

Bioregional Biography and the Geography of Affect: Spatialised Somnambulance in Alice Oswald's *Sleepwalk on the Severn*¹

TOM BRISTOW
University of Melbourne

If only I could see a landscape as it is when I am not there. But when I am in any place I disturb the silence
of heaven by the beating of my heart.
Simon Weil

Very hard to define, most close in kind
To the mighty angels of purgatory
Who come solar-powered into darkness
Using no other sails than their shining wings
Alice Oswald

An opening

At the centre of Oswald's second book-length poem, *Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009), lies a conflation of the feminine gendered moon and an elderly woman dressed in black, pictured against rainfall at night. Distinctions of kind and various senses of incongruence are evident markers in the text that denotes changeability of humans in the unfixed environment. It is with a sensitivity to our own understanding of the hydrologic cycle and our planet's relation to its moon that Oswald deconstructs textual markers of subject positions. In *Sleepwalk*, identity—individual and communal—is aligned to poetic voice, which in itself is impressionable and unfixed, subject to specific situations in which the text and space are imbricated, one with the other. This article argues that environmentally emplaced affect can be located through an attention to Oswald's concrete, spatialised ecopoetic 'registers' (voices) and an undulating, accumulative literary score that underpin *Sleepwalk's* geographic imaginary. The Severn estuary divides England and Wales; it is among the world's natural wonders: wind, moon and water combine to create an unusually wide tidal range and the spectacular phenomenon of the Severn bore, a wave that surges upriver at high tide from Sharpness to Gloucester, a transit approximately 18 miles on the river.

The person in question is a symbol of blindness and dislocation: 'where might she be found?' (23:8) it is asked; and yet the figure is not completely lost to our sensory and cartographic toolkits, only revealed as a subject indistinct from her life-world in this moment of the poem's cyclic model. Silhouetted against the riverscape, she 'puts her ear to her heart—no sound' (13); she 'scans the surroundings by ultrasound' (17). These reports indicate an inquisitive and heightened sonic subject that adapts to external input failing solipsism; it is part of Oswald's soundscape where subjectivity is stitched into the collective (read polyphonic) fabric of the environment as lyric: here, life attuned to the cyclical melodies and pressures of rainfall under moonlight beyond the upper human sense (ultrasound).² The reports propose that sound is an active watermark and perceptible fabric to the life-world and to this poem; additionally, they frame an intriguing question raised by the poem's objective register of the conflated psychosis of the two subjects (moon and woman): 'Where might I emerge in the midst of being rained

away?' (14). Selves as objects of introspection and reflective action tentatively enter the poem's dramatic centre only to be partly dissolved into other subjects with at least a commensurate instability upon their repeated entrances into the environment, during clearly demarcated phases of moonrise. Change and constancy are central intellectual contours of this poem 'in several registers' (sleevenote) that clearly contends with the notion of an extended / relational self. The term register also draws readers' attention to attentiveness itself, for many words, phrases and rhythms of one subject are used by another subject. Oswald is promoting communal and accumulative voices and identities in a resistance to singularity, solitude and solipsism.

With respect to identity, *Sleepwalk* is racked with disquiet, anxiety and discomfort; it speaks of subjects 'struggling' (5:4; 11:5; 30:2), and then relieved, by an advanced environmental and emotional literacy as the structuring narrative progresses through the phases of the moon. The example of the rhetorical question, above, offering epigrammatic and succinct intellectual release from the quandary of how to emote in language, locates selfhood and validates how exercising a responsive lyrical voice might *not* entail a narrow sense of security with ourselves, to which I will return below. The question here, while offering such qualified relief from identity formation, details the larger relation between moon and earth. Oswald thrusts lyricism toward the dynamics within the hydrological cycle, the 'huge repeating mechanism' (3: 4) in which the human scale is dwarfed by the lunar cycle; this is where new subject formations take hold. Syllabic emphasis and musical stress falling on 'I emerge' and 'rained away' (above) deletes the series of linear temporalities that give rise to named phases of the moon and the life-world responsive to it. It underlines emergence within loss, or better, ecological metamorphoses over stable identity politics: the old woman is 'old' in the sense that she represents repetition, memory and change more than she is determined by a signal, chronological trajectory.

In *Sleepwalk* we are taken outside of any causal, diachronic domain of reasoning for we enter a contract with the poem in terms of synchronic ambivalence that is best understood as transitional. *Sleepwalk* both embodies and gestures to this immanent dimension of our *lebenswelt*. At one point 'backings and forthings' (23:23) suggest movements or repetition with tidal economies and a sense of vibrating pictorial depth. To complement this aesthetic complexity, *Sleepwalk* endows a model of self, inculcated in the environment and yet remains attentive to the paradox of self and world as one, as unitary:

She puts out her hands
Nothing
One or two stars but no moon
This is no good

She gives up
Soft little sigh with no mouth
Yes
This is not I (24:1–8)

The first of these quatrains resonates with earlier lines (cited above) when the figure listens to her heartbeat: ‘nothing’ is the response. Readers might question whether this is simply the natural world operating on its own terms, resisting our instrumental and reductive anthropocentric frameworks; or perhaps a writerly product of empty sound translated from the auditory dimension to text, which is indicative of the impossibility of complete (and simultaneous) dissolution of subject in harmony with the dissolution of moon. For ecocritics, it is hard not to notice that once the subject ‘gives up’ the (re)quest for response from the other (‘nature’), the cult of the explorer is dropped and the world is affirmed in its more-than-human sense ‘not I’.³

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Space and sound are interlayered in this poem. These lines precede a long pause. It will remind readers of Oswald’s earlier book-length river poem, *Dart* (2002), and its empty reflection on immersion in water that is represented by a musical interval constituting an entire blank page. These pregnant moments of stillness indicate the poet’s interest in silence and typographical emptiness as gathering spaces; both pauses in these two river texts are silent ruptures that follow moments when an ego or strategic mind is relinquished *and* the human is clarified as environmental existent—here it is the wind that speaks of the ‘other’, the human as ‘not I.’ Wind, moon, and people are given space to speak in this poem.

