

Alice Oswald's Poetic Mappings:
Finding Water's "Sources" in Myths & Language

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Alice Oswald's book-length poems of *Dart* and *Memorial* invite topographical and eco-critical readings. While Oswald calls *Dart* a "sound-map," I would also argue for a toponymic lens for reading these poems as narrative maps of Greco-Roman and Druidic heritages. Specifically, these poems argue for the staying power of myths and linguistic inheritances that linger in the toponyms still found on contemporary maps of England and Greece. Oswald's eponymous River Dart of Devonshire charts the Anthropocene age and hints at its beginnings not with the Industrial Revolution but with the dawn of humanity and its stories. *Dart* heroizes, even deifies, the natural world by granting water a voice whereby its poetic conventions shift along with the river's path and its role in human history. In lieu of the human desire for renown or *kleos*, *Memorial*, drawing its inspiration from *The Iliad*, celebrates what the Greeks call *energeia* and the power of nature. *Memorial*, like *Dart*, underscores not only the human practice of naming and claiming waterways but polluting them. Both poems foreground the importance of waterways without which landmasses could not become nations (for which epics were written). However, the contemporary epic poems of *Dart* and *Memorial* subvert

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national narratives and highlight layers of history, which are more than allusions because they grant water voice and perspective in (re)telling the story of place and the human relationships to those specific sites. Oswald calls attention to waterways as place and “a pause in movement,” in Tuan’s words, where one is asked to ponder the natural world and its well of myths. Celebrating the endurance and potency of nature and its roots in silence and mythos, Oswald’s waterways both define and transcend place.

References

Oswald, A. (2002). *Dart*. London: Faber & Faber, Ltd.

Oswald, A. (2013). *Memorial*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Tuan, Y. (1977). *Space and Place*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.