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'A River Speaks': Translating Aquatic Voice and Re-Animation of Fluvial Monstrosities[1]

'There is a language in that mighty stream'.[2]

After the Odra's catastrophe or introducing the endangered rivers concept

Within the Anthropocene period, the commodification of rivers and their threatened condition due to poor environmental management on the state level can tragically escalate ecological disasters like the one that happened to the Odra River from July to August 2022. Such accidents occur because of miscommunication between humans and their environments. This article argues for investigating how literature might provide an alternative language and a non-commodified approach to river preservation. Such an approach will help explain the shift in addressing the restoration of rivers and offer a means of interpreting primary literary sources according to the history of human impact on rivers' transformations. As writers imagine living and dying rivers, employ poetics and rhetoric, and give voice to or mute rivers, their works provide models for translating and rendering the ecological nature of rivers today.

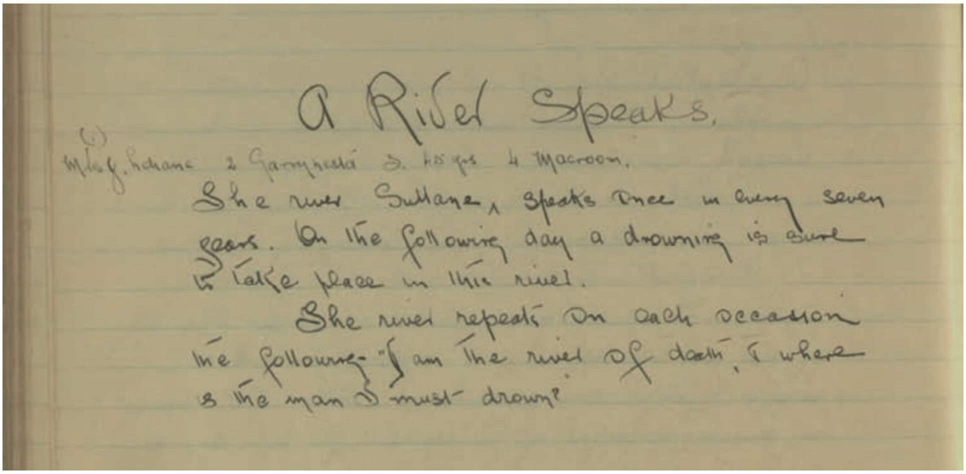
This work of translating bodies of water draws upon concepts and methodologies that have emerged in the area of new/radical animism[3] to advocate for

[1] This article was based on archive work in the National Folklore Collection at UCD in Ireland and supported by Independent Research Social Foundation (grant *Small Group Project 2021*); whereas the theoretical part was partly prepared within the SONATA, a program of the Polish National Science Centre (NCN) (project no. 2019/35/D/HS2/02840).

[2] An untitled poem in: J.B. Cullen, *The Shannon and Its Shrines*, Catholic Truth Society of Ireland, Dublin 1909, p. 107.

[3] *Rethinking Relations and Animism: Personhood and Materiality,* ed. M. Astor-Aguilera, G. Harvey*,* Routledge, London 2018; J. Deer, *Radical Animism: Reading for the End of the World*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2020; A. Nacher, *Antropocen nad Missisipi – języki rzeki,* „Kultura

a non-anthropocentric approach to translation, not developed within conventional interlingual translation studies, but related to the concept of eco-translation.[4] Eco-translation emphasizes the need to study the circulation of information between different cultures, species, and ecosystems. Looking at the example of voicing a concrete river in southern Ireland – the Sullane River (fig.1) – from an eco-translation perspective, this article will reflect on what it means when a river is considered a living entity, even if it is hazardous for humans' lives. What kind of local knowledge is encoded in this account and what constitutes the river today as different from the canal or aqueduct? Finally, is it possible to find a river's voice outside of techno-oriented studies and believe that – if not today then perhaps in the past – rivers were heard and treated as mighty creatures?


A River Speaks.

The river Sullane speaks once in every seven years. On the following day a drowning is sure to take place in this river.

The river repeats on each occasion the following "I am the river of death, & where is the man I must drown?"

Fig. 1. 'A River Speaks' (collected as part of the Schools' Folklore scheme, 1937–1938, County Cork, Ireland, National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin).

One of the basic obstacles to answering these questions is that in Europe, we do not communicate rivers' personhood in the same way that other cultures have long mediated the attachment and dependence of human populations on water, often through animistic systems of belief.[5] Their linguistic choices refer to nature's kin or rivers perceived as 'relatives'[6] or to what indigenous water scholars such as Eleanor Hayman

Współczesna" 2021, no. 1 (113), p. 43–59. For a distinct approach to 'thinking with water' and animating water presence compare publications by A. Neimanis.

[4] M. Cronin, *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene*, Routledge, New York 2017.

[5] S. Harding, *Towards an Animistic Science of the Earth*, in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. G. Harvey, Routledge, London 2014, p. 373–374; C. Clark et al., *Can You Hear the Rivers Sing? Legal Personhood, Ontology, and the Nitty-Gritty of Governance*, "Ecology Law Quarterly" 2019, no. 45, p. 787–844; G.J. Brierley, *Finding the Voice of the River Beyond Restoration and Management,* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2020.

