

LISTENING TO THE ENVIRONMENT: ALICE OSWALD'S D(ECO)NSTRUCTION

Monika Szuba and Julian Wolfreys

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2023.66.8>

Abstract: In this article, the authors pay strict attention to the minimal, the small, the barely there in Alice Oswald. Arguing that hers is an inclusive response to the environment, in which everything flows into everything else and the human being part of this flow, enfolded by the world he or she hears and sees, the authors focus on the small, the local, the barely heard, and ultimately the idea and presence of the stone as measures of how Oswald hears her environment, how this listening connects the local to the global, and how such poetic practice overcomes, or presents at least the possibility of overcoming, the anthropocentric superiority and distance that determines much thinking of the environment in conventional discourses.

Keywords: ecology, phenomenology, stones, water, silence, listening, locality

Before writing I always spend a certain amount of time preparing my listening. I might take a day or sometimes as much as a month picking up the rhythms I find, either in other poems or in the world around me.¹

Nobody. The Thing. Memorial. Dart. Woods etc.

Consider these words. They exist, along with many others in the works of Alice Oswald, as part of the “aneconomic, noncircular return”² of the “natural” environment to which she listens; they are part of its rhythms of the world around

¹ Alice Oswald, “Introduction: A Dew’s Harp,” in *The Thunder Matters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, ed. Alice Oswald (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) ix-x.

² Michael Marder, “Ecology as Event,” in *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Matthais Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) 156.

her.³ This bare sequence drawn from titles, words with which the titles resonate, hardly worthy of being named a list (for there is no immediately discernible taxonomy or logic), captures, or appears to capture, everything – and all the rest – as if the line, as if each partial title, each term, seemingly composed of, drawn from random observations and selections from across Alice Oswald’s published works, gathered, in a nutshell, how Alice Oswald hears the environment; or as if they were, there together in this list, a nutshell; and moreover, it is as if such fragments, passing signifiers, fleeting signifiers flowing into and out of provisionally identified forms, becoming other, suggest that with which Alice Oswald concerns herself, in which she involves herself and by which she surrounds her proper name as a poet of the so-called natural world and the environment: “Oswald,” writes Janne Stigen Drangsholt, “has frequently been described as a nature poet, and her work is crucially concerned with natural landscape and displays a particular kind of eco-connection to the land.”⁴

That “eco-connection” is such because each term, and every other term like it, *just is* a verbal signifier of things-in-the-world through which everything is said, while suggesting in the bareness, the difficulty and insufficiency, every other term, while maintaining its singularity, its provisionality, and its relation to every other term in supplementarity: every word is a supplement of – an addition to and a replacement for – every other, in an endless relation without relation.

A necessary parenthesis: given the limits of space, we can only say a little more concerning the logic of the supplement, particularly as this is developed in the writings of Jacques Derrida. In *De la grammatologie*, specifically in relation to his reading of Rousseau and the subject of writing as secondary to speech, as a supplement,

³ “Nature” and “Natural” are horrendously overdetermined and problematic words. Not just “at present,” but for as long as the human subject has distinguished the “human” world from the “natural,” since “culture” or “society” were situated as opposites to “nature.” Given the scope of the present essay, it is impossible to do more than gesture here toward this problematic term, both more and less than a concept, more and less than an ontology always already haunted by its other. Suffice to say – and this is in itself insufficient – that the good reader should understand “nature” and the “natural,” or the “natural world” and all related terms and motifs, to be suspended in scare quotes, uttered ironically, placed under erasure, as being already of little or no practical use. There are many texts that seek to comprehend what the term “nature” means, but one might begin to understand what is at stake by turning to Peter Coates, *Nature: Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1998).

⁴ Janne Stigen Drangsholt, “Homecomings: Poetic Reformulations of Dwelling in Jo Shapcott, Alice Oswald, and Lavinia Greenlaw,” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 2016): 11.

Derrida observes the peculiar logic of supplementarity.⁵ The supplement takes place because despite the apparent plenitude of speech – this is my voice, it is a guarantor of my presence, it signs a plenitude without lack – , there is nonetheless a lack that writing seeks to bridge, to fill. In this, it is an addition that admits to a potentially unending series of supplements. In the present context of this essay, we argue that there is an economy of the supplement at work in the texts of Alice Oswald. Every word signifies, names, indicates, imagines, invents, but with these “actions,” something is admitted as being the shadow of the thing itself, attempting to supplement the bare, naked condition of the word as thing, and indeed the thing itself that is signified in the supplement that simply is the word used by Oswald to identify, describe, re-present in the absence of the thing itself.