In addition to the potential relations that emptiness affords, concrete spatial dimensions of the poem demonstrate that the space of the page organises the events around the Severn estuary, and that formations of (textual) spaces generate modes of consciousness and subjectivity, which can be read off the page as elements of a communal psychology. In *Sleepwalk*, lines work to clarify an environmental register within the poem that speaks clearly to an expansive subjectivity that runs across three meta-registers (columns) in the text.

Of the three meta-registers, the central column holds the lyric poem proper and promotes geographic determinants of human experience in the terrain; the left column indicates voice or identity (proto-registers); the right column monitors the phase of the moon.⁴ At any moment in the text, voice can be read as a cluster or knot, always already invoking collocated subjects, the weather and gravitational pull. The columns, conceived thus, herald subjectivity while acting as a fluid semantic structuring device.

Delineation of the vibrating visual scene is only part of Oswald’s eco-poetic mode; it is as if the lyrical ‘voice’ is a soloist that floats above and is from within the communal voices at play, akin to an improvisation on a musical score and thus an allegory of creative free-play and niche formation. I read the poem as the interaction between human and estuary as a total sum of separate agencies; however, rather than a holistic trinity of subjects, spatially arranged subjects operate like an animated triptych, wherein static or containing models of foreground and background are eliminated in the arrangement. The poetic site, therefore, registers the Severn catchment area as a fluid topos of collapsed and emergent

human subjectivity that is symbolically contained within the sense of being 'not I' i.e. being with others and changing with others as they are located with the spatial affordance of the text's structure. More acutely, this aesthetic instances human responses to an environment that simultaneously complicates that very demarcation (human / non-human; human / environment). I claim this as the unifying aspect that endorses the environment as theme and poetic 'eye' in Oswald's *Sleepwalk*.

A selective ecocritical argument

This dynamic text, underpinned by voices that are born from a non-duality of musical cognition (reader) and cue (poem), is a form of denotation that is, in effect, augmentation: articulation of the physical and mental interdependencies in the Severn estuary. This article clarifies this modulation of subjectivity as the geography of affect *within* a bioregional biography: changes to humans recorded as a collective history and communal story of experience *within* the estuary region. What might be clarified in abstract as cyclical energies and ecological metamorphosis, is a sense of new identity within diluted versions of pre-stabilised subjectivity: a lyrical mode, underpinned by affect that extends metaphoric tenor (of somnambulance) to the intellectual freight of allegory to speak of emergence within (qualified) loss.

'Uncountry of an Estuary': a synthesis of accumulative changes

Sleepwalk, speaks of 'moodswung creatures / That have settled in this beautiful / Uncountry of an Estuary' (Prologue: 2–5), an emphasis on creaturely affect and the changeability of place. Despite the River Severn acting as index to cultural formations, the notion of settlement is highly contingent and provisional due to the influence of moon (affect, mood) and the unstable identities calibrated in accordance to fluid cartographies born of tidal movements ('uncountry'). Furthermore, if *Sleepwalk* is read as an extension of *Dart's* synthesis of subjectivity into a singular, protean soundscape, where all voices are the river's voice—a bioregional (auto)biography—the singular 'sleepwalk' denotes a consistent and coherent mental ecology throughout the poem. It is autoreferential.

Guattari challenges us to read 'aesthetico-existential effectiveness' of psychiatric modelling in order to:

grasp the a-signifying points of rupture—the rupture of denotation, connotation and signification—from which a certain number of semiotic chains are put to work in the service of an existential autoreferential effect. (56)

This in turn 'initiates the production of a partial subjectivity': the beginnings of 'a proto-subjectivity'. Oswald's somatic signification, often with an adjunct metaphor of hunger in *Sleepwalk*⁵ speaks to a 'corporealised imaginary' as envisioned by Guattari precisely through silent a-signifying points of rupture. I detail these as silence and deliberate space; however, *Sleepwalk* also puts to work the synthetic accretion of identity both within the spatial determinates of a page (the three columns of environmental 'registers') and over time, on which I shall now focus. These fluid-somatic registers borrow lines

from each other, and modalities and personhood are mimicked and distilled in specific voices in a sophisticated ‘semiotic chain’ that denotes the influence and impact of moon on subjectivity during the unfolding phases of moon: an immense biological engine (the moon-earth dynamic) and neural network (this Guattarian chain) are countersunk into the glow of expansive-diluted individual consciousness that registers self-in-world. This has been readily defined as ‘an almost sculptural attempt to fix and deliver language onto the surfaces and inter-connectivity of the situational’ (Whatley). The opening to the poem proper on page five will assist us here.

New Moon

*Flooded fields by the Severn. Waveridge Sand,
only walked on by the Wind. Almost dark. New
Moon not yet risen. Car noise continuous.*

*Two sleepwalkers struggling along, one painfully
thin with eyes closed (that’s the Moon), the other
writing, (that’s me). I’m always out here, noting
things down in my nightbook being interrupted...*

*Enter a wobbling light. A bicycle. A Birdwatcher
with infra-red telescope. Off bicycle. Sets up tele-
scope and trains it on reeds. Gasps. Checks with
the naked eye. Makes bird calls. Shakes head.
Points telescope at reeds again. Shrieks.*

birdwatcher

Impossible! Not here! Not now! Please not! Rare
Visitor. Rare? Not breeding surely! Not now!
Please!

*Notice a fisherman walking home, with the Wind in rustling clothes
following.*

Fisherman

It’s late. I don’t like walking on the mud at night.

A little horse trots through, knowing its way.

Did you see that?

Shhh!

The filmic quality to the poem combined with the flowing form (narrative, action, speech) seeks to bridge subject and object, commingling environment, observer and voice. The right column indicates ‘New Moon’; half way down the page, the left column denotes and cues the ‘Birdwatcher’ followed by the ‘Fisherman’; the central lyrical space opens with three italicised paragraphs (the notebook entry of the ‘Dream Secretary’), followed by two entries for the ‘Birdwatcher’ (his voice, the notebook), then four entries for ‘the Fisherman’ (two representing his voice split by the recording of events and underlined by an exclamation: ‘Shhh!’ (5:22) by the ‘Dream Secretary’, our witness to events in the locale). Three signifiers help to detail the situational aspect: sound, light, and embodied landscape. The scene is ‘almost dark’ (2) and it is cut through by the

Birdwatcher's 'wobbling light' from a bicycle; the soundscape contains bird calls from humans, a confessional disclosure by the Fisherman, exasperated questions from both male figures, and the interruption of the Dream Secretary. It is one example of Oswaldian meshwork.