[6] N. Bird-David, *Persons or Relatives. Animistic Scales of Practice and Imagination*, in: *Rethinking Relations and Animism: Personhood and Materiality*, ed. M. Astor-Aguilera, G. Harvey, Routledge, London 2018, p. 25.

recognise as 'aqua-centric' approach to water that needs to be decolonised from modern 'H2O' heritage.[7] However, some river-related sources created by river people (i.e. people who are directly related to their streams by profession or dwelling) can be compared to an indigenous language by itself, which is also endangered or colonised by a dominant monoculture (like Irish by British). If we want to review languages in their environmental connectedness, as cultures 'rooted in a particular ecological niche',[8] the rural traditions and the wetlands are inextricably linked. Thus, enchanted rivers inhabited by water deities and demons in folk belief, often embedded in Celtic, Slavic, and Germanic mythological traditions, are found in Europe in relation to the unregulated rivers of the past and their uncolonized landscapes.[9] These portrayals of rivers include those in demonological sources where the magical creatures differ by their names but have similar functions and features, e.g. *nixes* in Germanic and *undines* or *mavkas* in Slavic sources; *floaters* and *vodyanovs* in Slavic, *wassermen* in Germanic; sacralised or worshipped animal species, e.g. magical powers of eels and lobsters,[10] salmon,[11] crayfish, and other animals[12]; and deities of particular rivers. Moreover, this so-called material culture – when culture is tied to nature – can be studied not only from the 'anthropological' perspective, but also from the 'philological' perspective, including various genres of poetry and prose, predictions and spells, proverbs, as well as beliefs and superstitions,[13] which address animated rivers.

Those rivers were speaking to their residents as well as to poets and their biographers. From 'the whispering Nixes [mermaids]' in Strauss's waltz *The Blue Danube*[14] to monstrous 'roaring and howling'[15] flooding rivers to those 'muted' and polluted rivers, like T.S. Eliot's Thames, from which 'the nymphs are departed',[16] the river's voice has been deeply submerged in European literary traditions but has not

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[7] E. Hayman, J. Colleen, M. Wedge, *Decolonising Water—Decolonising Personhood—Decolonising Knowledge: A Tlingit and Tagish perspective*, "Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Studies" 2021, vol. 6, Issue 1, p. 102–142, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4483988 [access: 2022/12/30].

[8] M. Cronin, *Irish and Ecology*, Foilseacháin Ábhair Spioradálta, Dublin 2019, p. 22–23.

[9] A. Gieysztor, *Mitologia Słowian,* Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1986; L.J. Pełka, *Polska demonologia ludowa*, Wydawnictwo Iskry, Warszawa 1987.

[10] J. Tyszkiewicz, *Pogańska Polska. Wierzenia, kalendarz, zwyczaje,* Oficyna Wydawnicza Aspra, Warszawa 2020, p. 103–113.

[11] See the tale of Fionn and the Salmon of Knowledge from the Irish River Boyne, in: J.C.I. Dooge, *Water and Celtic Mythology*, „Hydrologie dans les Paye Celtique" 1996, no. 79, p. 17–18.

[12] K.W. Wójcicki, *Klechdy, starożytne podania i powieści ludu polskiego i Rusi*, PIW, Warszawa 1972, p. 253–256. See also J. Tyszkiewicz, *Pogańska Polska…,* op. cit.

[13] V. Krawczyk-Wasilewska, *Współczesna wiedza o folklorze*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1986, p. 19–20.

[14] F. Gernerth, *An der Schönen Blauen Donau* (1867). Lyrics to Johannes Strauss's waltz *The Blue Danube*, https://www.geocities.ws/ha_hammer/donausoblau.htm [access: 2022/08/28].

[15] S. Petofi, *The Tisza* (1847), transl. W. Kirkconnell, Visegrad Fund, https://www.visegradliterature.net/works/hu/Pet%C5%91fi_S%C3%A1ndor/A_Tisza/en/2071-The_Tisza [access: 2022/08/28].

[16] T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Boni & Liveright, New York 1922 (esp. part III – The Fire Sermon).

yet been interpreted as the voice of the 'endangered' river. The literary 'voice' can and should be politicised but also considered 'endangered', which relates here to the inadequately recognized value of rivers' aliveness in our postcolonial cultures of the Anthropocene.

Therefore, this text examines some examples within literary traditions of re-animating rivers which are present in Europe. One of the arguments here is that this ancestry of enlivening rivers is 'pre-colonial', belonging to an era 'under a spell', allowing 'the simultaneous presence of natural and supernatural'.[17] We can even speak here – after Andreas Weber, the author of *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics of the Anthropocene* – about 'poetic objectivity'[18] because it is shared across genres and involves all species and animated beings in a weak sense. In this sense, all such beings like rivers do not possess strong subjectivity like individual humans, but they act and 'sing' through our poetic languages. Their desire to live is strong enough to be mediated and embodied in artistic works before any scientific language can examine it.[19] Rediscovering this ancestral tradition of speaking on behalf and within the agential nature is inscribed into such new and radical positions as Jemma Deer's concept of animism where both organic and inorganic nature responds to climate and environmental distortions[20]; or to what environmental historians like Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor term as 'more-than-human histories' where multiple species and voices create collective worlds with humans.[21] But because the Anthropocene has made human and non-human environments inseparable, the water translation approach uses human artistic skills of creating and re-creating the language of non-human, aquatic actors within this more-than-human or non-human perspective.

