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# **Human and Nonhuman Experience of Water in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Alice Oswald's *Dart***

**Rebecca Bentley-Price**

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for  
award of the degree of MPhil in Classics and Ancient History in the Faculty of Arts.

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between humans and water in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Alice Oswald's *Dart*. It comprises an in-depth case study of two central characters in each text, Ovid's Cyane and Arethusa, and Oswald's John Edmunds and the swimmer, all of whom experience transformations into water. This study examines these processes from the perspectives of both humans and water to uncover these authors' conceptions of water's individual agency, identity, and purpose. It reveals points of both contact and dissonance between the texts in question. I argue that, while each poet's representation of the nonhuman world belongs to markedly different periods and literary cultures, reading their work in conjunction with each other fosters a kind of reciprocal reception. The *Metamorphoses* and *Dart* are in conversation with each other, separated by time, space, and language, but united by their authors' thoughtful considerations of the interplay between water and the human sphere. In charting these reciprocal receptions in Ovid and Oswald, I show how Oswald challenges and problematises Ovid's approach to water narratives and promotes a world in which humans and water interact as true equals, both part of the same ecosystem.

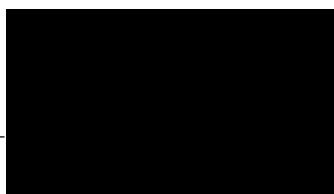
## **Dedication and Acknowledgements**

I would like to wholeheartedly thank Dr. Laura Jansen, my MPhil supervisor. Her insight and guidance have been invaluable not only for the completion of this project, but also for my understanding of environmental philosophy more widely.

## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is my own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: \_\_\_\_\_



DATE: 14<sup>th</sup> September 2024

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## Introduction

Alice Oswald is a poet celebrated for her imaginative treatment of the natural world. The careful consideration she grants to oft-overlooked nonhuman beings reveals her eco-centric outlook. Oswald's poem, 'Flies', for instance, which appears in her 2016 collection *Falling Awake*, is an example of her attentive, sympathetic, and unexpected portrayals of beings that are frequently disregarded by humans. Whilst flies are typically associated with dirt or death in literature and culture alike, Oswald re-characterises their buzzing as 'trembling sections of puzzlement'. Indeed, in many of Oswald's poems, it is as if she is viewing nature for the first time, without ingrained human preconceptions. Oswald brings curiosity and attention-to-detail to her sympathetic studies of various plants, animals, and landscapes. Undoubtedly, this stems from her Classical and horticultural background. Fiona Cox's study of Alice Oswald in her book, *Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing: Strange Monsters* (2018), describes how Oswald's 'relationship [with Ovid] was consolidated in later years when, having left Oxford [where she studied Classics], Oswald worked as a professional gardener.'<sup>1</sup> Oswald's interests in Classics and nature complement each other in her work, especially *Dart* (2002), the partial focus of this thesis. In *Dart*, Oswald privileges the narrative of the river Dart as it wends its way across the Devonian landscape and encounters humans along the way. According to Cox, 'Ovid's rivers, which have their own narrating selves, run through Oswald's poetic veins.'<sup>2</sup> The water narratives in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the other text under consideration in my study, are interwoven with Ovid's countless overlapping tales of transformation. Ovid finds in water a fluidity and an intangibility that are frequently beneficial to his human characters. At times, water nymphs, for instance, find themselves fleeing the sexually aggressive advances of male deities.<sup>3</sup> Their ability to become water proves advantageous in escaping the dangers posed by these men. The bulk of my thesis below comprises a case study of two such nymphs from book 5 of the *Metamorphoses*, Cyane and Arethusa, alongside two of Oswald's central characters, John Edmunds and the swimmer, both of whom interact and merge with the river Dart, the subject of Oswald's poem, to varying extents. I explore the various effects of water on these figures. In doing so, I argue that Ovid's attitude towards water is one that is primarily concerned with how humans might use water to their advantage, whereas Oswald exposes this approach as anthropocentric as she unveils humans' attempts to categorise and control the river as futile.

When viewed from the perspective of her reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Oswald's *Dart* invites a reconsideration of the ecopoetic ambitions in the Roman poet's work. At its very core, it is clear that Ovid's enterprise is the outcome of an anthropocentric view of the 'nodes of differentiated life that

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<sup>1</sup> 86.

<sup>2</sup> 2018: 88.

<sup>3</sup> Although Ovid's water nymphs and gods are not ostensibly human, at times their bodies and speech resemble that of humans. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, I consider them to fall under the umbrella of humanity.

sustain the biosphere.’<sup>4</sup> Human behaviours and experiences are central to the *Metamorphoses*, and Ovid’s nonhuman characters and narratives function as vessels for the human self and for human stories. Sissa contends that, for Ovid, ‘it is humanity that matters.’<sup>5</sup> Although he offers insight into the experience of water, he does so through an anthropocentric lens. In book 1, *natura* creates a world tailored for human life. Once the earth is formed and all its elements composed, Ovid ‘brings human beings on stage as superior entities,’<sup>6</sup> and traces their existence in a Roman-centric narrative up to the death of Julius Caesar, all the while establishing himself as an epic poet. As a contemporary fourth-wave feminist poet, Oswald repositions our reading of Ovid’s anthropocentric text to be an eco-centric one.<sup>7</sup> She does so partly by removing the sense of an authorial human self. Calvino hypothesises, ‘[w]hat if it were possible for a work to be conceived beyond the self, a work that allowed us to escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only in order to enter other similar selves, but to give voice to that which cannot speak.’<sup>8</sup> In *Dart*, the river itself drives the narrative by ‘linking... voices into a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea.’<sup>9</sup> Oswald renders the human experience as a means of expressing the identity and agency of the river. In doing so, this modern author invites readers of Ovid to reconsider his anthropocentric tales and creates poetry which transcends the human ego by centralising water. The water narratives in *Dart* recover something of the *Metamorphoses*, a poem which ultimately prioritises human regard for nature, but has elements of the ecopoetic that Oswald unveils. In reading *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses* alongside each other, a kind of reciprocal reception emerges, through which a series of ecocritical readings of both texts becomes possible.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid imposes human narratives onto the nonhuman by using human stories to explain nonhuman behaviour. One of these human narratives is that of sexual violence, something that Cyane experiences and with which Arethusa is threatened in the *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, ‘Ovid’s subject is frequently rape.’<sup>10</sup> Whilst the study of patterns of rape and sexual violence in Ovid’s poem is beyond the scope of my ecocritical investigation, it is significant that Ovid uses this narrative as an aetiological explanation for nonhuman phenomena. Pluto’s erotically-charged stabbing of Cyane is the catalyst for her subsequent transformation. Similarly, Ovid personifies the counter-currents within a river as the pursuing Alpheus and the fleeing Arethusa (Ov. *Met.* 5.636-8). In both cases, the nymph’s hydro-morphosis forms an aetiology for a real-life geographical location: the Fonte Ciane and the Fonte Aretusa, Sicily. Ovid imaginatively creates anthropocentric origins of nonhuman phenomena. This makes for a text in which the human is omnipresent, central to the narrative trajectory. What’s more, Ovid’s authorial persona is present throughout the *Metamorphoses*. He essentially writes a history of

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<sup>4</sup> Martelli and Sissa 2023: 15.

<sup>5</sup> Sissa 2023: 41.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson 1998: 160.

<sup>7</sup> Cox 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Calvino 2016: 151; in Jansen 2023: 5.

<sup>9</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.

<sup>10</sup> Curran 1978: 215.



the human from the Creation up to the death of Julius Caesar, with the thinly veiled ambition of securing his own immortality. It is long contested whether Ovid writes from an ‘Augustan’ or ‘anti-Augustan’ perspective.<sup>11</sup> Either way, this thesis contends that Ovid’s attitude is primarily a human one. If we turn to *Dart*, we can see that Oswald provides an alternative reading of Ovidian water narratives for a modern audience that is directed to the nonhuman in different, more overt ways.<sup>12</sup> *Dart* does not explain or justify water’s formation and behaviour through a human lens. In fact, the river Dart is not subject to personification or anthropomorphism in Oswald’s poem. At times, Oswald goes as far as to employ the reverse approach, describing human bodies in terms of water forms. For instance, the body of the swimmer, one of Oswald’s central characters, becomes ‘a wave to swim in’ (*Dart*: 23). Oswald’s poem gives water the space to exist on its own terms and allows the reader to observe a poetic world at the centre of which is the nonhuman. Oswald grants a true voice to nature; in *Dart*, water is the medium by which the narrative progresses and a key protagonist in the poem.

What are, then, the implications of these contrasting treatments of water narratives, and what knowledge of human and nonhuman spheres do they reveal? Sharrock finds that ‘there are passages in Ovid’s poetry which seem remarkably prescient of contemporary concerns’ and which expose anthropocentric human treatment of the nonhuman that may lead to environmental crises.<sup>13</sup> Oswald accentuates this: *Dart* draws upon a plethora of human attitudes towards the nonhuman to expose them as arbitrary.<sup>14</sup> By bypassing Ovid’s anthropocentric aetiological lens, *Dart* provides a view of the nonhuman, specifically water, that is more representative of water’s ultimate agency, identity, and purpose. This thesis pulls back the curtain on the reciprocity between the texts in question. With a focus on two pairs of contiguous characters from each text, all four of which experience transformation into water (albeit to varying extents), my study points to the effect of humans’ use and abuse of the natural world, specifically of water. The core of the thesis is organised around two complementary chapters, the first of which focuses on the human experience of water in my four-pronged case study, and the second of which uncovers the reverse perspective, water’s ‘experience’ of these four human characters. Chapter 1 establishes the impact and influence water has on human emotion, sensation, and cognition. An investigation into the interplay between human and water would be incomplete without consideration of the other side of the coin, and the second chapter of this thesis offers just that. Chapter 2 works towards an understanding of how water itself might ‘experience’ the human and searches for an answer to what it means for a nonhuman entity to experience something at all. I aim to cast off the narrow, restrictive, and oppressive outlook that comes with assuming that humans are both central and superior and to push for a different worldview, one which finds value, agency, and purpose in all beings, even if we as humans are unable to comprehend exactly what each of these might mean for water in particular. In doing so, my thesis

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<sup>11</sup> Giusti 2016: 3.

<sup>12</sup> Cox 2018.

<sup>13</sup> 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Cox 2018: 90.

advances aspects of the study of the environmental imagination of ancient and modern poets, while also encouraging the contemporary reader to question their place in the world, and the impact that their attitudes and actions have upon their environment.

### Key Terms

Throughout this thesis, I refer to human-to-water transformations as ‘hydro-morphoses’. This term encompasses a wide spectrum of interactions between human and water figures in both texts, from the ambiguous descriptive language where boundaries between human and water become blurred, to complete changes in physical form, where a human body is destroyed and the human identity prevails, albeit within or associated with liquid. Hydro-morphoses occur frequently in *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses* to varying extents.

Another term that is crucial to my study of the poems in question is ‘experience’. I use this term in both noun and verb form, for instance ‘human somatic and affective experiences of the river (p. 53) or ‘the swimmer experiences this river’ (p. 44). The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb ‘experience’ as ‘to ascertain or prove by experiment or observation, and related senses,’ and the noun as ‘an event by which one is affected, or a state or condition of which one is consciously aware.’<sup>15</sup> These definitions evoke a relationship between the being that is experiencing and that which is being experienced. My own usage of this term predominantly concerns the interaction between water and human. I focus on the various ways in which humans encounter and experience water, and investigate what it might mean for water itself to ‘experience’ humanity.

### Literary Survey

My project aims to contribute to the study of ecocriticism and new materialism in Classical and contemporary poetry. Greg Garrard’s thorough and expansive work, *Ecocriticism* (2023), defines ecocritical theory as ‘the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human throughout human cultural history.’<sup>16</sup> Garrard finds in new materialism a ‘resistance to hierarchies of being,’ which he labels ‘a “flat ontology”’.<sup>17</sup> In *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*, the question of a hierarchical cosmic structure is scrutinised in various similar and contrasting ways. This has a profound effect on the contemporary reader, namely for us to challenge our own perception of our place and role within the composition of the world. Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* is a fundamental source for my study of these texts, as it provides a comprehensive framework that my thesis may then apply to these poems in order to

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<sup>15</sup> 2024.

<sup>16</sup> 5.

<sup>17</sup> 36.

draw attention to their ecopoetic potential. As a reader of Ovid's text, Oswald is arguably deeply influenced by his approach to the natural world and to water in particular. It makes sense, therefore, to think of Oswald's *Dart* partly as a 'reception' of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Robert Holub, in *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1984) conceives reception theory as 'a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader.'<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in Fiona Cox's essential and enlightening volume, *Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing: Strange Monsters* (2018), her chapter on Alice Oswald outlines the relationship between Ovid and Oswald, positing that 'Oswald borrows Ovid's device of personifying rivers and allowing them their own voice or voices, while also drawing on a series of Ovidian myths in her depiction of the region.'<sup>19</sup> Such interplay between the two authors in question transcends temporal, geographical, and linguistic barriers, as their common interests in human-nonhuman interactions establish a conversation between their two poems. Cox's study of Ovid and Oswald is an essential secondary source for this thesis. She argues that Oswald's *Dart* reworks Ovid's environmental imagination and nonhuman narratives for a contemporary audience, whose perception of their impact upon nature is heavily influenced by the current climate emergency. In Cox's words, 'the classical, Ovidian world that Oswald reveals to us in Devon is being polluted by the negligence of the contemporary world.'<sup>20</sup> My thesis aligns with this view but pushes it further by focussing specifically on the presence and significance of water in both poems. It contends that Oswald's adaptation of Ovidian treatment of water teases out the eco-poetic from Ovid's primarily anthropocentric text. Whilst Ovid privileges the human narrative from their beginning to his own lifetime, Oswald shifts the focus onto water. She develops water's own individual identity, and simultaneously exposes human futility and insignificance against 'water's soliloquy' (*Dart*: 48). In my study of Ovid's and Oswald's approaches to water narratives below, I find that the fields of ecocriticism and reception overlap and complement each other. Reception theory originates in 1960s Germany with Hans Robert Jauss, who recognises that 'a dialogue between work and audience... forms a continuity.'<sup>21</sup> Oswald, as a contemporary poet and reader of Ovid, forms part of Ovid's audience. Through her poetry emerges Jauss' 'continuity'.<sup>22</sup> My focus is on the way in which Oswald receives and reworks Ovidian themes and attitudes towards nature and how we as contemporary readers of both texts are affected by Oswald's representation of Ovid's rivers.

Ecocriticism is a subject of increasing attention in the study of both Classical and contemporary literature. As Frank van den Boom notes in his fascinating article, 'New Bodies in an Ecological Crisis: The Unforeseeable Future in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*' (2021), 'in a crisis induced by human's destructive behaviour toward the nonhuman in a relationship based on capitalist exploitation, a literary work that

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<sup>18</sup> xii.

<sup>19</sup> 85.

<sup>20</sup> 2018: 92.

<sup>21</sup> 1982: 19.

<sup>22</sup> 1982: 19.

blurs the lines between human and nonhuman embodiment is a useful instrument for rethinking human's relation to the environment.<sup>23</sup> Modern authors and literary scholars alike are increasingly interested in the relationship between us and the world around us. Ovid has even found his way into popular media such as Melvyn Bragg's BBC Radio 4 *In Our Time* podcast episode, 'Metamorphosis', featuring novelist A.S. Byatt and Dr Catherine Bates, critic and Research Fellow at the University of Warwick. Scholars, authors, and readers alike are beginning to unpick long-held anthropocentric assumptions that the world of academia has perpetuated through its selective study of ancient literature. Indeed, Johanna Koivunen's Master's Thesis, entitled 'Understanding nonhuman agency in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*' (2022), is an illuminating study of bodies of wood, stone, and water in the ancient poem. In Koivunen's words, 'ecocritical approaches help to direct and invent our ways of viewing literature.'<sup>24</sup> Indeed, her thesis is a key text for my investigation into human-water interactions. She finds that 'agency is not dependent on humanity,' and that 'there are different ways of viewing agency in narrative.'<sup>25</sup> My own thesis aligns with and builds upon Koivunen's arguments. I delve into the study of water, specifically uncovering the ways in which Ovid and Oswald represent the agency of water within human-water relationships. In doing so, I argue that Oswald challenges the contemporary audience of Ovid. Oswald grants independent agency to the river Dart, an agency which is often unintelligible and out of her reader's intellectual reach. She acknowledges that humans are neither omniscient nor omnipresent, but that our wider understanding is blinkered by our own insular concerns about how we exist and interact with each other and with our environment. Conversely, Ovid's personification and anthropomorphism of water bodies betrays his elevation of human stories. For Ovid, the nonhuman is a means to the human end. Interactions between water and human or human-adjacent characters, including water nymphs and water deities, generally occur when hydro-morphosis would benefit the human in some way. Oswald poses questions about the motivation behind this Ovidian attitude. As a result, she frames Ovid's personification of rivers as anthropocentric, and exposes the *Metamorphoses*' neglect of nonhuman agency. Koivunen's studies of the water nymphs Arethusa and Cyane are particularly intrinsic to this thesis, as these characters form the Ovidian half of my extensive case study below. Her comparison of the transformations of these two characters is a springboard for my own examination of the interplay between human and water. Her thesis informs the way that I interpret Oswald's expression of the equivalent transformations of two of *Dart*'s central characters, John Edmunds and the swimmer.

