

ALICE OSWALD'S POETICAL CARTOGRAPHY OF THE RIVER DART: OSWALD'S ECHOLOCATING POETICS AGAINST THE CARTOGRAPHICAL REASON¹

LA CARTOGRAFÍA POÉTICA DEL RÍO DART DE ALICE OSWALD:
LA POÉTICA DE LA ECOLOCALIZACIÓN DE OSWALD FRENTE
A LA RAZÓN CARTOGRÁFICA

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Abstract: In this paper I want to define and describe Alice Oswald's «echolocating poetics». First, I will explore how Oswald's polemic relationship with the label of «nature poet» points towards an original poetical proposal that tries to separate itself from some of the characteristics of the traditional nature poetry. Then, by analysing Oswald's poem «Owl», I will propose a characterisation of Oswald's echolocating poetics, which is based on a vindication of the sense of hearing and a subsequent critique to the pre-eminence of the eye and the ensuing act of looking as privileged ways through which human knows and places itself into the natural world. Finally, the reading of *Dart* (2002) will present Oswald's critique to the cartographical reason that, for her, is associated with the so criticised privilege of sight. The ear-based concept of echolocation is there the tool that Oswald uses to draw a contrapuntal map of the river Dart that defies the (anthropocentric) epistemological assumptions that are hidden under the human device of the map.

Keywords: Alice Oswald. Nature Poetry. Echolocation. «Dart». Cartography.

Resumen: Mi objetivo en este ensayo es definir y describir la «poética de la ecolocalización» de Alice Oswald. En primer lugar, exploraré cómo la relación polémica de Oswald con la etiqueta de «poeta de la naturaleza» apunta hacia una propuesta poética original que intenta separarse de algunas de las características de la «poesía de la naturaleza» tradicional. Luego, al analizar el poema «Owl» de Oswald, propondré una caracterización de su poética de la ecolocalización, la cual se basa en una reivindicación del sentido del oído y una crítica posterior a la preeminencia del ojo y al consiguiente

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acto de mirar como formas privilegiadas a través de las cuales el ser humano conoce y se sitúa en el mundo natural. Finalmente, la lectura de «Dart» (2002) presentará la crítica de Oswald a la razón cartográfica que, para ella, está asociada con el tan criticado privilegio de la vista. El concepto de ecolocalización basado en el oído es la herramienta que Oswald utiliza para trazar un mapa contrapuntístico del río Dart que desafía las suposiciones epistemológicas (antropocéntricas) que están ocultas bajo el dispositivo humano del mapa.

Palabras clave: Alice Oswald. Poesía de la naturaleza. Ecolocalización. «Dart». Cartografía.

1 «I'm not a nature poet». Alice Oswald's poetics in her own words²

With a task and a rake,
with a clay-slow boot and a yellow mack,
I bolted for shelter under the black strake dripping of timber,

summer of rain, summer of green rain
coming everywhere all day down
through a whole in my foot.

*

Listen Listen Listen Listen

Alice Oswald.

A Greyhound in the Evening after a Long Day of Rain

The highly acclaimed British writer Jeanette Winterson lays the foundations for a commonplace among Oswald's readers when in a 2004 entry of her webpage she wrote about *Dart* and the significance of Oswald's poetry in the following terms:

If Ted Hughes re-invented the Pastoral with his extraordinary poem, *Thought-Fox*, Oswald is Hughes rightful heir. She is a Nature poet, a spiritual poet, with the wildness of Hughes or John Clare, or Traherne. She turns the countryside into an inner landscape, a place not at odds with the more fashionable beats of the city, or a clichéd antidote to it, but as something which I can only call authentic desire.

However, Alice Oswald's relationship with both Ted Hughes' poetry and the label of «Nature poet» that has been usually associated with him and, by extension, with her, is polemic at best, reluctant at worst. As can be appreciated in her work as an editor, which includes an anthology of Hughes's animal poems (*A Ted Hughes Bestiary: Poems*, 2016) as well as a much wider selection of poems related with nature from diverse authors among which Hughes' poems are also incorporated (*The*

2 I would like to take this footnote as an opportunity to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, whose suggestions and extensive, meticulous comments have greatly contributed to the final outcome of this paper.

thunder Mutters: 101 poems for the Planet, 2005), the presence of Ted Hughes in Oswald's poetry is pervasive and deep-rooted.