The river question and 'fluid being'

Among the numerous representations of diverse environments in literature, rivers are the most 'liminal' beings. From the symbolic associations with the life and death of Hades' rivers, to the national and regional identity of border rivers, to their private, biographical attachments, the environmental status of rivers as living beings has not been fully recognized in European culture in comparison to rivers in the indigenous and animist traditions outside Europe. In this text, I ask about the literary traditions of animating rivers inspired by the speaking Sullane River and Irish connection to the mythical 'otherworld'[22] since the mythological underworld might be thought of as the first place in the European tradition where the boundary condition of rivers as alive

[17] D. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition,* University of Missouri Press, Columbia 2011, p. 159.

[18] A. Weber, *Enlivenment. Toward a Poetics of the Anthropocene*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2019, p. 139.

[19] Tamże, p. 139–140.

[20] J. Deer, Radical Animism…, op. cit., see p. 7–53.

[21] E. O'Gorman, A. Gaynor, *More-than-Human Histories*, "Environmental History" 2020, no. 25(4), p. 711–735.

[22] Like Hades, 'the Celtic Otherworld was always connected with a body of water either beneath the surface of the sea or a lake or beneath the surface of the ground' which included the underground waters, in: J.C.I. Dooge, *Water and Celtic Mythology…*, op. cit. p. 16.

and dead was put into question in an ecological sense. Reposing such a question – the 'river question' – is to ask what 'dead' and 'alive' connote through the multi-faceted presence of rivers as spanning ecological science, historical accounts, and literary articulations. In addition, more and more non-indigenous Western, internationally acclaimed scholars and authors (like Veronica Strang or Robert MacFarlane) tend to re-animate rivers in their recent works.

Between 2019–2021, Professor James Scott, the author of *Against the Grain*, delivered a series of lectures at major academic institutions titled *In Praise of Floods.*[23] As a political scientist and anthropologist, he addressed the river question informed by ecology and history but also in a unique way – by what I would categorize as a literary approach, taking the perspective of a river as an animated, alive being. In his lectures, accompanied by stunning visuals[24] and reflection on the well-established perspective of the geomorphic and hydraulic transformation of such rivers as the Mississippi, Rhine, and Yellow Rivers, Scott shaped his narration on rivers as living, self-damming, prone to meandering, and abruptly shifting creatures. To help his audience understand repeated floods, he used a metaphor, 'the river must breathe deeply'. In effect, he put into a serious discussion the ontological conditions and epistemological sources which enable us to call any river alive.

The literary trope of animation in its poetic and rhetorical developments, as anchored in the Aristotelian notion of 'anima' that alone moves itself,[25] can help to fill what Scott pointed out as the epistemological gap by restoring rivers' ecological meaning in European literary heritage while only alluding to animist traditions outside Europe. In other words, literary sources can help assemble a kind of aquapoetic glossary of those animating devices which poeticize and ecologise rivers and which can be paralleled with some animist categories, e.g., relative kinfolk, 'river personhood', 'spirit', and other concepts of magical and intimate engagement with rivers[26] that lead to their 'eco-translation', i.e., recognizing the river's aliveness in literary forms, works, and river people's traditions. For example, the kinship of nature and rivers perceived as 'relatives' are animist categories, while in Europe, the parental phraseology involves rivers but mostly as symbols in the nationalistic rhetoric. In the nineteenth century, romantic literature portrays rivers speaking as 'mothers' (the Vistula, the Volga) and 'fathers' (the Rhine), which is not an aquapoetic device for animating rivers in the aquacritical framework I am developing here. In other words, these examples show rivers used as mere symbols and do not represent living rivers. However, the literary figure of the river's voice can lead to new aquapoetic examples such as 'the uncorrupted voice of the river', which does not literally involve 'speaking' but meandering and

[23] The most recent recording can be found at the Havens Wright Center for Social Justice: https://havenswrightcenter.wisc.edu/2021/09/07/james-scott-political-science-and-anthropology-yale-university/ [access: 28/08/2022].

[24] For example, Harold Fisk's maps. See also: A. Nacher, *Antropocen nad Missisipi...,* op. cit., p. 47.

[25] *Aristotle De Anima with Translation, Introduction, and Notes,* ed. R.D. Hicks, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1907, p. 404a22–404a24.

