

## THE EVELYN UNDERHILL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

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### THE NOTE OF FAILURE IN THE SYMPHONY OF GRACE: READING EVELYN UNDERHILL'S THEOPHANIES

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A modern reader coming to *Theophanies* is bound to be put off by the Edwardian conventionality of rhythm and music and by the tendentiousness of those poems on explicitly spiritual--especially neo-platonic--themes. But buried among these unsatisfactory efforts are flashes of genuine and original insights, where we see Underhill testing and using her gift for imaging, in homely terms, what she perceived as the presence and pull of God's love in the world.

For example, the poem entitled "In the Train" contrasts the ardor and excitement of her own vision with the blindness of those around her. Beginning "O Train full of blind eyes, rushing through the world," it goes on to sketch out in vivid, positively sensual imagery the poet's imaginative communion with the meadow outside--"it and I, close locked in passionate embrace"

And the moist ridged field gives itself up to me, all the life of it...  
I know the supple curves of resilient bramble  
The obstinate plait of the thicket...."

The identity between this union and the experience of prayer becomes more explicit, less satisfyingly poetic, as the poem goes on. But these opening images offer a glimpse into the passionate soul of this writer at this early stage of her spiritual development, beginning to test and own her particular gift of visionary perception.

Other such personal glimpses come in poems that seem to have grown out of holidays with Hubert Stuart Moore and with her family. For example in "Continuous Voyage," inspired by her many yachting holidays with them, we get a feel for Underhill's simple openness to pleasure and her buried spiritual passions. It begins

At twilight, when I lean the gunwale o'er  
And watch the water turning from the bow,  
I sometimes think the best is here and now,  
The voyage all, and nought the hidden shore.

Though the blank verse forms of "In the Train" may seem more congenial to our post-modernist ears, the orderly rhymes and meter here provide an appropriate form for this tranquil appreciation of the beauty of a moment on a yacht at twilight. But the form becomes more irregular as the poem develops the image of the boat sailing before the wind as a reflection of the poet's longing to surrender to the rushing wind of the Divine love. The poet's Romantic

longing for what the poem calls "the steep, great billow of (God's ) love" strains against the tranquility of the opening lines, much as Underhill's own inner ardor must have strained against the social obligations and responsibilities imposed by those early years of her married life and growing professional success.

The sea recurs in **Theophanies** to image states of spiritual receptiveness and dryness. "High Tide" begins with the longing prayer, "Flood thou my soul with thy great quietness..." and goes on to develop an analogy between the waiting soul and tidal pools that come quietly to life as the rising tide flows into them. This longing for invasion by the distant sea of divine love--an image Underhill took from her study of the mystic tradition and made her own--is vividly expressed in the ending stanza of "Thought's a Strange Land," one of the better poems in this volume:

There's news to be had in the marshes---  
A salted wind, sharp taste of the hidden wave:  
There on the fringes of thought when the night is falling  
I'll wait the invading tide.

Most of Underhill's poems prove disappointing because they begin with a concrete image and then wander from there into more or less explicit versified meditations on spiritual principles. The gems are those few that stay with a single image and so develop and communicate Underhill's special gift of seeing, for example, her appreciation of a blooming snowdrop in "Forest Epiphany" or the homely image of divine nurture explored in "The Thrush." Anyone in search of fresh feminine images of God--especially images with roots in a long tradition--can do far worse than the simple quatrain that Underhill entitles "NIHIL LONGE DEO" (nothing is far from God):

As sleeping infants in their dream despair,  
We range, and grope thy breast;  
But wake to find that haven everywhere  
And we already blest.

**Theophanies** closes with a poem entitled "Invocation," which laments the inadequacies of the poet's gifts. Although this sort of lament is a familiar convention of love poetry and sometimes of devotional poetry, we can also see in it Underhill's own real awareness of the inadequacy of her gifts as a poetic artist. "Invocation" offers a rueful self-critique by acknowledging this disparity between vision and skill: "Though every sense cry out thy Name/ My song may not declare the same." Yet the glimpse into this highly original imagination offered by some of the poems in **Theophanies** answers the closing prayer of "Invocation," -- also the closing words of this volume, and of Underhill's career as a poet.

Within they mighty metric span  
My faltering son do thou enfold:  
That in thy symphony of grace  
The note of failure find its place.

