

PD02 - Dustsceawung - An Old English word for "Meditate on death"?

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"Dustsceawung"

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The beguiling Old English word *dustsceawung* is typically translated as “the contemplation of dust,” although its full potential is certainly far richer and more complex than what those few words convey. To take a glance at some of this word’s depths, at *Guernica* magazine, the poet Maya C. Popa wrote that it means “the acknowledgment of dust as once having been other things, living beings or civilizations past,” adding that “dust requires us to confront our own transience and eventual anonymity, and doing so demands a flexible, inventive use of language.” The nonfiction writer Adam Nicolson poetically defined it as “the daydream of a mind strung between past and present.”

To our modern ears, a word that is all about staring at dust might sound hopelessly strange and archaic. Perhaps this is why, for poet Jane Zwart, who wrote a poem entitled “Dust-sceawung,” the word is evidence of just how much language has managed to name—if a word like this exists, then can anything not have a name? As she told Franchesca Viaud, who interviewed her for the *Massachusetts Review*:

Quote

That is the kind of amazing lexical gem that makes me think, for a second, that there’s a word for every single thing. I know that’s not really true . . . [b]ut it is true that there are names for a staggering number of things: for tailors’ scraps (carbage!), for the thin ring of light that an eclipse leaks (halation!), for the seed pods that helicopter down from maples (samaras!). I spend a lot of time, in fact, looking for the names of such things when I’m writing. . . . I want my students to get into that habit, too. I want them to understand that so much of language springs just from someone paying exquisite

attention to something and wanting to do that something.

It is strange to think that people living in the medieval era had already grown so comfortable with the way that dust forms the common factor of all things that they had a word for it, and stranger still to think that at some point English lost that word and we no longer have it—that we must look back through the centuries to rekindle our fascination with dust. *Dustsceawung* offers an opportunity to consider all the notions our language has chosen to keep, and which ones it has let fall by the wayside. It is an entry point to questions about what our culture values enough to preserve and what we see the value in paying attention to.

Let's pay a little more attention to dust for a moment. As the South Korean scholar and translator Sung-Il Lee puts it in an essay, the core of the concept of *dustsceawung* is "the thought that all existing things, including men and women, will eventually turn into dust." Stop and think about that (it may be an uncomfortable thought). This cosmic word tells us that, on a long enough timescale, everything will turn into dust, and dust will turn into everything. It's downright terrifying to imagine it, in that way the Borgesian can sometimes have of bending toward horror.

It's impossible to know just what thoughts and connotations *dustsceawung* would have brought to mind to a speaker of Old English, but Lee instructs us that it was associated with themes of mutability, transience, decay, and ruins. In our own time, the invocation of dust conjures up very different images—those of the cosmos: the massive, beautiful nebulae that stars are born in, the disc of dust that our solar system accreted from, the dust clouds that turn into the spectacular vision of Saturn's rings, and the stardust that emerged from stellar explosions, forming the higher elements without which development of complex life forms would be impossible. Dust connects some of the tiniest objects in our universe to some of the largest.

dustsceawung = pronounced "dust-shay-a-wung")