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■ THE ENDANGERED HORIZON IN ALICE OSWALD'S "DUNT: A POEM FOR A NEARLY DRIED-UP RIVER"

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U radu se analizira pesma Alis Osvald „Dunt: pesma za skoro isušenu reku“ u kojoj autorka ističe suprotnosti između klasičnog „presipanja“ i kulture, ispoljene kroz jezik, kao način postojanja i povezivanja, i kao deo prirode, koja je gotovo isušena. „Zamalo isušena“ nije samo jedna reka, već pristup klasičnoj kulturi, koju su Metju Arnold, C.S. Luis i Džon Raskin veličali da bi odbranili ne-naučne vidove ljudske prirode. „Dunt“ uspešno povezuje čitaoca sa tim svetom što traga za estetikom, a ne raspravom. Ponavljajući naredbu „pokušaj ponovo“, prikazuje pokušaj da sasluša to što skoro da više ne postoji. Oblikom imperativa odjekuje Hajdegerovo naređenje da saslušamo prirodu stvari, uprkos pokušaju savremenog napretka da ih uništi i prikrije njihovu sposobnost da „razasjavaju“ svet – zamalo da ih isuše.

Ključne reči: Dunt, Alis Osvald, nauka, priroda, kultura, klasično, viktorijanski mislioci, Hajdeger.

To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole
– Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

1. INTRODUCTION

There are dangers in finding one's way in any new atmosphere, especially one where the common horizon is riddled with alienation and forgetfulness. Though such a new atmosphere seems to have originated with Heidegger, who opened the possibilities of letting the language of art speak for itself and potentially recall us to ourselves, "following one's own path" in this atmosphere "does not come easy"

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(Gadamer 2001:125). Alice Oswald², in "Dunt: a poem for a nearly-dried up river",³ follows an aural path, with references to speech and sound that are repeated – rather like how translators rework words again and again in the attempt to get it right, until the poem cedes to outpourings of fluency and establishes connections: re-membling a horizon. There is an implied dialectic in approaching the idea of belonging in terms of *hearing*, because while we can look away, we cannot hear away (Gadamer 2004: 458). Along these lines, in response to the question of whether Oswald considered "Dunt" to be a political poem for an environmentally destitute time (a question with Heideggerian associations: Heidegger looks to poets in a "destitute time"; Heidegger 2001: 91-92), Oswald herself has said that she instead considers it exemplary of "polyphonic democracy" (Armistead; emphasis added).

The dialectic approach taken in the poem, with its repeated directive "try again", echoes the Heideggerian injunction to give a hearing to the nature of things (Heidegger 2001: 168), and exemplifies the transformative nature of the dialogue of tradition that is nearly dried-up.

On the surface, "Dunt", which won the Forward Prize for best single poem in 2007, is a multi-cultural poem: written for a British river through the mediation of a Roman statuette fashioned after the Grecian concept of what a nymph is. But to explain the poem that way is merely to be left with "abstract categories", of the kind that Erich Auerbach warns are inadequate points of departure, only to be used "when their meaning is made clear in a specific context". Here, our context has yet to be elaborated. And while this introduction may appear to be unnecessarily elaborate, it is being written to pass on a lamp of tradition⁴ as an aid to the dying breed of the philologist: Auerbach writes, "What is being studied should *speak for itself*, but that can never happen if the point of departure is neither concrete nor clearly defined" (Auerbach: 16).⁵ So, to borrow an injunction from Oswald's "Dunt", we are to "Try again".

2 Alice Oswald read Classics at New College, Oxford. She is known for her interests in ecology and music and for her emphasis on the importance of reading poetry aloud. Oswald's collections of poetry include: *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996), which received a Forward Poetry Prize for Best First Collection; *Dart* (2002), the result of research into the history, environment, and community along the River Dart in Devon – and which is the source of the poem considered in this paper; *Woods, etc.* (2005), winner of a Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize; *Weeds and Wild Flowers* (2009); *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009); *Memorial* (2011), a reworking of Homer's *Iliad* that has received critical praise and won the 2013 Warwick Prize for writing (marking the first time a poet won that prize), and *Falling Awake* (2016), which won the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2017.