Something, a “something,” that which is “something,” is signalled, named, but how we hear, how Alice Oswald hears and invites us to hear, this is something not so easy to capture. For, we might say, Oswald reads the environment in deconstruction – or d(eco)nstruction. Oswald’s world of things, woods, raindrops, stones is a world always in process of construction, the *de-* not being a negative, but rather pointing us toward a manner of constructing that is always ongoing, presenting and performing ecology as event, to recall the title of an essay by Michael Marder; and to borrow a little from Marder, *eco* derives from the Greek *oikos* “meaning house or dwelling.”⁶ Oswald’s d(eco)nstruction shows us and invites us to dwell with and in a world of localities and pieces, fragments and flows, even as her poetry hears the *eco-*, the echo as well, in every “tiny thing” that barely reveals itself before giving way to another in the d(eco)nstruction of “this beautiful / Uncountry.”⁷

Further trenchant examples of Oswald’s d(eco)nstruction are to be seen and heard at work in all her poetry, often working through the means of lists, itemisation, brief observation, but for the moment we will take one brief instance from the poem that opens her *Falling Awake* (2016), “A Short Story of Falling.”⁸ The gerund motivating both the collection in its title and the “story” – in which motivation as motion and motif intertwine with each other – is nothing as such and yet is the movement that brings life and brings to life, initially as “falling rain,” the story of which is to “turn into a leaf,” which in turn falls. This motion, summoned through the gerund, generates the opening four stanzas, which trace

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967) 308ff.

⁶ Marder, “Ecology as Event” 141-64.

⁷ Alice Oswald, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009) 8, 3. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text; the introductory materials in the edition are unpaginated, and are referenced as such.

⁸ Alice Oswald, *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016) 1.

a sequence of falling motions that brings alive the non-human, specifically vegetal world; and this in turn is followed by a wish, “if only,” whereby through analogical imagination, the human subject desires the endless experience of becoming that the falling charts. The environment’s rhythms are heard by the poet, captured in the figure of falling, and apprehended as belonging to a process of flow and flux, change and transformation, to which processes human desire longs to be a part – one part among many, just as another momentary fragment, like a voice, a stone, a leaf, a twig.

More than this, and from this – from every fragment with which Oswald presents us, inviting us to supplement the fragments so as to see the world she sees – what we witness, what we hear is an organic and seemingly random eco-cartography at work, as that “short story of calling” attests: “[t]he idea of cartography” in Oswald’s text “comprises a democratic vision of being, suggesting that the voices and the languages of human selves are somehow naturally interlinked with the landscape.”⁹ Thus, the smallest thing, a rain drop, a stone, an unnameable “thing,” a named river: all form a series of connections and in doing so, cause transformations as we have said. This reiteration is a necessary response to the iterations of Oswald’s work, if we are to hear that properly. In Oswald’s poetry human voices respond to what they are given, as the poet does; they name the given, the gift of the so-called “natural,” non-human other, and do so, initially appearing either through flow or in iterative stutter, as one fragment supplements another, transforms or is transformed by every other fragment. From this, there is “a polymorphous and multifarious sense [...] explored through a variety of form (the collection [*Woods etc.*] consists of rhymed and unrhymed sonnets, free verse, ballads etc.) and a metaphoric range which stretches from trees, outer space, birds, stones, and fields.”¹⁰

It should not be thought, however, that everything is unordered, absent of taxonomy (there will come a taxonomy observed, below); unless of course, Oswald has an idea of a macro-pseudo-taxonomy of the world that admits of everything, thinking big, rather than small, as Timothy Morton suggests we do with regard to the world and everything in it. Rowan Middleton summarises Morton thus: for “Morton, the very idea of ‘nature’ sets up barriers; consequently, he argues that we need to think big rather than small, ‘dislocating’ ourselves from the local if we are to come to terms with what he calls ‘The Mesh,’ or the ‘interconnectedness of all living and non-living things.’”¹¹

⁹ Drangsholt, “Homecomings” 12.

¹⁰ Drangsholt, “Homecomings” 16.

¹¹ Rowan Middleton, “Connection, Disconnection and the Self in Alice Oswald’s *Dart*,” *Green Letters* 19, no. 2 (2015): 157. Middleton refers to Timothy Morton, *Ecology without*

Certainly, the notion of the mesh, elevated to a concept, might be one form for thinking Oswald's poetry, hearing it. The problem with this, though, is that in order for the idea of the mesh to be a concept in Morton's way of thinking, it must be economic rather than aneconomic, it must be containable as an ontology: that is to say a manner of thinking in which everything is consonant with everything else, in the thinking of which properties, phenomena, things and the relations between all of these is absent of difference and non-belonging. That said, it must also be remembered that a mesh has holes, the holes are the difference that defines the mesh, and things fall through the holes, leaving the ontology and all thought reliant on it in ruins. If "nature" is thought as that which is everything that can be named without reducing everything to consonance, then it is not a concept, and therefore admits of difference, of local terms, of things and phenomena that resist incorporation and so cannot be gathered in a mesh.