The study of water in the *Metamorphoses* would be incomplete without an understanding of the ancient environmental imagination. Georgia Irby's *Conceptions of the Watery World in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (2021) tracks the early philosophies of water. Irby's comprehensive history of the relationship between Ancient Greeks and Romans and the world's seas, for instance, provides an important context for Ovid's

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<sup>23</sup> 155.

<sup>24</sup> 2022: 56.

<sup>25</sup> 2022: 54-5.

epic poem. She writes that the ‘sea was the backdrop for mythology and heroic quests.’<sup>26</sup> For Ovid and his contemporaries, water is deeply interconnected with epic human activity, but remains a passive feature of the landscape, not an independent being with its own identity. Similarly, Irby says of rivers, that the ‘rhythms of the waterways were recognised as guaranteeing both human life and the land’s fertility.’<sup>27</sup> Time and again, ancient Greco-Roman philosophy reveals its anthropocentrism. It assumes that water exists to benefit and nurture human life. Furthermore, ‘water was a central factor in maintaining, understanding, and interrogating the delicate balance between human and divine.’<sup>28</sup> To the ancient Greeks and Romans, water was a tool to facilitate their actions. Irby’s volume situates Ovid within this area of thought. This contributes towards our understanding of Ovid’s overarching priority: to elevate the human narrative, thereby marginalising the nonhuman. Oswald, on the other hand, writing two millennia hence, writes from an ecocritical position, and so *Dart* has the opposite effect of the *Metamorphoses*. Oswald’s poem forces humans to the wings and places water centre-stage instead.

Understandably, due to its comparably recent publication, there are fewer secondary sources for *Dart* than there are for the *Metamorphoses*. Yet, my understanding of Oswald’s poem has been enhanced by select studies of water, acoustics, and language in her text. Robert Baker touches upon the connection between *Dart* and ancient poetry. He notes that Oswald ‘brings to life an ancient gift of the lyric tradition: the gift of a more spacious life, a life beyond the cramped boundaries of the self we too often are.’<sup>29</sup> My thesis amplifies this view of Oswald’s work. I argue that, when read in conjunction with the *Metamorphoses*, *Dart* offers an illuminating perspective on the significance, or lack thereof, of humanity in water narratives. I find that it is not only the case that Oswald’s reader may fathom from her poem ‘a life beyond the cramped boundaries of the self.’<sup>30</sup> In fact, below I contend that Oswald’s poem problematises the conception of such boundaries themselves. As a result, she celebrates water as humanity’s equal and presents the multifaceted human experience of water objectively. In *Dart*, drownings exist on the same plane as a pleasurable dip in the river. Similarly, poachers, bailiffs, and oyster catchers are not categorised in a moral hierarchy, nor are they characterised as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ as a result of their conflicting attitudes towards and interactions with the river. Oswald approaches the multiplicity of humanity impartially. In doing so, she exposes their attempts to utilise the river’s resources as futile and arbitrary. In the end, the river will always prevail, ‘driving [its] many selves from cave to cave...’ (*Dart*, 48).

Other scholars of Oswald are preoccupied with Oswald’s attribution of a voice to the river Dart. Significant sources include Bastien Goursaud’s “‘The River’s Mutterings’: Lyrical Discretion, Communal Utterances, and Poetry Beyond the Human in Alice Oswald’s *Dart*” (2019), Peter Howarth’s

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<sup>26</sup> 2021: 3.

<sup>27</sup> 2021: 13.

<sup>28</sup> Irby 2021: 8.

<sup>29</sup> 2017: 117.

<sup>30</sup> Baker 2017: 117.

“‘Water’s Soliloquy’: Soundscape and Environment in Alice Oswald’s *Dart*’ (2013), and Mary Pinard’s ‘Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter’ (2009). These articles work towards a common conclusion, that *Dart* fosters a kind of ‘acoustic ecology’.<sup>31</sup> Whilst Oswald writes ‘in parallel with the geography of the river’s current, the poem also follows the trajectory of a single listener.’<sup>32</sup> Part of her mapping of Dartmoor is to foster a conversational relationship between Devonians and the river Dart, and between the river and the reader. These scholars focus on Oswald’s elevation of human and nonhuman voices. Goursaud concludes that ‘Oswald’s *Dart* is a community of voices disseminated and paradoxically reunited by the acoustic infiltration of the non-human within the human.’<sup>33</sup> My thesis expands upon these interpretations of Oswald’s ‘sound-map of the river.’<sup>34</sup> I aim to demonstrate that the human acoustic experience of the river forms part of a holistic participation in their environment. The river Dart interacts with the human via sounds, and Oswald’s characters such as John Edmunds, who is central to my case study below, become part of the soundscape of Dartmoor via hydro-morphosis.

Oswald’s approach closely resembles material ecocriticism, a faction of a contemporary environmental position, new materialism.<sup>35</sup> Garrard summarises new materialism as ‘a resistance to hierarchies of being.’<sup>36</sup> In *Theocritus and Things: Material Agency in the Idylls* (2023) Lilah Grace Canevaro defines material ecocriticism as ‘the possibility of shifting our perspective, our world-view, and of decentring typically foregrounded agents and moving others to the centre or focusing on the margins.’<sup>37</sup> Canevaro’s introduction to her insightful volume encourages her reader to pay attention to the multiplicity of voices present in literature rather than that of the human alone, which is often the loudest. Canevaro is consistent in the attention she gives to the literary nonhuman. Her article, ‘The Agency of the Idyllic Landscape: Entanglement in Theocritus’ *Idyll* 21’ (2024), is another significant source for my thesis. She poses ‘an entangled view of mind and world, human and nonhuman, culture and nature.’<sup>38</sup> This entanglement opens up the possibility for metamorphosis. Of course, in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid promotes an interconnected worldview in the sense that humans become nonhumans. The fluidity of form in his poem allows for perpetual metamorphosis. However, the transformation tales in the *Metamorphoses* primarily trace the human consciousness between various nonhuman forms. Ovid creates a world in which flux is partial. The human retains their identity, consciousness, and values, whilst their body changes into something new. Recent ecocritical studies of the *Metamorphoses* recognise this too. Francesca Martelli and Giulia Sissa argue in their introduction to *Ovid’s*

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<sup>31</sup> Pinard 2009: 31.

<sup>32</sup> Goursaud 2019: 4.

<sup>33</sup> 2019: 39.

<sup>34</sup> 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Timothy Clark 2019: 112.

<sup>36</sup> 2023: 36.

<sup>37</sup> 3.

<sup>38</sup> 18.

*Metamorphoses and the Environmental Imagination* (2023) that ‘transformation occurs as an accident, but, because it does so over and over again, verse after verse, book after book, it becomes a systemic occurrence.’<sup>39</sup> Martelli and Sissa’s volume is another that is of significant relevance to my study of *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*. In particular, Sissa’s chapter entitled ‘*cuncta fluunt*: The Fluidity of Life in Ovid’s Metamorphic World’ focusses on the Ovidian Pythagoras’ speech in book 15 of Ovid’s epic poem.<sup>40</sup> In Sissa’s words, ‘Pythagoras claims that ‘all things are in flux’ (*cuncta fluunt*).’<sup>41</sup> My thesis builds upon the concept of flux and explores what it means for humans to experience this phenomenon. I find that different levels of flux occur, to varying extremes, and that the texts in question handle this concept in different ways. To a certain extent, this branch of my investigation develops ideas posed in Sissa’s chapter. Sissa pays particular attention to Pythagoras’ justification for vegetarianism, claiming that his speech is ‘a manifesto of animism.’<sup>42</sup> Pythagoras expresses fears that eating certain plants and animals may constitute cannibalism because of the concept of metempsychosis, the movement of a soul from one body to another at the point of death that ‘creates both morphological dissimilarity and physical consanguinity among living beings.’<sup>43</sup> In other words, humans and nonhumans have common internal, invisible characteristics whilst appearing different. Indeed, ‘in a world where metempsychosis is possible, a non-human animal *might* be, also, human.’<sup>44</sup> This coincides with Italo Calvino’s recognition of the presence of ‘universal contiguity’ in the *Metamorphoses*. Calvino elaborates on this concept. He envisages Ovid’s world as a ‘system made up of elementary components’ with potential for ‘growing, diminishing, hardening, softening, curving, straightening, joining, separating etc.’<sup>45</sup> This recognition of the contiguity between all things is significant for my study of Ovid’s poem, as I argue below that this contributes towards Ovid’s overarching anthropocentrism. I find that Ovid grants a voice to the nonhuman only when it is inhabited by the human. In the *Metamorphoses*, we only understand the nonhuman via the human mind.

This raises questions about what it means to possess consciousness, sentience, or a ‘soul’, and how Ovid and Oswald approach human to water metamorphoses in terms of the prevailing human identity. At this juncture, it is important to establish the meaning of the term ‘animism’. In his valuable work, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), the anthropologist Philippe Descola defines animism as:

‘... the attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own. This attribution humanizes plants and, above all, animals, since the soul with which it endows them allows them not only to behave in conformity with the social norms and ethical precepts of humans but also to establish communicative relations both with humans and among themselves.

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<sup>39</sup> 3.

<sup>40</sup> 35-54.

<sup>41</sup> 36.

<sup>42</sup> 2023: 36.

<sup>43</sup> Sissa 2023: 35.

<sup>44</sup> Sissa 2023: 41.

<sup>45</sup> 1999: 25.

This similarity of interiorities justifies extending a state of “culture” to nonhumans, together with all the attributes that this implies, ranging from intersubjectivity to a mastery of techniques and including ritualized conduct and deference to conventions.’<sup>46</sup>

Animism is a significant philosophical framework for my discussion of humanity in these two poems. I find that Ovid’s own representation of metamorphosis involves a ‘similarity of interiorities’<sup>47</sup> between human and nonhuman, as the human consciousness is frequently present pre- and post-transformation. Ovid’s humanising of plants and animals makes for an omnipresent humanity, one which automatically renders the nonhuman as inferior. Sissa’s chapter exposes Ovid’s human-centred outlook. Whilst Pythagoras is the voice of these concerns, the very nature of his worries entirely revolves around human welfare. Pythagoras is troubled by the consequences of consuming animal flesh solely because it might contain a human soul, rather than for the sake of the animal itself. In Sissa’s words, in the *Metamorphoses* ‘it is humanity that matters.’<sup>48</sup> My own thesis cultivates this notion. I unearth Ovid’s overarching concern for humanity in the two tales of transformation under my consideration, those of Arethusa and Cyane. I argue that reading *Dart* alongside the *Metamorphoses* highlights the anthropocentrism of the latter and the ecocentrism of the former. When read as a reception of Ovid’s epic poem, it becomes clearer that Oswald’s work is one which rejects the idea that the human is superior and is able to permeate every being. In fact, I find that human aims are considered ephemeral and trivial by Oswald, as she exposes the futility of human endeavour when set against the perpetual, awesome presence of the river Dart.

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<sup>46</sup> 70.

<sup>47</sup> Descola 2013: 70.

<sup>48</sup> 2023: 41.



## The Human Experience of Water

A striking parallel in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Oswald's *Dart* is their common unfolding of narratives of water, human, and nonhuman. Both Ovid and Oswald show a concern for the moments at which water and humanity meet and the consequences of these interactions for both entities. With a focus on four characters from Ovid's and Oswald's poems, this chapter stages the way both poems are implicitly in dialogue with one another. Both are standalone texts, but looking at them together enriches each one. More specifically, this chapter explores two interrelated issues in order to uncover points of contact and departure. It delves into Ovid's depictions of Cyane (Ov. *Met.* 5.409-437; 5.462-473) and Arethusa (Ov. *Met.* 5.572-641) and Oswald's treatment of the voice of John Edmunds, who drowned in the Dart in 1840 as he was travelling with his wife 'from Staverton Church, where they had been married',<sup>49</sup> together with the character of the swimmer (Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 20-24). In both poems, these characters experience water through various means of sensation and cognition. This chapter investigates the process by which humans become liquid, a process that I refer to throughout as 'hydro-morphosis'. It concentrates on human behaviour and how it is changed by these interactions. All four of these characters are subject to hydro-morphosis, albeit to different degrees. This chapter examines their experience of this process, focussing on their positions in space, time, and narrative, their sensory experience of water, their desire and ability to communicate, and how their voices prevail or are erased by their hydro-morphoses.

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Common features emerge when reading the tales of Arethusa, Cyane, John Edmunds, and the swimmer. All four characters are entrenched in agriculture. The context of their tales involves human influence over the earth. Ovid's 'Rape of Proserpina' episode, in which Cyane and Arethusa appear, depicts how Ceres, goddess of agriculture, imposes and retracts human control over the natural world at will by both establishing and destroying agricultural processes. Likewise in *Dart*, the voices of John Edmunds and the swimmer are sandwiched between those of agricultural workers of the river. Prior to the lines attributed to John Edmunds, a 'worker at Buckfast Woollen Mills' describes the way in which they process sheep's wool (*Dart*: 18-20). They cleanse and comb it to make it acceptable for human usage. After the voice of the swimmer comes that of the 'water abstractor' (*Dart*: 24-7), who transforms the river into something he considers palatable, safe for human consumption. All of the characters adjacent to Cyane, Arethusa, John Edmunds, and the swimmer demonstrate conflict with and separation from nature. Conversely, these four characters become immersed in river narratives through their interactions

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<sup>49</sup> Baring-Gould 1900: 198.

with water. This chapter delves into these moments of immersion, revealing points at which the boundaries between human and water become blurred, and the effect of this on these characters.

### **Alpheios, Ciane, and Dart: Rivers between Reality and Fiction**

There are thematic correlations in the wider narratives of both poems, too. Ovid weaves the tales of Cyane's and Arethusa's hydro-morphoses into the 'Rape of Proserpina' episode, narrated by Calliope (Ov. *Met.* 5.341-641). Cyane and Arethusa emerge as antagonists of Pluto, Proserpina's kidnapper. First, Cyane attempts to obstruct Pluto in his violent abduction of the daughter of Ceres, and later she helps Ceres to solve the mystery of Proserpina's disappearance. Similarly, Arethusa rises from the waves to assist Ceres, and later is invited by the goddess to tell the story of her own transformation. Oswald, too, moves seamlessly between various voices associated with water. John Edmunds speaks to us as he succumbs to drowning in the river Dart. Next, the swimmer leaps both into the river and onto the page to describe his own experience of the water. The parallels between John Edmunds and the swimmer and Ovid's Cyane and Arethusa are striking and crucially, as I will show, they enhance our understanding of these ancient and modern authors' environmental imaginations and ecological concerns.

Geographical context of the tales of Cyane, Arethusa, John Edmunds, and the swimmer lends greater significance to the intersection of *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*, and instils a realism into the tales of their transformations. The Fonte Ciane and the Fonte Aretusa are found on the east coast of Sicily, near the town of Syracuse.<sup>50</sup> Arethusa travels here from Achaia, Greece, via the Alpheios River and through the 'dark depths' to the island of Ortygia, part of Syracuse (Ov. *Met.* 5.604-13; 5.639-41). Ovid introduces Cyane and Arethusa at Syracuse (Ov. *Met.* 5.409-410). The Sicilian coastline closely resembles the shape formed by Torbay and Dartmouth (the estuary of the river Dart, the subject of Oswald's poem) on the southern coast of England.

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<sup>50</sup> Melville and Kenney 1986: 111.



Figure 1: Maps depicting the location of the Fonte Aretusa and Fonte Ciane, Sicily (Google Maps 2023).

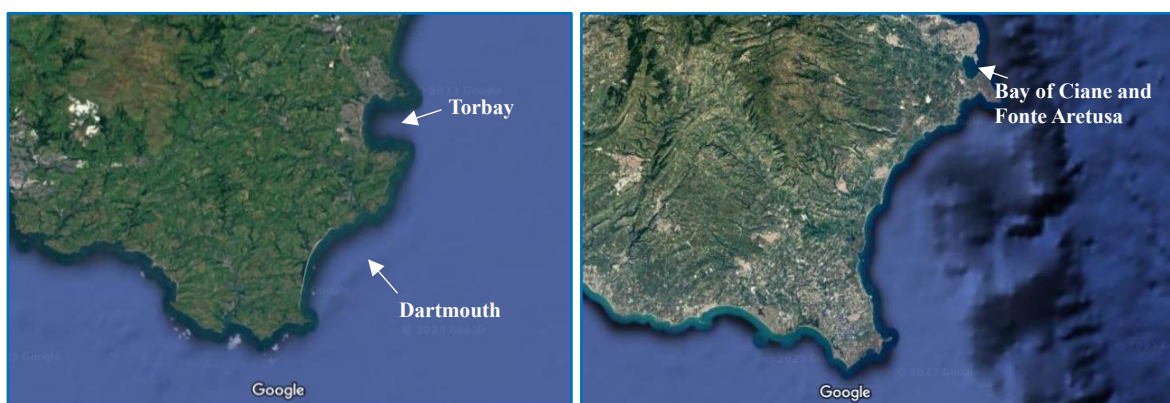


Figure 2: Maps comparing the coastlines of southern England and of eastern Sicily (Google Maps 2023).



Figure 3: Maps depicting the section of the river Dart which John Edmonds and the swimmer occupy. (Google Maps 2023)

Just as Cyane and Arethusa share the same Sicilian Bay, John Edmonds and the swimmer occupy the same stretch of the river Dart. John Edmonds drowns ‘at Staverton Ford’ (*Dart*: 20). Staverton Ford traverses Still Pool Copse, where the swimmer enters the river (*Dart*: 22). In the preface to *Dart*, Oswald states that the voices in her poem ‘do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions’. The mythical nature of Ovid’s Cyane and Arethusa functions in the same way. Their intertextuality in Greek and Roman myth allows for fluctuation in their tales. Indeed, ‘Ovid’s version... appears to be his own invention.’<sup>51</sup> However, just as Cyane and Arethusa are immortalised as bodies of water which bear their names, a man named John Edmonds *did* drown at Staverton Ford in 1840,<sup>52</sup> and people *do* swim regularly at Still

<sup>51</sup> Melville and Kenney 1986: 111.

