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A River's Autobiography: Fusion of Human and Nature in Alice Oswald's *Dart*

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Abstract

Published in 2002 and awarded the T.S Eliot Prize, Alice Oswald's *Dart* subverts the human-centred perspective which is conventionally attributed to autobiographies. As the lyric 'I' and narrative 'I' are intertwined in each other throughout the poem, the readers are presented with a voice which is shaped by the coexistence of human beings and the river Dart in Devon. In the poem, the first person pronouns are used by different subjects such as a forester, a water nymph and a fisherman as well as the river itself. Thus, the autobiography comes out as a product of the mutual impacts that nature and living beings make on one another. During the examination of the eco-autobiographic structure of the poem, this paper is going to pay a particular attention to the process of 'mapping', which holds a significant place in eco-autobiographic studies and which is also frequently emphasized in Oswald's poem. In *Dart*, the process of mapping arises from the speakers' positioning of themselves within a natural space. Though mapping also requires the placement of borders among different speakers, the poem uses the borders as a point of interaction, which in the end, result in the merging of the speakers' voices. Consequently, in this alternative type of autobiography, spatiality rather than temporality becomes the dominant element which influences the autobiographical narratives.

Keywords: Alice Oswald, Dart, poetry, ecocriticism, autobiography

Bir Nehrin Otobiyografisi: Alice Oswald'ın *Dart* şiirinde İnsan ve Doğanın Birleşimi

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Özet

2002 yılında yayınlanan ve aynı yıl T.S Eliot ödülünü de alan Alice Oswald'ın *Dart* isimli şiir kitabı otobiyografilere atfedilen insan merkezli bakış açısını kırmayı hedefler. Şiir boyunca ' lirik ben ile ' anlatıcı ben' iç içe geçerken okuyuculara insanlar ve İngiltere, Devon'daki Dart nehrinin eş yaşamı ile şekillenen bir özne tanıtılır. Şiirde birinci tekil kişi hem ormancı, su perisi, balıkçı vs. gibi isimler hem de nehrin kendisi tarafından kullanılır: bu anlatıcılar şiirde bir bütün halinde sunulduğu için hangisinin konuşmaya ne zaman başlayıp ne zaman bitirdiği çoğunlukla belirgin olmamaktadır. Bu da şiirde otobiyografinin canlıların ve doğanın karşılıklı ilişki ve etkilerinden doğduğu fikrini ortaya koyar. Bu makale şiirin eko-otobiyografik yapısını incelerken, bu tarz çalışmalarda önemli yer tutan ve Oswald'ın şiirinde de sıkça vurgulanan 'şiirde haritalama' sürecinin üzerinde duracaktır. Dart şiirinde haritalama konuş(turul)an öznelerin kendilerini bir doğal alan üzerine konumlandırmasıyla ortaya çıkar. Haritalama farklı konuşmacılar arasında sınır koymayı gerektirirken şiir sınırları bir etkileşim noktası olarak kullanır. Bu etkileşimin sonucunda konuşmacıların ifadeleri birbirine geçip şiirdeki nehir otobiyografisini oluşturmaktadır. Buna bağlı olarak bu alternatif otobiyografi türünde zamansallıktan ziyade mekansallık baskın unsur olarak karşımıza çıkar.

Anahtar sözcükler: Alice Oswald, Dart, şiir, eko-kritisizm, otobiyografi

Autobiography is perhaps the most human-oriented literary genre as it requires an agent that can speak on behalf of himself/herself. Besides, the narrator of an autobiography, who is both the subject and object of his narrative, inevitably adopts a self-centred attitude in his narrative as he foregrounds his own experiences and emotions. While autobiographies are conventionally grounded on a bias towards human perception and experiences, the word 'bio' (meaning 'life' in Greek) in the structure of the word 'biography' still implies a scope which can include living beings in general. However, the presentation of other natural beings' lives in the form of biography is not a case that is often observed in literary works. This being the case, *autobiography* of a natural entity apart from humans can lend itself only to the experimental forms of the genre. Alice Oswald's poem *Dart*, which was published in 2002 and won the T.S Eliot Prize in the same year, is an impressive work that seeks to formulate a life writing of a natural entity through its effective use of narrative structure. The poem incorporates the voices of various people who have different relationships with the river Dart (located in Devon, England) and it skilfully blurs the borders between the narrators and natural beings. In this way, Oswald puts forward a collective narrative which can include the life experiences of the whole natural environment.