In response to the problematic of thinking the mesh, and as a way of considering alternative ways of thinking the figure of the mesh and listening to the landscape and the environment that we can learn from reading and listening to Oswald, we wish to pause at a particular poem. As an example of Oswald's fragmentary thinking and "fragment-listening," to coin a phrase for how we perceive what is at work in her poetry, let us consider what for want of a better phrase might be termed a key-word: the word "something," a word that at once points to something, and yet admits of this thing, this phenomenon, that it cannot be named as such. Even though we may hear, like Oswald, we can only respond by admitting the paucity of language in the face of a "nature," an environment irreducible to an ontology.

"Mountains," one of the poems from *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996), Oswald's first collection, is traced through with the word "something," which word is, again, irreducible to any ontological status, given that it names at various times gaps, silences, and the impossibility to name directly.¹² The word "something" appears repeatedly, both directly and indirectly; it is inferred through the shift in observation and subject. A thing that is unspecified and unknown, this pronoun "something" is at once barely a word, so poor, so little, and yet capable of embracing everything; it appears to name, it stands in for the name, when there is no name.

Immediately, the word appears in "Mountains" six times across twenty lines and three stanzas, two of eight lines each, and one of four. However, there is an argument that would suggest that "something" is at work indirectly too, in places

Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 27-28.

¹² Alice Oswald, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 34. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

where it is not named but inferred, implied (both being moments in the process of composition), or, as Oswald has it in the poem's final two lines – where, in the penultimate line “mountains” are finally signified directly (“the bigger mountains hidden by the mountains”) – “hidden [...] / like intentions among suggestions.” How many times might “something” be said to be hidden in the poem? It is impossible to count, and this is the point. The poem suggests seemingly endlessly, all the while observing that “something is twice as different,” it is “side by side with anyone,” even while the poem acknowledges “spaces,” “between places,” “edges,” “lines,” “entrances,” holes, things that have gone, and so forth. In a line that echoes with the voice of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Oswald observes how a “something” “inslides itself between moments.” This between-something is a ghostly fragment that remains unnameable as such, as is every something in the poem, at once in it and yet not there. Something is both the threads, the weave of a mesh of the world, the environment, and also the holes, the absences, the difference that serve to define that mesh. There is no environment, no world in the poem, for the poet, without the possibility of hearing something, some bare thing, some minimal element or phenomenon. One can only begin to think something large like “the environment” or “the natural world,” Oswald tells us, by giving attention to, and so receiving the gift of, the small, the hardly there, the otherwise absent and indirectly inferred, and of course the local (the local being crucial in Oswald's works, as the river poems concerning the Severn and the Dart attest).

Coming back to Morton, his argument is that the idea of the local is limited by its associations with, as he puts it, “the here and now, not the there and then.”¹³ Before continuing with what it is that Oswald may or may not be doing exactly through those fragments, those lists and gatherings that accrete into a flow, it seems necessary to pause again over the Mortonian thesis. As with much of Morton's work, there is a provocation here, the logic or assertion of which on further observation and reflection will not hold. Alice Oswald is, if nothing else – and yet the good reader will know she is so much more – a thinker of the local. Titles such as *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009) or *Dart* (2002) make this abundantly clear. Yet both poems, concerning themselves with hearing – and recording – the voices of people who “live and work on the Dart”¹⁴ and the voices of “real people,” “some living, some dead” (*Severn*, n.p.) captured during the phases of the moon along the Severn Estuary; and from there the motions of the moon and its effects

¹³ Middleton, “Connection, Disconnection and the Self” 157; Morton, *The Ecological Thought* 27.

¹⁴ Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) n.p. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text; the introductory materials in the edition are unpaginated, and are referenced as such.

on the river and those voices or otherwise voices “read as the river’s mutterings” (*Dart*, n.p.); such poems may well be local, but they are not limited to the here and now, they are also concerned with the there and then, to recall Morton’s phrases. The water flows in each poem through the lives of those who are there at the times of writing, and also through those lives now gone. The past is always there in both poems, with their references to the work carried on for generations that make the histories of the rivers – the work of foresters, boat builders, crabbers, or as one line from *Dart* has it, “medics, milkmen, policemen” (7). (This line recalls the act of listing, of bare definition, with which we began.)¹⁵ All such figures, many with “embodied relationships with nature,” come to speak of the local, but also the global, they attest to a present, but also a past.¹⁶ Thus, when Morton speaks of the mesh, urging “the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things,”¹⁷ this is something already known to readers of Oswald. Everything in her texts is interconnected, everything with everything else; but we only know this if we can “only connect,” as a much more circumspect and considerably careful thinker has it; if we respect and give attention to difference as Oswald does, to what is precisely local, singular, specific; to that which connects the here and now to the there and then; and from a slow and measured understanding of the local “thing,” the “gap,” the “Dart,” rain, woods and all the other phenomena that Oswald lists, observes and pursues in their stillness and their motions; only then may we make connections.