<sup>52</sup> Baring-Gould 1900: 198.

Pool Copse.<sup>53</sup> These characters are anchored in reality, connected in some way to real events or locations in water narratologies. Below, I present a case study of these four characters to delve into the physical and emotional impact of water on humanity and to uncover the complex relationship between ancient and modern human attitudes to the nonhuman world. I posit that Oswald's imaginative response to Ovid's water narratives makes for a fresh perspective on an ancient text, as well as confronting her audience with the consequences of their treatment of the natural world and inspiring them to view the world in a new, more eco-centric way.

### Mood/Voice

Tensions can be traced in characters' experiences of water. During these moments, there exists conflict between emotional pairings, predominantly feelings of grief and acceptance, fear and relief. This is the case with Cyane and John Edmunds. Each experiences a profound sense of loss that resolves as an acceptance of or a willingness to embrace their new forms. However, their emotions have different functions in their individual transformations. In Ovid, human emotions often trigger metamorphoses. It is the psychological change as a response to human-water interactions that Oswald is concerned with, though. This section begins by untangling the emotional responses of the characters which form the crux of my case study. Discussion then turns to Arethusa's and the swimmer's experiences of water. I concentrate on emotions and sensations to investigate whether engagement with water always enables psychological and physical relief from discomfort. By tracing such conflicting aspects of human and water, I argue that the water narratives in *Dart* recover something of the *Metamorphoses*, a text which ultimately promotes human regard for nature, but which has elements of the ecopoetic that Oswald unveils. I find that, by reading *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses* alongside each other, a kind of reciprocal reception emerges, through which a series of ecocritical readings of both texts becomes possible.

#### i. Cyane and John Edmunds: From Grief to Acceptance

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the nymph Cyane mourns for Proserpina, who has been kidnapped by Pluto, and for the rights of her own pool. Her tears consume her body:

*at Cyane, raptamque deam contemptaque fontis  
iura sui maerens, inconsolabile vulnus  
mente gerit tacita lacrimisque absumitur omnis*

(Ov. *Met.* 5.425-7).

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<sup>53</sup> Venn 2020.



Suspended at the end of a line, Cyane's 'irreparable wound' (*inconsolabile vulnus*; 5.426) points to her physical wound by Pluto's attack, during which he stabs her pool with his sceptre (5.421-3). However, the ablatives *mente... tacita* (5.427) draw attention to an *emotional*, rather than physical wound: 'she bore it in her quiet mind'. Furthermore, *tacita* emphasises that her grief is internal, unexpressed in her body or speech. Indeed, Cyane's transformation begins with her being 'dissolved by all her tears' (5.427) and is triggered by her 'wound'.<sup>54</sup> Her internal, invisible grief is the catalyst for her transformation. Yet more significantly, it is the water contained within her, her tears, that 'dissolve' her human body (5.427). Cyane's grief is connected to her transformation. Her human consciousness is not transferred into a new form, but rather her human body is *reformed* into water. Her tears overwhelm her flesh and become the dominant element of her physical composition. Cyane possesses the potential for metamorphosis at all times. It is contained within her body and does not require interaction with the natural world. Water is an element of the human body, an alternative form which the occupant of the body may inhabit at their convenience.

Oswald, on the other hand, does not appeal to emotion as a trigger for metamorphosis. Rather, Edmunds' grief is the *result* of his encounter with the river Dart and his subsequent inability to regain his human form:

**o I wish** I was slammicking home  
in wet clothes, shrammed with cold and bivvering **but**  
  
this is my voice

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 21).

This is a man who has lost his human form, his new wife, and his future. The phrase 'o I wish' hints at Oswald's background in Classics. In Latin, 'o' is 'the commonest exclamation of joy, astonishment, desire, grief, indignation.'<sup>55</sup> In a single sound, a lone letter, Edmunds vocalises his grief. He then becomes resigned to his fate. His emotional adjustment hinges on the word 'but', which hangs on the end of the line, acting as the pivot between the two emotions, grief and acceptance, that he experiences. One might expect Edmunds' next words after 'but' to be something to the effect of 'at least I would be safe and sound', but instead he looks to the present. The next line 'this is my voice' conveys that Edmunds focusses on what he has left before he is 'silenced'. The prevailing present tense connects this line and Edmunds' first utterance in *Dart*. The constancy of 'all day my voice is being washed away' (*Dart*: 20) and 'this is my voice' (*Dart*: 21) emphasises both Edmunds' loss of his life as a human and his willingness to embrace his new form. While Cyane's transformation is triggered by her grief, and begins with her producing tears, Edmunds experiences grief because of his immersion in the water (water which is separate from his human form, unlike Cyane's tears), and the loss of his human life

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<sup>54</sup> Anderson 1998: 542.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis & Short 1879: 1231-2.

caused by his subsequent drowning. Oswald takes Ovid's exploration of the human experience of water and turns it on its head. For Ovid, metamorphosis is a human physiological response to a psychological change. The transformation narratives in the *Metamorphoses* are indistinguishable from the human emotional experience. From Cyane's transformation we can deduce that water is the property of the human, since her hydro-morphosis provides escape from an existence that would be impossibly unbearable for her.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, for Oswald, water is central to the narrative of *Dart*. The river Dart acts upon John Edmunds, to the extent that he is 'washed away' (*Dart*: 20), and his emotional experience is a secondary effect of this encounter, rather than a primary cause. So, Oswald dismisses human emotion as a catalyst for hydro-morphosis and instead prioritises the behaviour of water. As a result, Oswald minimises the power and significance Ovid attributes to human emotion. Instead, her focus turns to how humans and water encounter and interact with each other as equals. In *Dart*, these entities have distinct individual autonomies. Oswald's interests lie in the points at which these autonomies converge.

Both John Edmunds and Cyane experience acceptance. This manifests as determination to retain their voices. Although he mourns the loss of his body, Edmunds displays concern about his 'voice'. He exclaims:

but listen! if you listen  
I will move you a few known sounds  
in a constant irregular pattern

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 21).

Edmunds' use of the conditional here implies that his existence is a two-way process. For him to exist, he must be perceived, namely heard. Sound is his only agency here. His onomatopoeic language suggests that, as he drowns, he exists only as the sounds of the river:

this is my voice  
under the spickety leaves  
under the knee-napped trees  
rustling in its cubby holes  
[...]  
and the silence pouring into what's left maybe eighty seconds

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 21).

Edmunds' movement and his voice become one during this process. Oswald writes in her preface to *Dart* that 'all voices should be read as the river's mutterings'. Edmunds' drowning is the process of the river adopting his voice as its own, for the motion of water is what creates its sound, as it 'rustles'

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<sup>56</sup> Koivunen 2022: 46.

between its banks. Edmunds' lines are followed by a blank page, which Oswald labels as 'silence' in her marginal note (*Dart*: 22) (see figure 4 below).

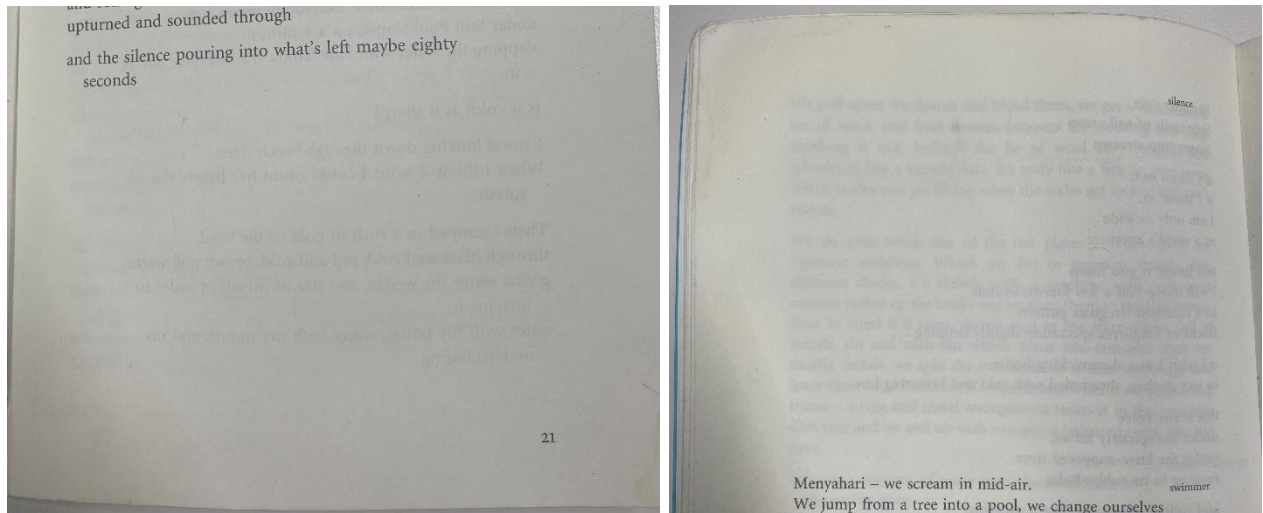


Figure 4: Pages 21-2 of *Dart*. There is an empty space equivalent to approximately one page, labelled 'silence'. (Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 21-2).

This space is ambiguous. Does Edmunds' silence mean that he has died, or that he has just ceased to speak, such is his immersion in the water? The latter explanation aligns with the reason for Cyane's vocal absence, that she no longer has mouth or tongue to speak (*Ov. Met.* 5.466-7). Edmunds' 'voice is... washed away,' (*Dart*: 20), and thereafter he can only be silent. Yet, he is immortalised by this event, just like Cyane and Arethusa: a tombstone in Dartington Churchyard memorialises his drowning.<sup>57</sup> Edmunds is overwhelmed by the river and experiences a complete transformation. Apart from the tombstone, which acts as a retrospective reminder of the absence Edmunds leaves behind after his death, he no longer exists, hence the page of 'silence' (*Dart*: 22) which follows his lines. The river Dart is more powerful than his body and mind, whereas for Cyane, the water which transforms her is already part of her body. Furthermore, Cyane's mind prevails post-metamorphosis. Unlike Edmunds, her humanity is not destroyed by the river.

Meanwhile, Cyane's encounter with Ceres taps on the continuity of her communicative presence, despite being ostensibly silenced:

*ea ni mutata fuisset,  
omnia **narrasset**: sed et os et lingua **volenti**  
dicere non aderant, nec quo loqueretur habebat.  
**signa** tamen **manifesta dedit** notamque parenti,  
illo forte loco delapsam in gurgite sacro,*

<sup>57</sup> Baring-Gould 1900: 198.



*Persephones zonam summis ostendit in undis.*

(Ov. *Met.* 5.465-70).

Cyane's desire to speak to Ceres is evident in the participle *volenti*. She finds an alternative method of communication through 'clear signs' rather than speech (*signa... manifesta*; Ov. *Met.* 5.468). In doing so, she accepts, or at least resigns herself to, her new way of existence: she chooses to find a new way to tell Ceres about Pluto's kidnap of Proserpina, despite her nonhuman form. Her actions here are consistent with her previous encounter with Pluto, during which she attempts to halt his kidnap of Proserpina to no avail:

*"nec longius ibitis!" inquit,*

[...]

*dixit et in partes diversas bracchia tendens*

*obstitit.*

(Ov. *Met.* 5.414-420).

Cyane's identity, values, loyalties, and intentions are unchanged by her metamorphosis. Her prevailing desire in the narrative is to prevent or end Pluto's kidnap of Proserpina. However, her verbal assault upon Pluto is futile since he responds by becoming enraged and piercing her pool with his sceptre (Ov. *Met.* 5.420-423). Yet when Cyane displays Proserpina's girdle on the surface of her river, Ceres instantly realises what has become of her daughter: *quam simul agnovit* (Ov. *Met.* 5.471). The word *simul* supplies an immediacy: Cyane's communication, albeit nonverbal, is effective. In the words of Koivunen, Cyane 'remains the subject... of verbs like *narrasset*, *dedit* and *ostendit*. Cyane is a subject with a will and an inventive way of communicating.'<sup>58</sup> Her acceptance of her new form is implicit in her adaptation to it. In allowing Cyane to exist post-metamorphosis, Ovid grants his reader insight into the nonhuman experience. In the *Metamorphoses*, human consciousness occupies nonhuman forms,<sup>59</sup> whereas in *Dart* the transformations are complete and do not result in hybridity. Oswald does not give her reader Edmunds' new perspective having been 'washed away' into the river Dart (*Dart*: 20). An effect of *Dart* is to offer a view of the interaction between human and water through an objective lens, without an anthropocentric bias. There is an Ovidian presence in Oswald's poem,<sup>60</sup> but Oswald pushes Ovid's concept of hydro-morphosis further. Unlike Ovid, Oswald does not purport to understand a nonhuman perspective and so does not attempt to offer one. In doing so, she problematises the *Metamorphoses*. Oswald revises and expands stories and themes present in Ovid from a more ecopoetic stance, offering the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader a world in which complete rather than partial flux takes place. The outcome of this adaptation is to erase the pervading influence of humanity. In *Dart*, humans are not

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<sup>58</sup> 2022: 46.

<sup>59</sup> Sissa 2023: 36.

<sup>60</sup> Cox 2018: 88.

omnipresent, as in the *Metamorphoses*. This raises questions for the contemporary reader, not only about the eco-potential of Ovid's water narratives, despite his paradoxical position, but also regarding our own place in the world. *Dart* impels its audience to step down off the pedestal on which we place humanity and to examine our own view and treatment of the nonhuman world, particularly of waterways. Whilst it is true that Ovid confronts us with the possibility that the consumption of certain nonhuman beings may constitute cannibalism since 'they may contain the souls of human beings like us' that have been subject to metamorphosis,<sup>61</sup> Oswald encourages us to consider the value and suffering of nonhuman beings whilst simultaneously acknowledging that we are not able to understand fully their consciousness and the way that they experience the world.

## ii. Arethusa and the Swimmer: From Discomfort to Relief

Ovid offers us a second human perspective of water's experience, via Arethusa's metamorphosis. Like Cyane, Arethusa is transformed as a result of her hyperbolic bodily response, which is triggered by her emotional reaction to another human character's aggression towards her. Whilst being chased by Alpheus on land, she appeals to Diana for assistance, who shrouds her in a cloud to protect her. Arethusa sweats with fear within the dense vapour and it is her sweat which destroys her human body (Ov. *Met.* 5.577-641). However, in Arethusa's case, Ovid is inconsistent in his depiction of water's ability to provide a voice for the human. Unlike Cyane, Arethusa does not communicate with Ceres as water, but instead transforms back into her human form to narrate the tale of her metamorphosis at Ceres' request. Although she describes herself as 'changed to water' (*in latices mutor*; Ov. *Met.* 5.636), she emerges as human and speaks to Ceres:

*dea sustulit alto*  
*fonte caput viridesque manu siccata capillos*  
*fluminis Elei veteres narravit amores*

(Ov. *Met.* 5.574-6).

Arethusa retains at least her head, her hands, and her hair. One can confidently assume that this includes her mouth and tongue. This is significant because these were the features that Ovid explicitly describes Cyane losing during her own transformation. Ovid makes it clear that the loss of these characteristics is why Cyane can no longer speak (Ov. *Met.* 5.466). Somehow, Arethusa is both human and water at once, or able to shift between the two forms.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps this is because she still feels the fear which she felt as a human, since her hydro-morphosis did not enable her to escape her pursuer. Nevertheless, as in the case of Cyane, this aligns with the retention of human identity typical to transformations in the

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<sup>61</sup> Sissa 2023: 36.

<sup>62</sup> Koivunen 2022: 47.

*Metamorphoses*. As Anderson recognises, ‘the feelings of that human spirit [remain] inside the changing and changed body.’<sup>63</sup> Like Cyane, Arethusa experiences hybridity. For, the human is omnipresent in this transformation narrative. Alpheus’ pursuit and Diana’s assistance (which entails her concealment of Arethusa from Alpheus on land and aids her escape from him within the river) are the main points of action within this transformation tale. Only human characters possess and intentionally execute agency in this episode. Like Cyane’s, Arethusa’s own body produces the liquid by which she is dissolved. Both characters’ metamorphoses are centred around humanity and excessive functions of the human body as a result of emotion triggered by the actions of other humans. This evokes a kind of hyper-humanity. The human body reacts naturally, but to such an extent that it destroys itself. Such hyper-humanity contributes to Ovid’s anthropocentric outlook. Furthermore, for Arethusa, the threat posed by Alpheus is consistent to her pre- and post-metamorphic states. She retains her consciousness and thus her identity. Alpheus recognises Arethusa-as-water and transforms himself to continue his chase (Ov. *Met.* 5.636-8). Humanity permeates Ovid’s hydro-morphoses via such hybridity of human mind and nonhuman form.