It is in a 2005 lecture, shortly after the publication of *Dart* (2002), a book which earned her the T.S. Eliot Prize, where Alice Oswald's particular interpretation of Hughes's poetic labour and hence of her own can be fully appreciated. Placing herself in opposition to some canonical readings according to which Hughes should be situated in the lore of the reflective and yearning poetry of the Pastoral, Alice Oswald praises Hughes's ability to bring the «real, breathing presence» (Oswald, *Wild Things*) of the object into the poem. Thus, considering Hughes's famous poem «The Horses», Oswald extols its capacity to summon the horses, «steaming and glistening», without defining or analysing them directly. «It was a new idea to me», she writes, «that instead of describing something (which always involves a separation between you and the object) you could replay it alive in the form of sound» (Oswald, *Wild Things*). Through the eyes of Oswald, Hughes would not be a descriptive, natural poet, whose most extraordinary achievement would consist in invoking the astonishing allure of the British landscape better than anyone. Quite the opposite, by means of an acute acoustic engagement with the subject of the poem, Hughes's particular prowess would consist in marking no distance between the contemplated element and the one who is watching at it, to such an extent that the distinction between «the poet» and «Nature» can be hardly made. A little further ahead in the lecture, Oswald makes her argument much more explicit: «But in all the poems I knew (perhaps I didn't know that many), there was a flavour of absence or at least distance - as if the poet was sitting on a rock on a hill looking at the world through a telescope». As it can be noted in the poem that opens this section, Oswald's engagement with nature must be imagined in quite different terms: «with a task and a rake» in her hands, in a «yellow mack», soaking wet under a timber roof, the poet is not observing nature «through a telescope» (Oswald, *The Thing in 4*). Instead, she is listening to the world that surrounds her in quadruplicate, trying to capture the imperceptible sound of a greyhound who is slowly crossing the field so softly that it can be hardly heard among the raindrops.

Conducted by the BBC, the 2008 Oswald's speech «Poetry for Beginners» explicitly extends these reflections about listening and language to the creative process. «Poems», Oswald asserts, «are written in the sound house of a whole body, not just with the hands. So before writing, I always spend a certain amount of time preparing my listening» (Oswald, *BBC interview*) until the moment that the «whole being feels like a musical score». The body, defined as the support on which «the music of things» is arranged, turns out to be a more essential medium for the poet than it is the pen, so that Oswald moves forward: «Then, before putting pen to paper, I ask myself, "Am I listening? Am I really listening with a soft, slow listening that will not obliterate the speaker?"» (Oswald, *BBC interview*). Beautifully coined by Oswald, the concept of «slow listening» stands for a watchful attitude of the poet that goes together with the releasement of the voices of things so that they can emerge without any disturbance, as it happens with the greyhound. «It's a primitive kind of echo-location, like they use on ships» (Oswald, *BBC interview*), Oswald concludes, meaning that, as the reflecting sound waves used by ships to know the position of objects in its surroundings without abruptly approaching them, the poet casts the waves of her attention before she starts writing, and then perceives how those waves are sent back to her and what information they offer.

In the introduction to the anthology *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*, Alice Oswald summons the work of acoustic ecologist Murray Schaefer, who coined the concept of «soundscape» and defines it as «the sonic environment. Technically, any portion of the sonic environment

regarded as a field for study» (Schaefer 274). If the concept of landscape implies, for Oswald, a superficial image of nature «as if the poet was sitting on a rock on a hill looking at the world through a telescope», the soundscape ends with the primacy of eyesight and leaves room for “the sonic properties already there in the materials of the universe” (Oswald, *The Thunder* ix). As a gardener for the Royal Horticultural Society at the time she gave the lecture, Oswald denounces the tendency among the poet-gardeners towards conceiving nature «as the just-vanished place, the place we can’t quite reach» (Oswald, *Wild Things*). In an interview with Kate Kellaway, she in fact admits that her job as a gardener allowed her a different way of perceiving things detached from a looking to the landscape «in a baffled, longing way». Indeed, in sharp contrast with such an aloof engagement, she instead asserts to enjoy «a view of the natural world that’s participatory -that you don’t look at it with your eye, you look at it with your ear and with your body» (Oswald, *Presiding*) For Oswald, the aloofness which contagiously emerges from these poems unavoidably leads to nostalgia (Oswald, *Wild Things*), a feeling through which the speaker positions herself apart from nature, looking at it from the distance and only finding the all-pervading presence of her own emotion. In a dialogue with the British writer Max Porter, another self-professed lover of Ted Hughes, Oswald categorically states that her poetic work is at odds with the label of nature poetry: «I have quite a problem with the nature poet label, mostly because it might become a name I could wear comfortably and never have to face the confusions that spring up between poems. I’m not a nature poet» (Oswald, *Interview by Max*)