3 The version of the poem consulted in this paper is: Alice Oswald, "Dunt a poem for a nearly dried-up river", *Agni*, No. 64 (2006: 52-54). It is noted that extant versions differ: the one cited here, for example, employs capitalizations differently.

4 λαμπάδια ἔχοντες διαδῶσουσιν ἀλλήλοις ἀμιλλώμενοι τοῖς ἵπποις: enlightenment is passed on to others. So, without people as a medium, knowledge could not be passed on. See Plato (1903: 328a). Also note the context in which this passing on appears: "could you persuade us ... if we refused to listen?" "Nohow" (Plato 1969: 327c).

5 Emphasis added. This quotation is also added to warn of a "multicultural" approach to literature, which too quickly falls victim to "levelling" and "standardization" as Auerbach warns in this same essay (Auerbach: 2).

2. THE SUBJECT OF "DUNT"

"Dunt" takes as its focus a Roman statuette of a Greek water nymph, describing her as attempting to call forth water from stone to the British River Dunt. The poem is punctuated by directives ("Try again"; "Yes"; "Go on"), which serve not just as interjections encouraging this summoning, but to highlight the point in the poem where first water, then the river, together with the accoutrements and actions accompanying river life, are finally depicted. The directives are indicative of a great effort that is made in the poem – eight times in "Dunt" does the goddess try to "summon river out of limestone". While literary editor Claire Armistead writes that "it unfolds like a cry of environmental despair" due to this attempt to summon a river, and wonders if the poem was "intentionally political" (Armistead), we shall see that this effort is better compared to the "great effort" Giambattista Vico describes is necessary in order to understand natures "which we cannot at all imagine" (Vico: 89) – that of an ancient river nymph, that of a river.

To help with this imagining, it may be said that the River Dunt, sometimes referred to as the Dunt, or Dun, brook or stream, is located in a small valley, which implies that it was never a great river, but always a tributary running through Daglingworth into the Churn, although the section near to Daglingworth indicates that it had been fast moving during Roman times, and there is evidence that that waterway had been filled in (Rogers: 57-8).⁶ Oswald moved to its vicinity after having lived alongside a far greater river, "the kind that drowns people" – the Dart, and considered it "thirsty" by comparison, until one day when she happened upon a tiny figurine of a water nymph in the Corinium Museum:

I spent a couple of hours looking at the water nymph and bought a postcard in order to keep looking at her. Then I drove home and when I rounded the last corner into the Dunt valley, it had changed. The river was still small, but the energy of its water was visible everywhere: a kind of downward suction, like a long inhalation of the sea drawing everything towards it. What had happened, I suppose, was that the water nymph ... had brought me back to the present. It had updated my imagination... (Oswald: 2013)

Oswald had spent hours looking at the statuette: for how can we imagine the convergence of nature – specifically that of a river – and a water nymph without making a "great effort"? Oswald has said: "The Greeks called anything they didn't understand a nymph. It could be a tree or a river. I don't think it meant a picturesque woman at all. They lived on this hypothetical level" (Oswald: 2013). John Ruskin explains that the ancient Greeks saw gods and nature as indivisible: "What sympathy and fellowship [the Greek] had, were always for the spirit *in* the stream, not for the stream" (Ruskin: 88

6 The Daglingworth Brook was divided amongst five Domesday manors, all called Duntisbourne (Dunt 's-burna = Dunt's stream), and thus indicative of an early unity in its own right. See also Verey: 92, which describes the Dunt as a river tributary with own private valley. For uses of "brook" and "stream" see especially McWhirr: 200.

and 80).⁷ He cites an instance in the *Iliad*, pertaining the Scamander river's defense of the Trojans against Achilles, which demonstrates that the ruling spirit and the thing ruled represent the actual qualities of the object. The object is ultimately understood verbally: Ruskin continues, "the spirit of classical landscape has hardly been expressed in any other way than by words" (Ruskin: 76).