Hybridity is intrinsic to transformations in the *Metamorphoses*. Humanity prevails in characters’ post-metamorphic forms,<sup>64</sup> and so human stories underscore the anthropocentric in Ovid’s water narratives. Other characters in the *Metamorphoses* experience impermanent transformations. In book I, for instance, Io is turned into a ‘beautiful cow’ (Ov. *Met.* 1.611) by Jupiter, who fears that his wife, Juno, will discover that he ‘took [Io’s] virginity’ (Ov. *Met.* 1.599). Later, however, Io encounters her father, who recognises her when she traces her name in the dust with a hoof (Ov. *Met.* 1.648-9). Like Cyane, Io cannot talk post-metamorphosis, but is able to communicate with other humans despite this. Similarly, just as Ceres understands Cyane and Alpheus identifies Arethusa once they have both become water, Io’s father recognises his daughter instantly, again illustrating the effectiveness of nonverbal communication. Io experiences psychological distress, inflicted by Juno, so Jupiter begs that she might be allowed to return to her human form. Juno concedes and Io transforms (Ov. *Met.* 1.737-42). However, she is too terrified to speak lest she low like a cow and so forgets how to talk (Ov. *Met.* 1.743-5). Although this is an example of temporary metamorphosis, Io’s experience contradicts Arethusa’s, who returns to her human form for the very purpose of speaking to Ceres, whereas Io never regains the ability to talk, even once she has become human again. Perhaps this is because water’s form allows for freedom in a way that a cow’s does not. Io is transformed against her will, whereas Arethusa begs to be saved from Alpheus’ advancing pursuit. Whilst hydro-morphosis itself does not provide Arethusa with relief, her changed form enables her to descend into the Underworld (Ov. *Met.* 5.639-41), something she would not have been able to do when occupying a human body.

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<sup>63</sup> 1998: 8.

<sup>64</sup> Sissa 2023: 41.

Again, Ovid's prioritisation of the human shines through. He is concerned with how the human responds to the nonhuman experience. Io, Cyane, and Arethusa retain their human identities, even in their new forms. This grants the reader an insight into the nonhuman experience, but one which is not necessarily accurate, as Ovid approaches this as from a purely human perspective. Conversely, Oswald's John Edmunds no longer exists once he has been transformed into water. Edmunds' death is indicative of his complete metamorphosis. Both his mind and his body are 'washed away' (*Dart*: 20) by the river Dart. Oswald hereby highlights the relevance of Ovidian eco-poetics for her own audience. Contemporary radical ecology argues that the current climate crisis is a result of human anthropocentrism, overpopulation, and subsequent damage to the world.<sup>65</sup> As a result, we now begin to recognise the intrinsic value and agency of the nonhuman. Oswald's human characters and their experience of nature are not her priority. Rather, this modern poet portrays human-water interaction as episodes within the river Dart's wider narrative, and thus the river becomes the prevailing 'character' of the poem, to the extent that her poem shares its name with the river. In doing so, Oswald encourages us to view humans as an element functioning as part of a wider ecosystem. In turn, contemporary readers of *Dart* might reevaluate their place in the world alongside other beings. Oswald's decentralising of the human from stories of hydro-morphosis allows us to view the world more objectively and to read Ovid's poem more critically. She encourages us to consider the individual experiences of the nonhuman and the effect we as humans have on waterways in our use or potential abuse of them.

For Arethusa, fear operates in the same way as Cyane's grief. Arethusa's fear causes her body to produce liquid, in the form of sweat, by which her body is melted: *occupat obsessos sudor mihi frigidus artus, | caeruleaeque cadunt toto de corpore guttae* (Ov. *Met.* 5.632-3). The verb *occupat* carries a sense of possession or invasion. The way in which Arethusa's 'cold sweat', *sudor... frigidus*, takes possession of her *obsessos... artus* recalls how Cyane's tears become her dominant feature by 'dissolving' her human form. For Ovid, metamorphosis is an insular human process. Although there is a separation of mind and form, as Cyane and Arethusa both have little control over their excessive bodily functions (weeping and perspiring), the changes their bodies endure are intertwined with their psychological responses to actions by other human figures, Pluto and Alpheus. They do not merge with the nonhuman. Rather, they experience a kind of hyper-humanity during their metamorphoses, in that their human emotional responses trigger hyperbolic physical responses which cause them to *reform* into liquid.

Like Arethusa, Oswald's swimmer also experiences trepidation. He reveals his uncertainty as he questions of the water: 'Is it cold? Is it sharp?' (*Dart*: 22). He then pauses: 'I stood looking down through beech trees. | When I threw a stone I could count five before the splash' (*Dart*: 22). His hesitation conveys his fear, but he is aware that this emotional discomfort will be relieved once he enters the water:

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<sup>65</sup> Garrard 2023: 33.

‘it’s fine once you’re in’ (*Dart*: 22). The swimmer is right. Once in, he basks in the rich tranquillity of the river Dart:

He dives, he shuts himself in a deep soft-bottomed silence  
which underwater is all nectarine, nacreous. He lifts  
the lid and shuts and lifts the lid and shuts and the sky  
jumps in and out of the world he loafs in.  
Far off and orange in the glow of it he drifts...

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 23).

Despite this visceral description, the swimmer does not become water in the same way that Arethusa and Cyane do. Similarly, he does not lose his humanity, as John Edmunds does. Not only does the swimmer retain his human life by not drowning, but he also does not lose his human form. He immerses himself in the water strictly as a human, and at no point does he lose control of his body and its formation. In fact, he takes control of this interaction and ‘shuts himself’ in the river. There is a boundary between human and water here. By presenting the swimmer and the river Dart as disparate entities, Oswald reiterates her rejection of Ovid’s omnipresent human. This is not in the sense that humans have retreated from the ‘natural world’ and exist on a superior plane to the nonhuman. Oswald does not presume to understand the nonhuman experience and therefore impose a narrative onto it from her perspective. Instead, *Dart* presents a vision of the human as part of the world’s ecosystem within which it interacts with other entities, including water. As Baker points out, ‘things are changed by their relationships with what they are not. The speakers of Oswald’s poems tell again and again of their mimetic participation in the world they move through.’<sup>66</sup> However, this participation does not constitute subtraction. The swimmer ‘shuts himself in a deep soft-bottomed silence’ and ‘loafs’ in the deep calm of the water (*Dart*: 23). In doing so, he interacts with the water as an equal. He benefits from the river Dart without taking anything from it.

For those who swim in the Dart, water offers an escape from both physical and emotional suffering. Others’ visits to Still Pool Copse involve them ‘slowly methodically swimming rid of their jobs’ (*Dart*: 24). This phenomenon is documented by poet Katherine Venn, who, inspired by Oswald’s poem, encountered Still Pool Copse when she walked the length of the river Dart in 2020:

Still Pool Copse is marked on my map so I cross the river, into a plantation wood and amble down to a spot that’s surprisingly **busy** with a few families and lots of kids, splashing down into the water from a rope swing: some confident, some needing to be persuaded. I wander around a bit to find somewhere to change before giving up and stripping off in the half-screen of a large tree, its leaves kissing the stones that hurt my feet, where a woman comes over to change too, along with her

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<sup>66</sup> 2017: 105.

gorgeous black lab. We swim up the river together, talking about the **pull of the water** and **leaving London**.<sup>67</sup>

Swimmers' perpetual presence at this 'busy' spot is evidence of the 'pull of the water.' To reinforce this, Oswald describes the way in which people are attracted to 'leaving London' and 'swimming rid of their jobs' (*Dart*: 24). That the countryside offers an escape from the pressures of city life is a trope common to ancient and contemporary literature alike. The pastoral tradition is influenced by Theocritus' *Idyll* VII. It 'contrast[s] the frenetic, corrupt, impersonal city... with the peaceful, abundant countryside.'<sup>68</sup> 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature and media often perpetuate this motif. Authors and characters alike frequently idealise the restorative and healing qualities of rural settings. Many contemporary English-speaking poets use this motif, including Louise Glück, Carol Ann Duffy, and Anne Carson, all of whom play with the concept of rural and urban and the effect that the immediate environment has on their human characters. In doing so, they reflect contemporary environmental concerns. Indeed, 'the latest iteration of pastoral to emerge in contemporary British writing is sparked by and shaped – *reformed* – around environmental crisis.'<sup>69</sup> The current dialogue around climate change creates a preoccupation with nature and our role within it. The 'pervasive sense of human culpability for environmental harm'<sup>70</sup> invites us to reject our anthropocentric worldview and regain a presence in the natural world that is based on mutual respect. Authors and readers alike seek solace in the rural, sensing that a retreat to what constitutes 'natural' will supply a solution to both mundane and apocalyptic concerns.

Oswald's depictions of human-water encounters are not always consistent. Whilst swimming in the river Dart provides some characters with relief from typically human stressors of employment and the urban cityscape, she also subverts the notion that water provides an escape from physical discomfort. She situates the swimmer 'beside' (*Dart*: 23) characters who have drowned in the Dart and are now eternally trapped there. Alongside the swimmer are 'twenty knights at arms':

they sank like coins with the heads on them still conscious  
between water and steel trying to prize a little niche, a  
hesitation, a hiding-place, a breath  
[...]  
[they] now swim light as decayed spiderweb leaves.

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 23-4).

Even though drowning allows the knights to lose their weight, leaving them 'light' so that they no longer '[sink] like coins,' the image of 'decayed spiderweb leaves' does not evoke life and freedom. The

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<sup>67</sup> Venn 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Garrard 2023: 41.

<sup>69</sup> Lilley 2020: 29.

<sup>70</sup> Garrard 2023: 59.

knights now ‘swim light,’ but it is not a joyful experience. Likewise, for the next pair of characters in Oswald’s poem, death does not provide physical relief:

Poor Kathy Pellam and the scout from Deadman’s pool  
tangled in the river’s wires. There they lie  
like scratchmarks in a stack of glass,  
trapped under panes while [the swimmer] slides by...

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 24).

The use of ‘tangled’ and ‘trapped’ evokes a negative experience. Their entrapment is to such an extent that the river is solid around them. This claustrophobic image does not convey that these characters have been liberated from their discomfort by drowning. Rather, they are stuck forever, taunted by the swimmer as he ‘slides by.’ This contrasts Ovid, for whom metamorphosis happens as punishment, as an escape from trauma, or as an aetiological explanation for nonhuman phenomena. Humans are, therefore, at the centre of Ovid’s poetic world, since changes happen to them or because of them. For Oswald, metamorphoses are random occurrences which do not always have a human explanation. The reader is not provided with a reason for the drownings of Kathy Pellam and the scout from Deadman’s pool, nor do these characters have stories of their own. They are just part of the river’s own narrative. The river is the medium in *Dart*, not the human. This allows Oswald to extract elements of the eco-poetic from Ovid’s text and pushes them to the forefront. From this point onwards, the modern reader is able to return to the *Metamorphoses* and uncover these eco-centric themes in Ovid’s poem. By viewing water as an independent being, we can read Ovid’s poem in a different way. Despite Ovid’s concern with the human narrative from Creation to the Roman Empire and his presence in the poem as an author, both of which overshadow the eco-poetic nature of the poem, we can see that there are eco-centric elements in Ovid’s work. This fosters a kind of reciprocal reception, by which reading both texts in conjunction with each other enriches the eco-poetic readings of each one, as well as own awareness of both poems’ ecological concerns.

As is the case for Oswald’s knights, Kathy Pellam, and the scout, tension is left unresolved after Arethusa’s hydro-morphosis. Upon first tentatively entering the water, she expects a pleasant experience:

*accessi primumque pedis vestigia tinxi,  
poplite deinde tenus: **necque eo contenta**, recingor  
molliaque impono salici velamina curvae  
nudaque mergor aquis.*

(Ov. *Met.* 5.592-5).

The phrase *necque eo contenta* indicates that Arethusa anticipates contentment once she has completely immersed herself in the river. This recalls the swimmer’s self-reassurance: ‘it’s fine once you’re in’

(*Dart*: 24). But unlike the swimmer and Cyane, who is safe after her transformation because ‘nothing remains, that you can touch’ (Ov. *Met.* 5.437), Arethusa only experiences temporary relief after her hydro-morphosis. Alpheus, the cause of her distress, continues his pursuit by transforming into the water:

*sed enim cognoscit amatas  
amnis aquas, positoque viri, quod sumpserat, ore  
vertitur in proprias, ut se mihi misceat, undas.*

(Ov. *Met.* 5.636-8).

Arethusa’s description of how Alpheus ‘is turned into the right [sort of] waves, so that he might mix with me’ is enhanced by the convoluted word-order of these lines. Disjointed phrasing is caused by the interrupting clauses *quod sumpserat* and *ut se mihi misceat*, which both separate nouns from their adjectives, *ore* from *positoque* and *undas* from *propriis*. This directs our attention to the way in which Alpheus ‘mixes’ with Arethusa in the river. The pair move through the water, their forms are indistinguishable. Like those who drown in the Dart, Arethusa is not freed by water during her transformation, but encased within it, alongside her attacker. Arethusa’s escape from Alpheus is due to her appeal to Diana, who allows her to descend below the earth, and not to her hydro-morphosis (Ov. *Met.* 5.639-41). For Arethusa, water does not provide relief, let alone the serenity that the swimmer finds: ‘far off and orange in the glow of it he drifts’ (*Dart*: 23).

Despite this, the nymph does eventually experience peace. She finds a resting place once she emerges from the underworld at Ortygia, which she finds pleasing (*grata*; Ov. *Met.* 5.641). The emotional trajectory of this event recalls those of Cyane, John Edmunds, and the swimmer. All of these characters move through negative emotions to find comfort and solace, and their psychological journeys are intrinsically intertwined with water’s own narrative. However, in the *Metamorphoses*, the focus is on how a human might feel when encountering water. Ovid’s narrative follows these human characters’ emotional journeys through their metamorphoses. Oswald, on the other hand, offers a plethora of human encounters with water. These form a narrative at the centre of which is the river Dart’s journey ‘from the source to the sea.’<sup>71</sup> Oswald teases something of the eco-poetic from the *Metamorphoses*, as she works towards an eco-centric rather than an anthropocentric poem. There is a reciprocity between the river Dart and the people who interact with it which contributes towards this eco-centrism. In *Dart*, humans and water are engaged in a dynamic of give and take. Oswald is interested in the question of how water can be ‘nourishing and destructive’ to humans,<sup>72</sup> whereas Ovid is more concerned with the unilateral human experience of water. To understand these dynamics further, I now turn to the human synaesthetic interpretation of water. Shane Butler understands synaesthesia as a kind of fusion or ‘unity’

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<sup>71</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.

<sup>72</sup> Irby 2021: 33.



of the senses,<sup>73</sup> which grants the reader a more holistic and immersive perception of a text. In order to fathom Ovid's and Oswald's portrayals of the human experience of water, we must recognise the 'complex, synaesthetic nature of experience itself.'<sup>74</sup> Analysis of Ovid's and Oswald's portrayal of humans' emotional trajectory through their encounters with water bodies would not be complete without the examination of human sensation and cognition. In 'Colour' below, I explore the human multi-sensory exposure to water, how this contributes towards the wider human experience, and how Ovid and Oswald each promote their own attitudes to water through preconceptions of colour associations.

## Colour

Water is second to Ovid's human characters and narratives in the *Metamorphoses*. As I argue above, Cyane's and Arethusa's hydro-morphoses are the consequence of their heightened emotions. They experience hyper-human physiological responses to psychological traumas. Water is used by Cyane and Arethusa as a means to escape danger and therefore becomes a commodity of humanity as it has no autonomy of its own without these characters and their stories. Ovid appeals to colour adjectives such as *caeruleus* to pinpoint water's journey through his poem. Both Cyane and Arethusa are described using *caeruleus*. This is significant because, prior to their tales, this adjective pinpoints water's journey from sea to river to spring throughout the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>75</sup> Oswald also uses colour to heighten the visual impact of water in her poem, but she plays with our associations of colour by tracing water's various roles through different colours which denote different levels of aesthetic and monetary value. Whilst Ovid's use of *caeruleus* is restricted to water, water bodies, and water transformations, Oswald's colours are not. All beings, human and nonhuman, share a rich and varied colour palette. As a result, they exist equally, not separated based on their appearance or agency. Below I delve into this important issue, analyse the effect of Oswald's departure from Ovid's use of colour on both the characters and the readers of *Dart*, and uncover what this means for our understanding of humanity's place within the world.

The correlation between Cyane, Arethusa, and water is enhanced by Ovid's treatment of some parts of their bodies as *caeruleus*. As Anderson notes, 'the adjective properly means the colour of blue-green associated with water. It was almost exclusively employed by poets... meaning simply "of the sea."'<sup>76</sup> In the *Metamorphoses*, *caeruleus* is a fundamental aspect of water. The adjective begins its journey in the text by describing the sea and sea deities. At 1.275, Ovid uses *caeruleus* to describe Neptune, the god of the sea. Similarly, at 2.8, sea deities which are carved into the Sun's palace are characterised as

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<sup>73</sup> 2014: 6.

<sup>74</sup> Butler 2014: 5.

<sup>75</sup> Anderson 1998: 230-1.

<sup>76</sup> Anderson 1998: 230-1.