In the light of the recent studies on *eco-autobiography*, this paper will argue that Oswald challenges the traditional understanding about autobiography as a human-centred genre through its lyrical and narrational outlooks. On the one hand, *Dart* remarkably nourishes from lyric poetry as it delineates the speakers' personal emotions, which are evoked by the river. On the other hand, these personal emotions become a significant part of the speakers' life experiences, which are recounted in the form of small narratives. The combination of the lyric 'I' and the narrative 'I' plays a major role in the construction of autobiographic narratives in Oswald's poem. Though the presence of different speakers seems to create fragmentation among the voices, the positioning of the speakers within the same natural space unifies them. The poem not just combines the voices of the speakers but also turns them into mouthpieces for the river. As the speakers narrate their physical relationships with the Dart, the river begins to 'speak' through its impact on their bodies and lives. In this way, the interaction between the speakers and the river brings about a shared voice: the word 'I', which is the fundamental component of autobiographies, begins to emanate from the whole ecosystem depicted in the poem. The extraordinary narrative structure of the poem, which is going to be scrutinized in the following pages, substantially contributes to this unification. During the examination of the eco-autobiographic structure of the poem, this paper is going to pay a particular attention to the process of 'mapping', which holds a significant place in eco-autobiographic studies and which is also frequently emphasized in Oswald's poem. In the poem, the process of mapping arises from the speakers' positioning of themselves

within a natural space. Though mapping also requires the placement of borders among different speakers, the poem uses the borders as a point of interaction (echoing Susan Stanford Friedman's argument about borders in *Mappings* even though she uses this idea in a feminist context), which in the end, result in the merging of the speakers' voices. Consequently, in this alternative type of autobiography, spatiality rather than temporality becomes the dominant element which influences the autobiographical narratives of the speakers.

One of the most salient elements that contribute to Oswald's ecocritical approach to autobiography is the harmonious incorporation of differences both in the form and the content of the poem. To break the disregard towards nature as well as the superiority ascribed to humans (which are often observed in many literary works and which have been a fundamental subject for ecological criticism); *Dart* blends different voices none of which is brought to the centre and foregrounds impact of the river on these voices. In such a structure, the speakers can dominate neither each other nor the natural setting. The miscellaneous voices which are presented in *Dart* range from those of a mountaineer, a chambermaid, a fisherman, the water researcher Theodore Scwenke to a canoeist, an oyster gatherer, a ferryman etc. What particularly strikes the eye regarding the representation of these voices is that the reader needs to depend on the short notes in the margins to learn the identities of the voices. Without these notes, it becomes rather hard to distinguish the voices which are blended into one another in one single poem. The notes in the margins function as a border which mostly serves a pragmatic purpose to help the reader follow the changes in the point of view. As a result of the detachment of the margins from the main body of the poem, the first person pronouns which are used by different voices merges into one another. While the identities of the speakers are placed in the margins; the emotions and perspectives aroused by the river are centralized in the poem as a whole. In this way, readers are invited to take the integrative aspect of the poem into consideration despite the constant variations in the perspective:

forester

and here I am coop-feeling in the valley, felling small sections to
give the forest some structure. When the chainsaw cuts out the
place starts up again. It's Spring, you can work in a wood and
feel the earth turning

woodman working on your own
knocking the long shadows down

waterynymph

and all day the river's eyes
 peep and pry among the trees
 (...)
 Listen, I can clap and slide
 my hollow hands along my side
 imagine the bare feel of water,
 woodman, to the weinkled timber¹

In the quotation above, though the perceptions and impressions of the forester and the waternymph differ from one another, the natural force of the river on the bodies of the speakers plays a connective role in the poem. The mutual relationship between the speakers and the river constitutes not just a part of the speakers' lives, but a part of the river's life as well. In this example, one can notice that Oswald does not dismiss the differences and changes but impressively incorporates them in the narrative structure of the poem, which echoes the flux of river and water. Apart from the changes in the point of view, the poem also goes back and forth between poetry and prose, which creates an alteration in the rhythmical pattern of the poem. In this way, sense of unexpectedness which is often associated with water is reflected on the flow of the poem as well. Besides, the interplay of reality and fantasy becomes a salient element in the poem serving to the construction of flux as well. While the intervention of the waternymph's voice gives a dreamy mood to the poem in the previous quotation; in different parts of the poem, the social conditions and problems of workers at the Woollen Mill, fishermen and oyster gatherers are illustrated in a realistic manner. The coexistence of differences in the form and content of the poem substantially contributes to the sense of unity that arises from the ecological concerns of the poem.