[26] G. Harvey, *Adjusted Styles of Communication (ASCs) in the Post-Cartesian World*, in: *Rethinking Relations and Animism: Personhood and Materiality*, ed. M. Astor-Aguilera, G. Harvey, Routledge, London 2018, p. 47.

swampy riverine territory[27] and employs a real, ecological representation of a healthy, living river.[28]

Asking the river question in the frame of an aquacritical perspective can provide a model for analysing other sources for how they communicate and/or translate 'river personhood' or 'river ancestry' and other animistic concepts into empirical engagement with rivers. It can be understood as decoding the ecological knowledge in European literary traditions, such as the elements of riparian folk and mythologies; but it can also be seen in specific inventive literary categories like the Danube's 'Great Personage' as a metaphor of river personhood in this passage from *The Willows* (1907) by Algernon Blackwood:

> From its tiny bubbling entry into the world among the pinewood gardens of Donaueschingen, until this moment when it began to play the river-game of losing itself among the deserted swamps, unobserved, unrestrained, it had seemed to us like following the grown of some living creature. Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, through all the countries we had passed, holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders, playing roughly with us sometimes, yet always friendly and well meaning, till at length we had come inevitably to regard it as a Great Personage.

This uneven, anthropomorphized, and living Danube is presented here as a powerful monstrous fluvial creature, who is 'conscious' and who moves 'like some huge fluid being', but in the end, it makes the human travelers notice its aquatic spirit, soul, or persona ('Great Personage'). However, perhaps even more, it is the case of flooding events, when the category of monstrosity[29] conveys the personhood of rivers alongside the limited power of people to influence the riparian environment. 'Monstrous' rivers' poetics perform an ecological role of keeping people at a distance, reminding them about the rivers' elemental, dangerous nature. These poetics represent folk wisdom like in this literary essay on the Odra River.

Six years after the most catastrophic flood in Polish living memory in 1997, Olga Tokarczuk, the eventual 2018 Nobel prize winner who lived near the Odra in her childhood, wrote: 'The Odra had a set of moods – from the darkest green to charcoal black… She [the river] could be as strong as a pack animal that does not have a specific shape in itself but can become any creature she wishes',[30] and, she adds, the river is a 'living entity'.[31] Outside of the human world, the Odra leads its own 'contemplative' life in the

[27] 'On the River Wye', in: Ch. Rangeley-Wilson, *Silt Road. The Story of a Lost River*, Vintage Books, London 2014, p. 126.

[28] Another idea for translating the river's voice is connected with movement or the fluvial choreography as shown in this deep mapping project on the Vistula River in Poland: Aquacritical Atlas of the River Vistula, Zenodo 2022, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7414929 [access: 2023/01/08].

[29] Recently redefined by J.J. Cohen *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1996; J.A. Weinstock *The Monster Theory Reader,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2020.

[30] O. Tokarczuk, *Odra*, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, Krytyka Polityczna, Warszawa 2003, p. 154–155 [my transl.].

[31] Ibidem, p. 155.

old riverbed, in its rich, swampy, insect-filled, and human-unfriendly ecosystem.[32] This 'poeticized' knowledge that the river serves the people while leading its own 'ecological' and non-human life that can become dangerous at will, survived in Silesian cultural and literary memory.

The ecological function of the old riverbed where the river slows down is a remnant of the mythological, premodern landscape soaked with folk stories. It is a wider literary phenomenon, captured in other river-related writings such as the collection of essays about the river Lea in Esther Kinsky's *River*[33] or in the etymology of the river Ooze in Olivia Laing's *To the River*:

> There are many Ouses in England, and consequently much debate about the meaning of the word. The source is generally supposed to be usa, the Celtic word for water, but I favoured the argument, this being a region of Anglo-Saxon settlement, that here it was drawn from the Saxon word wase, from which derives also our word ooze, meaning soft mud or slime; earth so wet as to flow gently. Listen: ooooze. It trickles along almost silently, sucking at your shoes. An ooze is a marsh or swampy ground, and to ooze is to dribble or slither. I liked the slippery way it caught at both earth's facility for holding water and water's knack for working through soil: a flexive, doubling word. You could hear the river in it, oooozing up through the Weald and snaking its way down valleys to where it once formed a lethal marsh.[34]

In all these literary examples rivers are sort of 'living' or enlivened creatures, meandering and 'ouzing' in different European landscapes and languages. Due to the Anthropocene's challenges, though, including the impact of global warming on drying/flooding rivers and of anthropogenic pressure on their water ecosystems, the river question is as pressing a question for the critical humanities as 'the animal question' has been and continues to be since Derrida's essay.[35] Moreover, the theory and methodology of ecocritical studies[36] and the development of interdisciplinary animal and human-animal studies,[37] can be useful for investigating 'monstrous' rivers. These fields of study align with restoration ecology and the historical evidence of rivers' commodification, allowing inquiry into the condition of (endangered) living animals and new and experimental literary means of widening ecological knowledge and understanding the contexts of 'silenced rivers' (e.g. by large dams).[38] Putting rivers into

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[32] Ibidem.

[33] E. Kinsky, *Am Fluss. Roman*, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin 2014 [there is a great Polish translation of this book by Sława Lisiecka, published in 2017 as *Nad rzeką* by Biuro Literackie].

[34] O. Laing, *To the River: A Journey Beneath the Surface,* Canongate Canons, Edinburgh 2011, p. 22.

[35] J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, transl. D. Willis, „Critical Inquiry" 2002, no. 28 (2), p. 369–418.

[36] A. Barcz, *Odra – rzeka ekoparadygmatyczna*, „Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka," no. 50 (30), p. 221–235.

[37] G. Marvin, S. McHugh (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies,* Routledge, London 2014.