*caeruleus*. At both 1.333 and 2.528, Ovid depicts the oceans as *caeruleus*. Then Ovid homes in on the intricacies of water's movement and appearance, incidentally showcasing the vast range of forms that water might take. He uses *caeruleus* to describe a serpent who lives in a spring in the Cadmus episode (Ov. *Met.* 3.38) and the nymph Liriope, who was raped by a river god Cephissus while trapped in his river (Ov. *Met.* 3.342). The next three occurrences of *caeruleus* in the *Metamorphoses* depict details on transforming bodies: Cadmus' skin becomes speckled with blue spots as he becomes a serpent (Ov. *Met.* 4.568), Cyane's hair is the same colour (Ov. *Met.* 5.432), and Arethusa's body produces sweat of this hue (Ov. *Met.* 5.633).<sup>77</sup> The association of *caeruleus* with a variety of water forms, from vast sea to incidental spring, furnishes the hydro-morphoses of Cyane and Arethusa with important context. Before Cyane transforms, her hair is already the colour of water. This contributes to the sense of her body being reconfigured into water, rather than completely changed from one form to another, from human to water. The boundary between human and water in the *Metamorphoses* is undefined. Cyane, as a nymph, is and always was a hybrid of water and human and simply reverts to a fluid form. Likewise, Arethusa produces sweat which matches the blue of the seas, springs, and rivers that precede her appearance in the poem. Water resides within her human body. She too is a hybrid figure. Irby notes that 'ancient nomenclature is often ambiguous,' in that bodies of water such as seas and lakes are not as clearly categorised in antiquity as in contemporary thought.<sup>78</sup> For Ovid, the lack of distinction between water forms is much broader, as it includes human and nonhuman beings who are associated with water. Despite this, a broader categorisation remains, since only those who are associated with water may undergo hydro-morphosis in his poem. The presence of *caeruleus* throughout the *Metamorphoses* also contributes to its overarching water narrative. Water flows through Ovid's text and his characters, whilst being itself the paradigm of metamorphosis. Indeed, 'for Heraclitus, "existing things" are comparable "to the flow of the river" that is in a state of constant flux.'<sup>79</sup> Ovid echoes this idea by mirroring the 'flux' and changeability of water in Cyane and Arethusa. It follows that the term *caeruleus* is both implicitly tied to water, and can be used to denote the presence of water in all things.

Oswald also plays with our associations of colour, by tracing water's various roles through different colours which denote different levels of aesthetic and monetary value:

Then I jumped in a rush of **gold** to the head,  
 through **black** and cold, **red** and cold, **brown** and warm,  
 [...]  
 ... underwater is all **nectarine**, **nacreous**.  
 [...]

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<sup>77</sup> Since there are no further uses of *caeruleus* until book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, I have only included its occurrence prior to Cyane's and Arethusa's transformations, throughout which *caeruleus* becomes associated with smaller and smaller bodies of water.

<sup>78</sup> 2021: 36.

<sup>79</sup> Irby 2021: 40.

Far off and **orange** in the glow of it he drifts (Oswald, *Dart*, pp. 22-3).

Unlike *caeruleus* in the *Metamorphoses*, the colours employed by Oswald to describe water are unusual in this context. Water is typically associated with cool hues of blue and green, but Oswald subverts this expectation. There is warmth in these colours: ‘red’, ‘brown’, and ‘orange’ are more commonly associated with heat than the piercing cold that the swimmer anticipates before he dives into the river (p. 22). There is also a simplicity here that contrasts the complex *caeruleus*. These flat colours are juxtaposed by the richness of the swimmer’s ‘rush of gold to the head’ and the fact that ‘underwater is all nectarine, nacreous.’ ‘Gold’ is not only a colour with more depth than ‘red’, ‘brown’, and ‘orange’, but it also implies that the river has significant value. The swimmer recognises this value only as he enters the river. He ‘jump[s] in a rush of gold to the head.’ Similarly, the movement through various colours and temperatures, culminating in ‘brown and warm’, suggests that, once in the water, the swimmer’s preconceptions of its coldness are erased. The rich complexity of ‘gold’ continues: ‘nectarine’ not only invokes the freshness of the fruit of the same name, but functions here as an adjective, suggesting that the water resembles nectar. Likewise, ‘nacreous’ conveys an iridescence. The water resembles mother-of-pearl. Oswald taps into the multilayered *caeruleus* and its connotations, but takes it further. She confronts the reader with a variety of simple and complex colours and sensations. In *Dart*, Oswald recognises that water is not singular, but is a complex, multifaceted entity which humans cannot pin down. Her 21<sup>st</sup> century audience is forced to confront their perception of water and its value. This encourages us to return to Ovid’s water narratives and consider them more eco-critically. Consequently, we may recognise that Ovid does not prioritise the independent autonomy of the river and the plurality of its identity. Furthermore, we can apply such eco-critical thinking to our own treatment of waterways, at a time when rivers are experiencing exponential pollution due to human activity,<sup>80</sup> and question the low level of value we grant to different aspects of the nonhuman world. Perhaps Oswald is suggesting that if we humans were to set aside our anthropocentrism and accept our ignorance in the face of water’s identity, agency, and purpose, waterways and other nonhuman entities would be able to exist unharmed.

Colours which appear in the swimmer’s episode are also visible elsewhere in *Dart*. For instance, in the lines attributed to the town boys:

the real Dart

writhes like a **black** fire, smelling of fish and soil  
and traces a **red** leaf flood mark  
and catches a drift of placer **gold** in her cracks (p17).

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<sup>80</sup> Ungood-Thomas and Jenz 2023.

Later on, the water abstractor asks, ‘have you... dealt with the **black** inert matter?’ (p25). The salmon netsman and poacher describes the river mud as ‘foul **black** stuff’ (p39) and says, ‘some days the river’s **dark black** – that’s the moor water’ (p42). The association between the colour red and leaves prevails in the voice of the ferryman, who says of his ‘beautiful **red**-haired wife’, ‘I think of her in the autumn, when the trees go **this amazing colour** round Old Mill Creek’ (p43). Associating colour with temporality allows us to trace the movement of the river both temporally and spatially: water ‘has a rhythmical form in *space*, and it is also subject to a rhythmical process in *time*.’<sup>81</sup>

Whilst Ovid places *caeruleus* at specific points throughout the *Metamorphoses* to drip-feed his reader a subtle yet overarching water narrative from vast ocean to minute human teardrops and beads of perspiration, Oswald paints the *Dart* with vivid, unexpected colours that subvert the human view of water and the value we assign to it. The colours Oswald uses are not confined to water. Oswald’s de-categorisation of colour allows the reader to view human and nonhuman on an equal plane and contributes to the concept of complete flux. Ovid, on the other hand, confines *caeruleus* to water and water beings. As a result, Cyane and Arethusa may only experience partial flux. Their bodies are able to reform solely into water because it is already part of their bodies and their identities as water nymphs. Furthermore, their post-metamorphic experience still does not resemble that of water, since they retain their human identities within their new liquid forms. As noted above, John Edmunds is initially separate to water but undergoes a full hydro-morphosis, to the extent that he no longer exists as a human, neither physically nor psychologically. Oswald’s creative re-reading of Ovid raises critical points about Ovid’s relationship with water. Her choice of colour problematises human categorisation of the world’s elements. Ovid uses a singular term, *caeruleus*, to pinpoint water’s narrative throughout his poem. This term is used to describe various beings, from bodies of water such as seas and rivers to human bodies and the patterns that appear on them prior to hydro-morphosis. Although *caeruleus* has complex connotations, it is specific to water.<sup>82</sup> Oswald use of colour reworks this complexity to decentre the human and to promote a more water-centric narrative.

The human experience of water is not just intra-textual. Whilst the human characters within *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses* perceive water both sensorily and emotionally, the human reader of these texts also conjures an image of water from the authors’ descriptions. Colour, therefore, is a significant part of the reader’s experience. According to Canevaro, Tim Ingold’s definition of imagination “‘as a way of living creatively in a world that is itself crescent, always in formation” ... casts imagination not just as representation but as participation: as something not projected onto the world but devised in conjunction with it’.<sup>83</sup> Both Ovid and Oswald create multisensory textual environments for the reader. However, Oswald’s departure from Ovid’s categorisation of water as a singular entity and her use of a fuller, richer

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<sup>81</sup> Schwenke 1965: 20.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson 1998: 230-1.

<sup>83</sup> Ingold 2012: 3; in Canevaro 2024: 9.

colour palette contribute towards a more rounded sensory experience. Just as John Edmunds and the swimmer become immersed in the river, so does the reader become immersed in the world Oswald establishes. Combined with the rejection of the authorial persona, which is a significant part of Ovid's epic poem, this immersion enhances the reader's experience. Ovid's own form of textual immersion is predominantly focussed on the effect of metamorphosis on the human body, rather than the vivid and varied appearance and existence of water. Cyane's and Arethusa's transformations are painstakingly detailed. Ovid takes twelve lines to depict the way in which different parts of Cyane's body are dissolved by her tears. Her bones, limbs, hair, fingers, shoulders, back, sides, chest, and finally her blood are individually mentioned (Ov. *Met.* 5.428-37). Whilst Arethusa's transformation happens 'faster than the story can be told' (*citius, quam nunc tibi facta renarro*; Ov. *Met.* 5.635), Ovid still takes the time to depict how the droplets of her sweat pour over her whole body, how puddles appear at her feet, and liquid drips from her hair (Ov. *Met.* 5.633-5). Indeed, Arethusa's transformation is a dramatic crescendo in the final lines of her tale, and the sensations she experiences are palpable. The human reader almost feels the destruction of each part of the body, which makes for vivid and impactful transformations. Yet, there is still an undercurrent of Ovidian anthropocentrism in these motifs. For, Ovid's focus remains fixed upon conveying the effect of water on the human body. Oswald manages to use colours in a more imaginative way. In doing so, she adds to the sense of the world as an eco-system that includes but it by no means dominated by humans.

Cyane, Arethusa, John Edmunds, and the swimmer's encounters with rivers form just half of the story in their respective episodes. In chapter 2, I examine the other side of this fascinating story of hydro-morphosis – how does water interact with the human? While we, as readers, resonate with these characters' emotional and sensory connections to water, Ovid and Oswald provide us with a second narrative. In the next chapter, I examine how water engages with and moves through these characters, making a case for water's own agency as we trace its motion and movement around humans.

## Water's 'Experience' of the Human

In chapter 1, I delved into the human experience of water in *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*. I found that human characters' sensations and emotions during interactions which can be described as hydro-morphoses work towards a depiction of the behaviour and characteristics of water in relation to the human. But an examination of human-water interplay is insufficient when water is only viewed through a human lens. In this chapter, I propose an alternative perspective: water's 'experience' of the human<sup>84</sup>. Water functions as a dynamic system of forces, and this system interacts with human characters in *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses* in similar and contrasting ways. Building on Canevaro's study of new materialism and ecocriticism, wherein she argues that new materialism involves 'decentring typically foregrounded agents [i.e. the human] and moving others [i.e. water] to the centre or focussing on the margins,'<sup>85</sup> I also contend that Oswald reworks Ovid's representation of water-dynamics and water's encounter with the human by concentrating on the presence and behaviour of water rather than humans. *Dart* is the story of the river Dart, as it flows 'from the source to the sea'.<sup>86</sup> The way in which Oswald privileges the river's trajectory taps into Ovid's own tales of water, not only exposing the anthropocentrism of Ovid's poem, but also unveiling moments at which the *Metamorphoses* might promote an eco-centric version of the world, rather than a human-centric one, however implicitly in this ancient text.

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Water possesses its own identity, agency, and purpose, which are distinct from those of humans. Water exists independently from humanity, whilst interacting with the human characters, and it is through examination of such interaction that we as Ovid's and Oswald's readers can grasp water's ultimate agency. Koivunen acknowledges that 'agency is not dependent on humanity' in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, I contend that water's individual agency is characterised by its movement. Water encounters and alters human figures via simple motion, by pouring into or out of their bodies. Both Ovid and Oswald acknowledge that water is a living entity: the blood in the veins of the Ovidian Cyane is driven out and replaced by water (Ov. *Met.* 5.436-7), while in *Dart*, Oswald describes the river's 'huge vascular structure' (*Dart*: 42) and 'the crash of | surrendering riverflesh falling' at the foot of Totnes Weir (*Dart*:

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<sup>84</sup> The term 'experience' is imaginatively applied here. I acknowledge that the nonhuman (except for animals) cannot experience something in the way that we do as humans. With this in mind, I will continue to use the term 'experience' when thinking about how water encounters and interacts with the human.

<sup>85</sup> Canevaro 2024: 17.

<sup>86</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.

<sup>87</sup> 2022: 54.

26). Water and human forms are analogous.<sup>88</sup> The system of dynamic forces present within water allows the river to adopt the form of the human body and thereby to transform it.

With a focus on this coaction between water and human, this chapter delves into water's adaptation and transformation of the human form in *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*. Beginning with a discussion of 'Inpouring/Outpouring', I examine the ways in which water's physical properties manifest through motion. I trace the emergence of other formal characteristics of water which are present in both texts, 'Hollowness' and 'Water Forms: Droplets/Spirals'. My exploration of the multifaceted nature of water then leads me to 'Nourishment/Destruction', which builds upon Irby's recognition that water is both 'nurturing and destructive'<sup>89</sup> to human life. Ovid's and Oswald's depictions of water's identity as intrinsically fluid reinforces water as the paradigm of metamorphosis. In this interplay between water and human, we can find water's independent agency and purpose.

### **Inpouring/Outpouring**

The texts under consideration speak powerfully to the way water flows into and out of the human during the process of change. Via motion through the human body, water enacts its agency as a metamorphic being. The river Dart takes the space of John Edmunds' voice, as well as his body:

all day my voice is being washed away  
out of a lapse in my throat  
[...]  
and the silence pouring into what's left...

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 20-1).

Edmunds' body is altered by the motion of the river, against which he has no power. The passivity of the phrase 'being washed away' and the dichotomy of 'voice' and 'silence' illustrate the finality of this moment. The river Dart is 'the silence pouring into what's left' and so the human body becomes a shell for the inpouring of the river. The river then occupies the body of the swimmer:

giving water the weight and size of myself in order to imagine it,  
water with my bones, water with my mouth and my understanding  
when my body was in some way a wave to swim in

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 22-3).

Unlike Edmunds, the swimmer is somewhat active in his transformation. He states, 'we change ourselves' (*Dart*: 22). However, the same sense of inpouring is present in this process as in Edmunds'

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<sup>88</sup> Martelli and Sissa 2023: 4.

<sup>89</sup> 2021: 33.

drowning. The swimmer's question, 'Is it sharp?' (*Dart*: 22) suggests that the water penetrates the skin, moving within from without. Just as the swimmer enters the river, so does the water permeate his own body, and so the river *Dart* is as active in this metamorphosis as the swimmer. For the water inhabits as much of the swimmer's body as it does Edmunds', saturating his 'bones', his 'mouth' and his 'understanding'. Like Edmunds', not only is the swimmer's body influenced by the river, but so too are both his mechanism of speech and his mind. Canevaro defines 'intra-action' as 'the meeting of agencies halfway, the performative establishment of agency, the collaborative co-constitution of meaning between a variety of parties.'<sup>90</sup> In *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*, the 'intra-activity' between water and human involves the flow of water through the human body. Through motion inwards, water occupies the space where the human body once was. In doing so, water flushes humanity from the human form.

In Ovid, water pours *out of* Cyane's and Arethusa's bodies, and consumes them externally, rather than pouring *in*, replacing what was once there. For Cyane, her transformation begins in her eyes, with her tears: *lacrimisque absumitur omnis* (Ov. *Met.* 5.427). In the same way, liquid seeps from Arethusa's pores as beads of sweat, *caeruleaeque cadunt toto de corpore guttae* (Ov. *Met.* 5.633). In both cases, water moves from the inside to the surface of their bodies via tiny gaps. This recalls the 'lapse' through which water pours into John Edmunds' throat, as well as the image of the 'sharp' water pricking the swimmer's skin. Canevaro finds that 'in ancient poetry the hands are often the porous and permeable boundary between the human and the nonhuman.'<sup>91</sup> I contend that this is true for Cyane's and Arethusa's entire bodies, which Ovid painstakingly describes as they are destroyed by water (Ov. *Met.* 5.425-37; 5.632-6). In *Dart*, too, the whole body is a 'porous and permeable boundary.'<sup>92</sup> Oswald's imagery is unusual and unsettling, in that it renders the human body as vulnerable and able to be pervaded by water in unexpected places.

As I argued in chapter 1 above, Ovid's depictions of Cyane's and Arethusa's metamorphoses augment natural human processes (weeping and perspiring) to ostensibly destructive levels. They are dissolved by an excess of their own mechanisms, as their own bodies produce the liquid which overwhelms their forms. It follows that metamorphosis itself is a characteristic of the human in Ovid's poem. Ovid appropriates the mutability that is intrinsic to water and incorporates it into the natural functioning of the human body. According to Sissa, for Ovid 'it is humanity that matters.'<sup>93</sup> Without humanity, hydro-morphoses would not take place in this poem, since at the heart of such processes are human physiological responses to external human actions. As I propose above, Cyane's transformation is triggered by her grief towards Pluto's kidnap of Proserpina and his attack of Cyane's pool, and Arethusa's by her fear of Alpheus' pursuit. Although Ovid opens up the reader's vision of the biosphere

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<sup>90</sup> 2023: 4.

<sup>91</sup> 2024: 12.

<sup>92</sup> Canevaro 2024: 12.

<sup>93</sup> 2023: 41.



at large by allowing human consciousness to occupy nonhuman forms,<sup>94</sup> the *Metamorphoses* is ultimately an anthropocentric text narrated by a human authorial persona concerned with the effects of processes such as hydro-morphosis on the human body and mind. Humanity is central to the *Metamorphoses*.