In the poem, the unity of different voices is also significant in the sense that it prevents the humanization of the river. The representation of natural entities through the insertion of human attributes is particularly subject to ecological literary criticism mostly because such a representation puts the human perceiver on top of a hierarchy that disregards the natural being itself. Instead of imposing a single humanized voice on the river and presenting the narrative of the river's history with this constructed voice, Oswald chooses to focus on how the river Dart makes people speak in various ways. Here, the river is not a passive entity that is the subject of human gaze. As a consequence, the poem does not provide much space for the visual description of the river itself (even if there is description, it is embedded in the poem's active narrative) nor the characters celebrate the river by attributing human characteristics to it. Rather, Oswald's poetry emphasizes the activity of the river and its capability to make an impact

¹ Alice Oswald, *Dart*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 11.

on the lives, perspectives and voices of different characters. In this way, a natural entity ‘speaks’ about its life without being personified.

In an interview with Madeleine Bunting in *the Guardian* where she criticizes the humanization of nature, Oswald states: “We’re colonizing it. We’re turning it into something human rather than what it is for itself. That spreads very quickly into the whole of your life and you then can begin to lead a kind of inert life of colonizing other people – colonizing everything. That’s what I am working against”.² Oswald’s poetic structure effectively prevents such a colonization that makes the human characters put their own viewpoint and perceptions on the top. In this poem which does not prioritize any of the voices in the narratives, the word ‘I’, which is repeatedly used by miscellaneous voices in the poem, begins to signify the collective existence of humans and nature. At the same time, since nature and humans are subject to change, the identity represented by the first person pronoun inevitably becomes mutable. Particularly at the end of the poem when a sealwatcher begins to speak, one can notice that the individuality of human melts within the whole natural space:

who’s this moving in the dark? Me.
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 cave³

In these lines, the unity of human and water reaches its peak: the voice speaks as if he sees his reflection on water. Through this reflection, he becomes a part of the water. Turning into the “water’s soliloquy”, he begins to lose his clear-cut identity. This blend of identity gets more meaning particularly when the beginning of the poem is taken into consideration.

The Dart, lying low in darkness calls out Who is it?
Trying to summon itself by speaking...

the walker replies
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 Dart⁴

² Alice Oswald, interview by Madeleine Bunting, *The Guardian*, July 13, 2012

³ Oswald, *Dart*, 48

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1

The beginning of the poem, which asks the very same question ‘Who is it?’, presents the mountaineer and the river as two distinct entities. Yet, as the poem progresses, the borders that separate these entities begin to blur. In the final part of the poem, instead of introducing himself as a sealwatcher, the speaker just uses the word ‘me’ since his identity is constantly subject to change. This is also observed in the speaker’s mention of the Greek river god Proteus whose name comes from the adjective ‘protean’ meaning ‘mutable’ and ‘flexible’. Such an approach is conveyed to the reader from the very beginning with the words of Ivan Illich: “Water always comes with an ego and alter ego”.⁵ The poem delineates the speakers, who almost become reflections on the surface of water, as the alter ego of the river and the first person pronoun stops signifying a single entity.

The small narratives in the poem are actually made up of the statements of various people interviewed by Alice Oswald herself and at the beginning of the book, she points to these conversations: “I’ve used these records as life-models from which to sketch out a series of characters – linking their voices into a sound-map of the river, a songline from source to the sea. There are indications in the margin where one voice changes into another. These do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions. All voices should be read as the river’s mutterings”.⁶ In this expression, the “sound-map of the river” is a phrase that needs to be paid a close attention as it indicates a placement within a space. As the voices tell their life experiences with the river, they position themselves in various points around the river and this substantially influence the language they use to depict their identities. This condition enables the readers to read the poem as eco-autobiography, which is a term that has recently been introduced by some scholars such as Peter Perreten. In *Handbook of Narratology*, Helga Schwalm defines this concept with these words: “By ‘mapping the self’ (Regard ed. 2003), eco-biography designates a specific mode of autobiography that constructs a ‘relationship between the natural setting and the self’... (Perreten 2003)”.⁷ In the essay “Eco-Autobiography: Portrait Place/Self-Portrait”, Peter Perreten points to Charles Bergman’s “‘The Curious Peach’: Nature and Language of Desire”, where he suggests that narratives about nature can help narrators find “a new self in nature”.⁸ In the light of this viewpoint, Perreten puts forward a new

⁵ Oswald, ‘foreword’ in *Dart*, iii

⁶ *Ibid.*, i

⁷ Helga Schwarm, “Autobiography”, in *Handbook of Narratology*. ed. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, Wolf Schmid. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter: 2014), 24.