Oswald’s resistance to that categorization can be thereby condensed into three main points:

1. First, Oswald criticises the unavoidable distance that arouses when trying to describe any natural element by using the sense of sight. «A flavour of absence or at least distance» (Oswald, *Wild Things*) is what emerges when the poet’s engagement with nature and her subsequent literary discourse about it is guided by the distance that the human gaze imposes upon itself and the contemplated object. Thus, Oswald’s critique points out to a destabilization of the preeminent role that human sense of sight has received in Western tradition in favour of another ways of approaching nature that potentially allow a more «participatory engagement» with it.
2. This participatory engagement is achieved by means of the sense of hearing. By bringing the aliveness of the object into the poem through the sense of hearing (Oswald, *Wild Things*) Oswald tries to surpass the aloofness and distant nostalgia of what she considers the traditional nature poem. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of the critics (Pinard; Thacker; Gorji, Aber) have pointed out Alice Oswald’s «acoustically informed aesthetics» (Pinard 18). Nevertheless, what has not been sufficiently remarked is the importance of the concept of echolocation in Oswald’s poetics. Instead of mapping a place with the eye, Oswald advocates for a kind of «primitive echolocation» (Oswald, *BBC Interview*) according to which the hearing self of the poet places herself taking into account the position of the other without the interference of sight.
3. Besides, Oswald’s acoustic recognition of the other seems to disrupt the comfort of the traditional nature poem by defending the singularity of the many more-than-human-worlds. Thus, Oswald tries to bring the thing into the poem «without disturbing its strangeness» (Oswald, *Wild Things*).

Assuming these critiques, Oswald’s develops an «echolocating poetics» which, by means of the sense of hearing, will offer an alternative to the traditional engagement with the thing that the nature poem enacts. This poetics is clearly deployed in «Owl», the poem that will be analysed in the next section.

2. «Hearing my listening heard»: Defining Echolocating Poetics

Last night at the joint of dawn
an owl's call opened the darkness

miles away, more than a world beyond this room
and immediately, I was in the woods again,
poised, seeing my eyes seen,
hearing my listening heard

under a huge tree improvised by fear

Alice Oswald. *Owl*

Gareth Jones, an acclaimed biologist and one of the main authorities when it comes to study echolocation in bats, defines echolocation as «the production of sound by animals and the subsequent determination of the position (and other features) of objects from information encoded in acoustic reflections», also noting that «because we rely largely on vision to perceive the world, we find it difficult to comprehend the challenges faced by organisms that use other senses for perception». Echolocation, he adds, takes place when «vision is ineffective, for example at night or in turbid water» (Jones: 384). Indeed, the origin of the concept dates back to 1938, when Donald Griffin, a Harvard student, began to wonder how bats can perceive things and fly through an environment in total darkness. Later scientific evidence, moreover, extended the concept of echolocation to humans by acknowledging that some «blind humans interpret their respective worlds by listening to the echoes bouncing off objects and surfaces from the clicking noises they make» (Thaler y Goodale: 382). In fact, researchers nowadays have demonstrated that everyone, blind or not, «can learn to avoid obstacles without vision, as long as they have normal hearing» (Thaler y Goodale: 383).

Now, let's briefly analyse the poem which opens this section. Included in *Woods, etc.* (2005), «Owl» stands for the perfect example of the poet's «primitive echolocation» (Oswald, *BBC Interview*), which involves both a conscious knowledge about the self-position of the poet into the environment as well as of the position of the «listened» other. From the beginning, the poem appeals to the sense of hearing by referring to an «owl's call»: «last night at the joint of dawn, /an owl's call opened the darkness» (vv. 1-2). The listener, as a bat who needed to «detect and localize prey in conditions where vision is ineffective» (Griffin: 487), has to orient herself in conditions of complete darkness. Although the sound comes from miles away, «more than a world beyond this room», the poet's response instantly comes: «and immediately I was in the woods again, / poised, seeing my eyes seen, / hearing my listening heard» (vv. 3-6).

