

'No more myself but a colander': Dimensions of death and vitality in Alice Oswald's *Falling Awake*

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Abstract. Winner of multiple prestigious awards, contemporary English poet Alice Oswald is considered one of the leading voices in modern poetry. In her seventh poetry collection, *Falling Awake*, Oswald has crafted a poetic image of death that diverges from the traditional conceptions of death as morbid and a source of anxiety. This article examines Oswald's depiction of death in *Falling Awake* within the framework of German-American philosophy academic Peter Koestenbaum's theory of the two dimensions of death. In her exploration of the physical and metaphysical dimensions of death, the 'death of another' and the 'death of myself', Oswald actively investigates their roles as agents of erosion and their relationship with life and vitality. This essay analyses a selection of poems from *Falling Awake* in accordance with Koestenbaum's dimensions of death, arguing that in her illustration of death, Oswald conceptualises it as a reminder to sustain life and vitality, and as a process in the cycle of life that fosters the disintegration and diversification of the individual, thereby enabling the emergence of new life forms and the enhancement of the vitality of the macrocosm.

1 Introduction

'The art of erosion' is one of the focuses of the poetry of award-winning contemporary poet Alice Oswald, who views erosion as a process that contributes to the cycle of life, where the death of an entity supplements the birth of another [1]. Indeed, there is much depiction of death in Oswald's more recent works, whether it be her retelling of the *Iliad*, *Memorial: A Version of Homer's Iliad*, or her seventh poetry collection, *Falling Awake*. However, rather than illustrating death as a tragic and morbid experience, Oswald's poetic image in *Falling Awake* is focused on erosion and vitality, exploring the spirit that transcends death and breaches between the physical and metaphysical.

Although Oswald is recognised as a major poet in her English homeland, having won prestigious awards such as the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Griffin Poetry Prize, existing research on her work tends to focus on examining her relationship with nature, the sonic and acoustic arrangements in her poetry, or her refiguring of Homeric epics in comparison to other poets. Few articles have investigated Oswald's interest in death and erosion and their relationship with vitality in her more recent collection, *Falling Awake*, and this study intends to bridge

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that gap. Instead of concentrating on ‘living-death’ and the death of the ‘non-human’, this paper aims to analyse the connection between erosion and vitality in *Falling Awake* in respect to Peter Koestenbaum’s theory of the two perceptions of death, ‘death of another’ and ‘death of myself’.

In *Falling Awake*, Oswald frequently presents death from the perspective of an observer. From the swan that flees the scene of her own death to the severed head of Orpheus, who continues to sing as he floats down the river [2], the consciousness or spirit of the entity that has died exists outside of its decaying body and observes its death as though it is the ‘death of another’. However, the ‘death of another’ erodes to the ‘death of myself’ on occasion in a process that Oswald calls ‘moving oneself out of the way so that light or water or wind or some other agent of erosion can fall on the poem without obstruction’ [3]. As this process is imperative to understanding Oswald’s work and her approach to poetry, this article will examine how Oswald depicts life and vitality through erosion and death in *Falling Awake* in the context of Koestenbaum’s theories of the ‘death of another’ and the ‘death of myself’.

2 The two dimensions of death

There exists a Latin phrase ‘memento mori’, which roughly translates to ‘remember that you must die’, often used as a symbolic motif serving as a reminder of death’s inevitability. In his essay, *The Vitality of Death*, German-American philosophy academic Peter Koestenbaum explores this concept, examining how the awareness of the inevitable death can be used to structure one’s life. In his examination of death and mortality, Koestenbaum posits that there are two dimensions of death, or rather, of viewing death: ‘death of another’ and ‘death of myself’. The ‘death of another’, Koestenbaum proposes, is seen from the perspective of an observer’s ‘subjectivity and inwardness’ [4] and views death as an occurrence that happens within the world while the rest of the living-world continues. Accidents, cessation of cardiac activity, burials, and disintegration are ways an observer might view the ‘death of another’. Even as an individual imagines their own death, they think of the presence of a corpse while assuring the continuation of the world, which is thinking of death in the terms of ‘death of another’. It is in this way that Koestenbaum argues that an individual can experience their bodily and personal death as an illustration of the ‘death of another’. Considering and theorising death within the ‘death of another’ framework separates an individual from the experience of anxiety, dread and nausea due to the detachment of thinking of death from the standpoint of an observer. In essence, ‘death of another’ is the concept of perceiving death as a mechanical, bodily elimination of an object while ensuring the world’s perpetuation.