The landscape takes on two forms: the changeable 'flooded fields' home to those who are living within its darkened spatial formations e.g. the wind that walks on Waveridge Sand (1–2), the horse that 'trots through, knowing its way' (20); the 'struggling along' (4) of bodies who find difficulty in either acknowledging what is in front of their eyes (the birdwatcher cannot believe the birds are breeding at this time of the year) or difficulty in negotiating the physical topos (the fisherman walking in the mud). A commonplace, physical continuum of struggle, the *topoi* is a bricolage of signifiers that collide and accumulate to indicate the difficulty of each 'character's' situation, particularly if they desire rest or stillness as a moment to gather the self—to reflect upon one's identity, and in the case of the birds, breeding.

This negative somnambulism refracted in the anxiety of moon and poet, and in silences and darkness, promotes a phenomenological shift in the cultural geography of the poet-figure throughout the whole of *Sleepwalk*. The poem moves from an early indication of the operational environment (signalled by the left column denoting subject registers defined by vocation and labour) in the first half of the poem, towards the perceptual environment in the latter half. Characterisation and mood before the second new moon ('Moon reborn') marries *Dart's* poetic census of life-in-place; furthermore, in *Sleepwalk* the perceptual emphasis in the second movement of the poem, largely signalled by the effects of the moon-earth dynamic, extends beyond census to generate a transgression of accountability and mapping in its fluid sustaining of the cartographic mode into the specific cultural memory of perception and reflection by each individual 'register' (subject / Not 'I'). I shall now look at some of the characters whose environmental and emotional literacy develops owing to their exposure to moonlight.

Articled Clerk, Fisherman and Vicar

Named so as not to be confused with the Parish Clerk, the Articled Clerk makes an appalling entrance: 'BANG!' (11:18), killing a goose that he mistakes for a duck while complaining about his physical predicament: 'Miserable weather. Bitterly bitterly cold.' He is an incompetent misfit, and a nuisance to the poet and Birdwatcher who require silence as a prerequisite to attuning to the environment. Later, the moodswung Clerk (another aspect of the lunar light) is almost unrecognisable:

... there was
That flutter of white napkins of waders hurrying in

And so many mucous mudglands

The simmering dish of mush and
All night that seeping feeding sound
Of moistness digesting smallness (30:4–5; 7; 14–16)

Picking up on an observation made by another ‘I’ of the poem some lines earlier, the ‘Articled Clerk’ speaks metaphorically (complementing Oswald’s sub-text of sustenance), remarking on the dimly conceived folds of wings and sounds of feathers to represent birds as napkins. It appears that the wildlife remains the subject of his consumption; however, the Clerk’s sensitivity to the environment has affected his sense of being to the point that he articulates within (i.e. as part of) the evident soundscape. Note the onomatopoeia of walking in the tidal estuary, the mood-setting assonance of the use of ‘a’ and ‘u’ in southwest English dialect: ‘many mucous mudglands’ elasticised into the sonic oscillation and convergence in the extended use of ‘m’ alongside the sibilance of the ‘s’: ‘simmering dish of mud’ and ‘moistness digesting smallness’ all to denote the consumptive energia that generates organic material (humus) within the complex repetition of consonants with subtly distinct notes (particularly accented by the use of ‘a’ ‘e’ and ‘i’). While this might not indicate a complete collapse of the former illiterate, atonal, bumbling self that the poem portrays in the early stanzas, this change does seem to indicate environmental affect that troubles the guaranteeing of personhood beyond the earth’s turning.

It is invaluable, however, to read slight resistance to this complete change. The Clerk is not a figure of absolute dilution and pro-environmental embodiment; he carries his rigid sense of self by sticking tight to his quatrains, and by articulating an unresolved inner conflict: ‘I thought really I should have webbed feet / I should have white wings to walk here’ (31:3–4). There is no equation between human and non-human and yet there is a gesture towards the more-than-human from within the affected subject position. To claim that this is not his place, while undoubtedly ethically charged in comparison with his earlier apostrophe, is as much a false interpretation of his shared emplacement with others as his instrumental entrance complete with shotgun.

Changes in the Fisherman are equally drastic and inconclusive as the Clerk’s. We begin with the counting out of a non-linear history:

Another thousand years
The Moon, mother of many rivers
Has grown young again

It could happen to anyone
Whose being both dims and widens
As if carried by the wind (26:12–17)

Simultaneously to these two tercets, *Sleepwalk* registers the wind as ‘very excitable with flute’ (margin) to foreground Aeolian inspirational forces within the shaping soundscape: this is what ‘carries’ any subject in this space: bodies are enworlded.⁶ To grow young in this spatial arrangement of lines is to indicate planetary cycles before a sense of chance and possibility; and again, the ego within dimming selfhood, consonant with widening selfhood, permits a relinquishment of control for an expansive subject in tune, or at play, with melodic, cyclical elements (‘carried by the wind’).

The counting out of non-linearity is picked up and repeated by the Fisherman moments later: the tercets are compressed into a sestet and recalled exactly (29:1–6) and then substantiated twice, echoically:

A man for example,
Sitting very still in his bone-web,
Dipped in old age up to the eyes,
When the tide recedes, his arms
Draggle to his sides
As hollow as reeds.