Oswald is, then, a writer of the local who apprehends and empathises with the global. Beginning with the small and specific, barely naming that and resisting unnecessary rhetorical amplification, Oswald is an inductive rather than deductive thinker. She sees the “World in a Grain of Sand,” as William Blake

¹⁵ Such listing of characters on Oswald’s part is not a little reminiscent of another nocturnal voice drama concerned with the local, *Under Milk Wood*, by Dylan Thomas (1954). Consider, when reading Oswald in *Dart* or *Severn*, the following lines by Thomas: “the farmers, the fishers, the tradesmen and pensioners, cobbler, schoolteacher, postman and publican...” etc. or “And you alone can hear the invisible starfall, the darkest-before-dawn minutely dewgrazed stir of the black, dab-filled sea where the *Arctura*, the *Curlew* and the *Skylark*, *Zanzibar*, *Rhiannon*, the *Rover*, the *Cormorant*, and the *Star of Wales* tilt and ride.” Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood* (New York: New Directions, 1954) 1, 2. Compare these boats with what Oswald calls in *Dart* the “boat voices”: “Oceanides Atlanta Proserpina Minerva [...] Lizzie of Lymington Doris of Dit’sum” (34). There is, clearly, another essay or more to be written considering the relationship between Dylan Thomas and Alice Oswald.

¹⁶ Middleton, “Connection, Disconnection and the Self” 159.

¹⁷ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought* 27-28.

famously has it in “Auguries of Innocence,”¹⁸ and if she does not apperceive “Heaven in a Wild Flower,” to continue this Blakean analogy, she nonetheless invites her readers to realise the world and environment from such small signifiers. She is also the poet of the local who knows that understanding the so-called “natural” world (nature is after all not natural but a highly complex concept that humans have employed to various ideological and material ends in thought and in practice) begins and must always remain with the local, a “local” that is grounded in and by a single item, a thing or phenomenon. Take Oswald’s effort to name, to describe the river that is “not river at all” (3) from *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. Definition is difficult, for the “not river” is “something like” what Oswald calls a “huge repeating mechanism [...] Very hard to define,” but having a “Muscular unsolid unstillness” (4) marked by an “endless wavering in whose engine / I too am living” (4). It is important to acknowledge that this is not limited to a “here” or a specific temporal moment; it is at once local and global: it is concerned with the Severn river, and yet this is all rivers; all forms of water are unstill, unsolid, muscular, iterable; Oswald is clearly aware, acknowledges and agrees with the Heraclitean dictum that “no man [*sic*] stands in the same river twice.” So far, so familiar, but as Heraclitus goes on to observe, “for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.”¹⁹ The river changes, but rivers change us, we are changed by the world we inhabit. Rivers are mechanisms and engines, and Oswald (typically) defamiliarises our relation to so-called nature in order to have us understand and feel more completely, if we listen, as Oswald would seem to urge us to, with what might be called keen ears.

What exactly is a keen ear? This can be explained if we acknowledge a commentary on Friedrich Nietzsche by Jacques Derrida: “To hear [Nietzsche], one must have a keen ear [...] it is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the autos of my autobiography.”²⁰ For Oswald, listening is a crucial process of apprehending the world and thereby understanding one’s being in the world; she speaks often of listening, as the epigraph to this essay admits. But more than this, her poetry invites its reader also to be a careful auditor, to hear, in those lists and acts of ecological cataloguing, how the world is in the rain drop, the leaf, the shafts of light and streams of water, the stones, the rivers, and so forth.

¹⁸ William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence,” *Poetry Foundation* [source: *Poets of the English Language* (New York: Viking Press, 1950)], <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>.

¹⁹ See Plato, *Cratylus* 402a and Heraclitus *Homericus* B49a.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell (New York: Schocken Books, 1985) 50-51.

There is, moreover, across and in all of Oswald's poetry that ineluctable endlessness that involves the self, in which selfhood lives if the self listens and does not simply observe; for (and if this is stating the obvious, then perhaps that is necessary to counter, if not silence, the critique of the local) beginning with a particular river, which is always already not river, not river and more than river in Oswald's understanding, Oswald moves through and from the unnameable to an energy typical of all waters everywhere, and beyond the subject of water, to the energy of everything in the world, including the human. Oswald has this understanding of water as at once always local (she not only writes about the Severn but also the River Dart in *Dart*) and always global and more than itself; indeed, in that the global reveals itself through meditation on the local, we see once more how the logic of the supplement is always at work. Let us consider one last aqueous example, this time from *Woods etc.* (2005): "Sea Poem."²¹ Oswald does not assume knowledge of water but asks what it is, what its sound is. There is in Oswald's work a relentless yet necessary and rigorous deconstruction that moves backwards as soon as there is a beginning, prior to commenting that it, water, is "oscillation endlessly shaken / into an entirely new structure,"²² and from there moving to ask about the depth of water and what defines that. Such is the depth, she tells us, that time "has been rooted out" from it, leaving us with an understanding of "steep shafts warm streams / coal salt cod weed." We find ourselves in this apprehension back with a bare list, minimal signifiers of otherwise unrelated or minimally related phenomena. Yet, as with the meditation on the River Severn, so here, water is the medium through the interrogation of which we come to understand something other than water, even if that "something" is not always immediately discernible. The work of a truly environmental poet is not easy, and it never rests on easy definitions; it must admit to difficulty, to limits, to relying on mere signifiers, often as figures for which there is no name as such.

