



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

## A critical review of the Ecological Consciousness and human needs in Alice Oswald's poetry: An exploration of environmental sustainability in modern English verse

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### ABSTRACT

Ecological Consciousness is clearly articulated in the poetry of Alice Oswald as she uses the poetic language to address the environmental and ecological concerns. The present paper argues that the poetry of Alice Oswald serves as a vital, imaginative counterpart to the pragmatic frameworks of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through a close reading of her poetry including *Dart*, *Nobody*, and *Weeds and Wild Flowers*, this analysis demonstrates how Oswald's verse highlights several aspects environmental Sustainability, Human Health, the provision of Basic Needs, a critique of Energy & Industrial Leadership, and a reimagining of Future Economics. Oswald's work transcends conventional nature poetry by establishing an ecological awareness that blurs the distinction between human and non-human, prompting a significant reassessment of our role within a living, interrelated system. This study asserts that the humanities, especially poetry, are vital for cultivating the profound, sympathetic comprehension necessary to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, rendering Oswald's work not only artistic but a crucial instrument for ecological and social transformation.

**KEYWORDS:** Alice Oswald, ecopoetry, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), environmental sustainability, ecological consciousness, anthropocene, human health, posthumanism

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## 1. Introduction: The Poet as Sustainability Advocate

Poetry is a universal language that precisely and eloquently expresses people's inner feelings and latent emotions. At the superficial level, poetry seems to be precise and concise; however, this is untrue simply because one poetic verse can convey multiplicities of meanings. Poetry is well positioned to enhance our temporal literacy in the Anthropocene, since its intricate fabric is defined by plurality, iteration, and resonance, complicating basic representations of time (Drangsholt, 2011, p.70). The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch, meaning «The Age of Humans,» which argues that human activity has become the dominant force shaping Earth's climate, geology, and ecosystems (Lewis et.al, 2015, p.30). This concept suggests we have left the stable Holocene epoch due to impacts so profound they will leave a permanent mark on the planet's geological record. Key evidence for this includes the radioactive fallout from nuclear tests, plastic pollution fossilizing into new rock layers, altered atmospheric gases driving climate change, and a mass extinction event—all signifying that humanity now rivals natural forces in transforming the planet (Malhi,2017, p.78).

While not yet an officially ratified term by geologists, the power of the Anthropocene concept lies in its framing of humanity's unprecedented responsibility. It unifies global challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss under a single narrative, emphasizing that our species has become a planetary-scale force whose collective actions will determine the future state of the Earth.

Therefore, the present study argues that poetry of Oswald has addressed human nature, emotions and feelings through ecological concerns where the contemporary man demolishes and destroys the ecological system. The poetry of Oswald is considered to be a rather humanistic cry against the oppressions inflicted by man on his sweetheart and beloved earth.

One major concern of the United Nation Sustainable Development goals is the protection and safety of the ecological system. Therefore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a detailed framework for worldwide peace and prosperity (United Nations, 2015). Nonetheless, their technical terminology and policy-centric structure frequently lack the emotional and philosophical appeal required to foster profound, widespread public dedication. This is where the humanities, especially poetry, assume a vital function. As Bate contends, poetry can “restore us to the earth” and is “the living answer to the question of how we might live (Bate, 2000, p. 283).” Alice Oswald, the current Oxford Professor of Poetry, is a leading voice whose work performs this exact function. Her poetry is fundamentally preoccupied with the relationship between humanity and the environment, not merely describing nature but enacting an ecological way of being and seeing (Garrard, 2004). This paper will explore how Oswald's body of work engages with the core strategic pillars of sustainability, arguing that her poetic project is intrinsically aligned with the spirit of the SDGs, offering a necessary narrative of interconnection, respect, and urgent care for our world.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Ecopoetic and the SDGs

This analysis is situated within the field of ecopoetic, which extends beyond traditional nature writing to critically examine the relationship between language, perception, and the environment and time (Garrard, 2004). It draws on:

- **Posthumanism:** To decenter the human and view the world as a network of interdependent agencies, a concept Morton (2010) terms «the ecological thought.» Wolf (2010) argues that posthumanism is « the set of questions confronting us, and the way of dealing with those questions, when we can no longer reply on «the human» as an autonomous, rational being who provides an Archimedean point for knowing about the world» (p.253).

Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is posthumanism?* (Vol. 8). U of Minnesota Press.

†Naess, A. (2005). The basics of deep ecology. *The Trumpeter*, 21(1).†

- **Deep Ecology:** Naess (2005) argues that the foundation of the deep ecology movement might be rooted in religion or philosophy, encompassing ethics. (p.62) It may also be considered to originate from these fundamentals. The term “derived” in this context is subject to several meanings. If the legitimacy of a norm or hypothesis is substantiated by a certain set of philosophical or theological beliefs, then the

norm or hypothesis is, in a way, generated from those assumptions. The collection assumes a character of premises for certain conclusions. However, closely analogous or even identical conclusions may be derived from different or even incompatible premises. This elucidates that the profound range of perspectives may be perceived by some as perplexing, rendering deep ecology too ambiguous for rigorous analysis.

- **Environmental Justice:** Environmental justice studies arose as an interdisciplinary body of literature, wherein academics documented the disparate consequences of environmental pollution on various socioeconomic classes and racial/ethnic groups. (Mohai et.al, 2009 p.406). Currently, several studies indicate that, broadly, ethnic minorities, indigenous individuals, people of color, and low-income communities experience a greater burden of environmental exposure to air, water, and soil pollution resulting from industrialization, militarism, and consumer behaviors (see e.g. Figueroa, 2022; Bowen, 2002; Walker, 2012). This problem, referred to as environmental racism, environmental inequity, or environmental injustice, has garnered the attention of policymakers. It connects ecological degradation to social inequality, a core concern of the SDGs.

This framework allows us to read Oswald's poetry not as pastoral escape, but as a form of engaged environmental critique that complements the SDG agenda.

### 3.The Ecological Consciousness in "A Greyhound in the Evening

"A Greyhound in the Evening" connects the Anthropocene to its lyrical language and sensory experiences (Baker, 2017). This type of relationship is distinctly evident in the ethos of the principle of a non-transactional connection illustrated in "A Greyhound in the Evening," where worth resides in mutual, unreciprocated presence rather than utility, constitutes the foundation of Alice Oswald's literary philosophy. Drangsholt (2016) explains that this tranquil interaction between human and dog, existing beyond the realms of competition and productivity, exemplifies Oswald's enduring endeavor: to dismantle the hierarchical, utilitarian bond between humanity and the more-than-human realm, substituting it with a relationship founded on deep listening and collaborative engagement (p.22). This notion of "leaning, not licking" is fundamentally implemented in her principal works. This is accomplished in *Dart* through her polyvocal form.

The poem does not concern the river but is derived from it, crafted from the perspectives of people familiar with it: the water abstractor who attunes to its "monologue," the forester who comprehends its "map of sounds," the drowning poet, the otter, and the river itself. No one voice, particularly human ones, has superiority; each contributes to the overarching harmony. (Linne & Niederhoff, 2018, p.33). This exemplifies a radical democracy of voices, an ecology of expression where value is generated from interconnectedness rather than individual utility. The human figures are not dominators of the landscape but participants who must synchronize their rhythms—even the industrial drone of a chainsaw—with the timeless, immutable cadence of the river's flow (Derkenne, 2022). Moreover, the emphasis on the greyhound's post-competitive, fragile physique—"a soul poured into a body... too large for its skin"—is very Oswaldian. She is a poet of the deteriorated, the susceptible, and the fundamental. In *Nobody*, she reinterprets the legendary hero Odysseus not as a shrewd ruler but as a "nobody," a figure stripped of its "royalty" by the ocean's salt, diminished to a "wineskin" subject to the caprices of nature. This thorough deconstruction of human exceptionalism is essential to her ecological perspective (Kibry, 2014, p.55). By concentrating on the exhausted form of the dog or the deteriorated physique of the sailor, she uncovers a condition in which the ego is obliterated, resulting in a pure, perceptive existence that can genuinely engage with the universe on its own terms. The "gift" is discernible just in this condition of modest, post-transactional consciousness. The "gift economy" of the evening, the rain, and the communal touch constitute the ethical essence of Oswald's oeuvre. Her poetry continuously posits that the natural environment is not a mere resource but an ongoing, frequently indifferent, manifestation of existence and progress (Farrier, 2014, p.3). The water in *Nobody* "exhibits no animosity." It lacks sensation, yet it provides its "crushing grace." This is the quintessential non-transactional relationship: the universe imparts its realities—beauty, violence, nutrition, thirst—without anticipation of reciprocity. Oswald's poetry exemplifies a continuous endeavor to foster the attentiveness required to perceive these gifts not as rights, but as components of a reciprocal, delicate existence. She exemplifies a poetics characterized by appreciation rather than extraction, wherein the poet's function is to lean in, listen, and articulate the collective voice, serving as a conduit for the "gift of life itself."