‘Death of myself’, on the other hand, involves the total decomposition of an individual’s personal world and is related to the phenomenological terms of ‘void’ and ‘encounters with nothingness’ [4]. Koestenbaum asserts that the ‘death of myself’ is the dimension of death when it is thought with candour, and therefore elicits a sense of anxiety as it entails the complete disappearance of the world to an individual. To imagine the ‘death of myself’ is to imagine complete nothingness and its emotional consequences without slipping into the picture of one’s own death as an observer. However, the ‘death of myself’ is not always synonymous with an individual’s personal death; it could take the form of the ‘death of another’ that causes as much anxiety and emotional turmoil to an individual as it will if they think about their own death. Here, the ‘death of another’ coalesces with the ‘death of myself’, which completes the picture of death as two dimensions, one being the death of the body as observed from the perspective of another, and the other being the death of one’s existence and one’s personal world.

3 Persisting consciousness and the ‘death of another’

3.1 'Death of another' in 'Swan'

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard has written, 'a poet can bring us an image, [...] when our being was perhaps being tempted by the non-being' [5]. Such an image is frequently found in Oswald's *Falling Awake* in the form of the persisting consciousness of an entity that exists between the states of being and non-being. This persisting consciousness is first introduced in 'Swan', where the swan is depicted hurrying away from her decomposing body and is able to articulate her thoughts despite her supposed expiration. The opening lines of the poem are scattered haphazardly across the page, eating into the white spaces to illustrate the disorientation and restlessness of the swan as she is confronted by the image of her death. The image is cognitive; Oswald devotes little attention to describing the emotional response of the swan in reaction to the scene of her death, instead concentrating on the swan's interpretation and perception of the event. The repeated use of the word 'thinking' establishes the swan's death as a phenomenon that is apprehended as a mental process. On account of this, the swan is able to observe her rotting body from the perspective of an outsider despite the indication in the first line that her body is decomposing. At first, the swan is apprehensive about the image of her death. She is 'getting panicky' and is eager to escape from the mental image. However, she cannot help but return to the image and examine it in closer detail, observing her rotting body in a physical, mechanical light: her wings appear to be a 'plane-crash mess', her feathers 'symmetrical quill-points' and her breast bone akin to a 'clean china serving-dish'. The choice of mechanical metaphors is deliberate; Oswald uses these images of human objects to illustrate the awkwardness and functionality of the physical body, and how the dead body of the swan is 'a horrible plastic / mould of herself'.

The swan notes how the parts of her body exhibit mechanical functionality and realises that when observed from the perspective of an outsider, her dead body appears alienated and unrecognisable. This aligns with observing death as the 'death of another'; the swan views her decaying body as the bodily elimination of her physical form that has perished while her consciousness, or her cognitive process, continues to exist, as does the rest of the living-world. Rather than being alarmed by the image of her death, the swan contemplates how the death of her body is 'a waste of detail', suggesting that she finds her physical death to be futile. After reflecting on the image of her death, the swan finally leaves the image behind her, but not before reminding herself to seize an opportune moment 'before it thaws'. The ending lines of the poem are neater, more compact and written in regular stanzas, turning to a colder but alienated reality as the swan averts from her death observed as the 'death of another'. Oswald uses these final lines to describe the strangeness of life – which is akin to how death may be perceived – but also how it carries on without interruption. The poem illustrates how one might be 'tempted by the non-being' in the physically improbable image of the consciousness of the swan being fascinated by her own dead body postmortem to depict the mental process of an individual who imagines their death as the 'death of another'.

3.2 'Death of another' in 'Body'

The 'death of another' is depicted slightly differently in 'Body', where the death of an entity – the badger – is perceived by external observers distinct from the badger himself. Oswald refers to these observers as 'the dead', which is firstly an exhibit of the enduring consciousness, and is secondly a figurative representation of individuals who have grown accustomed to the lack of vitality in their lives and the idea of death. 'The dead' are depicted to follow a routine, which they execute carefully in the shadow of mundanity, until they are interrupted by the sudden appearance of a badger and become bewildered by him. Oswald employs another mechanical metaphor in describing the badger as 'the living shovel of himself' to allude to the functionality of the badger's body, and how he is 'hard at work' with

shuffling away, diligently engaging in his task until death inevitably overtakes him. For the most part of the poem, the badger appears to be alive and concentrated on the task of ‘shuffling away’. However, in the second last stanza, the badger is abruptly transformed into a corpse falling towards himself. The consciousness of the badger also continues to endure after death, but unlike the previously mentioned swan, the badger is unaware of his own death. Despite his death, the badger’s consciousness persists, driven by a ‘bindweed will’ as though he was still alive. In the final lines of the poem, Oswald utilises the metaphor of a ‘broken jar’ to evoke the deteriorated state of the badger’s corpse. She demonstrates that just as water cannot ‘keep its shape’ in a broken vessel, it is equally impossible to sustain life when the physical body is compromised. Xavier Bichat’s assertion that ‘life is the totality of those functions that resist death’ [6] underscores this idea, as the poem conveys the necessity of preserving the physical body as a prerequisite for sustaining life through the depiction of the death of the badger as the ‘death of another’.