In this respect, Oswald's poem reads almost like a manual to remembering how to reach the classical landscape through the aurality of words – and has spoken, if indirectly, about the Heideggerian daring to metaphorically reclaim things from objectification, to reconnect with the existence of life around us.⁸ She has said: "I admire anyone who dares, by means of metaphor (and all language is rooted in metaphor), to communicate with something that isn't human. ... it's an effort ... to make contact with something inscrutable" (Oswald: 2013).

3. THE BID TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE INSCRUTABLE AND UNHEARD

The contact with the inscrutable in "Dunt" can be seen in the mysterious parallels that emerge between the figurine and the river in the middle of the poem:

Little shuffling sound as of a nearly dried-up woman,
not really moving through the fields,
having had the gleam taken out of her
to the point where she resembles twilight. Try again.

The river nymph seems to metamorphose into the river because it assimilates her attributes:

Little hobbling tripping of a nearly dried-up river
not really moving through the fields,
having had the gleam taken out of it
to the point where it resembles twilight.
Little grumbling shivering last-ditch attempt at a river
more nettles than water. Try again.

7 "It cannot be the ... water ... that is wayward. But it must be something *in* this water ... So there may be a power in the water which is not water, but to which the water is as a body; - which can strike with it, move in it, suffer in it, yet not be destroyed with it. This something, this Great Water Spirit, must not confuse with the waves, which are only its body. *They* may flow hither and thither, increase or diminish. *That* must be invisible – imperishable – a god" for "the Greek never removed himself out of nature at all ... Content with this human sympathy, he approached the actual waves and woody fibres with no sympathy at all".

8 Heidegger writes that to be daring is to "dare language" (Heidegger 2001: 129). This can also mean, focus on the gathering property of things. "To sing, truly to say worldly existence ... means: to belong to the precinct ... [which], as the very nature of language, is Being itself" (ibid: 135).

The injunction to "Try again" after these enfeebled passages is reminiscent of the task of dialectic as described by Gadamer, which "consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength" (Gadamer 2004: 361). Thus the subsequent emphasis in the river's "struggling to keep up with what's already gone" is on its onetime attributes: "the boat the wheel the sluice gate,/ the two otters larricking along." This section ends with the encouraging injunction, "Go on." But although the poem gives a hearing to the strengths of the river and the river nymph, it also establishes that such a hearing is not a given.

Just as Heidegger writes that in the modern age of technology, "the nature of the thing ... never gets a hearing" (Heidegger 2001: 168), remaining concealed and forgotten, Oswald's nymph at the beginning of the poem has "lost the hearing of her surroundings". And just as science cannot "reveal to us the reality of the jug" (ibid: 169), the reality of the pocket goddess can be *concealed* behind the glass case of knowledge on exhibit: "Year after year in a sealed glass case,/ having lost the hearing of her surroundings ... Year after year in a sealed glass case", the water nymph made of bone is "the last known speaker of her language".

"The last known speaker of her language, she tries to summon a river out of limestone". What is next emitted are "little distant sound of dry grass." The nymph "very endangered now" next tries "in a largely unintelligible monotone" to summon the river. She "seemingly has no voice". The voice then cedes to action – which then leads to the first instance where the directive changes from "Try again" to an affirmative "Yes". The ensuing subtle shift in the poem, where the statuette now "tries leaning, pouring pure outwardness from a grey urn", yields to more generous dimensions of thought, almost Heideggerian in its explication of the urn, or thing.

Heidegger's essay "The Thing" focuses on an urn – a jug, to be exact. The urn's urn character:

consists in the poured gift of the pouring out ... the gift of the outpouring is what makes the jug a jug ... To pour a gush, when it is achieved in its essence, thought through with sufficient generosity, and genuinely uttered, is to donate, to offer in sacrifice, and hence to give. ... In the gift of the outpouring earth and sky, divinities and mortals dwell together all at once ... Our language denotes what a gathering is by an ancient word. That word is: thing. (Heidegger 2001: 170-171)