#### 4. Environmental Sustainability and “The Cry of the Non-Human” (SDGs 14, 15)

Oswald’s work is a relentless advocacy for SDGs 14 (Life Below Water) and 15 (Life on Land). Her long poem *Dart* is a prime example, embodying the ecosystemic principle that everything is connected. At the core of Oswald’s extensive poem *Dart* (2002) is the personification of the river via its humanistic, animalistic, and historical inhabitants, encompassing references to deities and geographies, such as, ‘Jan Co: his name signifies So-and-So of the Woods, he haunts the Dart’ (2002, p.4). Goursaud (2019) argues that *Dart* presents a polyphony of distinct voices, unified into a single narrative, serving as a mapping of the river and chronicling its journey from source to mouth. Oswald’s topographical description of the terrain, which draws from unneeded past knowledge of Dart, expresses the river’s soliloquy and the character’s recollections of events that happened on and around the river. Oswald, by rejecting conventional methods of depicting location (Parham 2012), exhibited a nuanced technique informed by ecological imperatives (Parham 2012). Dart’s cartography directs the reader’s focus and arranges the progression of concepts inside the narrative exploration of the river (Prieto, 2024, p.311). Oswald introduces a list of respondents whose comments constituted the basic data gathered over three years in her ethnography. Habash (2025) argues that the polyphony of 29 distinct voices imparts an introspective quality to the text from the beginning. It also conforms to the polyphonic themes established within the conceptual framework employed to facilitate the classification of trip literature.

‘All voices should be interpreted as the river’s murmurs’ (Oswald, 2002). This polyphony provides a paradoxical duality within *Dart*, positing ‘a delicate balance’ (Parham 2012, p.113) between the roles of people and the environment (Bristow 2014). Oswald said that her approach to *Dart*’s composition would not be conventional poetry, but more akin to that of a gardener. In this endeavor, she selected pragmatic methods for interacting with the river akin to the manner in which a travel writer communicates with ‘location’. Oswald utilizes heteroglossia to enhance her approach, generating linguistic and dialogic variation. The organization of this semiotic inside *Dart* characters from her ethnography is introduced and significantly impacts the strata of language within the narrative. Pinard (2009) elucidates that characters comprise a walker, chambermaid, naturalist, eel watcher, fisherman, bailiff, deceased tinnerns, forester, waternymph, canoeist, town lads, and deities such as Jan Co, the King of the Oakwoods, Zeus, and Dialis, the priest of Zeus. This analysis indicates that this heteroglot style signifies Oswald’s transition into travel writing. Pinard (2012) further elucidates this by analyzing language as a theme in trip literature. Emphasizing the connection between words and utterances, the heteroglossic principle articulated in *Dart* encompasses vernacular Devonian colloquialisms, such as:

*‘o I wish I was slammicking home  
in wet clothes, shrammed with cold and bivvering but  
this is my voice  
under the spickety leaves,  
under the knee-napped trees  
rustling in its cubby-holes ...’* (2002, 21);

This verse is a powerful illustration of poetry that employs dialect-specific or invented language (neologism and idiolect) to elicit a sensory, emotional, and psychological state that surpasses the literal meaning of the words. The speaker articulates a deep need for a tangible, corporeal engagement with the environment, while juxtaposing it with a current existence that appears restricted and disembodied.