4 Erosion and the ‘death of myself’

4.1 ‘Death of myself’ in ‘Severed Head Floating Downriver’

Oswald highlights the theme of erosion early on in *Falling Awake*. In ‘Swan’, she writes of the dead body of the swan returning back to its origins, ‘with their rusty juices trickling back to the river’. The particular depiction of the river as a source of life – and death – warrants attention. In another poem, ‘Severed Head Floating Downriver’, a river is also closely related to the death of an entity. The head of Orpheus, after being detached from his body, continues singing impossibly while floating down the river Hebron in spite of the fact of his death. Orpheus first recounts the origins of his myth – the death of Eurydice – and establishes one of the themes of the poem in the first line: the loss of identity. The river has always been seen as an image for the examination of identity, beginning with the Heraclitean dilemma as to whether it is possible for one to set foot in the same river twice [7]. As the head Orpheus drifts down the river, he slowly loses his grip over language and his identity, repeatedly declaring that he is already forgetting who he is. However, this loss of identity, as observed in Orpheus, can be interpreted as its pluralisation. By publicly declaring his diminishing self, Orpheus effectively invalidates the personal reality of losing his identity, paralleling Heidegger’s notion of death becoming a public event that occurs universally, and, therefore, lacks specificity to any individual [8]. Thus, Orpheus’ loss of identity can be comprehended as his assimilation into a broader, different identity – that of water and, more broadly, nature. Such a loss of identity is similar to how Oswald depicts death: she magnifies the strangeness and alienation of death by illustrating it as an erosive process that contributes to an agent of erosion or the birth of another entity. This erosive process is akin to the ‘death of myself’, where the cognitive and personal world of an individual ceases to exist. Koestenbaum writes that the ‘death of myself’ is confronting death with candour and, therefore, elicits anxiety in encountering the void of existence in the ‘death of myself’ [4]. Oswald expresses this sentiment through Orpheus’ wish for a child to ‘hoik’ him out, evading the loss of his identity and personal world. Eventually, he acknowledges that the water is drinking his mind, referring to himself as nothing more than a ‘colander’ while the water, an agent of erosion, assumes control over his voice.

Mythological thought often addresses profound metaphysical issues – such as birth, death, and identity – by filtering the unknown through familiar concepts, offering a means to understand complex or chaotic events [9]. Oswald uses the myth of Orpheus to examine what is essentially a metaphysical dimension of death. She depicts Orpheus’ loss of identity as one of the outcomes of his death, yet simultaneously utilises this dissolution of self to explore the

emergence of a new, pluralised identity – one where Orpheus’ voice (and self) is eroded and assimilated into the river’s water as he drifts along. Oswald highlights the ephemeral nature of the existence of an individual under the scope of the infinite macrocosm, ‘lying under its lashes like a glance’, but she resists succumbing to the existential dread inherent in this sentiment. Instead, she portrays the death and erosion of an individual entity as a contribution to the natural world. Towards the end of the poem, Orpheus is depicted as merging as one with the water, which holds him together but also carries him away, illustrating how Orpheus – his identity and his vitality – has been eroded away into the natural world.

4.2 ‘Death of myself’ in ‘And so he goes on dwindling away’

Oswald writes about another kind of erosion in ‘And so he goes on dwindling away’, where the erosive process is presented to the reader visually: the lines slowly fade into the whites of the page, the words eroded away by blankness while the protagonist of the poem – an entity of sorts – becomes increasingly insubstantial. The poem merges the concepts of the ‘death of another’ and the ‘death of myself’ in its reflection of the transient nature of existence. While it is predominantly written in the third person in observance of an entity’s disintegration, it delineates the ultimate annihilation of an individual’s cognitive and personal reality in the event of death. Oswald articulates the uncertainty of death through phrases such as ‘lost as dust’ and ‘hearsays half-thoughts’ and emphasises death’s ineffability in the repetition of ‘but never quite / but never quite’ [2]. ‘Unanimous unrest’ conveys death and disintegration as inherently unsettling, but Oswald also portrays this process as one of gradual erosion, where the cognitive and personal world of an individual dissolves and blends into the broader environment. Much akin to ‘Severed Head Floating Downriver’, Oswald does not avoid the disquietude of death in ‘And so he goes on dwindling away’. However, she also considers that while death marks the end of an individual’s existence, it simultaneously contributes to the cycle of life by way of erosion, underscoring the inherent vitality of death.