Firstly, the poem suggests that the distance which drifts apart the listener and the owl cannot be only measured in miles. Quite the opposite, «more than a world» separates them, since they belong to different species. Moreover, everything seems to happen in the dark so that the sound waves required for echolocation are the only way for the speaker to perceive her surroundings. What happens is that, by responding to the owl's call, the listener obtains in return an image of herself («seeing my eyes seen», v. 6) so that it might be said that the wave of her attention comes back to her. Thus, she does

not merely see or hear: she is also able to see herself seeing, to hear herself hearing. The poet, whose vision is hindered by the darkness, has learned to make, as blind people do, «mouth clicks» in order «to sense obstacles and objects of interest in [her] surroundings» by using the information of the returning echoes (Thaler and Goodale: 382). What kind of «mouth clicks» did the poet make? Should we read those clicks literally? I do not think so. It is the poem itself which has to be conceived as a big «mouth click», that is to say, as the series of sounds made by the poet through which she becomes aware of the environment in conditions of ineffective vision. At night, in the middle of the forest, as a bat or as any animal, the poet finds herself, Oswald adds, «under a huge tree improvised by fear». Indeed, used by dolphins and bats to identify their preys, echolocation always implies a danger which consists in the very possibility of being located, chased and hunted. The bodily implications of echolocation do not allow a safety distance.

If, for Wordsworth, the poem was the «emotion recollected in tranquillity», captured «when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or in pensive mood» by means of the «inward eye» (Wordsworth: 107), Oswald takes here a radically different path: for her, it might be said, the poem is the emotion recollected in danger, written at night not on the couch but on the field, captured with no eye but with an ear which is attentive to the potential danger that could come from anywhere in the forest. Indeed, Wordsworth's famous poem «I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud» should be read as that kind of «nature poem» which conveys the comfort and the distance from nature that Oswald wants to surpass through her echolocating poetics. Far from such Wordsworthian tranquillity, the «mouth click» made by the poet in the form of words implies a recognition of the strangeness of the other («more than a world» away: v. 3) as well as a self-consciousness about the not privileged (dangerous, embodied) position of the listener. As a consequence, the traditional comfort offered by the nature poem has been dismantled by undoing the distinction between hunter and prey. Nature is no longer the «just vanished place» seen from a «distant rock» (Oswald, *Wild Things*) (or from a distant couch): here, Oswald seems to suggest, with no aid of the eye that could sustain the separation between the subject and the object, that the poet's body is dangerously at the same level of what she wants to write about, be it a greyhound or an owl.

Therefore, it should be noted how «Owl» succinctly conveys the three critiques that Oswald makes to the label of nature poetry that has tended to be associated with her work. The critique to the preeminence of the sense of sight, together with the positive enacting of the sense of hearing as a way to echolocate herself into the environment, and, lastly, the recognition of an other's radical strangeness which cannot be disturbed by the poem. All these three elements can be traced back in «Owl».

Although Oswald does not usually talk about the political affiliations of her poetic proposal, there are some places where she exposes the political concerns that guide her critique of nature poetry with regard to the context of the environmental crisis. Foremost, in a conversation with Madeleine Bunting for *The Guardian*, Oswald asserts that «the most extraordinary moment [of environmental crisis]» in which we are living requires both poets and readers not «to be complacent» (Oswald, *Alice Oswald on*) «To live and speak well», she continues, as far as possible from idyllic conceptions of nature, demands an exercise of «smashing down the nostalgia», which implies to approach nature «with a rake and a task», face to face (or ear to ear, it may be funnily said) with what you want to write about (Oswald, *Alice Oswald on*). In fact, Oswald is seemingly suggesting that the current state of

nature is grounded upon an engagement with it that the traditional nature poem mirrors. For her, the consequences of this image are devastating:

We're colonizing it. We're turning it into something human rather than what it is for itself. That spreads very quickly into the whole of your life and you then can begin to lead a kind of inert life of colonizing other people – colonizing everything. That's what I am working against (Oswald, *Alice Oswald on*)

As we have seen, Oswald's response to that process of colonization that is turning nature «into something human rather than what it is for itself» (Oswald, *Alice Oswald on*) consist in offering an echolocating poetics capable of dismantling the hierarchies between eye and ear, hunter and prey, safety and danger.

In the next section, we will look at the book in which such a project has been articulated in clearer terms: *Dart* (2002). There, Oswald enacts the act of echolocation into the environment of the actual river Dart, in Devon. She denounces how the position of the colonizing human among this environment depends on a kind of domestication of the habitat through the technology that is prominently associated with the sight: we are talking about the traditional man-made map, against which Oswald wants to offer the «sound-map» of the river in which *Dart* consists of.

