and knock down the trees around it. And that tree 'll stand getting slowly thicker and taller, taking care of its surroundings, full of birds and moss and cavities where bats 'll roost and fly out when you work into dusk" (Oswald 2002: 32). Singling out a "maiden oak," the woodsman shows his ecological awareness of how the oak tree supports other species.<sup>4</sup> It links the river again to its Devon name source.

Nymphs and pixies in Dart lore hint at not only the cultural narratives at work, but how the winds work with the water and land to mimic song and cries. Trickster-like, the river beckons a young cowhand, "And so one night he sneaks away downriver, /told us he could hear voices woووоо/ we know what voices means, Jan Coо Jan Coо" (Oswald 2002: 4). To explain the river's siren song and the drownings, Jan Coо, more sounds than spirit, is blamed.

Needed by human and nonhuman species, water reminds us that we must imagine it as both life-giver and life-taker. Like the Scamander River, this river-poem reminds us it is a grave when it memorializes its dead. The River Dart memorializes its voiceless and almost forgotten drowned, specifically John Edmunds in 1840 (Oswald 2002: 20) whose voice merges with the river that claims his life: "[...] all day my voice is being washed away/out of a lapse in my throat" (Oswald 2002: 20). As his body is tossed about, displacing water, and fills with water, the man's voice joins with the river, creating a paradoxical exchange of speech and silence: "[...] and the silence pouring into what's left maybe eighty/seconds" (Oswald 2002: 21). If silence pours in, the voice is trapped within, reminding one of the physical and gestural nature of the speech act. Blankness, wordless space concludes one page and carries onto the next one (Oswald 2002: 21–22), leaving the reader-auditor in silence. While *Memorial* catalogues the names of the dead, its use of text imitates the way names are carved into stone markers. However, the self-aware river-poet draws attention to its role as both storyteller and narrative. A site for reflection, the silence of the ensuing blank page acts as a memorial for John Edmunds. It opens the space to imagine the names of other drowned persons.

If *Dart* opens to disclose itself as a former secret, it follows the river's vocal course to document the life and "mutterings" of the tributary and its people, and it closes to express its all-encompassing "many selves." In confluence, the

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<sup>4</sup> The James Hutton Institute, in partnership with RSPB, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and the University of Cambridge, found that thousands of species need the oak in varying degrees (<https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/departments/ecological-sciences/our%20science/biodiversity-and-ecosystems/decline-oak>, accessed 2022-06-09).

river and its animal inhabitants act as witnesses to the changing waterscapes and landscapes. God-like, Oswald's Dart rhetorically challenges narrative as a human creation and permits the water to speak with an omniscience limited to imagined deities and narrators. Resisting the absence of language, it also speaks in a language recognizable to human animals. In the poem's final four lines, the river's voice declares its amorphous essence before fading out and continuing its path with the seals and their ancient shepherd to the sea:

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 [...]. (Oswald 2002: 48)

A fluid body and shapeshifter, the river soliloquizes its polynomial and polyvocal identity: it is all. Naming itself as *Proteus*, the river aligns itself with Meneláos's tale of the Old Man of the sea in Homer's *Odyssey*.<sup>5</sup> Through Homeric allusions and their mythos, Oswald's River Dart self-defines by simultaneously asserting anonymity and identity through naming. It is at once local and universal. A protean body, the river is not just adaptable and mutable as others have noted, but, as I argue, an aqueous anthology of myths, wherein the ordinary melds with the extraordinary, and the regional meshes with the universal. If Proteus symbolizes original matter, so too does the River Dart become emblematic of water's original significance to all living things.

*Dart*'s structure mirrors the topographical flow of the river, yet the river speaks to fulfil human expectations for narrative design, for knowledge, and for the discomfort with silence. As noted earlier, the poem opens with the river's beginnings in a spring and concludes with its mouth at the sea, allowing the river to speak in a kind of dialogue with its co-narrators. However, the poem's final ellipsis resists a finite resolution expected of narratives and lyric poetry. As a non-human, omniscient bard, the river refutes the fictions of an ending, in Frank Kermode's terms (1968: 7). The ellipsis suggests there is 'more,' and silence is included in that 'more' as the indeterminate, eternal return to formlessness. A river's contours – banks, bends, narrows, etc. – are shaped unlike the wild, amorphous sea it fills.

David Wheatley of *The Guardian* (2002) places Oswald in the pantheon

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<sup>5</sup> In Book IV of Homer's *Odyssey* per Fitzgerald's translation, Meneláos recounts to Odysseus's son Telémakhos how he contrives his escape from captivity to capture Proteus. The "Ancient" Proteus is described by his daughter as a shepherd of seals: "[Proteus] goes amid the seals to check their number/and when he sees them all, and counts them all/he lies down like a shepherd with his flock" (Homer 1990: 440–442). And Meneláos and his men wear the sealskins, "a strong disguise" (Homer 1990: 471), to vanquish the one who "can take the forms/of all the beasts, and water, and blinding fire" (Homer 1990: 446–447). After changing into animal forms and "sousing water" (Homer 1990: 489), Proteus is restrained by Meneláos and gives his human captor instructions and news of Odysseus's captivity by Calypso.

of those who embody the “genius loci, the spirit of place [...] lovingly elaborated topographical lore.” However, Oswald’s ecological epics are not limited to Wheatley’s “topographical lore.” These poems are local and universal. They reverberate with the myths of Ancient Greece, a cornerstone for Western narrative and etymology. Through Roman, Druidic, and Homeric allusions and their mythos, Oswald’s River Dart self-defines by simultaneously asserting anonymity and identity through naming; *Memorial* highlights the *potamoi* (river gods) and naiads’ diminishing role over the anonymity of rain that all but washes away the names of the dead. Both poems allow for the names of the dead, drowned or fallen, to stand in for sites and bear witness to the ephemeral lives of the named. Oswald’s poems ask readers to get to know place and re-establish relationships to place again through language and naming. Place names’ origins reveal something about past relationships to the land and water as well as our forebears’ knowledge of land and waterways for survival. As time passes and as language continues to evolve, the stories behind place names still inspire poetry and unearth a mine of narratives through etymology.

## 7. Conclusion

The works of men are and are not vanishing. While the natural world reclaims bodies, it has not yet effaced place names that survive in human history. I cannot help but hear the reverberations of Hemingway’s young, jaded narrator’s disillusionment with the Great War and his toponymic axiom in *A farewell to arms* (Hemingway 1969: 184–185): “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. [...] There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same way and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything.” The concreteness of and dignity in place names replace illusions of honour or glory. In these ecological poems of the 21st century, the narrative of heroes has been replaced with the stories and voices of the water and its various inhabitants. And so, where the epic poem has played a role in nation building by creating a shared narrative to celebrate a hero, Oswald’s poems, *Dart* and *Memorial*, transform the epic’s sense of *kleos*. Instead of immortality for a singular self, these works re-purpose ideas of legacy and glory to celebrate the natural world’s, namely bodies of water, enduring power to amaze, wreak havoc on, drown, and sustain its human and non-human dependents. The tradition of chronicling the natural world across the Anthropocene begins in and continues in the imagined spaces provided by poetry and silence. Nature inspires human awe which needs space for reflection and takes place in silence where narrative arrangement begins. Because humans of the 21st century are historically and often psychically removed from the existing names for rivers and waterways,

the origins of place names are no longer common knowledge. Oswald's ecological epics reinstate the value of hydronyms and other place names.

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