And a man for example . . .
When the tide returns he runs
Thigh-deep through the Severn,
Chasing the lightning of a salmon. (29:7–12; 19, 22–24)

Stepping outside of himself to speak of the Fisherman in the third person as a singular contour with the polyphonic biography of the Severn estuary, we note the extent to which tidal movements impact on the space and its subjects. The man is hollow without the river and yet, with the return of the tide, is able to follow the atmospheric discharge of the changeable journeying fish. Such polarity or extremity emphasises the ambivalent phrase ‘bone-web’—a compound that bridges rigidity and flexibility, fibre and fabric, that indicates terminus of life and interconnecting textuality; these textual webs transform the figure from an instrumental oriented subject who is desirous of an audience upon whom he could project his fishing stories, to an instantiation of tidal forces and emblem of corporeality that is part of the river’s vector of free play.

The complexification of character continues in the treatment of the Vicar. The poem’s final representation of this subject evokes Oswald’s consideration of whether nature has ‘an authenticity requiring certain intelligence to decode it,’ and by implication due to the interest in cultural ecology and feedback to the individual in *Sleepwalk*, ‘considers if non-human life transmits its detail without formulation or recourse to human epistemologies’ (Bristow 168). The increasingly attentive representative of a religious community identifies the limits to human understanding through one sensory field (vision):

Sometimes you see mudfish
Those short lead lengths of eels
That hide at low tide
Those roping and wagging
Preliminary pre-world creatures, cousins of the moon
Who love blackness aloofness
Always move under the cover of the unmoon
And then as soon as you see them
gone

Untranslatable hissed interruptions
 Unspeakable wide chapped lips
 It's the wind again
 Cursing the water and when it clears

You keep looking and looking for those
 Underlurkers, uncontrolled little eddies (38:1–17)

The movement from ‘sometimes’ to ‘you’, to the second person that includes ‘I’ and ‘you’ equally (as in the third person ‘one’), encourages a sense of objectivity in the opening to the twelve-line stanzas that attempt to enfold life into the riverscape. *Sleepwalk*'s poetics negotiate falling into problems of interpolation and complicity, however; the repeated, strangulated stanzaic formulation compressed at a single word line—‘gone’—not only spatially communicates to foreground loss (of syntax, voice and subject) but details the reverse energy or negative poetics that heralds the impossibility of possession (cognitively or otherwise), and thus detracts from constructing sense, sensitivity or subjectivity.⁷ The loss of world to be captured, coupled to the voice that is parsed through broken, moisture-lacking ‘chapped lips’ delineates a loss of authority that acts as a central holding point, visually and cognitively: ‘gone’ shifts the register from the experiential present participle, ‘roping’, ‘wagging’, ‘looking’, ‘sucking’ (21), to comparatively reflective and atemporal stock-phrases, ‘untranslatable’ (25), ‘unspeakable’ (26), that lack the river’s fluency.

It is quite telling how this shaping of language under moonlight measures up to the Vicar’s first appearance in the poem, arriving late and struggling with his horse:

Heavenly Father etc. On my way to Arlingham
 over the river. Already late, Lord. No boat. Pretty
 angry now on account of (1920–22)

Primarily instancing another disconnected, goal oriented, instrumental subject to support the figures of the Birdwatcher (below), Fisherman, and Clerk, the Vicar is not only bodily out-of-synch with the elements but his voice is fragmented, abbreviated and interrupted. Voice is of great concern to Oswald, thus we must read significance here. Furthermore, the addressee in this earlier section is transcendental; in the final scene with the vicar it is emergent and co-constitutive. Our non-authoritative, reflective subject under the influence of the new moon has travelled some distance from the frustrated figure of impaired speech.

The earlier weakness was prefigured by the poet’s eye ‘moving over the night map’ (19: 9) in the introductory narrative in the central column under ‘No Moon’. A printed night-map in the poet’s hands to suggest the recourse to human tools and our species’ technological advantage (i.e. cartographic representation) might enable one mode of connection to moon. Noting the subtle change in the Vicar from this position, however, allows us to disconnect his earlier frustrations to later surface indicators of anger: ‘cursing’, ‘bothering’; for these are not expletives demonstrating an inner self’s turmoil

and struggle, they are verbs that help map the wind and its spatially registered impact on place while it remains unseen. This again details a more environmentally perceptive subject: 'Cursing the water' (38: 13) and 'bothering the reeds' (27) before it 'clears' (13; 27). It clarifies an intimacy with the tidal flows that only momentarily rupture the visionary field. We witness heightened sensitivity to place and the translation of an emotional lexis into environmental movements within a discrete shift in voice.

The Wind and The Dream Secretary

It is instructive to track how perspectives and experience merge into each other in *Sleepwalk* as this gives rise to an account of environmental feedback (affect oriented), which leads to heightened sensitivity. The wind is the symbolic inspirational force in this poem and it allows for ruminations on a macro-scale but only after subtle, local foreshadowing of this wider space by the Birdwatcher.

Has something happened? There's a hatstand here. There are tables in the bushes and hundreds of wayfaring birds coming down at angles to their mirrors but it's this coat that interests me . . . (21:9–13)

Following a list of eleven names at the top of this page (ghosts and folk figures who drowned in or live off the Severn) the Birdwatcher's unfixed mind is cradled by a world of things; once settled on a single random object, it is indirectly addressed by an 'inconsolable' wind that critiques self 'interest':

In the beginning people didn't die
They waxed and waned and
Here lie the very thin remains
Of a man

Sigh

Enter almost nothing
No more than the rim of an ear
Or the white of an eye (14–21)

Particularity has given way; the body here is ensounded: swept up in the currents of the medium. This is a response to the Birdwatcher noticing wildlife mirrored in cultural objects during the poem's presencing of absent, ghostly figures of the landscape; it is also part of a sub-text of keeping attention strong.

In this kaleidoscope of persons and objects, the two quatrains offer three modes of address from the mood-centered subject (moon). In order: firstly, the historical, eschatological voice evokes an omniscient or metaphysical vantage point drawing from the lexicon of lunar phases; secondly, the first, fragmented opening of the second array of sense units delimiting the humanised action of the wind—the sigh—an exhalation of poetic breath and emotional register that bridges the abstract and universal to the particular; the psycho-geographic ecological self triggered by the indicative mood and

translated into phenomenological account stabilises a third modality.⁸ However, rather than complexify the soundscape, the wind's response symbolises a gradual loss of intensity; note an attenuation of flux to a calm, universal medium. This latter mode needs a little unpacking to understand how it leads to this particular sense of loss.