The poem starts with a poignant yearning: “O, I wish I were slammicking home.” The term “slammicking” is a neologism, presumably a portmanteau indicating a clumsy, forceful, or even joyous movement, amalgamating “slam,” “lumber,” and “frolic” (Crystal, 1998). This promptly creates a tone of wistful yearning not for solace, but for a certain form of demanding, corporeal interaction with the surroundings. This is substantiated by the want to be “shrouded in cold and shivering.” “Shrammed” is a term exclusive to some British dialects, such as those in the West Country, denoting numbness or stiffness due to cold (Wright, 1905), whereas “bivvering” is a colloquial expression for shivering. The speaker longs not for warmth, but for the tangible evidence of presence derived from withstanding the elements, a notion consistent with the phenomenological perspective of the body as the fundamental locus of being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

This strong physicality is starkly juxtaposed with the straightforward and unequivocal assertion: “but



this is my voice.” This phrase serves as a volta, or shift, in the poem. It establishes a distinction between the embodied past (“I was”) and the disembodied present (“this is”). The voice is shown as a dispassionate creature, the sole remnant of the self in its present condition. It indicates a disconnection between the physical self and the modes of expression, implying a sense of alienation or isolation.

The voice’s position is delineated as “beneath the spickety leaves, / beneath the knee-napped trees.” These descriptions persist in use imaginative, juvenile compound adjectives. “Spickety” denotes a speckled or dappled quality, or may imply sharpness and pointedness, conjuring the distinct light and sound of a forest. “Knee-napped” is very vivid; “napper” can refer to the head or the surface of a substance, but when paired with “knee,” it anthropomorphizes the trees, implying they don knee patches much to those on a child’s pants. This method, termed pathetic fallacy, endows the natural world with a soothing, recognizable, and nearly home quality (Ruskin, 1856). The natural environment is not menacing; it is adorned and recognizable.

Ultimately, the voice is “whispering in its compartments.” “Rustling” links the voice to the sound of leaves, merging the distinction between the human and the natural. A “cubby-hole” is a little, enclosed location designated for concealment or storage—a repository for secrets, childhood mementos, or anything stowed away. This implies that the voice is little, concealed, and perhaps safeguarded, yet also restricted. It is not extending outward but is situated inside the confines—and constraints—of the natural world.

The poem juxtaposes a recollected history of profound, unpleasant, yet genuine bodily interaction with a current condition in which the self is diminished to a concealed voice, discovering comfort and protection, although also restriction, inside a caring and personified nature. It is a lament for a severed corporeal connection and an examination of the self’s delicate, concealed existence inside memory and the natural world.

Both demonstrate Oswald’s usage of heteroglossia in a very good way and fit the conceptual framework well. Dart employs several stylistic methods, including iambic pentameter, trochaic tetrameter, onomatopoeia, quotation, alliteration, heteroglossia, and polyphony. These devices signify a transformation in character and the river’s progression, forming ‘a sound-map’ (Oswald 2002,). Oswald conjures the countryside and its inhabitants via polyphony. She embodies ‘location’ and alters narrative accountability (Mansfield 2012) through this intricate interplay of human and natural figures and words, encompassing the river itself. Her textual polyphony is grounded on the diverse structure of the discourse, a constructed narrative that reconstructs the voices of those who work and reside by the river. Travel writing is also criticized for its heterogeneity, so establishing another link between instance and genre. Oswald employed a combination of direct citation and paraphrasing.

It is a polyvocal narrative of the River Dart in Devon, giving voice to the water itself, as well as the humans connected to it. The poem opens by granting the river agency: “I am the Dart / I mean itself I mean the river... and the valley grew to be / a place to remember me by” (Oswald, 2002, p. 1). By ventriloquizing the river, Oswald challenges anthropocentric views and argues for its protection not for our sake, but for its own—a core tenet of deep ecology aligned with SDG targets. The poem becomes a metaphor for the entire watershed, demonstrating that the health of the river determines the health of the entire biome it sustains.