[38] P. McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams,* Zed Books, New York 2001.

question is not only timely because of the environmental and climate crisis, but doing so can also extend the ecocritical study in regard to understanding what literature as literature does with this question anew and how.

From problems with nature conservation through sustainability studies and climate change to the environmental and climate catastrophe – demarcated now by the Anthropocene – ecocriticism has been evolving alongside the currents in environmental discourse. In effect, the theoretical language of ecocriticism has been growing exponentially with the environmental and climate crisis[39] and intersects with other theories (e.g. new materialism) to address the agential role of environments (and elements like water) in ecocritical theory – 'an environmental agentism'.[40] Ecocriticism also applies to narratology and poetics where literary scholarship is particularly represented, furthering self-reflection on existing structures to address the dynamics of environmental problems[41]; however, it has not specifically addressed endangered rivers. In other words, it is theoretically interesting to position environments as agents, but the actual meaning of elemental powers – like flooding rivers – could be more specifically traced back in literary sources through material and non-symbolic presence of waters.

The central role of the river question in this text represents the aquacritical variant of ecocriticism and addresses a gap in the scholarship. To recognise the poor and neglected condition of rivers around the world, we need to infuse our interpretation with ecological concerns and reconsider cultural depictions of rivers across different literary traditions. Crossing these traditions and disciplinary boundaries – like between colonial and indigenous Europe – is an ecological act just like flooding, monstrous rivers cross human-constructed barriers. For example, the River Thames's sewage is a repetitive motif in early modern English literature, including Shakespeare's *The Tempest,*[42] as well as the commodification of rivers in a Victorian consumerist society.[43] However, these ecocritical analyses do not provide the framework for translating rivers; they need to be supplemented by the re-animated image of the mighty Thames, which

[39] T. Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, p. 9, 24, 38.

[40] J.J. Cohen and L. Duckert, *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2015, p. 6.

[41] See e.g.: S. Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language*, Massachusetts University Press, Amherst 2012; T. Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place,* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2015; S. Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene. Ecology, biology and technology in contemporary British and Irish poetry*, Routledge, Oxon 2016; M. Griffiths, *The New Poetics of Climate Change. Modernist Aesthetics for a Warming World,* Bloomsbury, London 2017; D. Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2019; A. Weber, *Enlivenment…*, op. cit.

[42] L. Duckert, *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2017.

[43] A. Kneitz, *Polluted Thames, Declining City: London as an Ecosystem in Charles Dickens's Our Mutual Friend*, in: *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained: Rethinking City-River Relations*, ed. M. Knoll, U. Lübken, D. Schott, p. 219–238, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2017; S. Philpin, *An Ecocritical Reading of the River Thames in Selected "Fin de Siècle" Literature* (PhD Thesis), Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff 2018.

can also be found in the sources. But to what extent do these depictions reconstruct and to what extent do they fantasise about the pre-modern heritage?[44]

Reflecting on this now, more importantly, is to see that by integrating the voice of enlivening rivers and the environmental history of rivers' colonization – which stretches between pre-industrialized 'rivers' and post-industrialized 'channels' – aquacriticism can lead to a critical reflection on 'virtual rivers'[45] that look like rivers and flood like rivers but have lost their ecological richness, viz. aliveness; and on these 'channelized and canalized [rivers] bereft of life, acting as "zombie" forms, behaving like the living dead as clean water flows through a sterile but tidy channel'[46]; '[t]hese encircling rivers of Hades, rivers of the sullen, rivers of blood and pain, wailing and regret' that 'mute in the pit of Tartarus' are 'rivers of myth [that] are now real'.[47] That is why the 'liminal' status of rivers, so deeply embedded in European literary traditions – the life-death rivers of Hades – when embodied by such examples as the 'speaking' Sullane River, invites a translation approach. This approach requires identifying more of those European literary traditions of enlivening rivers of river people's (riparian) cultures, including how they coped with the elemental nature of rivers and negotiated their space in the riparian landscape by translating the river's voice and how rivers were giving voice to colonized, minor groups and nations as well.

The river's voice reconsidered

By 'taking the perspective' of a river, I revisit the literary theory of voice. The role of voicing 'subjective' nature was recognized by Frankfurt School philosophers as a cultural response to nature being 'repressed by human domination and objectification'.[48] At the same time, these ethically and politically engaged theoreticians revealed the gaps that the arts, including literature, fill in. If 'the language of nature is mute, art seeks to make this muteness eloquent'[49] and aquacritical investigation provides these missing contexts of 'voicing' and 'muting' the rivers within literature.

However, the voice in literary theory is one of such contested in ecocritical scholarship. Simon Estok ironically observes that 'there has been no shortage of work that addresses matters of voice, about voicing/giving voice to nature, "listening" to an imagined voice of nature',[50] but the commentary of Estok and other leading ecocritics, such as Lawrence Buell and Cate Sandilands, consider rather the 'authentic' reference to nature's voice, indebted in the mimetic traditions of literature, which do not apply

[44] P. Ackroyd, *Thames: Sacred River,* Vintage Books, London 2008.

[45] E. Wohl, *Virtual Rivers*. *Lessons from the Mountain Rivers of the Colorado Front Range*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2001.