"The Apple Shed" from *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* provides a more ordered example of what we call bare naming: "and now the comfortable dropping sound / of rain as heavy as a shower of apples / Ribston Pippin, Cox's Orange / Woolbrook Russet, Sturmer Pippin, / Bradley, Crispin, Margie, Spartan, / Beauty of Bath and Merton Beauty" (37). But what exactly are we invited to observe? Yes, these are all apples – will every reader be aware of this, save for the demonstrable fact of naming in which the poem indulges, as if to illustrate a shower? – but beyond that? The list excludes, prohibits as much as it invites, and we are left with the "comfortable dropping sound" not of rain but of names, as each drops, one

²¹ Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) 3.

²² Might this not be a definition of poetry itself, of a poem?

after the other, line after line. The list performs itself, articulated by a barely present self who is subsumed within the act of naming, subject to it.

And, before moving forward haltingly, beyond our beginning of a naked list-in-ruins, we might wish to ask ourselves whether these are acts of naming, forms of representation, citations, or fragmentary iterations. At the same time however, we confront such sequences, occasionally ordered – ordering imposed by an occasion of being at a single location such as an apple shed – but more often we encounter a seemingly arbitrary *pro forma* that satisfies the minimum requirements, performed perfunctorily, of an introduction (which in a certain way we never move beyond) – or let us say a constant and endless reintroduction, to the world, and everything that is the world and in the world. It is a form of introduction, moreover, that says everything, while neither giving anything away nor exaggerating. There is in Oswald the utter absence of hyperbole, she writes as she hears: in litotes. This is not to say that nothing comes of such listening, such observation; there are flows, gatherings, consolidations at work through “rhythms of loosening, gathering, piling.”²³ It is tempting to suggest, to make a suggestion that acts as a provocation to the reader, that everything we might wish to say about Alice Oswald, or indeed which Alice Oswald wishes to say about the natural world and the environment, is herein contained, and yet uncontainable: once again there remains a gap, and so there is the necessity of the supplement. For all of these minimal signifiers are at once barriers, which require we pause before them and take them in, hear them aright, and yet are absolutely open to all the world. More than this, each word is not simply a word that obliquely defines the work, the texts of Alice Oswald; to take the opening line of this essay again, that which arrives “in-between” the epigraph and the “first” paragraph: each word is either a title, or from a title, already chosen by Oswald for various of her collections of poetry; each also names something, *some thing* other than the volume from which it is taken. So, it is at once a hieratic border or gateway. Because of this we find ourselves excluded, but we must necessarily attempt to cross, and in doing so we read, we *hear* through forms of naming the things in themselves, and yet more than themselves. Singly, and together, they form and perform a hermetic trace that is also the possible key or series of keys to a poetic-hermeneutic of the natural, or perhaps more accurately, the material world and environment.

Why might this be the case? What is going on here that we feel compelled to maintain the problematic even while we try to unpick the lock, as it were? If as yet

²³ Mary Pinard, “Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter Author(s),” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 10, no. 2 “Ecopoetics and the Eco-Narrative” (Spring 2009): 18.

we have not found a way into the texts of Alice Oswald, but instead find ourselves moving around those same texts, let us take the second sentence of "Introduction: A Dew's Harp," written by Oswald for a collection of "nature poems" or, as the subtitle of the collection has it, "poems for the planet."²⁴ This second sentence makes the following affirmation: "[t]his book is dedicated to the rake, which I see as a rhythmical but not predictable instrument that connects the earth to our hands."²⁵ Is Oswald really speaking of a rake, a farmhand or gardener's tool? Or is she speaking of the act of writing poetry itself, a certain kind of poetry that connects, through the rhythmic but not predictable "raking" of the pen, held by the hand, across paper, ploughing or tilling the blank field, to the earth of which it writes, to which it bears witness, to which it listens, and through which it performs a textual and linguistic, semantic and signifiatory analog? (And of course, fingers to keys to screen, there, even at an electronic telematiatic remove, is the same connecting the earth to our hands, and returning, via our hands, the earth to our vision, in those visions we call poems.) As with that remark, itself something of a provocation to the reader as well as being a personal manifesto on Oswald's part, so too the words with which we chanced to begin, and by which we open, even as we stall our reader at the opening to this essay. For each word as a singularity nonetheless gives the key to Alice Oswald's writing the natural environment, an environment made of things without name, with rivers, with that which grows, that which acts as the bearer of memory, and of course, everything else that comes with these, and after these, signalled in that brief, elliptical abbreviation for all the rest of the world and all the words signifying that world: etc.