'Enter almost nothing' is not an instruction; it is the personal recording of the moon inscribed within the moment of experience offered as imaginative invocation to the reader. Oswald is borrowing from Sean Borodale's embodied cartographic technique that resonates with topographical work and echoes a tradition of situationist psycho-geography, a sample of which follows:

A man and woman in
tense dialogue. See stems of flowers through a
window. See a black umbrella open like a flower
in a deep doorway and move at man-height out
into the street like a dandelion seed. Cry of a
scooter. An umbrella open and closes and
opens like a fidget. Hear, "Sorry." (Borodale, 2003: 238)

These lines record images and sounds encountered by the body moving in space; we picture the mind processing multiple depths of field and instamatic surfaces rather than a rich, layered, historical palimpsest (as in *Dart*); all data is revealed within the circumambience of the walker's experience, which when captured poetically, attends to assembling an associative poetic haphazard jigsaw (of which I have offered one arbitrary fragment, framed by dialogue).

The indicative mode discloses evidence as it is brought into a sensorial space, to reflect the subjective processing of experience at the time of the experience of the writing subject; this momentary opening out as subtle extending of time is a phenomenological mode paradoxically recorded to recreate the moment after it has passed, during the reader's experience of the words out of time. Borodale has named this as a strain of theatre, as 'field': 'a hybrid form which takes on a live correspondence with the world and draws rawly on its conscious and unconscious elements' ('Ancient Light'). Borodale's aesthetic inspires Oswald and yet the latter qualifies the modernist 'remaking' of the environment by the individual with an itinerary, for the environment 'remakes' the individual in *Sleepwalk*.⁹

At page twenty-one, Oswald uses this inherited modality to enable the wind to voice its plummeting into the world. Note the 'white of the eye' and 'rim of the ear' the sclera (wall) and helix (in-curve rim), respectively; this is not an image of the sense organ proper but the containing space that affords sense experience: in abstraction, concepts of protection and openness simultaneously. This receptive locale is metaphoric: entering into the path and home of the sensory receptacle to the point that there is no distinction between the two, no internal or external boundary. These fragmented eight lines and the succeeding white space work to postulate changeability as a response to concretising or confirming our identity. Movement toward the unknown is to decontaminate and absolve

one's self of the striving to secure or affirm the 'I' (Oswald's 'struggle' above): to be stripped back to essentials, which in turn loses a sense of perspective on the flux (in the manner that the dead figures are lost) for it enters the flux. Notice Oswaldian attenuation in microcosm.

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It is noteworthy that attenuation, the gradual loss in intensity of any one kind of flux (subjectivity, for example) is significantly linked to an accumulative and therefore 'grand' voice / identity in *Sleepwalk*. Moreover, a loss of signal or isolated selfhood is directly linked to how the moon has an effect on voices. As already noted above, people change under conditions. *Sleepwalk's* changeability, however, is not limited to human affect. The wind and the Dream Secretary are two cases in point. The wind is constant in that it is supremely negative in the first half of the poem: 'painfully thin' (5:4); 'restless neurotic' (12: margin); 'very downhearted desperate' (16: margin); 'inconsolable' (21: margin). Following the new moon ('moon reborn' 25), the wind is transformed, 'excitable' (26: margin) and subsequently enfolded into the chorus that gives way to the refigured Dream Secretary, promoted from the central italicised commentary column to full representation in the final page. How are these distinct identities related and to what aesthetic effect?

These two subjects are always seen together in the first lines of any phase of the moon (5, 11, 15, 19, 25), primarily as figures 'struggling along' the landscape (5:4, 11:5), some distance from unified, symbiotic actualisation. The moon affects the wind, however, its voice and identity increases in musicality; the Secretary (our poet figure who is writing out these experiences in pace for us to read as this very poem) remains constant. The wind begins to modulate when it resembles the quartets of the chorus proper (12:24–27); this fuses the emotional wind focused on the presences of the dead river figures (6) to the visualised witnessing of the chorus (8–9). Mutation is developed a little further when the wind encounters flute music. Initially the Dream Secretary records the ability to 'notice' the music (16); this triggers a wider aural receptivity in the poem, one that receives 'children's voices and distant singing of the wind' (17). The human's account enables the wind to connect to the ghostly presences of dead children; later the musically (and communally) attuned wind sustains its resemblance to the chorus to the point that it belongs to the chorus (23).

This slow development is partly contagious, partly choric itself: when 'excitable' the wind can speak of susceptibility to change in terms of the moon, 'Whose being both dims and widens / As if carried by the wind; (26:16–17). The wind has evolved into the vehicle of change, the major key to the poem. The Fisherman repeating line 26:16 at 29:5, as noted above subsequently picks up the wind's tenor. This moment is a development of a minor key. It follows strophic form (25), elaborating the theme of constancy *within* change in the repetition of the italicised contextual stanzas of page five, the old moon echoed in the moon reborn.

This extended moment of highly patterned verse provides the perception of similar phrasing from multiple sources as a single, richer, dispersed voice. There is an indication of radical non-duality here despite environmental affect clearly registering change and

difference. Central to this achievement across fourteen pages is the moment when the moon evokes the stanzaic formulation of the established chorus when ‘glum with monotonous flute music’ (23:1). It is the location of the voice that speaks of ‘an old woman in black / Slipping out at nightfall in the rain’ (6–7); the section with which this essay opened. Is the female figure the poet-figure (Dream Secretary), the mother or the epileptic? We do not know; we have three fascinating female characters to keep in mind while reading this voice. The speaker here remains nameless and yet she is represented following ‘absolute Darkness’ (22:15) and one half page of white space, which leads to the wind’s reckoning of this person as ‘not I’ (24:8); this occurs during the closing words of the old moon sequence, the shift into darkness before new things. It is a significant moment in Oswald’s poetic architectonics.