[46] G.J. Brierley, *Finding the Voice of the River…,* op. cit., p. 9.

[47] Ch. Rangeley-Wilson, *Silt Road…,* op. cit., p. 127.

[48] J. Donovan, *Ethical Mimesis and Emergence Aesthetics,* "Humanities" 2019, no. 8 (2), vol. 102, p. 5.

[49] T. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. G. Adorno, R. Tiedemann, transl. R. Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, p. 78.

[50] S. Estok, *Ecocritical Theory, Presentism, and Praxis,* in: *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons,* ed. S. Oppermann, U. Ozdak, N. Ozkan and S. Slovic, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2011, p. 36.

to this argument.[51] The river's voice is also one of the major figures of speech, which is rhetorically used 'to speak as nonhuman nature' through human forms of language while also being inclusive of nature's 'voices'[52] as exemplified in Michael Drayton's 'poetic atlas of Britain', *Poly-Olbion* (published in two parts in 1612 and 1622). His work is spoken in the voices of the rivers themselves to express the 'harmonious unity' of the country,[53] and even Drayton's conventional form was analysed from the ecocritical perspective of early-modern landscape transformation.[54] The river's literary voice is a critical example of not only a device, but also a concept that moves readers closer to imagining other than human languages that need to be translated in the Anthropocene.

Prior to ecocriticism, the concept of voice has been widely discussed, redefined, and criticized in literary theory. From the long tradition of aural/oral sources[55] through Bakhtin's multi-voiced narrative[56] and triple character of voice presented in T.S. Eliot's essay *The Three Voices of Poetry*[57] to the 'death of the author',[58] the various representations of voice, more or less undermine the unique value of the single author's voice as the primary factor in the process of understanding and interpreting the literary text. Derrida's influential critique of speaking (human) subjects in *Of Grammatology* (1997 [1967]),[59] in which he privileged writing over speaking, added to this theoretical rejection of voice in studying literature. The debate over the voice was revived by feminist philosophers such as Helene Cixous[60] and Luce Irigaray,[61] who emancipated and differentiated the female voice in writing (*écriture feminine*) from the male (speaking and writing) author and further highlighted the 'subaltern', non-European voice as presented in postcolonial studies.[62] This 'emancipatory' function of literary

[51] Ibidem.

[52] S. Oppermann, *Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder*, "Journal of Faculty of Letters" no. 16.2 (December 1999), p. 29–46.

[53] J. Smith, *The New Nature Writing. Rethinking the Literature of Place*, Bloomsbury, London 2017, p. 47.

[54] S. Dasgupta, *Drayton's 'Silent Spring': "Poly-Olbion" and the Politics of Landscape,* "The Cambridge Quarterly" 2010, no. 39(2), p. 152–171.

[55] Zob np. W.J. Ong, *The Barbarian Within*, Macmillan, New York 1962; E.A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1986; P. Zumthor, *Oral poetry: an introduction*. Transl. K. Murphy-Judy, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1990.

[56] M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, transl. C. Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984 [1929].

[57] T.S. Eliot, *The Three Voices of Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, London 1957 [1953].

[58] R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, Fontana, London 1977.

[59] J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. G. Ch. Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1997.

[60] H. Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, transl. P. and K. Cohen, „Signs" 1976, no. 1(4), p. 875–893.

[61] Especially in this context, see her 'poetics of fluidity' in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche,* transl. Gillian C. Gill, Columbia University Press, New York 1991 [1980].

[62] G. Ch. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?,* in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1988, p. 271–313.

voice has been adopted and theorised further in ecocriticism,[63] posthumanism,[64] and animal studies[65] to situate non-human 'speaking' beings as subjects of ethics.

The concept of voice has also been discussed 'as a metaphor of person' in the western philosophical traditions[66] but not yet as a concept of nonhuman, animist personhood in the context of European rivers. However, the literary (and artistic) efforts to address the river's voice may enlighten this concept and render new meanings of the river's 'water personhood', to use the animist term. For example, the 'river' (and 'fishing') poet Ted Hughes poetically amplifies the river's voice, hearing the nuances when the river is 'rich' or 'poor' with water and affected by the season of the year in a poem *River in March* (1975)[67]; or in an experimental poetic form of Alice Oswald's acclaimed *Dart,*[68] the author seeks to employ a new structural form to 'voice' the 'fugitive' river and the people connected to the Dart in 'the river's mutterings', in one 'living voice, not just the poet's'.[69] These literary rivers trigger several river-specific questions that aquacriticism wishes to raise such as: How is voice bestowed on rivers? In what ecological/environmental contexts are the rivers 'voiced' and 'muted'? When does a river end and a canal start? Or, what constitutes a riparian community and collective voice of the river and her people?