"Raking," observes Oswald, "like any outdoor work, is a more mobile, more many-sided way of knowing a place than looking."²⁶ That mobility, that multifaceted aspect of the work which allows one an active participation and so a knowing that exceeds mere passive looking, is, again, a key to understanding the work of poetry for Oswald. Writing is a raking, and it may take place indoors, but the writing of poetry of the environment is more than merely an act of looking and recording. Any reader who merely looks will miss a great deal, in the performative work of writing-as-raking. That Oswald employs the gerund – raking – rather than the infinitive form speaks volumes, if you care to hear; for it remarks that which is ongoing, endless, a process rather than a static activity.

But let us ask about the possibility of language in relation to a particular thing: a stone. What language does the stone speak? This is a question that Alice Oswald

²⁴ Oswald, "Introduction: A Dew's Harp" ix.

²⁵ Oswald, "Introduction: A Dew's Harp" ix.

²⁶ Oswald, "Introduction: A Dew's Harp" ix.

frequently poses in her poems. Since her debut collection, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, Oswald has been demonstrating a constant preoccupation with the natural world, stones being among her favourite characters. In her poetic work, she combines interests in ecology and music as well as classical literature, having been trained as a classicist at New College, Oxford. Her insistence on the orality of poetry takes her back to its European roots. In *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (2011) she offers her own version of Homer's voice, emphasising the "bright unbearable reality" of the text.²⁷ *Dart* is a composition of people's voices, those who live by or with Dart. A characteristic feature of her work is personifying nature – birds, beasts, flowers and rocks – exploring the landscape by translating its voices and imagining what lies behind its silences.

Oswald listens to the world – to the song of the Earth as Jonathan Bate puts it²⁸ – in an empathetic manner. For silence is impossible on Earth. Even stones sing. The pulsating, palpitating, throbbing heart of the Earth forms the ground of being. At least it is thus according to a Sami myth about the beating heart of the earth, cited by John Burnside: "the myth in which the creator god takes the beating heart of a two-year-old reindeer and sets it at the centre of the earth, making its living pulse the ground of all being. When times are difficult, the story says, people have only to press their ears to the ground and listen: if they hear the beating of the reindeer's heart, all will be well. If they do not, they are doomed."²⁹ As Oswald demonstrates, our dwelling depends on hearing the beating of the heart of the Earth; it requires our deep and direct involvement. Or as she says in *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, "It's not so much what you see as what you are seeped in" (14). Moreover, as previously noted, we must be able to hear, or at least to apperceive, "the shiver of an owl's wing / Moving through stars" (27); we must be involved in the smallest, almost silent, motion and realise how this produces motions through the cosmos. We are involved in – where involve means to "envelop," from Latin *involvere*, "envelop, surround, overwhelm," literally "to roll into" (from *in+* *volvere*: "to roll" in the sense of "take in, include") – we need to be involved in, to be "seeped in," those places we inhabit, in which we dwell. And, because of this involvement, this being enfolded, "Something needs to be said to describe my moonlight / [...] / Made almost of water which has strictly speaking / No feature but a kind of counter light call it insight" (18). Water, strictly speaking, has no feature, and this means we must listen and observe all the more attentively if we are to hear anything, to say

²⁷ Alice Oswald, "Author Preface," in *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011) n.p.

²⁸ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

²⁹ John Burnside, "Journey to the Centre of the Earth," *The Guardian*, 18 October 2003.

anything. Moonlight when contrasted with water shares by analogy, if not phenomenal condition, that which produces insight.

In Oswald's poems auditory perception is given an important place, as her work repeatedly demonstrates a dialogic relation with the natural world. Yet the sounds are not pronounced, never deafening, barely audible. Take this example, from "A Greyhound in the Evening after a Long Day of Rain," the second poem from *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*: "Grass lifts, hedge breathes, / rose shakes its hair, / birds bring out all their washed songs, [...] And evening is come with a late sun unloading a silence / tiny begin-again" (4). The merest of sounds inhabit and are, again, "seeped in" the environment, as are we if we care to hear before there is "unloaded" a silence, which itself speaks volumes (to risk a cliché in the face of so startlingly original an image). What this gives us to understand is that "the idea of *complete* sentence is nonsensical," as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has it.³⁰ Merleau-Ponty defines what Oswald clearly knows and feels about her environment, that "all language is indirect or allusive [...] it is, if you wish, silence."³¹ Furthermore, Oswald knows, as does Merleau-Ponty, that we must always "begin by understanding that there is a tacit language" and it is this language that Oswald's hearing is keen enough to hear, and which we in turn, must hear.³² In order to apprehend the complexity of how Oswald hears, let us stay with Merleau-Ponty and, reading between him and Oswald, come to grasp a certain way of working. Of painting, Merleau-Ponty says, "there are two sides to the act of painting [as there are to poetry]: the spot or line of colour put on a point of the canvas [the word or phrase written on the page], and its effect in the whole, which is incommensurable with it, since it is almost nothing yet suffices to change a portrait or a landscape" – or for that matter a poem.³³