This movement suggests the understanding of being separate in the world and the politics of difference while reducing egotistical selfhood (‘not I’) during an expansive highlighting of the co-constitutive forces of environment, affect and language, which in turn assist evolution, intellectual and emotional development, and biological sensitivity. At one and the same time: wind modulating from positive to negative, recording ghostly presences and the ‘other’; poet in landscape recording the manifestations of environmental affect enhancing its legibility while female subjectivity is invoked by multiple sources informing the choral quality of the wind. It is quite clear here that the simultaneity, choric quality and co-constitutive sense of interdependency registered in the unified musical watermark to the poem denotes relationships to an extreme; whether this symbolises non-duality can be considered elsewhere.

I am claiming that Oswald’s second book length poem of an oral history of a river denotes the situated, embodied and partial subject, which in turn evokes a spatial history and a poetics of responsivity and observation. The use of the Dream Secretary heightens the performative aspect of the poem that enacts a biography of the voices of the river that are manifest in experience, and yet it is also symbolic of the event of writing, of literary texts as emerging geographical events: a performative social situation, spatially extensive and temporally specific (Hones 1311–1314).

To our postmodern and post-structuralist minds, the figure of the Dream Secretary is a problem: is the writer in the landscape mere historical fact? Or, as an embodied subjectivity heightened by the changing phases of moon, does the owner of the notebook (that becomes the poem that we are reading) signify an intelligently figured *intransitive* event of writing?¹⁰ To recall, *Sleepwalk* has defined environmental performativity, comprehensive absorption into the ‘other’, and it has offered a psychological ‘field’ mode to promote the temporal sense of event and bodily experience while simultaneously conflating subjectivity, voice and register in a synchronic soundscape. All these effects make it difficult to isolate a single or solitary agency in the multiple modes of biography that are coloured by various states of somnambulance and progressive affect. These text events and poetic modes are revisited in the three figures at the close of the poem. The ‘mother’, the ‘epileptic’ and the ‘dream secretary’ require a full article alone; however, my attention to the poet-figure sustains a reinvigorated literary approach to the sense of protean identity with which Oswald closes *Dart*.

* * *

The voice of the Dream Secretary ends *Sleepwalk* with three stanzas (two octets and a quintain) that contain irresistible contemplation on structure, spatial arrangement and line-length: thirteen of these twenty-one lines are self-contained sentences, which brings attention to the comparatively conspicuous eight enjambed lines and to the spatial formation of the stanza. Within this formulation there is another, hidden semantic mode: the floating octet, which runs between stanzas one and two:

World black and white. Walk up the lane.
Last thing each night. Look up for the moon.
No sign but rain. Almost back home.
One more last quick. Glance up for the moon.

Eyes stripped to the darkness. Can't help but notice
Little desk lamp glow. As from upstairs window.
Shoulder of a woman. There, that's her.
Very old poor soul, maybe all but gone. (40:5–12)

The irregular and rare breaking of the syntactic unit in this final movement (as indicated by the regular use of end-stopping) highlights pauses in breath and cognition. In concordance with Borodale's technique it highlights acute momentary psychosis and staccato rhythms. White space functions as both rupture and site of binding. This group of eight lines brings together the landscape as witnessed by the poet (5, 7, 9, 11); the instructive-historical, phenomenological navigation of place (5, 6, 8); the remove from emplaced subjectivity (7, 9–11) to an outside perspective, mirrored in the moon's phase (11–12). Once more, it is a microcosm of the poem at large.

Moreover, the moon's moods are mirrored in the affected subjects of *Sleepwalk*; the moon, too, is a mirror:

Part of the moon's effectual magic is that it borrows, by virtue of light being elsewhere. Such is the nature of a universe, and there is a sweep to this poem which lifts some of its light from other experiments, re-directing it onto the world stage of the present. (Borodale, 'Ancient Light')

The figure, walking up the lane in an old coat and old sleeves, glancing at the moon finds a 'very old poor soul' (*Sleepwalk* 4012). This is the self within the other, the 'not I' of things operating in the world of dynamic subjectivity, rather than in a suprasensible reality (noumena) or as appearances to us (phenomena). This post-Kantian doubling, echoing, mirroring world of 'unsettling lightness' (Borodale) threaded by Oswaldian preoccupations: 'gap, pause, calm, recess, abate, listen' is a world very much of the self and the non-self that combine to write of home, our *oikos* and our place, as Wordsworth noted, when moving 'into the light of things' ('Tables Turned: An Evening Scene on the Same Subject' 15). The infused urban perambulatory aesthetic within a contemporary

pastoral affords an ecological stance: to be situated in an expansive subjectivity neither backlit nor foreshadowed by ‘things’ but brought out by their light in relation to which subjectivity momentarily resides, co-constitutively.

It is with this neo-Romantic ecology in mind that Oswald drops the central symbolic device in this passage, the mirror, for the window: external vantage points of landscape and shared space over and above egotistical solipsism. Reflections of self in world via pictorial subjectivity of surfaces is exchanged for the specifically, arbitrarily delimited transparent frame momentarily witnessing—and deftly framing—passing events. There are seven references to moon in these closing three stanzas; there are nine references to light; and yet in these closing lines it is the understated window that takes hold of our imagination.

As indicated by the reading of the floating octet, the window signifies a move beyond the self, to a poetics of stepping outside of the self. The glance to the moon has become a glance to the dwelling place of the poet; as foreseen in the effort to find the moon, there was ‘No sign but rain. Almost back home’ (40:7): our thoughts return to the elderly woman (above), ghostly echoed in this ambivalent resonance between poet and moon once more. ‘Window’ takes the position of last word on the end-stopped line in the second stanza that echoes with two other words, in the same fashion that ‘moon’ rhymes twice with itself in the first stanza. Thus, in the underlined repetition we have something more open than the previous sound pattern: window is associated with ‘halo’ and ‘show’, indicator and performer that are thematic mirrors of the psycho-geographic ‘field’ mode (above).