The aim of restoring traditions of animating rivers is 'to depict nature in the active voice'[70] because the literary voice of the river is a figure of speech that primarily signifies the river's autonomy and not a mimetic view of nature. However, in this example of 'A River Speaks', we have a rare opportunity to read how a human informant translates the river's voice: 'The river Sullane, speaks once in every seven years. On the following day, a drowning is sure to take place in this river. The river repeats on each occasion the following, *'I am the river of death, & where is the man I must drown?'* To recognise the empirical river in this literary voice requires asking how literature poeticizes and makes ecological rivers 'speak' not necessarily in an articulated language. This can be done through literary memory of what a 'dead' or 'alive' river connote in the ecological and historical context. Here, it is precisely a warning message from the Sullane River, but also proof of a strong bond between the river people and the river herself. Such eco-translation is possible within a literary study, which enables one to 'take the perspective' of a river as an animated and biotic creature, which has its biological needs and environmental rights, as successfully postulated

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[63] E.g., Ch. Manes, *Nature and Silence*, „Environmental Ethics" 1992, no. 14 (4), p. 339–350; J. Bates, *The Song of the Earth,* Picador, London 2002.

[64] E.g., C. Wolfe, *What is posthumanism?,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2010.

[65] E.g., K. Weil, *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?,* Columbia University Press, New York 2012.

[66] T. Sławek, D. Wesling, *Literary Voice: The Calling of Jonah*, Suny Press, Albany 1995, p. 2.

[67] T. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. P. Keegan, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2003, p. 308–309; M. Wormald, *Fishing for Ted*, in: *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, ed. T. Gifford, M. Wormald, N. Roberts, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2013, p. 112–129.

[68] A. Oswald, *Dart*, Faber & Faber, London 2002.

[69] J. Smith, *The New Nature Writing. Rethinking the Literature of Place*, Bloomsbury, London 2017, p. 56.

[70] V. Plumwood, *Nature in the Active Voice*, in: *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism,* ed. G. Harvey, Routledge, London 2014, p. 451.

by the river people outside Europe. These rights include the right not to be polluted, to exist, to persist, to maintain, to sustain, and to regenerate its own vital ecology system[71]; however, the river has experienced a historical past of being polluted and ecologically distorted in the same way that some colonised human communities and their environments have been.

Translating a river's voice is to recognise the ecological context in how rivers have also been giving voice to colonised nations. Perhaps, within the aquacentric perspective such texts as Seamus Heaney's *A New Song*, in which the river Moyola symbolises Irish repossession of land and language, can be reread and literally eco-translated to give voice to wider than human and bonded with rivers commonality:

> (…) now our river tongues must rise
> From licking deep in native haunts
> To flood, with vowelling embrace,
> Demesnes staked out in consonants.[72]

'Mermaids lived in deep rivers'[73]

'Literary' tributaries can also lead to an exploration of new, often dormant regional and folk sources related to mythical entanglements between humans and rivers. Celtic, Germanic, Slavic, and folk traditions offer cross-cultural patterns of animating rivers in European literary traditions that have not been studied from the perspective of generating ecological knowledge and dismantling the 'technological' approach to rivers. Therefore, my concluding argument is to combine the aquacritical approach with 're-indigenisation' of aquatic cultures in the context of European streams.

The concept of 're-indigenisation' was introduced by Michael Cronin, Irish professor of translation studies and author of *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* to mark the unexplored Irish language and its culture repository of the ways in which people were and are connected with their lands before the British colonisation.[74] The very concept, I guess, can be further used to investigate how people were and are connected to living rivers, how their riparian cultures understand and poeticize rivers, which can be paralleled with the animist traditions, and how they communicate and interpret 'river personhood' into magical and intimate engagement with rivers like Irish people did in the case of their enchanted watery landscapes.

These mythical entanglements between humans and rivers can be traced in the sources found in the National Folklore Collection (University College Dublin) which present riparian people's traditions. The sources show how they have encoded ecologically loaded knowledge in their stories. What is striking is that even such a predominantly marine culture such as Irish contributes to rereading rivers from the aquapoetic perspective because the writing of Yeats or Joyce absorbed river-related

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[71] C. Clark et al., *Can You Hear the Rivers Sing?…,* op. cit., p. 836–837.

[72] S. Heaney, *New Selected Poems. 1966–1987*, Faber and Faber, London 1990, p. 27.

[73] The Schools' Collection, National Folklore Collection, UCD, vol. 0956, p. 348: https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes/4742053/4731261 [access: 2022/08/28].

[74] M. Cronin, *Irish and Ecology*…, op. cit., p. 22–25.

folk mythology[75] as an essential element of Irish identification. Therefore, not only do rivers[76] serve as boundaries of parishes and townlands, but they also are inhabited by other creatures (worldly fish and fairies) which make them alive and agential. Donna Potts notices in her book on Irish pastoral traditions and poetry that 'the otherworldly knowledge and wisdom of the salmon and trout is stressed throughout early Irish literatures'.[77] *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, which contains methodological guidelines for people collecting folk sources in Ireland since the 1930s, formulates questions regarding rivers and streams in the section 'Natural Features'. Some of the most interesting are related to the stories of 'serpents, water-horses, mermaids' and other 'monsters' in rivers or whether 'local tradition personify a river or stream in any way (e.g., by referring to it **as if it were a living being**)'[78]