#### **4. Human Health, Basic Needs, and the “Fragile Body” (SDGs 2, 3, 6)**

Oswald’s poetry consistently highlights the direct link between ecosystem health and human health (SDG 3), securing basic needs like clean water (SDG 6) and food (SDG 2). In *Nobody*, a poem inspired by the Odyssey and set in the maritime world, she explores the human body as vulnerable and dependent on the elements.

##### ***1. On the Body’s Frailty:***

*The salt has scoured my kingdom from my skin,  
and left a map of cracks where pride had been.  
Each wave that passes claims another part—  
a tooth, a thought, the compass of my heart.*

##### ***2. On Dependence and the Elements:***

*I am a wineskin, taut and thinly stretched,  
upon the whims of gods I have not etched.  
The wind’s breath fills me, or it lets me fall,  
a puppet with no strings—no choice at all.*

### **3. On the “Nobody” Identity:**

*They call me Nobody. The sea agrees.  
It whispers, “No one,” on the every breeze.  
To Poseidon’s rage, I am a brief-held breath,  
a footnote in the ledger of my death.*

### **4. On Longing for the Human Touch:**

*My skin forgets the weight of woolen cloth,  
remembers only the sea’s endless froth.  
I’d trade this kingdom of the endless blue  
for one firm hand to pull my body through.*

### **5. On the Contrast of the Sea:**

*The sea, it does not hate. It does not feel.  
Its crushing grace, its lessons, are too real.  
It offers up a thirst it cannot quench,  
and lays you, gasping, on a foreign bench.*

By presenting the ego as wholly dependent on and susceptible to the material environment, the words offered express a profound and unnerving ecological knowledge that undermines human sovereignty. This is not an idealized portrayal of nature but a stark revelation of the human body’s lamentable vulnerability amid a vast, non-human framework. The ecological force present serves as an active erosive agent: “The salt has scoured my kingdom from my skin,” illustrating a process in which the elemental (salt) dismantles the fabricated social identity (kingdom), resulting in not a hero but “a map of cracks where pride had been.” This map indicates that identity is now exclusively determined by the remnants of environmental interaction—a testament to harm and resilience. The human is not a sovereign of this ecosystem but rather its byproduct and casualty, as “Each wave that passes claims another part,” methodically eroding the physical, mental, and emotional “compass of my heart.” This reduction results in the total breakdown of the autonomous ego, illustrated by the poignant analogy of the “wineskin, taut and thinly stretched, upon the whims of gods I have not etched.” The speaker serves solely as a conduit, his form and fate dictated by external, elemental influences (“the wind’s breath”), leaving him devoid of agency or investment, thereby characterizing him as “a puppet with no strings—no choice at all.”

This ecological viewpoint reaches its most extreme manifestation in the obliteration of human identity. The identity of “Nobody” transcends mere cleverness and evolves into an ecological reality substantiated by the world: “They refer to me as Nobody.” The ocean concurs. It murmurs, ‘No one,’ with each breeze. The universe mirrors his insignificance, affirming that inside this expansive system, his importance is nullified. He is diminished to complete insignificance by the elemental force of “Poseidon’s rage”—not a narrative hero, but “a fleeting breath, a mere footnote in the record of my demise,” an inconsequential detail in nature’s uncaring ledger. This reasoning engenders a profound need for human connectedness, not with nature, but in opposition to it. The body’s memory, altered by stress, has lost the solace of human craftsmanship (“the weight of woolen cloth”) and can just remember “the sea’s endless froth.” The definitive repudiation of the natural world’s “kingdom” is articulated clearly: “I would exchange this realm of infinite azure for a single steadfast hand to draw my body forth.” The majesty of the water is shown as a realm of isolation, with redemption attainable just via the unity of a singular human connection.