Oswald gives new shape to Ovid's anthropocentric approach to water. As we have seen, in *Dart* it is the river itself which pours into the bodies of John Edmunds and the swimmer. It has autonomy within these interactions that is distinct from that of the human. The river is an individual participant in the transformations of these human characters and merges with their bodies whilst, in the *Metamorphoses*, Cyane's and Arethusa's human bodies are simply reconfigured into water without interacting with the nonhuman world. Oswald grants independent agency to the river in these interactions and, in doing so, she produces a poem which transcends the human ego, offering a more objective view of human-nonhuman relationships.<sup>95</sup> The narrative of *Dart* is driven solely by the journey of the river 'from the source to the sea,'<sup>96</sup> a strategy that has the effect of erasing the human authorial presence. Within these interactions, then, water's own identity, agency, and purpose come to the fore. For Oswald's readers, surely deeply aware of the environmental emergency that defines our era, this decentralising of the human is perhaps more instinctive than for an ancient reader of Ovid. Although 'there are passages in Ovid's poetry which seem remarkably prescient of contemporary concerns,'<sup>97</sup> Ovid focusses on human activity and its consequences, whereas Oswald exposes human attempts at controlling the nonhuman as futile.<sup>98</sup> In *Dart*, water is central to the narrative. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are beginning to realise the scale of human impact upon the earth as the climate crisis 'permeates our lives, politics, and cultures.'<sup>99</sup> Subsequently, works of poetry like *Dart* serve to confront the contemporary human reader with their ingrained anthropocentrism. By directing the spotlight away from the human and towards water narratives, Oswald subverts readers' expectations of how nature is portrayed in literature, allowing us to view an alternative, eco-centric perspective of the world and our place within it.<sup>100</sup>

## Hollowness

Both Ovid and Oswald use language of emptiness, hollowness, and absence in conjunction with water narratives. For Cyane, Arethusa, John Edmunds, and the swimmer, hollowness is an essential aspect of water's in/outpouring mechanisms. As I argue above in 'Inpouring/Outpouring', water's dynamism in relation to the human involves motion into or out of the human body. Whilst the process of in- and

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<sup>94</sup> Martelli and Sissa 2023: 15.

<sup>95</sup> Cox 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.

<sup>97</sup> Sharrock 2021.

<sup>98</sup> Cox 2018: 90.

<sup>99</sup> Garrard 2023: 18.

<sup>100</sup> Cox 2018.

outpouring is the first stage of these characters' transformations into water, hollowness occurs at the height of these metamorphoses. Hollowness is most prevalent at points of tension and hybridity between human and water, where the boundary between the two entities is most blurred.

Hollowness can be found in all four episodes. At times, the human characters themselves are hollow. For instance, John Edmunds becomes a vessel for the river:

all day my voice is being washed away

out of a **lapse** in my throat

[...]

I am only as wide

as a word's **aperture**

[...]

this is my voice

[...]

rolling me round, like a **container**

[...]

and the silence pouring into what's left

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002: 20-1).

The language of emptiness and absence here is significant, as it draws attention to the notion of the body-as-shell, the occupant of which can be replaced by the motion of the river. 'Lapse' evokes not only a void, but also failure. Edmunds' body no longer satisfies the conditions of humanity, and thus he is overwhelmed and absorbed by the river Dart. It is true that 'aperture' 'recalls a photographic device, as though this watery voice was also the recorder of an instant.'<sup>101</sup> However, 'aperture' also signifies an opening, or a gap. The lines 'I am only as wide | as a word's aperture' suggest that Edmunds' only presence at this moment is his voice. Apart from his use of words, he is absent. Whilst Cyane is unable to talk 'post-metamorphosis' (*Ov. Met.* 5.465-7), and Arethusa must transform back into a human body to be able to speak (*Ov. Met.* 5.574-6), the only human action that John Edmunds can perform during his transformation is speech, despite lacking the physical mechanisms to do so due to the 'lapse in [his] throat'. Indeed, a few lines later he compares his voice to a 'container'. This reiterates the theme of hollowness. Edmunds' physical form has been replaced by his voice, which is quickly being filled by 'silence pouring into what's left'. This is Edmunds' final line. Implicitly, the river's purpose in this transformation is to silence the human. It is unclear whether John Edmunds' 'container' refers to his body or to the river: he says 'this is my voice... rolling me round, like a container' (*Dart*: 21). Is Edmunds' body the container, or is he 'contained' within the river? Such ambiguity signals that the line between human and water is uncertain at this point. The presence of hollowness here reinforces the

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<sup>101</sup> Goursaud 2019: 16.

connection between hollowness and hybridity. However, for Edmunds, hybridity is impermanent. His ‘silence’ signals the complete loss of his humanity.

Cyane’s *inconsolabile vulnus* (Ov. *Met.* 5.426) echoes John Edmunds’ ‘lapse’. As I assert in chapter 1, this wound is emotional. Cyane is traumatised by Pluto’s attack. However, like ‘lapse’, *vulnus* points to a gap or a sense of emptiness for Cyane. Her body is damaged and failing in some way. Hollowness is present at this critical moment, manifesting as a ‘wound’. There is a causal connection between this silent, internal wound and Cyane’s subsequent weeping. Hollowness is a crucial component of hydro-morphosis. Cyane’s transformation then involves her blood being replaced by water: *pro vivo vitiatas sanguine venas | lympa subit* (Ov. *Met.* 5.436-7). At this moment of hybridity, there is tension between Cyane’s human and water forms. Cyane becomes a vessel through which water flows in place of blood, a hollow shell for the motion of the river. Hollowness is a significant feature of the tension created by water’s dynamic of in/outpouring. Water has a purpose in these moments of hybridity, to transform or absorb the human, and utilises hollowness to carry this out. Through motion in or out, water strives to impose hollowness via the sheer force of its motion. Water’s imposition of hollowness then enables it to alter the human body, either from within or from without. By identifying the moments at which both authors attribute purpose to water, it is possible to draw fresh perspectives from Ovid’s depiction of the relationship between human and water. It is clear that Oswald’s poem is the more eco-centric of the two, but there are points at which the two texts overlap. The poets’ common use of hollowness as a facet of hydro-morphosis is an example of this. Despite this transformative water belonging to the bodies of Cyane and Arethusa, I acknowledge that Ovid grants purpose to water here, albeit one which revolves around benefitting his human characters. This points to the potential for the discovery of eco-poetry in his work. Ovid’s environmental imagination is evident at these points in his tales of hydro-morphosis. Although Oswald’s characterisation of humanity constitutes a subversion of Ovid’s poem, the points of crossover between *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses* allow us to understand that there are glimpses of eco-centric thought in Ovid’s poem, however fleeting and obscure they may be.

Despite their common interlacing of metamorphosis and hollowness, the dynamics between human and water differ in *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*. The subject/object relationships are complex in Ovid’s text, whereas in *Dart* there is a clear division between the liquid subject and the human object. The passivity of the Ovidian Cyane is paradoxical. She is the subject of passive verbs, *lacrimisque absumitur omnis* (Ov. *Met.* 5. 427), *extenuatur aquas* (Ov. *Met.* 5.430), *brevis in gelidas membris exilibus undas | transitus est* (Ov. *Met.* 5.433-4), but, as I posit above, she is transformed by liquid which her own human body produces. This makes for ambiguity regarding Cyane’s position in the hierarchy of human and water. She is subject to hydro-morphosis, but the very process of transformation is triggered by her own weeping. Two liquids, blood and water, contest for a place within her hollow veins (Ov. *Met.* 5.436-7). Deliberately or not on Ovid’s part, it is unclear whether Cyane is active or passive in her metamorphosis. Cyane’s hollow veins contribute towards such complexity, since they act

as a space in which water chases her blood out of her body. The final line of Cyane's transformation, 'nothing remains, that you can grab' (*restatque nihil, quod prendere possis*; Ov. *Met.* 5.437), exemplifies the ambiguity of Cyane's form. By qualifying his statement with the caveat 'that you can grab', Ovid suggests that the inverse is also true, that something remains of Cyane's body that cannot be grabbed. The verb *restat* reinforces that the part of Cyane that cannot be grasped was present in her body before her transformation. Water was and is an element of her human body. Metamorphosis is a human physiological function, for which the catalyst is a psychological reaction to another human's aggression. Water, therefore, is not granted its own individual identity in Cyane's transformation. Although it possesses an explicit purpose, to change Cyane's form, it is indistinct from humanity and so belongs to and serves the human.

In *Dart*, Oswald cuts a clearer line between the river-as-subject and the human-as-object within these human-water interactions. Oswald clarifies human and water as individual, distinct beings with their own independent identity, purpose, and agency. In doing so, Oswald draws attention to an eco-centrism that Ovid arguably fails to show. The passivity of Ovid's Cyane prevails in Oswald's language, in that John Edmunds' voice is described as 'being washed away | out of a lapse in [his] throat,' and 'rolling [him] round, like a container' (*Dart*: p. 20-1). Water is in charge of this interaction, and Edmunds is powerless to save his humanity from the river. Furthermore, Oswald intertwines hollowness with human passivity in the face of water. The river Dart's motion through and around Edmunds' body renders him an empty shell, hence the lexical field of emptiness formed by vocabulary such as 'lapse' and 'container'. This speaks to water's agency as a mutable form, a dynamic force which imposes hollowness upon its subject. Whilst contemporary humans impose their presence upon water through various activities such as swimming, drowning, fishing, and depositing waste in waterways, the river Dart enacts its agency through absence. It takes human life via the process of drowning, and imposes hollowness upon the human body by exploiting its weak points and pouring in.

Another way in which we can see Oswald's deviation from Ovid's subject/object dynamic is through the narration of *Dart*. In the *Metamorphoses*, Cyane's transformation is narrated by Ovid, who speaks deictically to the reader, remarking that '**you** might **see** her limbs being softened' (*molliri membra videres*; Ov. *Met.* 5.430), and 'nothing remains, which **you** can **grab**' (*restatque nihil, quod prendere possis*; Ov. *Met.* 5.437). These second person singular verbs give a vivid sense of the audience's presence in the text. Cyane is part of two triangles. The first is intratextual and is comprised of Cyane, Calliope (the internal narrator), and the internal audience (composed of the eight other muses and Minerva). The second is metatextual, and contains Cyane, Ovid (the external narrator), and the reader (the external audience). Cyane is the object of both triangles, and her story is told on two levels, by two narrators, with two audiences, who are invited by the narrators to see and touch her. Similarly, although Arethusa's story is told in her own voice, she is an embedded narrator within Calliope's song, which is itself embedded within Ovid's epic poem. In *Dart*, on the other hand, John Edmunds talks directly to

the reader, urging to them to ‘listen!’ (*Dart*: 21). Oswald removes herself from this interaction between Edmunds and the reader. Instead, Edmunds himself is the narrator of his own death. In doing so, he attributes to his own body a sense of hollowness and emptiness. This self-portrait speaks directly to the reader and makes for a less complex conversation between narrator and audience. The removal of the authorial self and deictic voice also simplifies the dynamic between human and water. We hear Edmunds’ true experience of becoming water, rather than the author’s imagination of what this process might feel like, as is the case with Ovid’s text. In the world of *Dart*, human and water exist alongside one another, as disparate but equal and interacting entities. Whilst Ovid places the human author and characters at the centre of his poem, Oswald takes a step back in order to reevaluate this anthropocentric view of the world.

Hollowness is not only something that humans experience – water is also characterised as hollow in both poems. In the *Metamorphoses*, Arethusa appeals to the goddess Diana to save her from Alpheus’ pursuit. Diana takes pity upon her, and envelopes her in an ‘empty cloud’ (*cava nubila*; *Ov. Met.* 5.623) to protect her. In antiquity, clouds were known to be forms of water: it was understood that ‘at high altitudes air should condense into water to form clouds.’<sup>102</sup> Here, the presence of water in cloud form is entirely due to human or divine manipulation and not attributed to water itself. Again, Ovidian water narratives are secondary to those of his human characters, and water is a tool by which he may advance the human storyline. The ‘empty cloud’ which surrounds Arethusa is summoned by Diana and serves to conceal Arethusa from Alpheus’ sight. Water here is presented as entirely at humans’ disposal. In *Dart*, the swimmer is enveloped by water, too, but the dynamic between the two entities is different. Oswald uses language which associates the river with a container: ‘Slooshing the water open and... it Meeting shut behind me’, ‘He dives, she shuts himself in a deep soft-bottomed silence... He lifts the lid and shuts and lifts the lid and shuts...’ (*Dart*: 23). Water’s possession of a ‘lid’ which may be ‘opened’ and ‘shut’ conveys that it is an entity in which the human body can be encased. Furthermore, the swimmer is the subject of the reflexive verb ‘he shuts himself...’. Although the swimmer is submerged in the water, he chooses to be so that he might experience total immersion. The river *Dart* does not force this upon him. Like Arethusa, the swimmer uses water to his advantage. However, water provides the swimmer with relaxation and enjoyment, rather than protection from harm. The tone and focus of each text differ. Diana’s conjured cloud comes into being for the sole purpose of shielding a human character, whereas the river *Dart* in *Dart* is a constant presence, and its multi-faceted identity which has been established evolves throughout the text. The swimmer experiences this river, and does not leave it changed, either in form or purpose. Oswald’s swimmer is a character in the river’s narrative, not the reverse.

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<sup>102</sup> Irby 2021: 91.

Human-water relations in these two poems mark the evolution of environmental philosophy. Although both Ovid and Oswald portray hollowness as an intrinsic aspect of water narratives, one which is central to hydro-morphic processes, the circumstances surrounding water adopting this form vary. In fact, water's multiple purposes can be understood from its different forms. Human-water interactions often involve water's imposition of hollowness onto the human body. In the swimmer's episode, Oswald allows human and water to co-exist and privileges water's overarching narrative, whilst not diminishing the experience of the human. Such a balanced approach to the ecosystem of which we humans are a part points towards a kind of literary activism. Oswald tests the limits of our perception of nature as a separate and inferior concept. She promotes an alternative attitude to the nonhuman, one that does not view rivers and other entities as purely servants to the human experience, as Ovid does, but as individuals with their own independent narratives.

### Water Forms: Droplets/Spirals

Physical mutability is intrinsic to water in both texts. Water assumes various forms at different stages of metamorphosis. Hollowness contributes to the formations of water detailed thus far. Water also takes on two shapes in the episodes involving Cyane, Arethusa, John Edmunds, and the swimmer: droplets and spirals. Unsurprisingly, however, Ovid and Oswald differ in their treatment of these forms of water. Ovid reveals water's evolution from vast oceans in book 1 to minute droplets in book 5 and uses water to enhance the human narrative of the *Metamorphoses*. Oswald, by contrast, traces water's own agency in its physical formation. *Dart* depicts the role of the river Dart in controlling its own shape and movement and the purpose of the various forms it takes throughout the poem.

Ovid pinpoints water's narrative from sea to river to spring throughout the *Metamorphoses*. Water begins its journey in the text as sea and sea deities in books 1 and 2. The section entitled 'Colour' in chapter 1 identified Ovid's use of the adjective *caeruleus* to track the presence of water through his poem. Here, I recognise another significant word that Ovid uses repeatedly in conjunction with hydro-morphoses. Sweat appears on Arethusa's skin as 'droplets', *guttae* (Ov. *Met.* 5.633). The word *gutta* appears in the *Metamorphoses* eleven times. Often, it refers to bodily fluids: blood (Ov. *Met.* 2.360; 4.618; 9.344; 15.788), sweat (Ov. *Met.* 5.633), and tears (Ov. *Met.* 9.659;<sup>103</sup> 10.500). Twice in the *Metamorphoses*, *gutta* describes droplets of potions (Ov. *Met.* 7.283; 14.408). On two occasions, *gutta* translates as speckles which appear on the body of a human as it becomes reptilian (Ov. *Met.* 4.578; 5.461). Although *gutta* is used to mean a variety of small drops or spots, these points in the narrative are united by a distinct similarity: all are moments of transformation. A significant association emerges

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<sup>103</sup> At 9.659, *gutta* represents drops of pitch which falls from a gashed pine tree, but this substance is compared to the tears which Byblis weeps and by which she is dissolved, and thus falls in the category of bodily fluids here.

between the movement of liquids in droplet form, and the transformation of humans into nonhumans. Water appears as small drops that signal the first stage of Cyane's and Arethusa's transformations. Water becomes spherical in order to interact with and overcome Cyane's and Arethusa's human bodies, and thus absorb their consciousness into its own form.

Oswald, too, is concerned with the forms which water might take. Immediately preceding the depiction of John Edmunds' transformation, *Dart* grants a voice to Theodore Schwenke. Schwenke is the founder of the Institute of Flow, a scientific organisation which studies 'the effects of water in living nature,' and investigates 'the relationship between flow forms and forms of movement and development of living beings.'<sup>104</sup> Schwenke's book, *Sensitive Chaos* (1965), explores the 'archetypal movements of water', specifically how water is an 'active element and the foundation of life'.<sup>105</sup> Most significantly, however, Schwenke is concerned with the 'ability of water to flow in a variety of different forms compared to pure spring water as the archetype of natural, healthy and invigorating water'.<sup>106</sup> Using the 'drop method', he visualises water quality using the shape of a water droplet as it meets a surface.<sup>107</sup> In *Dart*, the voice of Schwenke alludes to this method:

'whenever currents of water meet the confluence is always the place  
where rhythmical and spiralling movements may arise,  
spiralling surfaces which glide past one another in manifold winding and curving forms  
new water keeps flowing through each single strand of water  
whole surfaces **interweaving spatially** and flowing past each other  
in spherical tension, through which **water strives to attain a spherical drop-form**'

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002, p. 20).