The same text considers the folk sources that animate rivers during the crucial events in this nation's tragic history. In the archive, there are accounts about how rivers were part of this pro-native attitude against all alien forces, including British colonists and Oliver Cromwell's conquer, and how the rivers themselves could even stop Cromwell's soldiers.[79] The oldest traditions, which could explain this, are related to a belief that evil spirits are unable to pass over running water.[80] These examples are part of a bigger argument that fighting with locals meant both human and non-human actors: 'Cromwell's greatest obstacles were not Irish or Confederate troops but the nature of Ireland itself, where conditions were terrible and the climate is even wetter than in England. Plague and influenza proved more devastating to Cromwell's men than Irish arms'.[81]

If there are different approaches to recognise the river's aliveness, they should be also anchored in European literary traditions and the environmental history of colonized lands. While European literature has developed special devices to animate nature (animal and ecocritical studies have shown that), it has not yet been investigated how these poetics and rhetorical figures animate rivers and what other factors play a role in developing the meaning of a living river in an anthropogenically transformed landscape or societies disconnected from their ecological awareness of fluvial monstrous mythologies. Finally, translating aquatic voice is a practice of reminding ourselves of how humans once secured one of the strongest bonds with animated environment in literature and how we can once again restore rivers into the interconnected mystery play.

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[75] J.C.I. Dooge 1996, p. 21–22.

[76] The river in Irish is *abhainn,* but the water – *uisce* – resembles the sound of a stream.

[77] D. Potts, *Contemporary Irish Poetry…,* op. cit., p. 147.

[78] S.Ó Súilleabháin, A *Handbook of Irish Folklore,* Singing Tree Press, Detroit 1970, p. 270 (my emphasis in bold).

[79] See e.g. The so-called 'ordnance survey letters' from 1841 (TS, p. 27; MS, p. 51).

[80] S.Ó Súilleabháin, A *Handbook of Irish Folklore,* op. cit., p. 268.

[81] *Irish Confederate Wars: Oliver Cromwell's Conquest of Ireland*, HistoryNet Staff, https://www.historynet.com/irish-confederate-wars-oliver-cromwells-conquest-of-ireland/ [access: 2022/08/28]

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Abstract

The voice of rivers is polyphonic and difficult to understand. What does it mean that rivers "speak"? This article argues that it is through experiments in listening to rivers and imagining the aquatic voice to convey a relevant message on behalf of empirical rivers one can understand their vulnerability and/or resilience to the anthropogenic changes in their environments. This message can be translated and further traced in the aquacritical study of selected sources such as folk and literary texts when we ask about the strong representation of rivers perceived as acting agents, for example, during floods, or rivers as sides of communication within collective worlds combined of humans, non-humans and even fairies.

Keywords: rivers, aquacriticism, non-human voice, eco-translation, aquapoetics, re-animism, monstrosity

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Język lodu, wody i łez. Żałoba klimatyczna jako empatyczna świadomość w dobie antropocenu

> […] zjednoczone strachy tematów, o których chce się krzyczeć (miałam napisać – wyć, tak); ruch głowy w stronę pohukiwań; pogrzeby lodowców – nakładanie na nie białych całunów odwracających uwagę słońca; co z żałoby dla nich?
>
> Małgorzata Lebda, z tomu *Mer de Glace*[1]

Świadomość, że nasze życie przypadło na czas szóstego wielkiego wymierania gatunków oraz zmian klimatu prowadzących do nieodwracalnej degradacji środowiska[2], a w końcu świadomość naszego własnego udziału w tych procesach sprawiają, że – jak pisze poetka – chce się krzyczeć, a nawet wyć. Żałoba klimatyczna staje się coraz bardziej użyteczną koncepcją do opisu ludzkich doświadczeń w antropocenie[3] – epoce, w której ludzie, choć zdominowali życie na Ziemi, to w efekcie nastawionej na zysk eksploatacji jej zasobów mierzyć się muszą z perspektywą postępującej straty środowiska naturalnego, w tym ekosystemów, w których wzrastali i rozwijali swoje kultury.

„Inuici są ludźmi morskiego lodu, bez lodu nie możemy być ludźmi morskiego lodu"[4] – odpowiadali Ashlee Cunsolo uczestnicy badań przeprowadzonych wśród społeczności Nunatsiavut na Labradorze. „To boli, że nie będę w stanie pokazać wnukom,

[1] M. Lebda, *Mer de Glace*, Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Warstwy, Wrocław 2021, s. 46.

[2] Niektórzy badacze i publicyści uważają wręcz, że stoimy na krawędzi i jest to ostatni moment na wybór między odbudową a całkowitą zagładą środowiska naturalnego (ekocydem). Więcej o pojęciu ekocydu: F. Broswimmer, *Ecocide: A Short History of the Mass Extinction of Species*, Pluto Press, London 2002. Zob. także A. Ubertowska, *Krajobraz po katastrofie: natura, historia, reprezentacja*, w: A. Ubertowska, D. Korczyńska-Partyka, E. Kuliś, *Poetyki ekocydu. Historia, natura, konflikt*, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, Warszawa 2019, s. 7–19.

[3] L. Head, *The Anthropoceneans*, „Geographical Research" 2015, nr 53, s. 313–320.

[4] A. Cunsolo, N.R. Ellis, *Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss*, „Nature Climate Change" 2018, nr 8, s. 275–281.