3. Destabilizing The Cartographical Reason: Alice Oswald's Ear-based Cartography of the river Dart

Published in 2002, after *The Thing in The Gap-Stone Style* (1996), *Dart* is Alice Oswald's second collection of poetry. When opening the book, the first thing we know is that it «is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart» so that Alice Oswald claims to have linked their voices into «a sound-map of the river» (Oswald, *Dart* 1). Nevertheless, the reader is told that the multiple voices that compose *Dart* «should be read as the river mutterings» (Oswald, *Dart* 1). Indeed, what is perhaps more striking when reading *Dart* is that the actual reference of the name (the 75-kilometres-long river Dart in Devon) gives rise to a more-than-human polyphony that makes it difficult to talk about any kind of unitary voice or place. As Oswald's points out with regard to *The Thunder Mutterers. 101 Poems for the Planet*, *Dart* is intended to portray a «more many-sided way of knowing a place than looking» (Oswald, *The Thunder* ix), making thus clear the critique to the sight since its very beginning.

From the very first line, the poem presents a man «moving alive over the moor / an old man seeking and finding a difficulty (Oswald, *Dart* 1, vv. 1-2). «Keeping his course through the swamp spaces» (Oswald, *Dart* 1, v. 6). The man, however, is surrounded by many creatures: tussocks, minute flies, / wind, wings, roots / He consults his map. A huge rain-coloured wilderness (Oswald, *Dart* 1, vv. 11-13).

In the middle of the «swamp spaces», the man tries to locate himself by consulting his map, which is described as a «wilderness». A bit later, he directly admits having the map of the river in his pocket: «I keep you folded in my mack pocket and I've marked in red /where the peat passes are» (Oswald, *Dart* 1, vv. 26-27).