This "thing" becomes the gathering focus of "who to pray to" of a "shut-away congregation" in the poem. It is a thing, not an abstraction, that becomes united with more timeless, ineffable aspects of existence – though this is no instance of what Ruskin has called "corrupt" or incomplete materialism (Ruskin: 81). By this stage in "Dunt", the sounds of dry grass are that much louder: in "little distant sounds of shut-away singing". This "singing" in the poem about a thing dares language, which Heidegger proposes is what poets are for (Heidegger 2001: 113). In the space of the obstructed Open, man himself and his things are exposed to the growing danger of turning into mere material and into a function of objectification – to be used up (Heidegger 2001: 113). Yet in the rescue from that space to interiority of the world's inner space that unbars the Open (Heidegger 2001: 127-128), man has a chance to say "to a greater

degree", "in the manner of the singing" which is "turned away from all purposeful self-assertion" (Heidegger 2001: 135).

This interiority is only reached through "great effort" – one is reminded of the difficult legacy of the humanities that many argue have become "very endangered" since the bifurcation of knowledge into two streams,⁹ like the almost-dried up Dunt and the abundant River Churn that runs parallel to it, and into which it ultimately flows. The drying up of a shared stream of knowledge is related to the loss of a shared metaphysical horizon, which has produced a forgetfulness of being.

4. INSCRUTABLE HORIZONS GAINED THROUGH DIALECTIC, NOT ARGUMENT

To find one's way in this new atmosphere by arguing with the "two cultures" argument (science vs. the humanities – see footnote above) would only work to strengthen that argument, just as the "romantic reversal of the Enlightenment's criteria of value actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason" (see Gadamer 2004: 275). Oswald has said that "the job of poetry is to change the aesthetic rather than to challenge the system" (Armistead), which corresponds to the technique Plato used in the *Meno*, which overcomes the argument of the Sophists by appealing to myth instead of by superior argument based on logic (Gadamer 2004: 340). This dialectic approach "is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter)" (Gadamer 2004: 361). In "Dunt", the subject matter is a single picture uniting the "human and the non-human" of the relatable female aspect of a river nymph and a river (Porter).

Oswald's understanding of what it means to be a nature poet essentially points to dialectic. She has said: "If the phrase must be used, then a nature poet is someone concerned with things being outside each other. How should extrinsic forms, man and

9 C. P. Snow in 1956 in "The Two Cultures" most recently and famously contrasted "the traditional culture, which is, of course, mainly literary" with "the scientific culture", arguing that both humanists and scientists should be at least fundamentally conversant with the rudiments of each culture. The essay had its precedents, most notably, Thomas Huxley's 1880 lecture, "Science and Culture", and Arnold's response, in "Literature and Science", which he later developed in a paper by the same name to refute the claim that science is effectual as literary education when it came to "attaining real culture" by arguing for the human need of "relating what we have learnt and known to the sense which we have in us for conduct ... for beauty". C. S. Lewis' "The Abolition of Man" similarly writes that men who have sacrificed their own share in traditional humanity in order to devote themselves to the task of deciding what "humanity" should mean have given up their soul for power in a "magician's bargain". In a Heideggerian chiasmus, he writes that the being (man) who stood to gain becomes equivalent to the being who has been sacrificed. Like Arnold, he writes that those who stand outside of all judgments of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their own impulses to another except through the emotional (i.e. not rational) strength of that impulse. What Lewis and Arnold (and also Ruskin) share in common with Oswald is a classical education at Oxford (C. P. Snow also studied there, but not the classics – though he was enough of a humanist to be moved to write).

earth for example, come into contact?" (cited in Pinard: 26). The directives she gives in "Dunt" ("Try again"; "Go on") guide the understanding both of such ontological concerns and of the quondam mediative role of the Greek-Roman water nymph. "Knowing a primal history is not ferreting out the primitive and collecting bones", Heidegger writes – in a sentence that happens to echo throughout "Dunt": the word "bone" appears eight times, mostly in the phrase, "a Roman water nymph made of bone". Heidegger writes that to know a primal history – which the nymph figurine could be said to represent – "is neither half nor whole natural science but, if it is anything at all, it is mythology" (Heidegger 2000: 166).