These rhyming words come from two distinct anthropocentric registers. Firstly, halo restates *Sleepwalk*’s sense of oscillation rather than opposition between black and white, seen and unseen, by continuing the sense of the ‘desk lamp glow’ (10) a tool for the human subject to write out these experiences, an object controlled by the human hand, flicked on and off. ‘Little hand torch halo’ (14) in addition to signifying fluctuation, collapses the beginning and end of the poem into a circle: *Sleepwalk* opened with an infra-red telescope in the hands of the Birdwatcher; while replaying this moment in new terms of the domestic space, the absent musical hyphen connecting these four words ‘little-hand-torch-halo’ denotes something beyond the circular coloured band of light around the light-source (in itself, not only echoing the moon’s visual appearance but indicating the human hand of the poet within the light of things, in proximity to this tool).

Secondly, the performative ‘show’ details what the poet sees of herself when she turns back to the house and glances at the figure in the writer’s room: ‘Letting only the light of a white sleeve show’ (16). The person is indistinct, not even adumbrated by moonlight, but bodily merged into the night, balancing ‘the dark medium of mime, or silence’ (Borodale) with the enlightenment of words. Language here does not mirror the landscape figure but offers a framed vision of the writerly hand, culturally radiant with the affect of changeable forces, poised to write the final lines of the poem.

Upon reflection, the circularity of the first rhyme with window, recalls an investment in technology by a dramatised character struggling in the environment at the poem’s beginning before moonlight affects their subjectivity. This occurs while the poet and

moon were more easily giving in to the darkness. The second rhyme brought out the authorial subjectivity into further relief despite the (visual-cognitive) obstruction of an aestheticised chiaroscuro. And yet, to entertain the notion of non-dualism implicitly performed within the poem's internal logic of non-opposition, these two rhymes are not at odds, they are but part of a step towards a third move. The repetition of 'window' in the position of line-ending in the enjambed line of the final quintain, not only overrides all rigid juxtaposition (above) by remarking a sense of fluidity, but it provides a teasing knot of sense before all is lost in the last three lines. These closing sentiments stress the word 'sometimes' five times to detail the changeability of moon in its phases and the contingency of what is captured by a visionary glance upon the landscape (receiving sometimes moon, sometimes the poet, sometimes only the rain).

In totality, Wordsworth's sense of 'a heart' as a subject 'that watches and receives' (31–32) is repeated in this poem: 'Sometimes the moon is more an upstairs window, / Curtains not quite drawn but lit within and lived in. (Oswald, 40:17–18)

The solitary orbiting satellite transforms into a transparent gateway between an interior professional space of writing and the outside world as we are taken on an imaginative journey to a subject's interior space: psychological, domestic, environmental. The curtains' ordinary social function to delimit public and private worlds and to obstruct or obscure, however, is relinquished for a metaphor of domestic presence illuminated by a wider locality of open selfhood ('not quite drawn'): indicating both loosely outlined rather than clearly detailed (not drawn in full) subjectivity that is continually receptive to moonlight. Furthermore, an internally awakened self, like our affected subjects ('lit within') is emplaced under the new moon and subject to the veracity of the Severn's bioregion ('lived within'). I claim this as an ecological 'self' in and of the landscape.

Conclusions

Disturbance and interruption; darkness and silence; with pulsations and repetitions that cross between these two quite separate domains, *Sleepwalk* is an instructive example of contemporary ecopoetics that asks readers to contemplate how the human fits within her environment. It also submits to how somnambulism might lead us to reassess the ways in which poetic reverie instantiates a *recreative* enaction of the world.

Paul Carter's understanding of malleability is based on a reading of Bachelard's texts, *Water and Dreams* (1942) and *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960) that indicate 'that a homology must exist between matter and mind, between the qualities of the material to be worked and the creative disposition of the artist who selects and works it' (186). This is one context to approach Oswald's poetry. While the English poet does not attempt to penetrate into substances in the way Bachelard claims, as a masculine 'will to power' (Wilson 33; qtd. in Carter 186), there is a common ground in that the double-malleability, the plasticity of human and world is a principle that accrues to the 'maker-dreamer' rather than 'to the material'; Oswald's 'Dream Secretary' is a case in point. Somnambulance is an example of the mingling of reverie and reality: an intermediary world between perception and reality (Bachelard).¹¹

Sleepwalk is a modern literary geography that attends to the textuality of space and spatiality of text (Thacker 62–65), and yet its outstanding contribution is to a poetics of porous personhood, and to a relational aesthetics that not only demonstrates the capacity of art to synthesise diverse facts, goals and references, but demonstrates how place attachment is relevant to the study of environmental perception. The person-process-place model outlined by Scannell and Gifford (2010) details how place attachment bonds individuals or groups to place, and how this varies ‘in terms of spatial level, degree of specificity, and social or physical features of the place’, which, as signalled by *Sleepwalk*, ‘is manifested through affective, cognitive, and behavioural psychological processes’ (5). Security-seeking motives partly explain place attachment from the perspective of positive affect providing a sense of protection and security, stability and contained identity; this study has moved beyond this area of environmental psychology to disclose extended loss of self as a means to feel more at home in the insecurity, fluidity and dynamics of place.

In *Sleepwalk*, the moon-animated river is a site through which a number of subjects or ‘registers’ pass and are reconfigured.¹² These registers are loosely framed between the voice of the moon (within five phases), and the identity of the Dream Secretary, the name given to the poet figure who is represented as the writer of the poem as it unfolds in time, taking note of the interactions and exchanges between humans and the environment under moonlight. These interactions are clarified and amplified by Oswald’s sonic stresses. The written out riverscape, therefore, in its very performative aspect (the figure of writer emplaced in text; the ‘sung’ lines of subjects) signifies non-representation. The interest in ethnography and social relations, moreover, demonstrates how Oswald reads cultural spaces: as active surfaces upon which environmental subjectivity is played out in lived relations that can be read off the page. These two impulses combined demonstrate that *Sleepwalk* inhabits a situational aesthetic that details how things relate to surroundings, how environmental stimuli and experience colour and modify subjectivity. This fusion lies at the heart of Oswald’s bioregional grapheme, the ‘I’. Line length, deliberate space and stanzaic formulation complement these impulses. Furthermore, rather than exemplify environmental determinism, agency and the generative quality of sense formation in *Sleepwalk*’s poetic form are modelled to move readers to think on how best to characterise Oswald’s geography of affect i.e. to think on how cartographic emplacement (threaded with somnambulist psychological states) gives rise to the environmental subject.