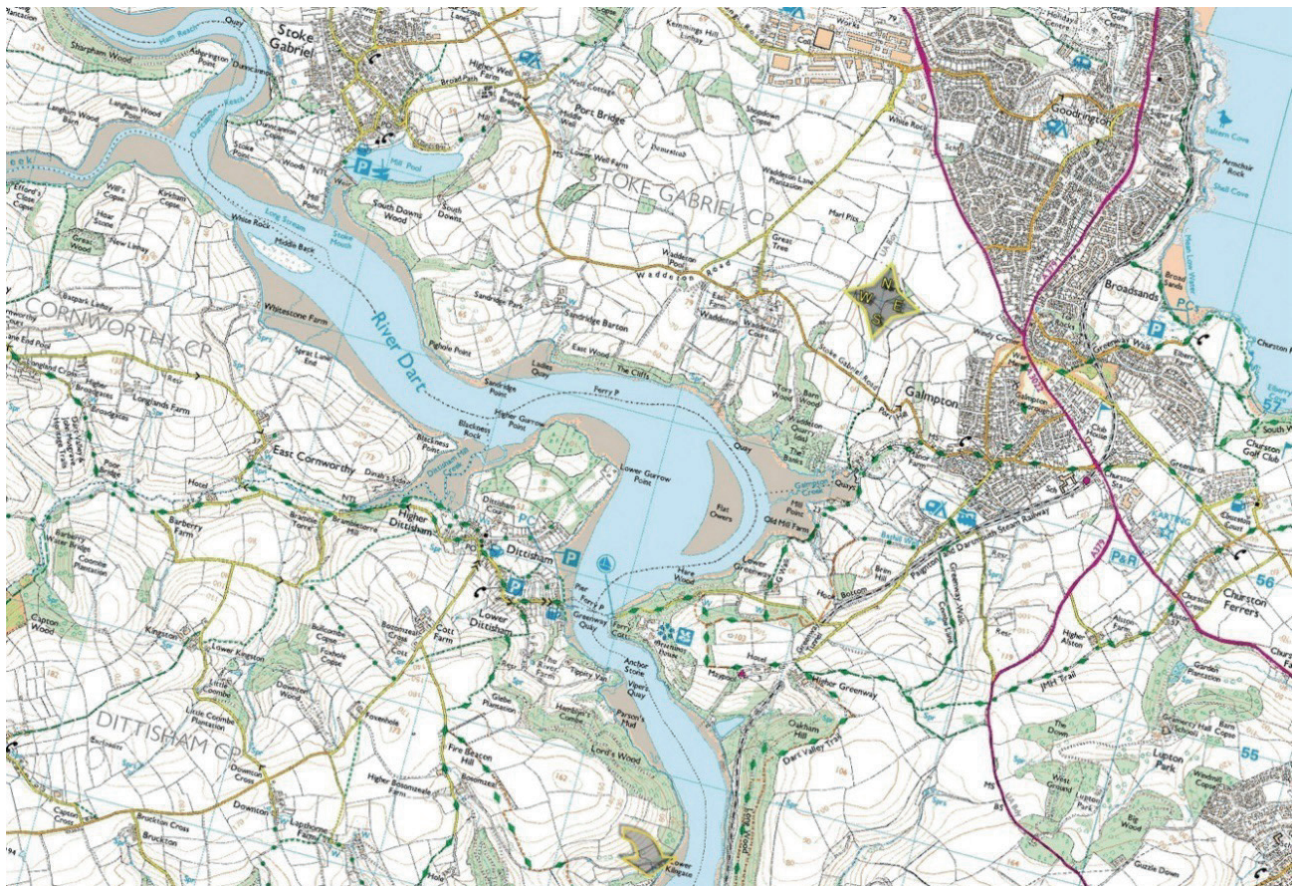


Figure 1. Map of the river Dart offered by Yellow Publications for 3.99£.
Extracted from: <https://www.yellowpublications.co.uk/dartmouth-the-river-dart-walking-map.html>

Here we have one of the many possible maps of the river Dart that the man could have in his pocket. The opening gesture of Oswald's book is therefore this one: a man «finding a difficulty» (v. 2) in orienting himself is taking a look at a map. Once Oswald's critique to the privilege of sight has been addressed, this beginning could not be read as innocent: what Oswald is conveying through the image of such a man is a strong critique to those ways of knowing a place than are based on the eye-privileging act of looking. A way of knowing, it must be said, that, for her, is mirrored and uncritically reproduced by the traditional nature poem.

The Italian geographer Franco Farinelli has shown how, since its origins, Western thought has been closely related with geographical representation, thus implying that «our rationality is determined from a cartographical point of view, that it is already contained and produced by the cartographical image» (Farinelli, 135). Indeed, it was René Descartes who established this relationship between rationality, sight and mapping when asserting:

All the management of our lives depends on the senses, and since that of sight is the most comprehensive and the noblest of these, there is no doubt that the inventions which serve to augment its power are among the most useful that there can be (Descartes, 5).

As David Harvey suggests, the emergence of cartography as an extended practice cannot be separated from that «Cartesian logic in which *res extensa* are presumed to be quite separate from the realms of mind and thought and capable of full depiction within some set of coordinates» (Harvey,

220). Once the complexity of the world has been reduced to the concept of *res extensa*, the map emerges as a necessary consequence of an abstract reason which privileges the sense of sight over any other. This is how an epistemology of «plain vision» (Krygier, 30) emerges, thereby naturalizing sight «as a source of clear unmediated knowledge» (Pickles, 6), while simultaneously enacting the reduction of «the meaningfulness of the world to a technological system of exchange, where all objects and even people are conceived as replaceable elements» (Keiling, 96) that Heidegger considered the essence of «the time of the World-as-picture». Not a big leap to conclude, as Farinelli did, that the Heideggerian «Time of World-as-Picture is literally the time of World-as-Map» (Farinelli, 143).

It is therefore not surprising that Janne Stigen Drangsholt has described Oswald's *Dart* as an «act of cartography» (Drangsholt, 176). By doing this, she points out to both the man's frustrated attempt to map the river as well as Oswald's own act of providing a «sound-map» that can offer an alternative to the (useless) man-made map that the speaker possesses since the beginning. Indeed, among «tussocks, minute flies, / wind, wings, roots» (Oswald, *Dart* 1, vv. 11-12), the man feels his sense of place challenged by the multiple voices of the river to which his map, far from providing any valuable information, is just «a huge rain-coloured wilderness» (Oswald, *Dart* 1, v. 13).

Shortly thereafter, *Dart* brings back the image of the man, who is now explicitly described as centred on «his own noise»:

Listen to the horrible keep-time of a man walking,
rustling and jingling his keys
at the centre of his own noise
clomping the silence in pieces... (Oswald, *Dart* 2, vv. 2-5)

With the map in his pocket, «at the centre of his own noise» (v. 4), the image seems to suggest a man who is only worried about the sound he makes and therefore not able to hear anything but himself. The image of the keys in this fragment can be understood literally or allegorically. On the one hand, the keys stand for man's private property, thereby emphasizing the self-absorbed image of a man who is «at the centre of his own noise». On the other, the keys, «rustling and jingling» (v.3), are making a sound and, since we know that it is precisely the sound which will be the «key» to decentre man's self-absorbed self along the poem, the keys can therefore be symbolically read as a reminder that the man, by cultivating the sense of hearing, has in himself the «key» to become opened to what lies beyond him.

According to Oswald's poetics based on echolocation, listening turns to be the key that the man will need in order to orient himself. If the map, according to the geographer John Pickles, stands for a device that «delimit potentialities through the control of space–time–action and thereby produce certain types of subjects, actors and places» (Pickles 111), the presence of the more-than-human worlds that, since the beginning, surround the male speaker with their sounds, will open him to the presence of new subjects, spaces and practices different from the eye-based looking through which the man has tried to place himself in the middle of the river Dart.