Oswald has discussed the mythological dimensions of a tradition: "a water nymph is not some kind of a literary personification of water, nor is it a liquefaction of women, but it's an effort, driven by an absolute need, to make contact with something inscrutable" (Oswald: 2013). This effort is expressed in "Dunt", in which a natural, so physical, dimension of metamorphosis unfolds, where concentration on the figurine of a river nymph yields an imaginative outpouring (or "gush", to use another Heideggerian term)¹⁰ of words about an abundant river. But this is not mere sophistry, for Oswald has explained that:

if you spend a lot of time outside you just do encounter things in a way that's somewhere between the human and what they are. And it feels very real, it's not something that's problematic, or literary or self-conscious. (Cited in Cox)

In this way, remembering what was said earlier about the Greek view of gods *in nature*, "Dunt" teaches us "the most radical historical knowledge": showing us how to "find entry into the Greek world" to bring us "face to face with the unfamiliarity" of this way of relating to language and nature – and is completely free of "uncreative imitation" (Heidegger 2000: 133).¹¹ Which is a rather elaborate way of saying: assimilate the strangeness of the ancient world into one's own original horizon.

5. THE HORIZON, DULLED AND CAST DOWN

Towards the end of the poem, the last of the repetitions is followed by descriptions reminiscent of earlier lines (specifically, "having had the gleam taken out of it/ to the point where it resembles twilight") that become updated to something familiar in the modern world:

¹⁰ Again, "To pour a gush, when it is achieved in its essence, thought through with sufficient generosity, and genuinely uttered" in the gift of the outpouring that makes a jug a jug, "is to donate, to offer in sacrifice, and hence to give" (Heidegger 2001: 170-1).

¹¹ Also see as an example of "radical historical knowledge" of an Aristotelian principle in *Nicomachean Ethics* (which is in turn a reworking of a Delphic saying) Matthew Arnold's view when he writes: "our hold upon the rule or standard to which we look for our one thing needful tends to become less and less near and vital, our conception of it more and more mechanical, and more and more unlike the thing itself as it was conceived in the mind where it originated" (Arnold: 110).

Little stoved-in, sucked-thin
low-burning glint of stones,
rough-sleeping and trembling and clinging to its rights.
Victim of Swindon.
Puddle midden.

The familiarity is the urban plight of homelessness; displacement, refuse.

A Heraclitean line featured in Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* reads: "the most beautiful world is like a dungheap, cast down in shambles", which in Heidegger's gloss means that because the most beautiful world is concealed, it can only be seen by the strong (Heidegger 2000: 142). The river in "Dunt" is described in similar terms: "Puddle midden./ Slums of overgreened foot-churns and pats". But we know that the strong can see past the confines of the present, the threat of the danger of objects and objectification, the cultural aridity where no one speaks the language of the ancient nymphs anymore because Greek and Latin are no longer required subjects and the past is presented as a dungheap...

6. REGENERATION REACHED THROUGH THE ATTEMPT TO 'GIVE A HEARING'

Through practiced repetition and effort, the last of the repetitions are updated ("struggling to keep up with what's already gone") to finally yield to abundant fluency: to the larricking of the animal world and ultimately to people gushing about floods: "And they say oh they say/ in the days of better rainfall/ it would flood through five valleys, there'd be cows and milking stools". By giving the river a hearing, the foot-churns and pats cede to cows and milking stools – a gift to he who listens. The true essence of hearing is that it opens up to those among the living the depths of tradition. Gadamer thus values hearing as paramount among the senses: "The primacy of hearing over seeing is due to the universality of the *logos*, which does not contradict the specific primacy of sight over all the other senses" (Gadamer 2004: 491).¹² This can also be explained in another way.

Oswald has said that, "if you want to look at something in a way that takes on board what it is rather than just projecting what you think it is ... you come halfway to meet it". Her comment corresponds to what Gadamer has written of the dialectical method: "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (Gadamer 2004: 371). To put this in terms already visited in this paper, to reach an understanding is also to "give a

12 In other words, while seeing can "supply for the primary wants of life", hearing "contributes most to the growth of intelligence" (Aristotle: 1.I.). Gadamer continues: "This difference between seeing and hearing is important for us because the primacy of hearing is the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon, as Aristotle saw" (Gadamer 2004: 458). Gadamer's footnote reads: "The primacy of hearing over seeing is due to the universality of the *logos*, which does not contradict the specific primacy of sight over all the other senses".

hearing" to others. Oswald has written that "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?' And if, for example, I want to write a poem about water, I try to listen so hard that my voice disappears and I speak water" (cited in Pinard: 26).