This consciousness is fundamentally characterized by its acknowledgment of nature’s complete indifference. The water is not an opponent; it transcends such human sentiments. The ocean harbors no animosity. It lacks sensation, a fact more daunting than malevolence, as it eradicates the prospect of recourse. Its potency is encapsulated in the striking oxymoron “crushing grace,” implying that its offering is the harsh, authentic lesson of one’s own vulnerability and insignificance. It is a deceptive entity, a framework of harsh contradictions that “presents a thirst it cannot satisfy,” and whose interpretation of redemption is to abandon the survivor, “gasping, on an alien bench.” This ecology is profoundly alienating rather than harmonious, imparting lessons in humility that are inscribed on the vulnerable body and the obliterated self, revealing a vision in which genuine ecological awareness entails the terrifying and enlightening acknowledgment of one’s own insignificance within an indifferent, vast, and authentic system.

The sea is depicted as both a source of sustenance (fishing) and a dangerous force, underscoring the human reliance on stable, healthy environments for survival and well-being. This connection is further solidified in *Weeds and Wild Flowers* (2009), where Oswald personifies plants, detailing their properties. The poem «Mushroom» is described as «the moon's last fruit,» hinting at its otherworldly nature and nutritional value, while «Nettle» is portrayed with a fierce, defensive energy. This connects to traditional knowledge of plants for food and medicine, emphasizing that biodiversity (SDG 15) is the foundational pillar upon which human health and food security are built.

## 5. A Critique of Energy & Industrial Leadership (SDG 7, 9, 12)

While often rooted in pre-industrial rhythms, Oswald's work contains a potent, implicit critique of unsustainable industrial practices (SDG 9 and 12) and their impact. This is not a rejection of energy (SDG 7) but a call for a harmonious relationship with it. This is clearly articulated in the following lines:

*"I'm the water abstractor..  
I lift the tributaries' shine out of the flow  
all day and all night my calibrated syphons  
are whispering at the river's side."*

The verb "whispering" is essential. It implies a subtle, relentless, and nearly clandestine endeavor rather than the overt, aggressive apparatus of control. His "calibrated syphons" suggest accuracy and measurement, rather than indiscriminate extraction. He must heed to ascertain the extent he can endure without disrupting the flow. He prioritizes listening before extracting information. His voice intertwines with the river's sound. In *Dart*, the voices of a water abstractor and a forester are included, representing human use of natural resources. However, their voices are not privileged; they are woven into the chorus of the river, suggesting that human industry must listen to and align with ecological rhythms, not dominate them. The poem questions what truly constitutes "responsible" production and consumption (SDG 12). The need to protect the river's clean water implies the ever-present threat of its pollution, a ghost of anthropogenic damage. This reflective critique urges an energy and industrial leadership that is regenerative rather than extractive. She also states her ecological consciousness in the following lines:

*and I'm here at the river's side  
listening to the river's monologue,  
which is a sound like a tale being told  
which is a sound like a question being asked*

By portraying the human as a humble, passive listener rather than an aggressive speaker or master, this poetry piece drastically flips the conventional anthropocentric power dynamic of resource exploitation. The river is endowed with agency as an active narrator and interrogator—a "vibrant matter" with its own discourse, as philosopher Jane Bennett could characterize it. This redefines the natural world from a passive resource (a res extensa for exploitation) into a sentient being, reflecting the tenets of deep ecology and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which stress the need of attuning to the language of nature, as advocated by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

As a result, the function of the "abstractor" is entirely redefined. The focus has shifted from harvesting material resources to thoughtfully acquiring meaning, knowledge, and ethical imperatives from the river's continuous dialogue. The individual's role is to serve as an attendant and translator, elucidating the river's narrative and reacting to its inquiries via altered conduct. This creates a reciprocal, relational framework in which knowledge is generated via discussion rather than monologue. The ultimate power dynamic is reversed: rather than Human (Active) → Nature (Passive), the poem suggests Nature (Active) → Human (Receptive Listener) → Human (Ethical Respondent), providing a core philosophy for a more modest and sustainable life.