Water's purpose is to become spherical, and it has agency in this process. 'Strives' conveys a will and autonomy. These lines evoke the beginning of the first chapter of Schwenke's book:

Wherever water occurs it tends to take on a spherical form... It is earthly laws which cause it to flow, draw it away from its spherical form and make it follow a more or less linear and **determined cause**. Yet water **continually strives** to return to its spherical form... A sphere is a totality, a whole, and water will always **attempt to form** an organic whole by joining what is divided and uniting it in circulation... Water is essentially the element of circulatory systems.<sup>108</sup>

Schwenke outlines a tension between the will of water and the 'earthly laws', as if water is an individual entity, but one which has the ability to interact and be influenced by other forces. The sense of purpose found in phrases such as 'determined cause', 'continually strives', and 'attempt to form' affords

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<sup>104</sup> Stroemungs Institut 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Schwenke 1965: 13-15.

<sup>106</sup> Stroemungs Institut 2024.

<sup>107</sup> Stroemungs Institut 2024.

<sup>108</sup> 1965: 13.

independent agency to water, a theme which Oswald's Schwenke emulates in the line 'water strives to attain a spherical drop form' (*Dart*: 20). Oswald builds upon Schwenke's notion by exploring how water's agency operates in its experience of the human. The river Dart is part of a 'circulatory system,'<sup>109</sup> the water cycle, and *Dart* follows a segment of this system as the river traverses Dartmoor on its way to Dartmouth. In doing so, the poem explores how the river interacts with the humans who live and work on it.<sup>110</sup> The human characters, including John Edmunds and the swimmer, form part of the river's own narrative. In Schwenk's own words, water 'envelops the whole sphere of the earth'<sup>111</sup> in the form of the sea, and it is 'from the source to the sea'<sup>112</sup> that the river Dart is rushing. The overarching narrative purpose of the river is to reach the sea, to become part of the earth's spherical form. Ovid also attributes purpose to water, but does so through an anthropocentric lens. In Arethusa's tale of her own hydro-morphosis, she describes how Alpheus becomes water 'so that he might mix with [her]' (Ov. *Met.* 5.638). This purpose clause attributes autonomy to Alpheus. He chooses to become water to continue his chase. However, the pursuit narrative is intertwined with human narratives in the *Metamorphoses*. Just as Cyane retains her identity, values and intentions post-metamorphoses (as we observed in chapter 1), Alpheus' transformation into water is triggered by his human desire to pursue Arethusa further. Oswald, on the other hand, recognises the individual agency of water. Water in *Dart* possesses its own purpose, which at this point in the poem is to choose to be 'spherical'.

Another aspect of water's agency and dynamism in both texts is its movement as spiralling counter currents within a single body of water. During metamorphic interactions between human and water, water moves as a pair of interwoven streams. For instance, Alpheus' hydro-morphosis allows him to 'mix' with Arethusa's own stream within his river (Ov. *Met.* 5.636-8). The river comprises a pair of intertwined but opposing streams, rather than existing as a single, unified entity. Arethusa's and Alpheus' human consciousnesses occupy water via hydro-morphosis, and so we as readers of Ovid have an insight into how water behaves when it exists as a river. However, it remains that these are human stories that Ovid applies to water. Ovid imposes the erotic chase narrative onto the river, to provide his reader with an aetiological tale for the Fonte Aretusa, Sicily. In the *Metamorphoses*, we only understand water's experience from a human perspective. Humanity permeates and appropriates the nonhuman. Oswald's depiction of water's choice to form counter currents is less anthropocentric than Ovid's. Oswald problematises Ovid's approach to the nonhuman world by centring the river's own story. The notion that the river is made of two twisting streams can be traced throughout *Dart*. For instance, towards the end of the poem, the voice of the oyster gatherers is concerned with the 'interweaving form' of the river:

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<sup>109</sup> Schwenke 1965: 13.

<sup>110</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.

<sup>111</sup> 1965: 13.

<sup>112</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.



why is this jostling procession of waters,  
 its many strands overclambering one another,  
 [...]

all these scrambled and **screw-like currents**  
 and knotty altercations of torrents,  
 why is this **interweaving form** as contiguously gliding  
 as two sisters, **so entwined, so dividing**

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002, p. 42).

The oyster gatherers' curiosity reveals that they are unaware of water's purpose. They are simply observing the river's behaviour, instead of forcing their own narrative upon it. Elsewhere, the mill worker who speaks before John Edmunds in *Dart* likens the winding of yarn to the streams within the river:

We stretch and wind it on a spinning frame – a ring and travel arrangement twists it in the  
 opposite direction and we end up with two-ply, a **balanced twist**, like the river

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002, p. 20).

Water becomes the paradigm of this spiral structure. These images of the river as a 'balanced twist' 'interweaving spatially' evoke Arethusa's experience. However, the relationship between the counter-currents of the river Dart is one of equality, whereas fearful Arethusa flees Alpheus' sexual advances within the river. The paradoxical nature of water returns. Rivers are places of both harmony and violence. Indeed, earlier on in *Dart*, the 'dead tinnars' describe Dartmeet, the place at which the East and West rivers meet to form the river Dart, as 'two wills gnarling and recoiling | and finally knuckling into balance ... at loggerheads, lying next to one another in the riverbed' (*Dart*: 10-11). Although there is conflict here, the duality of the river is resolved once they reach 'balance'. Significantly, Oswald reiterates the theme of the water's 'will'. Yet, *Dart* remains non-anthropocentric. Meanwhile, Ovid imposes an aetiological human narrative onto the nonhuman in an attempt to explain these phenomena that are intrinsic aspects of water's dynamism, while Oswald decentres the human. In focussing instead on the narrative of the nonhuman entity, the river, she reworks Ovid's approach. The poem simply guides us to the river's behaviour. In both poems, water achieves certain shapes or structures: droplets and spirals. An agency of water repeatedly emerges in its interactions with the human: its deliberately unstable form. Ovid and Oswald are both concerned with how such instability operates as part of the human-water dynamic, but their approaches have different implications for the reader's interpretation of this relationship. Ovid projects a very human story, the rape narrative, onto water's behaviour. Rape stories are frequent in the *Metamorphoses*,<sup>113</sup> and almost always involve a man pursuing a woman until

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<sup>113</sup> Curran 1978: 214.

he catches and rapes her, or until she transforms into a nonhuman form.<sup>114</sup> The examination of such incidents of sexual violence in Ovid's work is beyond the scope of this thesis, but there is something to be noted in Ovid's application of a tale of pursuit onto the motion of water. By using this human story to explain the occurrence of counter-currents within a river, Ovid perpetuates an anthropocentric view of the nonhuman world which assumes that humanity is the default. In the *Metamorphoses*, the nonhuman world follows the lead of the human in its behaviour. By contrast, Oswald's river exists independently *despite* various human attempts to explain or control it. The questions posed by the oyster gatherers, noted above, and the conflict between them and the poachers, whom they ask,

whose side are you on?  
I grew up on this river,  
I look after this river,  
what's your business?

(Oswald, *Dart*, 2002, p. 41),

convey that human categorisation and control of the river is arbitrary.<sup>115</sup> Despite various attempts of the human to make sense of the river in their own terms of ownership and responsibility, the river continues to exist as an individual entity, 'driving [its] many selves from cave to cave...' (*Dart*: 48). In *Dart*, Oswald acknowledges humans' innate desire to understand the nonhuman as a commodity and to project ideals of a human subject and a nonhuman object onto it. Contemporary readerships of Ovid and Oswald engage in a kind of reciprocal reception. Our reading of each text is enhanced by knowledge of the other. In the final section below, I investigate what this means for my case study of Cyane, Arethusa, John Edmunds, and the swimmer, and the implications of this ancient-modern reciprocity for both eco-poetics and human relationships with the natural world.

### Nourishment/Destruction

The relationship between human and water in *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses* is paradoxical. Water is essential to human existence, but simultaneously rivers have the power to take a human's life from them. Indeed, as Irby identifies, water is both 'nurturing and destructive'<sup>116</sup> to humans. However, Ovid and Oswald approach this paradox in different ways. Oswald's divergence from Ovid's treatment of the human-water dynamic has consequences for the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader's understanding of the human place and purpose in the world, alongside other entities such as water, rather than above them.

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<sup>114</sup> Koivunen 2022: 46.

<sup>115</sup> Cox 2018: 90.

<sup>116</sup> 2021: 33.

Ovid acknowledges that water is both ‘nurturing and destructive’<sup>117</sup> to human life. According to Sissa, this ancient poem is ‘paradoxically anthropocentric,’<sup>118</sup> in that Ovid throws a spotlight on the agency of the nonhuman but does so in such a way that the human remains centre stage. For instance, water in the *Metamorphoses* is often a divine tool for the punishment of human transgression. This is particularly evident in book 1 in which, as punishment for humans’ impious behaviour in the Bronze Age (Ov. *Met.* 1.125-50) and for the giants’ attack on the heavens (Ov. *Met.* 1.151-62) Jupiter determines to destroy humankind with water (Ov. *Met.* 1.260-1). Jupiter then employs gods of the rivers and the seas to aid him in his destruction (Ov. *Met.* 1.274-6). This leads, directly and indirectly, to the deaths of almost all living things on earth (Ov. *Met.* 1.311-2). Ovid’s focus here is on water as a pawn in the power dynamic between the human and the divine, not as a being with independent agency and purpose.

The theme of the Flood as a punitive divine act emerges in Ovid’s repeated use of *poena* throughout this episode. The first instance occurs in the description of the Golden Age, in which ‘there was no fear of punishment’ (Ov. *Met.* 1.91), as Ovid remarks that people had no need for laws, so ‘right’ was their behaviour (Ov. *Met.* 1.89-90). *poena* appears again in the Lycaon episode, in Jupiter’s speech denouncing Lycaon’s impiety towards him. Jupiter introduces this story by assuring his audience, the assembly of the gods, that Lycaon has endured punishment for his actions (Ov. *Met.* 1.209). Ovid’s third use of *poena* occurs in Jupiter’s final demand that all humans be punished for Lycaon’s transgression. Jupiter concludes with the lines *dent ocius omnes | quas meruere pati (sic stat sententia) poenas* (Ov. *Met.* 1.242-3). The emphatic position and spondaic rhythm of *poenas* lend weight to the word, conveying the important place that morality holds in this tale. Such uses of *poena* establish a causal connection between human transgression and divine punishment. Jupiter’s genocide by water, in the form of a global flood, is part of this narrative pattern of transgression and punishment. Water becomes a crucial element of this pattern, as Jupiter employs its ‘destructive’<sup>119</sup> agency towards humans in order to enact his punitive revenge. This approach is anthropocentric. Ovid’s focus is on the behaviour and existence of the human and the causal connection between this and the flood. Furthermore, it is Jupiter’s own decision to inflict the power of water onto humankind, motivated by his personal fear of his domination being threatened and overturned. Ovid’s personification of water as various divine figures in the *Metamorphoses* reinforces the text’s anthropocentrism. To a certain extent, the human embodiment of water in characters such as Neptune does allow us to understand water’s agency, but it still arises from a human perspective. This episode promotes the ‘destructive’<sup>120</sup> nature of water and water deities towards the human. However, water does not have true agency over the damage it inflicts upon humankind.

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<sup>117</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>118</sup> 2019: 182.

<sup>119</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>120</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

The transformations of Cyane and Arethusa are similarly paradoxical in terms of their treatment of the nonhuman. While Ovid explores the agency of water within these processes, his focus is on the way in which hydro-morphosis is beneficial to humans who are experiencing traumatic situations. Water ‘includes two forms which are also important to humans: to move and to change.’<sup>121</sup> For, water’s ‘lack of hardness and ability to escape being trapped and controlled’ benefits Cyane,<sup>122</sup> of whom Ovid says *restat... nihil, quod prendere possis* (Ov. *Met.* 5.437): ‘nothing remains, that you can touch.’ Cyane’s human body is ‘dissolved’ by water (Ov. *Met.* 5.427) and thus destroyed, yet this process is ‘nurturing’<sup>123</sup> to the part of Cyane that remains. She will never again experience an attack like that which Pluto inflicts upon her. This view of the independent agency of the nonhuman has developed only relatively recently. Previous analysis of these tales is often concerned with the way in which Ovid silences women with metamorphosis after they experience sexual violence. According to Segal, ‘in the Proserpina episode of Book 5 Ovid brilliantly interweaves three parallel and complementary tales of male sexual violence against a more or less helpless and passive female body.’<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Anderson describes Cyane’s transformation as ‘supremely sad.’<sup>125</sup> More recent scholarship recognises that, in the *Metamorphoses*, ‘agency is not dependent on humanity.’<sup>126</sup> Koivunen posits that the *Metamorphoses* acknowledges the various agency of all beings, human and nonhuman. It follows that to suggest that Cyane’s hydro-morphosis is ‘sad’<sup>127</sup> is an anthropocentric strategy in this poem. This attitude places a higher value upon the human experience than that of a river. My thesis builds upon Koivunen’s argument by contending that, although Ovid does indeed promote the agency of water, he himself only does so through an anthropocentric lens. Ovid focusses on what water can do for humans, and how it can be utilised in a way that is convenient for the human. In the *Metamorphoses*, water is a weapon of divine subjugation of the human, or a form which allows humans to escape trauma.

Water in the *Metamorphoses* is protective of humans at times, too. An ‘empty cloud’ envelops Arethusa after she asks Diana to protect her from Alpheus, her pursuer (Ov. *Met.* 5.623). Water is a tool for concealment rather than a weapon for divine punishment. The conjuring of the cloud is triggered by Arethusa’s plea and employed by Diana. Water here has no independent will. It is again under the command of human, albeit for ‘nurturing’ rather than ‘destructive’ purposes.<sup>128</sup> Later, Arethusa’s form as a current within the river allows her to descend to the Underworld and escape Alpheus’ pursuit (Ov. *Met.* 5.639-41). Again, her flight is enabled by further assistance from Diana, who ‘burst open the earth’ (Ov. *Met.* 5.639) to free Arethusa from Alpheus’ grasp. Koivunen argues that ‘the ability to travel

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<sup>121</sup> Koivunen 2022: 53.

<sup>122</sup> Koivunen 2022: 46.

<sup>123</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>124</sup> 1998: 22.

<sup>125</sup> 1998: 543.

<sup>126</sup> Koivunen 2022: 54.

<sup>127</sup> Anderson 1998: 543.

<sup>128</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

through earth and appear anew... is easier understood as something water would be able to do,<sup>129</sup> as opposed to a human. I contend that this is still an anthropocentric perspective, since Arethusa's escape from her pursuer is instigated by a human figure, the goddess Diana, to benefit Arethusa herself. Again, water in the *Metamorphoses* is only afforded value in its capacity to be 'nurturing'<sup>130</sup> to the human.

Ovid is consistently ambiguous in his treatment of the agency of the nonhuman. The *Metamorphoses* often acknowledges the 'nurturing'<sup>131</sup> properties of *natura*. It is *melior... natura* (Ov. *Met.* 1.21) who governs and organises the cosmos at the start of the poem. Like Neptune, 'nature' or 'Chaos' (Ov. *Met.* 1.6-7) is anthropomorphic. It possesses 'a single face' (Ov. *Met.* 1.6). Whilst Anderson argues that 'the metaphor of a human face does not personify Chaos but implies Ovid's thematic interest in forms and appearances,'<sup>132</sup> I contend that the association of *vultus* with the human face aligns with the anthropocentric treatment of the nonhuman that is recurrent throughout the *Metamorphoses*. By conjuring the image of the 'single face of nature' (Ov. *Met.* 1.6), Ovid introduces the reader to his human appropriation of the agency of the nonhuman. Nature's possession of a 'face' creates a subconscious connection between *natura* and the human. The reader learns to understand *natura* in human terms, whether or not this is Ovid's intention. This metaphor forms a connection between the 'ordering' of the cosmos and the human. From this point onwards, Ovidian humans are intrinsically linked to the formation of the earth as it is today, and the implication of this is a world designed with humans in mind. The *natura* present at the start of the text creates a world tailored for human life. Once the earth is formed and all its elements composed, Ovid 'brings human beings on stage as superior entities.'<sup>133</sup> Ovid's earth and everything in it is anthropocentrically designed to 'nurture'<sup>134</sup> the human. It is yet more significant that water itself plays a specific role in this 'nurturing'<sup>135</sup> of humankind. Ovid claims that the combination of fire and water is necessary to produce life on earth (Ov. *Met.* 1.430-3). The nonhuman world, particularly water, provides an environment by which humans are nourished and in which they are able to exist and thrive.

Oswald's reception of Ovid's poem paints a more nuanced picture of the ultimate dynamics of water. Whilst Ovid's approach is inherently concerned with the human, her water narratives arguably emerge more objectively. As she insists in her preface, 'all voices should be read as the river's mutterings.' These voices interweave to form a 'song-map of the river.'<sup>136</sup> From the outset, *Dart* is a text that circumscribes Ovid's anthropocentric tendencies. Her approach to the question of humans and water consists of an exploration of how water operates within such interactions. Whilst *Dart*, as we have seen

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<sup>129</sup> 2022: 48.

<sup>130</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>131</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>132</sup> 1998: 153.

<sup>133</sup> Anderson 1998: 160.

<sup>134</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>135</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>136</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.

in the previous chapter, involves an examination of human somatic and affective experiences of the river, Oswald also encourages the reader to imagine water's own perspective of this relationship. Intrinsic to *Dart* is the sense that 'agency is not dependent on humanity,'<sup>137</sup> as Oswald focusses on the agency of water and how it operates as an independent being.