Homer – Oswald's favourite poet for transmitting life without mediation¹³ – is a model writer in terms of not obliterating the speakers of multiple viewpoints; a model writer in terms of what Oswald has called "polyphonic democracy". Alexander Pope in the introduction to his translation of the *Iliad* wrote that "Homer makes us hearers" because readers, upon reading his works, do not think of the author himself (Pope: xvi). This same point was espoused by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: "Homer deserves praise for many things and especially for this, that alone of all poets he does not fail to understand what he ought to do himself. The poet should speak as seldom as possible in his own character, since he is not 'representing' the story in that sense" (Aristotle: 1460a). W. H. Fyfe clarifies this point by explaining that Homer, unlike other poets, represents life by assuming characters other than his own, and cites Ridgeway who pointed out that in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Homer "speaks himself" only 24 lines" (ibid).

Thus the polyphonic ideal could be said to involve giving a hearing to others, bringing – to quote Oswald – "living things unmediated into the text" (cited in Pinard: 23). Where modern science "always wants to become master over its object by means of a method and thus excludes that mutuality of participation existing between object and subject", that very mutuality is representative of the classical ideal¹⁴ that makes possible "our participation in the beautiful, the good and the just, *as well as in the values of communal human life*" (Gadamer 2001: 69-70). In the ancient ideal, "the essence of knowledge is the dialogue and not the mastery of objects comprehended as proceeding from an autonomous subjectivity, that victory of modern science that has even in a certain sense led to the end of metaphysics" (Gadamer 2001: 70).

Mutuality, or "coming half way" to meet things is characteristic of polyphonic democracy, which could also be described as holistic, to reference Heidegger, or as an example of "regenerate science", to quote Lewis. Heidegger writes that poets recall the "unwholesomeness" of the world "into a sound whole ... [singing] the healing whole in the midst of the unholy" – again, in the midst of a world that threatens to turn man and his things into mere material and a function of objectification (Heidegger 2001: 109-

13 See Oswald cited Pinard: "I'm so in love with what Homer does. He just transmits life. No mediation. He describes a leaf and you don't get a description of a leaf, you get a proper leaf. That's always been my principle. You've got to make something living". Also see Cox, where Oswald explains she mostly read Homer at Oxford, and says: "what I responded to partly in Homer was the feeling that it was all very much *in the present moment*. There's something about the language that is both being made spontaneously in the present, because that's how it's composed, but also that has a very *straightforward*, luminous way of looking, which doesn't get bogged down". Emphasis added. Similarly Ruskin writes that Homer's poetry is "descriptive of pure physical nature" and unmitigated by the abstract feelings projected by modern writers (Ruskin: 77).

14 While Gadamer is specifically addressing ancient Greek thought here, the idea is applicable to the concept of the "classical" more generally speaking, where "classical" is used in a normative sense, to refer to a specific stylistic ideal, or time or period that fulfilled this ideal. See Gadamer: 288.

112).¹⁵ Similarly, as a counterpoint to the threat to man posed by modern science, Lewis imagined a new Natural Philosophy, which he termed "regenerate science": "When it explained it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole" (Lewis: 30). This is to say that a Roman water nymph made of bone can speak of the whole of the river she represents.

Though the ending of "Dunt" reveals that it is the same almost dried-up river painted at the beginning – a "fish path with nearly no fish in", anyone who has heard the larricking it inspired can no longer hear away. "Dunt" is thus a lesson in dialectic, teaching us that: "The true method was an action of the thing itself" (Gadamer 2004: 459) – things which, like the hearts of so many people, only ask that they be given a hearing.

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15 Curiously, Ruskin described this very same impoverishment of the modern mind, explaining – as seen above in footnote 21 – that to see nature materialistically is to "degrade" a 'more mutual' conception – and is an *incomplete* view.

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