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A Sleepwalk on the Severn

Abstract: Perception of placehood is subject to the changeability of the moon in A Sleepwalk on the Severn; my critical analysis of human encounters as ecopoetic extensions to sensory exploration finds them inescapably tinged by moonlit flux. Oswald’s Anthropocene lyric navigates a perilingual channel that interconnects human and non-human affect. I argue that her mapping of the movement of emotions across people, planet and place is a mode of signifying the ways that subjectivity and environment call into being our enworldedness.

Keywords: affect; Alice Oswald; enworldedness; moon; placehood

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Alice Oswald entered the British poetry scene with a captivating and original collection, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996). Over nearly 20 years, a number of critics have noted Oswald’s originality – located nevertheless in a sense of British tradition – and her contribution to ecopoetics. Oswald is alert to the politics of the Anthropocene, keen to place the human subject as a listening self; her pursuit of an environmental aesthetic seems intuitive, her poetics bodily. While clearly the spellbinding work of an eminent craft practitioner, her body of work seems modest set beside the other two poets in this study; altogether less driven.

Oswald’s home in Devon, the geography of the southwest of England, encourages a deep engagement with place, folk history and oral culture; she fashions these materials into poetry. An attention to voice and dialect, of people, flora, fauna, water, wind and moon offers a sophisticated and sensitive terrain for the critic seeking to understand the contracts by which the landscape’s moods and the poet’s subjects are signatories. Oswald’s listening self attunes not to the speaking of humans but to the elusive affective dimensions of water. A preliminary analysis understands Oswald’s poetics of immersion as a site in which to register the ways humans are made aware of and touched by nature, and the ways and character of nature itself: its purposiveness, pains and pleasures.

*A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009) is Oswald’s second book-length poem centred on a river and its more-than-human community. The first, *Dart* (2002), is a sound map, or sonic census of the community that works along the river: water purifiers, stonewallers, fisherman and so on. The poem gives voice to a variety of actors without privilege; are all speaking subjects that mark particular sounds relevant to their connection to the river in their specific place, and relevant to the rhythms and sounds of the river where they work. Language and location combine to provide an accumulative voice that is the river’s own. Similar in approach, *Sleepwalk* is structured around five phases of the moon and nine characters walking a stretch of the River Severn’s estuary. The interaction of these elements is articulated by voices of the moon and the wind, in addition to a poet-figure observing all interactions and developments in the locale. The text looks and feels like a play; it is dramatic, emotionally literate, scene-centred and character driven. The lyric’s emphasis on the influence of the moon on the water and its temporary inhabitants speaks directly to human experience while