Oswald's marginal note to the voice of the swimmer, 'Dart Dart wants a heart' (p. 24) echoes a saying from Devonian folklore, 'Dart, Dart, cruel Dart, every year thou claim'st a heart.'<sup>138</sup> Indeed, the notion that 'particular rivers [including the Dart] demanded an annual sacrifice'<sup>139</sup> is prevalent in stories of those who drown in rivers. This evokes a reciprocity between human and water, a mutual exchange in which water has an active role. Indeed, the stanzas which follow the swimmer's encounter with the Dart express the river's desire to collect the drowned knights, 'counting them into her bag, taking her tythe' (p. 24). Further traces of those who have drowned occupy the same water: 'Jan Coo! Jan Coo! | have you any idea what goes into water?' (p. 25). Jan Coo appears in Devonian folklore as a figure who 'haunts the Dart' (p. 4) after he was lured down to the river by pixies who incessantly called out his name.<sup>140</sup> This context imbues the river Dart with mystery and danger: water is a threat to human life.

Meanwhile, the Dart supplies the people of Devon with water, essential to human existence. The process of siphoning and filtering the river water for human consumption is what 'keeps you and me alive' (p. 25), according to the voice of the 'water abstractor'. By juxtaposing multiple tales of drowning alongside the voice of the water abstractor, who justifies the channelling of water from the river, Oswald implicitly connects human use of the river with the Dart's accumulation of people. The price which the river demands for sustaining human life is human life itself. This reciprocity raises the question of whether human treatment of water in *Dart* constitutes use or abuse. Is this exchange mutually 'nurturing and destructive'<sup>141</sup> for both human and water, or does Oswald present humans as draining the resources from the river, like Ovid's humans transgress the bounds of their own role in the cosmos? I contend the latter, that Oswald problematises the idea of human use of the river, by building on Ovidian treatment of the nonhuman, and of water in particular. Whilst in the *Metamorphoses*, water is a force which can be utilised punitively against humans by the gods, it is the human characters who have a negative effect upon the waterways in *Dart*. The voice of the sewage worker states unabashedly of the sewage, 'if there's too much, I waste it off down the stormflow, it's not my problem' (*Dart*: 30). Perhaps Oswald's river Dart is retaliating for humans' abuse of waterways in the UK. An investigation by the *Observer* revealed that 'more than 90% of freshwater habitats on England's most precious rivers are in unfavourable condition, blighted by farming pollution, raw sewage and water abstraction.'<sup>142</sup> Indeed, in

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<sup>137</sup> Koivunen 2022: 54.

<sup>138</sup> Strang 2023: 181.

<sup>139</sup> Strang 2023: 181.

<sup>140</sup> Young 1978: 50.

<sup>141</sup> Irby 2021: 33.

<sup>142</sup> Ungoed-Thomas and Jenz 2023.

2022, Warfleet Creek Pumping Station spilt sewage into the mouth of the Dart 364 times, more frequently than all other storm overflows in the UK in that year.<sup>143</sup> Further upriver, Buckfastleigh Sewage Treatment Works spilt sewage into the river a total of 219 times in 2022. Buckfastleigh is approximately 6.5 kilometres from Staverton Ford, from which John Edmunds and the swimmer speak. At Staverton, there is a wastewater treatment works which also discharges sewage into the river.<sup>144</sup> The effects of these spillages include poor water quality and decreased biodiversity.<sup>145</sup> Although it may seem anachronistic to suggest that such mistreatment of rivers in 2022 may be relevant to Oswald's characterisation of a vengeful river Dart in a poem published two decades previously, human river pollution is not only a current issue. In 2000, 50,000 gallons of toxic farm slurry were spilt into the Dart, the 14<sup>th</sup> large river spill across the UK in the same month.<sup>146</sup> 250,000 fish are estimated to have been killed by these incidents.<sup>147</sup> This context interweaves a moral aspect into Oswald's poem.

With the implication that drowning is the river's 'tythe', a kind of taxation, Oswald engages with these events. Oswald expands upon Ovid's ambiguously anthropocentric portrayal of nonhuman agency, by challenging the *Metamorphoses*' treatment of water. Characters in *Dart* are concerned with what constitutes the 'real Dart' (*Dart*: 17), and the 'real work of the river' (*Dart*: 25). By incorporating a multiplicity of human perspectives of the river, Oswald exposes human categorisation and control of waterways as arbitrary. However humans perceive and try to control the river, it exists as an independent entity with its own agency and will. Whereas Ovid affords his reader a version of the nonhuman experience through human senses, via hydro-morphoses such as Cyane's and Arethusa's, Oswald offers a depiction of the behaviour of water without human explanation or justification. That the river Dart 'collect[s] [humans] into her bag, taking her tythe' (*Dart*: 24) is not contextualised by moral judgement. We as readers are not encouraged to think of this act of drowning humans as negative, whilst Ovid intrinsically connects morality with the behaviour of water and water deities. In *Dart*, drowning is a process which forms part of the relationship between human and water. Indeed, that these incidents of drowning are labelled as a 'tythe' implies that humans owe their lives to the river. The relationship is reciprocal. Oswald is promoting the decentralisation of 'typically foregrounded agents [i.e. the human] and moving others [i.e. water] to the centre or focussing on the margins,' an approach which builds on contemporary material ecocriticism.<sup>148</sup> By affording equal value to human and nonhuman existence and revealing the reciprocity of the interactions between human and nonhuman entities, Oswald exposes our anthropocentric treatment of the nonhuman, particularly our abuse of waterways. Oswald promotes the autonomy of the river Dart, whilst Ovid confines autonomy to humans and humans alone. The *Metamorphoses* is an anthropocentric catalogue of aetiologies in which Ovid imposes human narratives

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<sup>143</sup> Swinford 2023.

<sup>144</sup> The Rivers Trust 2023.

<sup>145</sup> Ungood-Thomas and Jenz 2023.

<sup>146</sup> Vidal 2000.

<sup>147</sup> Vidal 2000.

<sup>148</sup> Canevaro 2024: 17.

onto nonhuman behaviour, whereas *Dart* does not pretend to understand water's purpose. Oswald's river Dart is 'anonymous, water's soliloquy, | all names, all voices' (*Dart*: 48). Oswald does not assume she can understand water's identity in her poem. By contrast, Ovid follows human consciousness as it moves between and experiences various nonhuman forms, but is limited to his anthropocentric perspective. In *Dart*, nonhuman entities possess value which transcends their contribution towards the human experience. The effect that Oswald's reworking of Ovid approach has on 21<sup>st</sup> century readers of both texts is significant, as it contributes towards a shift in our understanding of our place in the world as an equal participant in a continuous process of motion and change, not as a superior, omnipresent being.



## Conclusion

Giulia Sissa, whose insightful chapter ‘*cuncta fluunt*: The Fluidity of Life in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*’ is a significant point of reference for this thesis, says that the *Metamorphoses*’ ‘morphological vulnerability causes perceptual insecurity and potential omophagy – for us.’<sup>149</sup> Sissa’s addition of those two small words, ‘for us’, exemplifies Ovid’s human-centric concerns in his epic poem. The poet’s preoccupation with the effect of metamorphosis on the human body and mind seeps into each overlapping tale. Indeed, in my bilateral case study of Cyane, Arethusa, John Edmunds, and the swimmer above, I hope to have shown that Ovid’s treatment of water narratives adheres to his overarching anthropocentrism, whereas Oswald complicates Ovid’s hierarchy of human and water. In *Dart*, Oswald’s depiction of the behaviour of water dismantles humans’ understanding of the world and their place within it. In Ovid’s stories of Cyane and Arethusa, water’s presence relies upon the anthropocentric preconception that the natural world exists to provide for and support human life. Cyane’s and Arethusa’s hydro-morphoses enable them to exist in new and alternative ways so that they might survive and thrive following the traumas that they experienced as humans. Conversely, in *Dart*, the river is the constant yet dynamic figure which transcends humanity’s attempts to govern it. The river Dart takes centre stage in Oswald’s poem, and permeates every aspect of human life, including leisure, work, and even death, just as Ovid’s human characters are able to pervade every nonhuman being in his epic poem. Oswald’s water replaces Ovid’s humanity.

In my examination of the hydro-morphoses of Cyane and Arethusa above, I have acknowledged the ‘closure’ that Koivunen finds in Ovid’s depictions of metamorphosis.<sup>150</sup> Koivunen challenges previous scholars who find metamorphosis to be ‘limiting’ to humanity.<sup>151</sup> She finds this approach anthropocentric, since interpreting Ovid’s human to nonhuman transformations as negative for human characters implies that the nonhuman experience and existence is inferior to that of the human.<sup>152</sup> However, whilst I concede that the long-held view of human to nonhuman metamorphosis as a downgrade of sorts betrays our ingrained sense of superiority over beings with which we share the world, I put pressure on Koivunen’s entirely eco-centric interpretation of Ovid’s poem. Instead, I find that Ovid’s primary concern is humanity. Alternatively, as I argue in Chapters 1 and 2 above, Oswald’s outlook is more, if not wholly, centralised around the nonhuman entity, water. When reading *Dart* as a reception of the *Metamorphoses*, this point of departure becomes more apparent and represents a wider disparity between ancient and modern ecological thought. Through my detailed case study, I have shown that Oswald’s reworking of Ovid’s environmental imagination results in a conversation between

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<sup>149</sup> 2023: 42.

<sup>150</sup> 2022: 54.

<sup>151</sup> 2022: 54.

<sup>152</sup> 2022: 54.

the two texts and raises questions about human engagement with a world that they can never fully understand, let alone control.

I have furthermore conducted a close investigation into the relationship between human and water in the two texts under my consideration. Chapter 1 offered an analysis of the physical and psychological effects of hydro-morphosis on the human. In Chapter 2, I focused on the reverse perspective, namely the way in which water might ‘experience’ humanity via motion in and out of the human body. One question remains: what is the effect on the contemporary audience of this reciprocity between *Dart* and the *Metamorphoses*? In other words, what can we as 21<sup>st</sup> century readers learn from Ovid’s and Oswald’s parallel yet diverging explorations of human and nonhuman relationships? It is this fascinating avenue that I intend to pursue in my conclusion, as I work towards a worldview that is based on new materialism’s ‘flat ontology,’<sup>153</sup> the notion that all beings have equal value, and thus the concept of value becomes extraneous.

In order to answer this question, I must first consider why the two pairs of characters, Ovid’s Cyane and Arethusa, and Oswald’s John Edmunds and the swimmer, initially stood out as points of contact between these two poems, and how they indicated to me that *Dart* may constitute an eco-critical reception of the *Metamorphoses*. I began this case study by examining the significant parallels between these four figures in the introductory section to Chapter 1, entitled ‘Alpheios, Ciane, and Dart: Rivers between Reality and Fiction.’. These interweaving characters highlight the Ovidian influence in *Dart* due to the overlap between the geographical locations and the narratological framing of their respective stories. However, these similarities, although significant for my study of these four characters, are obscure and require some thought before they become clear. The immediately evident connection between these four tales is that they all involve hydro-morphosis of some sort. This was the initial reason for the selection of these characters for my case study, and the less overt correlations between them became clear to me via further investigation of various contextual elements of their wider tales. Through my examination of Ovid’s and Oswald’s respective treatments of hydro-morphosis in Chapters 1 and 2 above, I have found that Oswald reworks Ovid’s depiction of this process to comment on human attitudes towards the nonhuman, specifically water. The result of her innovative treatment of water narratives is the reflection of contemporary attitudes towards the nonhuman. Whilst, as I argue in Chapter 1’s section ‘Mood/Voice’, Cyane and John Edmunds both experience a sense of acceptance towards their transformations, Cyane’s stems from the fact that she is able to retain her human identity and continue to exist as herself within the river, whereas John Edmunds’ resignation to his inevitable drowning reveals an admission of water’s superiority in this instance. The river Dart destroys Edmunds’ humanity, and so Oswald concedes the overwhelming power of water against the human.

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<sup>153</sup> Garrard 2023: 36.

For Arethusa, too, this thesis recognises a retention of her character, despite the hybridity with water to which she is subjected as a result of her metamorphosis. Ovid's perpetuation of this theme spans more widely than these tales alone. Post-metamorphic identity retention is an overarching theme and encourages animist readings of Ovid's epic poem, as it highlights the disconnect between mind and form. The *Metamorphoses*, despite the complexity of its interlacing metamorphic tales, is consistent in its depiction of the omnipresent, pervasive human. For Oswald, however, hydro-morphosis is more complex and varied. Humans in *Dart* experience water in a huge variety of ways, both positive and negative. Oswald complicates human relationships with waterways by juxtaposing the swimmer's jubilation and serenity with other characters' desperation and claustrophobia as they drown in the river (*Dart*: 23-4). By framing human-water relationships as both mutually harmful and beneficial, Oswald curates a worldview in which humans and water are equals that exist within an ecosystem. This involves entities such as these interacting perpetually and reciprocally. Whilst Ovid's human characters are constantly engaging with the nonhuman world, they do so in a way that acknowledges only their own value. Although this thesis recognises Koivunen's identification of 'different forms of agency'<sup>154</sup> in the *Metamorphoses*, I find that Ovid's overarching narrative is one that prioritises humans, their emotional and sensory experience of the world, and ultimately their evolution from Creation up to the death of Julius Caesar. Oswald, on the other hand, traces the trajectory and growth of the river Dart 'from the source to the sea.'<sup>155</sup> Humanity in *Dart* is incidental and transient. In addition to her examination of John Edmunds' and the swimmer's contrasting experiences of the river, Oswald explores moral disputes between other human figures. The voices of the 'salmon netsman and poacher' (*Dart*: 37-9) and the 'oyster gatherers' (*Dart*: 39-42) outline the tensions between various Devonians who consider themselves the rightful owners or guardians of the river and its contents. Morality and legality overlap in their references to the 'legal fisherman', and the 'bailiff' (*Dart*: 38), raising the question of whether laws conceived by human minds and culture are relevant and applicable to a nonhuman entity such as the river Dart. Similarly, the exchange between 'forester' and 'waterynymph' (*Dart*: 11-4) exemplifies humans' contradictory attitudes to nature. The 'waterynymph' flirtatiously and poetically calls out to the forester in verse, but her seduction falls on deaf ears, as the forester is too preoccupied with how he is systematically 'felling small sections to give the forest some structure' (*Dart*: 11) to notice her. Each human character who engages with the river and its immediate landscape in *Dart* holds incompatible and inconsistent ideals of how nature should appear and behave, and are too focussed on the personal benefits of their engagement with and use of the river to consider that their treatment of the river might not be sustainable.

Oswald's recognition and dismantlement of the notion that humans may impose their own ideals of order, legality, and morality onto nature is her most explicit engagement with Ovid's text. Ovid

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<sup>154</sup> 2022: 3.

<sup>155</sup> Oswald 2002: preface.

attributes human stories to processes that occur in the natural world independently from humanity to provide aetiological explanations for the world as we know and understand it. For instance, the tales of Arethusa and Cyane describe the origins of their namesake springs in Sicily, Fonte Aretusa and Fonte Ciane. Contemporary Western understanding is that bodies of water such as these springs occur naturally, without human action or intervention, whereas Ovid's explanations for their existence comprise two tales involving potential or actual sexual violence towards Cyane and Arethusa, perpetrated by two human figures, Pluto and Alpheus.<sup>156</sup> In the *Metamorphoses*, every aspect of the ever-changing cosmos revolves around humanity. Transformations happen to human bodies because of humans' own activity, and Ovid focusses on the effects of this process for the human psyche.<sup>157</sup> Oswald's departure from Ovid's epic poem stems from her rejection of Ovid's anthropocentric universe. She challenges Ovid's privileging of human narratives by incorporating many and varied human voices, all of whom clamour to express their individual views on the river's purpose. This exposes human attitudes to water as arbitrary. For Oswald, it is futile to attempt to categorise and control nonhuman beings such as water.

The effect, then, of Oswald's eco-centric approach to water narratives and her confrontation of Ovid's anthropocentric literary treatment of nonhuman beings is to encourage the contemporary reader of both texts to re-evaluate their own interactions with the natural world. At a time when we find ourselves so intentionally disconnected from nature to the detriment of ourselves and the rest of the planet, Oswald urges us to recognise the consequences of this retreat. The Western world's departure from a cyclical way of life to one which is both linear and incredibly short sighted (I am referring to factory farming, fast-fashion, single-use plastics, and other processes and inventions which prioritise convenience above all else) is of great concern to a vast majority of Oswald's audience. By definition, the concept of humanity is harmful, as it entails a separation from what we categorise as nonhuman and a subsequent narcissistic treatment of the natural world. For Ovid, humanity is an intangible consciousness which can permeate all beings, but ultimately remains distinct from the animals, plants, bodies of water, and other nonhuman beings it inhabits. As Sissa recognises, 'in a world where metempsychosis is possible, a non-human animal *might* be, also, human.'<sup>158</sup> This is the sole reason for the Ovidian Pythagoras' endorsement of vegetarianism. In short, it is only immoral to harm humans in the *Metamorphoses*. Oswald's literary activism forces us to reckon with the damage caused by this binary mode of thinking, to acknowledge that we are unable to comprehend the infinite processes that occur simultaneously and ubiquitously, and to re-engage with the world in a way that is mutually beneficial and respectful. In doing so, we, like Oswald's swimmer, may experience water joyfully and harmoniously.

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<sup>156</sup> Although Pluto and Alpheus are in fact divine figures, this thesis considers them to fall under the umbrella of humanity as they are conceived by humans, resemble humans, and behave like humans.

<sup>157</sup> Anderson 1998: 8-9.

<sup>158</sup> Sissa 2023: 41.

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