If in an aforementioned interview with Madeleine Bunting Oswald summarized her purpose in this way: «my idea has always been to create a sound world» (Oswald, *Alice Oswald on*), now it might be added that *Dart* is precisely such world opposed to the eye-centred world that provokes a nostalgic image of nature as well as a self-centred image of man. Thus, an invitation to hear the more-than-human noise is soon found in *Dart*:

listen,
a
lark
spinning
around
one
note
splitting
and
mending
it (Oswald, *Dart 2*, vv. 15-25)

Reproducing the actual shape of the river's course, this brief fragment spoken by the river itself invites the man to abandon the «centre of his own noise» in order to become a hearing self. The «sonic census of the community of the river» (Bristow, 78) in which *Dart* consists of, offers the man a new way of placing himself among nature attuned to the attentive acoustic awareness of the surroundings promoted by the concept of echolocation. Nevertheless, when enumerating his belongings («spare socks, compass, map, water purifier [...] tent, torch, chocolate, not much else» [Oswald, *Dart 3*, v. 4]) the man, «sitting in the tent door» (Oswald, *Dart 3*, v. 7), confesses to feel loneliness: «not so much as a stick to support the loneliness» (Oswald, *Dart 3*, v. 8). As a key tool of the anthropocentric cartographical reason, the map deceptive homogeneity, it might be said, has produced the man as the only relevant actor that can move through the river *Dart*. It is in this sense that John Pickles has asserted that «the drawing of lines is a fundamentally geographical and spatial act in which identities are 'inscribed' and the logos of western thought is founded» (Pickles, 3), consequently concluding that mapping must be considered «as productive power to constitute objects, identities and practices that are part of (and constitutive of) our world» (Pickles, 114).

Despite that, the river does not cease to invite him to abandon his loneliness in order to encounter the more-than-human identities through the sense of hearing. In fact, the voice of the river itself informs the reader that he and the man «has seen each other»:

If night comes down and he has to leave the path
then we've seen each other, somebody knows where
we are
falling back on appropriate words
turning the loneliness in all directions (Oswald, *Dart 3*, vv. 15-19)

In trying to mapping the river, or, in other words, in defining himself as the only relevant actor through the device of the map, the man is alone, but when his anthropocentric task is abandoned, that is to say, when the man has to «leave» the preestablished path marked by his map, then the encounter takes place and the loneliness «is turned in all directions». Indeed, the loneliness of the man «sitting in the tent door» is surpassed when he begins to develop attentiveness to the sounds and presences of the more-than-human worlds, as he confesses in this fragment:

(I let time go as slow as moss, I stand
and try to get the dragonflies to land
their gypsy-coloured engines on my hand)

whose voice is this who's talking in my larynx
who's in my privacy under my stone tent (Oswald, *Dart* 6, vv. 20-24)

At his point, the «privacy» of that man who was «at the centre of his own noise» has been surpassed through the development of many ways of attentiveness to the more-than-human worlds, in this case symbolized by the dragonflies. Astounded at how the privacy of his stone tent has been crossed, the man recognises the presence of «another» voice in his larynx, as if he was being possessed by the polyphony of the more-than-human noises that inhabit the river. From that moment forward, the solitude of the man has been definitely broken and the poem begins to deploy its many «mutterings», ranging from the ghost of Jan-Coo, who drowned in the river, to the naturalist who offers a map of the river based on the careful observation of its more-than human worlds (spiders, frogs, etc):

I'm hiding in red-brown grass all different lengths, bog bean,
sundew, I get excited by its wetness, I watch spiders watching
aphids, I keep my eyes crevices, I know two secret places, call
them x and y where the Large Blue Butterflies are breeding, it's
lovely, the male chasing the female, frogs singing lovesongs
(Oswald, *Dart* 5, vv. 16-20)

The «particular and singular conception of representation» (Pickles, 77) that privileges the eye has been definitely surpassed and, within a short period of time, the reader notices that the human impulse to orient himself by looking at the abstract space of the river's map has been disrupted by the many voices and acoustic maps of the river. By listening to the «river's mutterings», the monologue of the cartographical Western reason has turned into a symphony. In following the physical course of the river from Dartmoor to the sea at Dartmouth, the reader will progressively find a plurality of «sonic maps» of the river which are superimposed upon the man-made map by taking into account the respective location of many different subjects. In contrast with what was suggested at the beginning of *Dart*, the river does not have one map. It is rather the man mentioned at the beginning of the poem who is trying to make the river fit within a map, whereas the poem's growth, in its effort to disclose the many sonic maps of the river, stands against man's anthropocentric purpose. Therefore, Oswald's answer to the question that Henry Lefebvre puts forwards in his famous book *The Production of Space*, «How many maps, in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meanings and contents?», would be exactly the same of that which the author himself offers: «What we are most likely confronted with here is a sort of instant infinity, a situation reminiscent of a Mondrian painting» (Lefebvre, 85).