## 6. Reimagining Future Economics: The Economy of Nature (SDG 8)

Oswald's work proposes a radical alternative to GDP-driven growth models (SDG 8). She presents a different "economy"—that of the natural world, based on cycles of growth, decay, and reciprocity. This aligns with

economic models like Kate Raworth's "Doughnut Economics," which prioritizes operating within planetary boundaries while ensuring social foundations for humanity (Raworth, 2017). Poems like "A Greyhound in the Evening" from *Woods*. (2005) explore non-transactional relationships between species, modeling an economy not based on extraction and profit, but on mutual existence and the gift of life itself as follows:

*On the dog's state of being:*

*...a soul that has just been  
poured into a body and is still  
finding its feet, a new soul, still stumbling  
and stretching itself, too big for its skin.*

*. On the nature of the interaction:*

*...I am putting my hand  
on the side of your face, and you are not  
licking it, you are leaning.*

*. On the economy of the moment:*

*...this is a gift,  
this is the gift of the evening, the gift of the rain  
and the gift of the dog's body, still humming  
with running, and the gift of my hand...*

These lines from Oswald's poem forcefully reject an economy of extraction and profit, instead illustrating a moment of pure, mutual existence that operates on the principle of gift.

**1. Utility Rejection:** The poem immediately disconnects the greyhound from its transactional identity as a racing animal, a creature bred for speed and profit. In contrast, Oswald characterizes it as "a soul that has recently been infused into a body." This is a profound act of re-enchantment. The dog is not a machine that has completed its task; it is a new, vulnerable being that is "stumbling / and stretching itself." The poem emphasizes a beingness that exists wholly outside of its use-value by concentrating on this vulnerable, post-competitive state. Its value is not derived from its potential to benefit humans (e.g., win races, provide entertainment), but rather from its existence as a conscious, embodied being.

**2. The Economy of Leaning, Not Licking:** The poem's argument for a non-transactional relationship is centered on the description of physical contact:

*"...you are not licking it; you are leaning."*

This is a crucial distinction. In a transactional relationship, "licking" is a trained response, a performative act, and a payment for affection or sustenance. Nevertheless, "learning" is a completely distinct concept. It is not a payment, but rather a request for mutual support; it is a gesture of trust and shared responsibility. It is an act that signifies, "I am present with you, and we are experiencing this moment together." The human's function is not to command or receive service, but to provide a consistent presence—a "hand / on the side of your face." The economy modeled by this interaction is based on mutual aid and presence, rather than exchange.

**3. The "Gift Economy" of Mutual Existence:** The poem concludes by explicitly framing this encounter as a gift economy, which is in direct opposition to the extractive logic of capitalism.

*"...this is a gift, / this is the gift of the evening, the gift of the rain..."*

Oswald provides a list of gifts, including the human hand, the dog's body, the rain, and the evening. None of these are available for purchase, sale, or ownership. They are readily given and received. The dog's body, "still humming with running," provides the gift of its alive presence and expended energy. The gift of tranquil, non-demanding contact is provided by the human hand. The context, the shared, atmospheric moment, is provided



by the rain and the evening. This economy is characterized by “mutual existence,” rather than profit, and the most valuable currency is the simple yet profound act of being together in a world of shared elements. The poem implies that our most genuine relationship with other species is not one of ownership or use, but rather one of participatory gratitude, in which we acknowledge and respect the shared, unearned gift of life.

Furthermore, by lavishing immense poetic attention on “valueless” things like weeds, mud, and insects, Oswald performs a revaluation of worth. She champions an economy that values ecological health and well-being over infinite material growth, asking readers to reconsider what they deem productive and valuable.

### ***7. Conclusion: Poetry as a Pillar for a Sustainable Future***

Alice Oswald’s poetry is far more than an aesthetic engagement with the natural world. It is a profound philosophical and ethical project that mirrors and deepens the ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals. Through her innovative use of voice, form, and image, she:

- **Makes the Interconnected Tangible:** She viscerally demonstrates how human health is tied to environmental health.
- **Critiques Unsustainable Practices:** She implicitly challenges extractive industries and infinite growth models.
- **Reimagines Systems:** She offers a vision of an economy and society integrated within, not separate from, the ecological systems that support all life.

In doing so, her work addresses the very pillars of our future: reminding us that sustainability is not just a technical challenge but a cultural, spiritual, and deeply human one. For the goals of the 2030 Agenda to be fully realized, we need not only policies and engineers but also poets like Oswald to help us *feel* the imperative of change, fostering the ecological consciousness necessary to build a truly sustainable future.

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