\*Kathleen Henderson Staudt teaches at Wesley Seminary and Virginia Theological Seminary and is author of a book on the English Catholic poet David Jones.

## EVELYN UNDERHILL: MIDDLE-WAY WITHIN THE VIA MEDIA ?

Todd E. Johnson\*

" 'Souls who live an heroic spiritual life within great religious traditions and institutions, attain a rare volume and vividness of religious insight, conviction and reality'--far more seldom achieved by the religious individualist." Evelyn Underhill applied this quote of Baron von Hugel to the Oxford Tractarians and their spiritual revitalization of the Church of England. As Underhill describes the work of the Tractarians--those heroic souls whose vision of a church filled with mystery and awe created a renaissance within Anglicanism--one is struck by the similarity to her own life almost a century later. Underhill describes the Tractarians as restoring a sense of the Catholic tradition to the church, of reviving liturgical and sacramental worship, advocating a disciplined life, and emphasizing Christian sanctity. The examples of Underhill's writings which square nicely with each of these four areas are numerous. However the context in which they were written was very different.

The Anglican communion is often described as a *via media*--a middle-way between the Roman Catholic tradition and the Protestant reformation. Yet within the church of England in Underhill's day there were various theological schools, a variety of liturgical fashions, and sharp disagreement over the essentials of the faith. It becomes clear when examining these issues that Underhill steers an irenic middle way through the turbulent waters of her day.

The most obvious division within the Anglican communion was over worship. At the turn of the century Anglican worship styles ranged from simple "Evangelical" worship with an emphasis on preaching and hymnody to elaborate "Anglo-Catholic" worship reflecting the Catholic tradition both past and present. The result of this variety of worship styles and their supporting theologies led to the attempted revision of the Book of Common Prayer in both 1927 and again in 1928. No revision was found to be 'common' or acceptable to all of the camps within the church, failing to create the unity sought. Controversial issues were over the reservation of the Eucharistic elements, whether the principal Sunday service should be Morning prayer or Eucharist, and the form of consecration used in the Eucharistic prayer, either the Words of Institution or the *epiclesis*, a prayer invoking the Holy Spirit upon the elements as in the Eastern liturgies.

Although Underhill's preferences were squarely within the Anglo-Catholic camp, she showed a breadth of appreciation seldom seen in her day. Her work **Worship** is a strong defense for the validity of all forms of worship, which still emphasizing the primacy of the traditional and the sacramental. Likewise, she was a public advocate of Prayer Book reform, yet she hoped to keep both Morning Prayer and Eucharist as complementary services, striking a healthy balance between Word and Sacrament.

Underhill's most unique contribution to these issues was her understanding of the Eucharist. Like the "sacramental socialist," she saw the Eucharist as being an offering of one's self for the service of God. Yet she is clear that the best way to fulfill the Second Commandment is to fulfill the First. She clearly saw Anglican worship as "Catholic", but her understanding of this term covered the Catholic church ancient, medieval and modern, Eastern and Western. In fact it is through her understanding of the liturgies of the Eastern church that she recovers the presence of the Spirit in the liturgy, avoiding controversial pitfalls involving the presence of Christ. Underhill's most astute political and theological middle-ground is found in the issue of consecration. While an advocate of the recovery of an **epiclesis** in the liturgy, she maintains that it is neither the **epiclesis** nor the words of Institution which consecrate, and quotes St. John Chrysostom in arguing that it is the entire act of offering which makes both the gift and the givers sacred.

In a time when the Church of England was distinguished by its political and theological controversies, Evelyn Underhill charts a steady path through these conflicts in such a way that she both distilled the vast riches of the Christian tradition into manageable categories, as well as synthesized disparate views and defined a middle-ground on which both mutual understanding and dialogue could be founded. Underhill in her day, like the Tractarians before her, attained that rare perspective of religious insight that came from constructing her theology within the Anglican communion in a most tempestuous period.

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\*\*\*\*NEWS AND NOTES\*\*\*\*

Peter Gorday, Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta GA., is working on a thesis on Underhill and von Hugel.

Delroy Oberg's excellent **Daily Readings with a Modern Mystic: Selections from the Writings of Evelyn Underhill** is now available through 23rd Publications, \$ 9.95.

Grace Brame will lead a retreat on Underhill at the Kirkridge Retreat Center in PA on March 4-6, 1994. She hopes to present a paper on Underhill at the College Theology Society meeting in May 1994.