A new multidisciplinary research paradigm, loosely construed as ‘embodied cognition’ is delivering fresh analysis on physical properties of places but is limited by a methodology that does not review environmental factors as predictors of emotional bonds, nor as Lewicka remarks, ‘as a starting point for a “place theory of place attachment”’ (223). The reader might notice a role for the environmental humanities here, a new agenda with a mappable history. It is a quarter of a century since Donna Haraway placed discrete emphasis on Marxian resources to provide a fresh account of science to insist on legitimate feminist claims and meanings of objectivity, semiology and narratology:

[Our problem] is to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (579)

While *Sleepwalk* might find some criticism in its fallacy of ambiguity, ecocritical accounts should counterbalance this limited response with articulate reminders of the epistemological fallacies of dualism and subject-object relations critiqued via semiotic fluency. Radically attuned to issues of difference and multiplicity, Oswald's evocation of moonrise and its effect on people within the region of the estuary indicates an earthwide project that is not at odds with the sincerity of the intellectual legitimacy and humanist playfulness that Haraway requires. It appears, therefore, that literary studies can contribute significantly to environmental psychology, particularly as ‘place attachment studies need a theory of place’ (Lewicka 223). *Sleepwalk* provides the shifting and musical ground for that theory.

Postscript

Sleepwalk was commissioned by Gloucestershire County Council as part of the Severn Project (2009), which funded artistic interpretations of human-environment relations inspired by the river Severn, its stories and settings.¹³ At the time of publication, the British press was very interested in the river Severn and the Severn estuary as key ecological landmarks within the framework of the UK government's 2020 environmental targets. Charged with producing one third of its power through renewable energy sources within a decade, the estuary was at the heart of a governmental debate addressing collective responses to climate change and the capacity of the site to house a number of technologies including a barrage across the estuary (connecting England to Wales), a series of tidal lagoons, and a stretch of underwater turbines to harness the incredible fourteen metre tidal range of the Severn.

A fourteen metre range translated into eight gigawatts of electricity, five per cent of the UK's energy needs: a situation that is broadcast in newsprint, distributed by rhetoricians of the clinical world of ecological forecasts and economic modelling, and set in terms of myopic utilitarianism, expendability and crisis management during a morally bankrupt phase of toxic late-capitalism.

The situation of nature, our relationship with our lives and the external forces acting upon them, are elected as central themes taken out of the context of political environmentalism and placed within *Sleepwalk's* ‘uncountry’ of a community's voice. *Sleepwalk on the Severn* instances the poetic imagination that cannot be usurped for expediency or self-interest: an imaginative site where the very act of writing is a corollary to walking¹⁴, and therefore an embodied political act in itself. It is to be well regarded as we enter a new era of enclosed spaces.

NOTES

¹ This chapter is based upon a presentation at the annual conference of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), Hilton New York, New York, 26 February 2012.

² The author acknowledges the forthright critique of the concept ‘soundscape’ and its reliance on a metaphor from landscape studies for describing auditory space (Ingold); the concept is sustained to indicate geography of sound, the mapping of voices in space.

³ In *Woods etc.* (2005), relinquishment of stable identity takes on a distinct form from that of *Sleepwalk*: (i) ‘Excursion to the Planet Mercury’ presents us with an uncanny sense of metamorphosis (28), and a planetary void of ‘nothing but glimmering beginnings / making ready to manifest’ (31–32)—a life which emerges and crumbles, failing accumulation outside of the parameters of process. (ii) in ‘River’, a poem concerned with the sounds of trees and rivers under moon, the synthesis of sounds bring forth another sense: ecopoetic ‘I’-sight of the world beyond anthropocentrism (12–14).

⁴ I use the word ‘column’ rather than ‘margin’; the latter denotes peripherality (which is false), the former suggests equal weight to all three registers (which is correct) with the additional advantage of connoting classical architectonics to ‘hold up’ and ‘keep in place’. A comparative example of meta-structural poetics that underline a phenomenology of transformation can be found in Brenda Hillman’s *Cascadia* (2001).

⁵ E.g. 23: 17–24; 30: 1–24.

⁶ This broken sestet with flute triggers an acoustic ecology that discloses a plurality of presences, already there in the landscape and yet not accessible without this auditory consanguinity acting as thread and spine to the voices (n.b. a tension in the shift from couplet to tercet on the way to quatrains following dusk, pp. 26–30).

⁷ Negative poetics has been understood as a mode of intentional misrepresentation through warping, distortion and reorganisation (Jayne); and as a method that speaks to a sense of ‘ecstatic dwelling’, not homelessness but ‘dislocation, dispossession, and desecration’ (Rigby 90).

⁸ See Oswald’s acknowledgment to ‘The Salthouse Field Survey’ by Borodale, the Lake District poet (sleevenote). Three pages of this text were anthologised by Oswald in the *Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber, 2005).

⁹ The influence on this poem is most remarkable on pages 16 and 17.

¹⁰ I am drawing from Roland Barthes’ formulation.

¹¹ Schama notes that classical modes of streams of consciousness are translated into oppositions in the symbolic topography of Renaissance poetry wherein forests represent disorientation, and flowing water ‘in precise contrast ... gives the dream-traveller direction’ (273).

¹² Oswald’s instructional preface to the poem reads: ‘This is not a play. This is a poem in seven registers.’ Cf. the author’s comments on polyphony in *Dart*: ‘all voices should be read as the river’s mutterings’ (sleevenote to *Dart*).

¹³ The project was partly associated with ‘Quest’, a region-wide programme operating under the Cultural Olympiad community umbrella, designed to inspire communities in the lead up to the XXX Olympiad, London 2012.

¹⁴ This Ingoldian idea drawn from ecological anthropology ‘advances a philosophy of line-making as a creative, generative, sustaining and enriching process in a relational world’ (Lorimer 250). This corollary has a forebear in the idea that a walk is equivalent to a speech-act (de Certeau 97).

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