Attempts to communicate then happen through hearing a rose shake, a blade of grass lifting, or the breath of the hedge; communication occurs through the act of listening with keen ears, thus lending in Oswald's writing priority to auditory perception, which becomes manifest through and in the language of poetry. The perception of sounds belongs to other perceptual modalities at times eclipsed by the dominating sense of sight. Yet birds, beasts, flowers, and stone are given a voice to communicate their belonging. Their utterances foreground the problem of dwelling shared with other creatures as proper dwelling equals co-existence on

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 43.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* 43.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* 47.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* 45.

earth, marked with impermanence, something we are made to realise as we watch and listen to the world, its fleeting phenomena and elements. And thus we witness, we observe and listen. Being involved, corporeally immersed, senses attuned to what Kathleen Jamie, citing Louis MacNeice calls the “incurably plural” world, we have a chance to rediscover it.³⁴

Returning to stones. A stone is the merest of things, barely there. (It is tempting to suggest that every word in Oswald is a stone, unless and until we hear it; otherwise there is just silence.) We would like to argue that Oswald challenges Martin Heidegger’s statement that “[t]he stone is worldless,” where world is defined as accessibility of beings, and wordlessness means having no access to beings.³⁵ According to Heidegger the stone has no world and “the animal is poor in world.”³⁶ He writes that both forms of being – animals and stones – are lower in the hierarchy of being than man who possesses language (without realising apparently that it is only his human perspective that leads him to this perceptual misprision). Oswald, on the other hand, demonstrates that is not exactly true. The stone may be non-human and non-verbal, but it has nevertheless a language. According to Heidegger, human practices are world-forming (*weltbildend*) as opposed to animals, which are “poor in world” (*weltarm*).³⁷

The first line of Oswald’s “Sisyphus” foregrounds the human-centred focus of the poem: “This man Sisyphus.”³⁸ When touched by Sisyphus, the stone is a “dense unthinkable rock” who “has to endure his object” (11). The possessive pronoun is an indication of the perspective: it is *his* dense unthinkable rock, *his* object. *He* possesses it. For him the rock is “abstract” (11). It is Sisyphus and his anthropocentric view that makes it so; as Merleau-Ponty has it, “operat[ing] within being” and it is this operation which strengthens and re-enforces the contrast between the animate and inanimate world.³⁹ Sisyphus is “a stone / somewhere far away [...] an unborn / creature seeking a womb” (13). He says, “the rock’s heart is only another bone; / now he knows he will not get back home” (11): the body of the world, the flesh. He is preoccupied with his plight, the plight of dwelling to cite Heidegger again, “he has to oppose his patience to his per-

³⁴ Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London: Sort Of Books, 2005) 44.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) 176.

³⁶ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* 176.

³⁷ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* 176, 177, 184, 185, 192, 193.

³⁸ Oswald, *Woods etc.* 11-14.

³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) 346.

ceptions..." (11). His anthropocentric point of view is foregrounded once more in the following lines:

and⁴⁰ there is neither mouth
nor eye, there is not an anything
so closed, so abstract as this rock
except innumerable other rocks
that lie down under the shady trees
or chafe slowly in the seas. (11)

In his world there is no chance of communication, the stone is merely an inanimate rock, dead and immovable, identical with other innumerable rocks, worldless and wordless. However, when the anthropocentric perspective is absent, things demonstrate life of their own, their thingness. In the poem "A Winged Seed" from the same collection (10), the speaker is a seed, which says: "I set out, taking my whole world with me, / wrapping myself round in my own identity as thin as a soap film" (ll.9-10). It says I, my, myself, and my own identity. It is capable of sentience: "feeling myself at all angles" (l.17). It employs language – poetic language – to communicate its selfhood. The poet imagines the voice of the otherwise inarticulate thing, the seed, and in so doing performs a supplement, voicing that which strictly speaking the seed may be said to lack.

