

Confluence: Alice Oswald's *Dart*

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The guiding spirit of *Dart* is Proteus: shape-shifter, and shepherd of the seas, he was the god who could tell the future but always resisted revealing what he knew. Some of the most remarkable features of this book-length poem are its restlessness, its ability to change shape, and the extent to which it's woven together by difference, sometimes nearly to breaking point. The poem offers a clear and definite route – tracking the River Dart some 75 kilometres as it rises in high Dartmoor in the English county of Devon and descends south-east to Dartmouth, “a songline from the source to the sea.” But along the way, Alice Oswald's poem resists any sense of fixity and determination. It behaves, much of the time, like water.

Even in her opening note, Oswald tells us that “[t]he poem is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart,” which suggests that it's a found poem, picking up and transporting its bedload of words as it flows onward, but Oswald also claims that the voices we encounter “do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions.” So although there is a suggestion of authenticity about the language that the poem contains, such words and those who speak them apparently float free.

And yet the poem is a remarkable catalogue of very specific kinds of language that show there can be extraordinary depth and richness in capturing the local rather than the global. Most evidently in the marginal glosses that accompany the text, we are introduced to local tales (of Jan Coo, for instance, who “haunts the Dart”), local sayings (“Dart Dart / Every year thou / Claimest a heart”) and mention of people along the river—the fisherman, the dairy worker, the stonewaller, the oyster gatherers... *Dart* also celebrates the local using vocabulary and dialect: a gamut of “named varieties of water”; a forester explains that they

“tush” (or drag) the deadwood to the paths; and a character called John Edmunds describes how, rather than be washed away by the river, he would much prefer to be “slammicking home” (moving in an ungainly way), “shrammed with cold and bivvering” (benumbed and shivering). The poem locates us in southwest England and asserts that “this is my voice”—as if a true understanding of the River Dart must always be grounded in everyday language and local speech.

But Oswald dives deeper, as if to recognise that even this level of specificity is not enough. Instead she seeks to create a voice for the river that is unique, and she has it threaten to “outcanoevre” a canoeist “into the smallest small where it moils up” and invites them: “come roll it on my stones / come tongue-in-skull, come drinketh, come sleepeth.” Here and elsewhere through neologism and a fusion of forms into what she calls “this jabber of pidgin-river,” Oswald achieves what philosopher Martin Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art” calls a kind of “saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world.”

For me, one of Oswald’s triumphs in the book is to use these different modes of language to give voice to something unsayable: the experience of the Dart itself. For how do you speak for a river? From the opening of the poem and its own source, the Dart is intent on “trying to summon itself by speaking,” and again and again in the poem we are presented with instances of the river stirring itself into new beginnings, as different voices join the journey. As Heidegger wrote, “[a] beginning [...] always contains the undisclosed abundance of the awesome, which means it also contains strife with the familiar and ordinary.” Each time the poem begins with a new voice it startles us into attention. When, in one of the most stunning sections, “a dreamer” speaks, their words about seagulls shift into the voice of a dairy worker, though we hardly notice the transition at first: “rubbish pickers, mating blatantly, screaming // and slouch off scumming and flashing and hatching flies to the milk

factory.” But the poem often subtly changes course, spilling over from one kind of register into a radically different one. This friction, or “strife,” gives the poem a unique energy, and together with an intense focus on the ordinary and the local, each new start is inflected with the “awesome,” while the familiar is given a touch of the sublime, as the river rushes from one beginning to the next heedlessly, granting us no time to stop and reflect.

Poetry, Heidegger says, is “the saying of world and earth,” and while *Dart* is certainly work that speaks for the world and the earth, Oswald also describes a river that, like Proteus, resists our interference and remains mysterious; we can never fully unpick “the inexplicable knot of the river’s body.” What’s more, the river must be respected: it can cause damage, drownings, fear—and yet people depend upon it for life. As a worker at the woollen mills explains, “I see us like cormorants, living off the river.” Reading the poem now at a time of climate emergency, the value of a work of art that has the potential to astonish us into greater respect for and concern about the natural world should be obvious. But what *Dart* also does for us today in more unexpectedly political ways is to present a space of “confluence” where there are “whole surfaces interweaving spatially and flowing past each other / in surface tension, through which water strives to attain a spherical drop-form.” Or, to put it another way, *E Pluribus Unum*. In its resistance to fixity and authority, in its collection of registers and dialects, and even at moments of unity, the poem preserves and celebrates variety and difference.

One hundred years ago, the American philosopher John Dewey remarked that “[w]e are discovering that the locality is the only universal,” and in *Dart*, this most local of poems, we can find so much that tells us how and where we live now.