Then it comes the end of *Dart*, which actually coincides with that place «where [its] my name disappears and the sea slides in to / replace it» (Oswald, *Dart* 48, vv. 13-14) and the question of the beginning is brought back in a kind of circular movement:

who's this moving in the dark? Me.
This is me, anonymous, water soliloquy,
All names, all voices, slip-shape, this is Proteus,
Whoever that is, the shepherd of seals,
Driving my many selves from cave to cave... (Oswald, *Dart* 48, vv. 25-29)

Whereas the «who» of the beginning was «an old man seeking and finding a difficulty» (Oswald, *Dart* 1, v. 2), now the «who» has a different referent: it is indeed referred to «all voices» which, along the course of the *Dart*, have «turned» the man's loneliness «in all directions» (Oswald, *Dart* 3, v. 19). In this way, the individual «who» of the beginning has become a collective «who» represented by the sea-God Proteus, who is the God of the many forms, the «many selves» and surely the many voices. The journey of the river *Dart* from its source to its estuary runs in parallel with this other identity journey through which the self-centred human is progressively opening himself to the point of containing, in his «cavity», the many sounds of the river.

A poem from Oswald's first poetry book, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Style*, offers an image of the poet that very well supports the one of the poet as an echolocating being:

What did I do (I am a gap)
was lean these elbows on a wall
and sat on my hunkers pervading the boulders,
my pose became the pass across two kingdoms,
before behind antiphonal, my cavity the chord (Oswald, *The Thing*, 32)

«I am a gap», claims the speaker, thus providing an image of the poet as a «cavity», as an echo chamber in which the energies of the natural world find resonance. Moreover, the imagery which follows from these words points out to the actual anatomy of the human ear, whose cavities and membranes would compose «the [metaphorical and anatomical] pass across two kingdoms».

Tellingly, the image of the man as a big ear in whose cavity the more-than-human worlds re-sound is also suggested at the end of the *Dart*, when Proteus is said to drive his «many selves from cave to cave». The poem is then closed with a suggestive parallel that brings together the caves through which the water of the river *Dart* runs with the cavities of the ears of the animals and humans that appear all along *Dart*, including, needless to say, the poet's own ear inside which the «sonic-map» of the river resonates. It is thus how *Dart* ends: with this image of the man as a big ear an ear which is significantly similar to that enormous ears of echolocating bats that «are enlarged for the detection of faint echoes» (Jones, 485).

4. Conclusion

In short, Oswald's construction of a «sonic-map» of the river *Dart*, which, in her words, is intended to a «more many-sided way of knowing a place than looking» (2005b: ix), can be easily included under the label of echolocating poetics that has been defined in the first two sections of this paper. In unmasking the «hidden agenda» (Pickles, 181) of human map-making, Oswald would be doing for poetics what authors such as William Bunge have done for geography by insisting «on community-based mapping» which can surpass the abstract and interested objectivity of the urban

planner. As happens in *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution* (1971), where Bunge tries to make visible the history of racial imposition through the study of a small square in Detroit made from the point of view of their inhabitants, Oswald's *Dart* should be read as an ongoing cartography that reconfigures the natural space of the river by tracing new boundaries, identities and worlds that have been obliterated by the eye-based Cartesian practice of human map-making.

Instead of relying on the eye, as the majority of human-made cartographies do, the ear-based concept of echolocation is the tool that Oswald uses to draw this community-based map which defies the (anthropocentric) epistemological assumptions that are hidden under the human device of the map. In interrogating the function of a map, the world it creates, and the voice it lends to subjects, Oswald unveils the potential for a novel form of nature poetry, distinct from that which she heavily criticizes, traditionally perceiving nature from a detached standpoint, imbued with a «flavor of absence or, at the very least, distance» (Oswald, *Wild Things*). That form of echolocating poetics would ideally be capable of dismantling those human beliefs and practices that have led to «colonize everything» by «turning it into something human rather than what it is for itself» (Oswald, *Wild Things*).

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