In "Autobiography of a Stone,"⁴¹ a stone gains a voice and selfhood. It says, "I, Stone" (ll.3, 7), the repetition reinforcing the ipseity of the stone. It is a "Stone-in-hiding," its true identity never revealed to others. In line 9: "drawing my whole body inward into my skull": the body of the stone is human-like, the flesh, "not peering out" in line 11 suggests the sense of perception, a sentient being, features of character; "this air-borne earth" in the first lines suggests impermanence. This stone has a body, it has a skull and eyes that enable it to "peer out." And, like the wing-seed, it has its own identity, its own world. One could paraphrase a philosopher and say the stone responded. Language is seeking response from the other. The response may defy the limits of the intelligible or at least mark those limits. Silence is what arises between thought and language, between the unthought

⁴⁰ A strong reading might suggest that the work of the copulative "and," merest of words, most overlooked, most stone-like, in "Sisyphus," is in its generative and iterative state throughout the text, a word that functions, if we hear it properly and so receive it as we are invited to receive the stone in its environments, *for every other word-thing* in Oswald.

⁴¹ Oswald, *Woods etc.* 16.

and the unspoken, the moment of transferring thought to poetic language, in a betweenness wholly typical of Oswald's poetry. Against Heideggerian ontology, or rather supplementing the limit of Heideggerian ontology, Oswald offers her own ontological model, in which "[e]verything down to the lowest least whisper" (*Severn* 27), stones, leaves, and rivers may be capable of authentic dwelling, or a true *Dasein* and are neither worldless nor wordless but open, replenished with possibilities. As we read in *The Ear of the Other*, "[t]he ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become; large or small is what it can make or let happen (as in *laissez-faire*, since the ear is the most tendered and most open organ, the one that, as Freud reminds us, the infant cannot close."⁴² Poetry makes us hear what would otherwise remain unheard. Let us observe one last example of listening in Oswald's poetry, "Birdsong for Two Voices," where we are invited to listen:

A song that assembles the earth
out of nine notes and silence.
out of the unformed gloom before dawn
where every tree is a problem to be solved by birdsong.
[...]
it gathers the big bass silence of clouds
and the mind whispering in its shell
and all trees, with their ears to the air,
seeking a steady state and singing it over till it settles. (*Woods etc.* 5)

Oswald encourages us to listen, and, in learning from listening, to respond to the environments in which we find ourselves, and in which we desire to find that self more than merely in harmony with but instead "seeped in" that environment rather than being in a condition of anthropocentric superiority, in antagonistic or uncaring activity, or as Merleau-Ponty has it, in contradiction with the world.⁴³ Oswald overcomes the contradiction and grasps something fundamental in her rigorous adherence to the small, the barely nameable, the minimal, the local – which is that, to conclude with Merleau-Ponty:

no form of knowledge – not even science – gives us the invariable formula of a *facies totius uniuersi* [...] synthesis [...] is never completed [...]. And yet, there is something [...]. Something is determinate, at least to a certain degree of relativity. Even if *I ultimately do not know this stone absolutely*, even

⁴² Derrida, *The Ear of the Other* 33.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 345.

if knowledge of the stone gradually approaches infinity but is never completed, it is still the case that the perceived stone is there, that I recognized it, that I named it, and that we agree upon a certain number of claims regarding it.⁴⁴

And, we might add, the stone is there, I heard it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bate, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Blake, William. "Auguries of Innocence." *Poetry Foundation* [source: *Poets of the English Language* (Viking Press, 1950)]. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>.
- Burnside, John. "Ghosts of Subarctic Norway." *The Guardian*, 31 October 2009.
- Burnside, John. "Journey to the Centre of the Earth." *The Guardian*, 18 October 2003.
- Coates, Peter. *Nature: Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times*. Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1998.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Derrida, Jacques. *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit, 1967.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, edited by Christie McDonald. Translated by Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Drangsholt, Janne Stigen. "Homecomings: Poetic Reformulations of Dwelling in Jo Shapcott, Alice Oswald, and Lavinia Greenlaw." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 2016): 1-23.
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Translated by William McNeill. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Jamie, Kathleen. *Findings*. London: Sort Of Books, 2005.
- Marder, Michael. "Ecology as Event." In *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Matthais Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood, 141-64. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 345. Emphasis added.

- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Signs*. Translated by Richard C. McCleary. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- Middleton, Rowan. "Connection, Disconnection and the Self in Alice Oswald's *Dart*." *Green Letters* 19, no. 2 (2015): 157-69.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Oswald, Alice. *Dart*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- Oswald, Alice. *Falling Awake*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2016.
- Oswald, Alice. "Introduction: A Dew's Harp." In *The Thunder Matters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, edited by Alice Oswald, ix-x. London: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- Oswald, Alice. *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*. London: Faber and Faber, 2011.
- Oswald, Alice. *Nobody*. Illustrations by William Tillyer. London: 21 Publishing, 2018.
- Oswald, Alice. *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009.
- Oswald, Alice. *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- Oswald, Alice. *Woods etc.* London: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- Pinard, Mary. "Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter Author(s)." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 10, no. 2 "Ecopoetics and the Eco-Narrative" (Spring 2009): 17-32.
- Thomas, Dylan. *Under Milk Wood*. New York: New Directions, 1954.