⁸ Charles Bergman, “‘The Curious Peach’: Nature and Language of Desire,” in *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*. ed. Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 300.

understanding of autobiography which enables the narrators through their mutual relationship with a natural space. He suggests that in eco-autobiography “the autobiographical voice (...) is shaped by natural setting, and the structure and texture (...) also reflect the close interaction of author and the setting”.⁹ The “new self in nature” indicates a change in the narrator’s perception of himself and carries a different self-expression with it. The emphasis on alteration and flexibility in *Dart* demonstrate a parallelism with the emergence of a new self since the voices almost become the alter-ego of the river Dart.

In eco-autobiography, the body constitutes a fundamental element of narration since the influence of nature on the perception of the humans is directly related to their bodies: “the two bodies—the physical body of humans and the physical body of nature, the flesh and the planet—are written upon and through each other”.¹⁰ The connection between the body of the speakers and the river strikes the eye especially when the voice of a man named John Edmund, who was washed away in 1840, intervenes in the flow of the poem. Here, as John Edmund’s body unites with water which begins to fill his throat, his words are born out of his bodily connection with the river. As a result of this connection, Edmund’s words belong to the river as well. Just as Bergman states in the quotation above, the body of Edmund and the body of the river begin to be “written upon and through each other”:

all day my voice is being washed away
out of a lapse in my throat
like after rain
little trails of soil-creep
loosen into streams

if I shout out,
if I shout in,
I am only as wide
as a word’s aperture

(...)

this is my voice
under the spickety leaves,
under the knee-napped trees
rustling in its cubby-holes

⁹ Peter Perreten, “Eco-Autobiography: Portrait Place/Self-Portrait”. *Auto/biography Studies* 18, no.1 (2003): 2.

¹⁰ Charles Bergman, “‘The Curious Peach’: Nature and Language of Desire,” 282.

and rolling me round, like a container
upturned and sounded through

and the silence pouring into what's left maybe eighty
seconds¹¹

In this section, while the poem presents the readers with the ultimate incident of John Edmund's life, the very incident becomes a part of the river's history as well. Especially the words "this is my voice / under the spickety leaves (...)" mark the overlapping of Edmund's and the river's voice since they share the exact location. Hereby, the autobiographical accounts which are very often attributed to humans are presented as a part of the natural history. Through the construction of eco-autobiography within the poem, the borders which separate the narrator and his surrounding begin to shatter.

Susan Stanford Friedman in her *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* discusses the function of borders within the feminist scholarship. She argues that borders not just separate but they also present a space of communication:

Borders have a way of insisting on separation at the same time they acknowledge connection. Like bridges. Bridges signify the possibility of passing over (...) Identity is in fact unthinkable without some sort of imagined or literal boundary. But borders also specify the liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection and exchange.¹²

The same approach to borders can be applied to the way borders are presented in Oswald's poem with ecocritical concerns. Since the poem presents the readers with a sound-map of different voices (as Oswald puts it), the notes in the margin function like local points in a map. Even though these local points suggest separation and clear-cut distinction, in the poem these distinctions are transcended through the emphasis on the common space that encompass the voices. While this common space constitutes one of the strongest elements of eco-autobiography, it also signifies the strongest difference of eco-autobiographies from conventional autobiographies:

¹¹ Oswald, *Dart*, 20-21.

¹² Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3.

In a wider sense, eco- or topographical autobiographies undertake to place the autobiographical subject in terms of spatial or topographical figurations, bringing into play space/topography as a pivotal moment of biographical identity and thus potentially disturbing autobiography's anchorage in time. In any case, the prioritizing of space over time seems to question, if not to reverse, the dominance of temporality in autobiography and beyond since 1800.¹³

Contrary to many examples of autobiographies which mark the effect of the passing time on the narrators, in *Dart* the impact of space dominates the life experiences delineated in the poem. Here, personal change does not require a long amount of time as it is often the case in traditional autobiographies. The change arising from a contact with the nature is foregrounded in the poem.

To conclude, this essay has investigated the construction of eco-autobiography within Alice Oswald's *Dart*, which can bring a new understanding to ecocritical perspectives that investigates the impact of nature on narratives. While the borders between the self and the other constitutes an essential element of conventional autobiographies, the new approach to autobiography in *Dart* blurs the borders among different voices and delineates a collective life experience that combines nature and human. In this way, the poem leads the readers to re-examine the impact of nature on self-expression.

¹³ Schwarm, "Autobiography", 24.

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M. Tarık Ablak İstanbul'da dünyaya geldi. 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi'nin İslam ve Din Bilimleri Bölümü'nde lisans ve Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü'nde yan dal eğitimini tamamladı. İngilizce ve bilimsel hazırlık döneminin ardından şu anda Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Eski Türk Edebiyatı Bölümü'nde yüksek lisans ders dönemine devam etmektedir. İngilizce, Arapça ve Farsça bilmektedir. Evli ve bir çocuk babasıdır.