5 Death and erosion as agents of vitality

Death and its associated themes are frequently linked to the concept of loss. This connection is rooted in the human understanding of mortality, where the end of life is seen as the ultimate form of separation. Freud explores the themes of loss and separation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* through the analogy of a child’s game, where the child deals with his mother’s absence by repeatedly throwing and retrieving a wooden reel in an attempt to gain control over the anxiety of separation [10]. Similarly, poets often write about death as a way to confront and control its inevitability, transforming death from a point of separation that elicits fear and uncertainty to a force that revitalises the subject. Oswald does not avoid writing about the anxiety and uneasiness accompanied by the idea of death, nor does she write about death solely to resist it and attempt to govern it. Rather, she addresses it as a natural event that happens in due course and examines it in two dimensions.

Oswald illustrates the ‘death of another’ in the form of the consciousness of an entity that persists after death and is able to observe its own death, sometimes accompanied by external witnesses. She recognises ‘death of another’ as how the death of an individual is perceived by an observer on a physical level and depicts it as a singular event that appears strange, slightly bewildering, but not inherently disconcerting. Both the swan in ‘Swan’ and ‘the dead’ in ‘Body’ are bewildered and fascinated by the sight of death, but they are not faced with the anxiety that might be elicited when confronting the existential implications of death. ‘Death of another’ is manifested as the more mechanical dimension of death in *Falling Awake*, where death is viewed as a bodily experience related to the cessation of heartbeats and physical disintegration. The second dimension of death, or the ‘death of myself’, on the other hand, is

depicted differently and delivered through the incorporation of mythology and visual expression. This dimension of death, though portrayed with the details of a singular event, is seen as a process integral to a macrocosmic cycle. 'Death of myself', exemplified in 'Severed Head Floating Downriver' as Orpheus' gradual loss of identity and in 'And so he goes on dwindling away' as the dissolution of an entity's existence, entails the loss of an entity's identity, and personal and cognitive world, but is not described as a harrowing experience. Oswald represents death as an agent of erosion and as an erosive process, where the loss of an entity's identity in the form of the 'death of myself' is pertinent to the pluralisation of identity.

In *Falling Awake*, death is no longer seen as the end of an individual's existence and is instead marked as the turning point where death acts as an agent of erosion, which, in turn, facilitates the enhancement of vitality. By writing about death in two dimensions, Oswald discusses how death may be associated with, or more precisely, infused with vitality. Through her portrayal of death as the 'death of another', Oswald addresses the tangibility of death and its perceptual facets and employs it to accentuate the significance of vitality and the necessity of effectively preserving vitality in recognition of the unpredictability and inevitability of death. The active call in 'Swan' to 'say something to the / frozen cloud of the head / before it thaws' encourages individuals to live with deliberate intention and purpose, as opposed to passively moving through life as seen in 'Body', where 'the dead' exist under the constraints of regularity and mundanity and the badger is so lost in his task of digging that he fails to notice his own death. 'Death of another' thus serves as an agent of the physical aspects of life and allows Oswald to experiment with how death might be perceived and utilises this exploration to delve into the concept of vitality. Conversely, Oswald's depiction of the 'death of myself' serves to investigate the metaphysical dimensions of death and how they contribute to the cosmic rhythm of life and vitality. The dissolution of an entity manifested as the 'death of myself', such as Orpheus' steady hydraulic deterioration, performs the role of an agent of erosion and allows the death of an individual to integrate into and contribute to the vitality of the macrocosm. As such, Oswald's use of death as an agent of erosion, and erosion as an agent for vitality and life functions both as a reminder to value life and vitality and as an attempt to conceptualise death as a direct contributor to the cycle of life.

6 Conclusion

This article has examined Alice Oswald's exploration of the relationship between death and vitality in *Falling Awake* in the context of Peter Koestenbaum's theory of the two dimensions of death. In consideration of Oswald's interest in death and erosion, it is necessary to have an evaluating and dissecting analysis of Oswald's poetic image of death to gain insight into Oswald's perspective on death, vitality and the metaphysical. In her poetry, Oswald depicts death not merely as the conclusion of an entity's existence but as a process of erosion. She illustrates death in the physical dimension of the 'death of another' and the metaphysical dimension of the 'death of myself' to examine their contributions to preserving and sustaining vitality. This approach conceptualises death as an aide-memoire to uphold life and vitality and an element that, through its own progression, facilitates the dissolution and diversification of an individual to contribute to the emergence of new life forms and enhance the vitality of the cosmos.

It must be acknowledged that this essay has focused on the existential and metaphysical dimensions of Oswald's poems in *Falling Awake* and has failed to consider various other aspects that are vital to understanding her poetry. The reoccurring images of flight and falling, as well as the paradoxical awakening, suggested in the title of the collection, have yet to be examined due to the length and scope of this article. It should also be noted that while this essay has touched upon the use of mythology in Oswald's poetry, it has not delved deeply

into the subject. Instead, this essay has focused on Oswald's portrayal of death and its relationship to vitality in the context of the 'death of another' and the 'death of myself'.

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