



The Evelyn Underhill

Association Newsletter 2013-2014



Annual Day of Quiet Reflection
Saturday, June 21, 2014 9:30am - 3:30pm
Sayre House
The Washington National Cathedral

“The Poet as Mystic; the Mystic as Poet”

Directed by Kathleen Staudt

[Download Registration Form](#)

In *Essentials of Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill writes that “Poetry ever goes like the royal banners before ascending life; therefore man may safely follow its leadership in his prayer.” Underhill was always reserved about reporting the details of her own spiritual experience, but her poetry, published early in her career, gives us glimpses into the intensity of the life of prayer and the ardor of her early quest for God. In this day of quiet reflection, we will let the language of Underhill’s poetic writing invite us to a deepening of our own life of prayer, as we listen for the Spirit in words and silence.

Kathleen Henderson Staudt (Kathy) is a poet, educator retreat leader and spiritual director, teaching at Virginia Theological Seminary and Wesley Theological Seminary. She is the author of *Annunciations: Poems out of Scripture*, and *Waving Back: Poems of Mothering Life*. and is also included in the anthology *Imago Dei*. Her article on Evelyn Underhill’s Mysticism appeared the journal *Spiritus* in 2012.

Her blog is at www.poetproph.blogspot.com and her email address is kathleen.staudt@gmail.com.

NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

The spring 2013 issue of *Spiritus* contains an excellent article, ‘The Violent Are Taking It by Storm’ : Reflections on a Century of Women’s contributions to the Study of Mystical Spirituality” in which the contribution of Evelyn Underhill is appreciatively explored. The author, Bernard McGinn, states: “Evelyn Underhill remains the founding mother of the modern contribution of women to the study of mystical spirituality.” Also in that issue is a review of *A Mysticism of Kindness: The Biography of Lucie Christine*’ by Astrid M. O’Brien. In this article Underhill’s pioneering work on this French mystic is cited.

Michael Stoeber’ article, “Inter-Religious contexts and Comparative Theology in the Thought of Evelyn Underhill: Symbolic Narratives of Mysticism and the Songs of Kabir,” appeared in *The Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, Vol. 25, 2013.

King’s College, London, has a new descriptive summary of holdings of the Evelyn Underhill Archive. The Collection contains six boxes of material. The summary also lists other libraries which own Underhill materials.

Colleen Griffith, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Boston College, gave the 2012 Evelyn Underhill Lecturer in Christian Spirituality entitled “In the Footsteps of Mary Magdalene: A Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill.” Elizabeth A. Johnson, C. S. J., Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University, was the 2013 Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality. Her lecture was “Ask the Beasts: Spirituality and the Evolving Earth. These lectures are available on line from Boston College.

Online Books Page (Univ. of Pennsylvania) offers several of EU’s books online, including *Practical Mysticism*, *Mysticism*, *Life of the Spirit*. Her *The Church and War* is available from The Disseminary: Evelyn Underhill: The Church and War.

Interesting sites which have relevance to Underhill: See www.gracebrame.com/Underhill; www.carlmccolman.com/mystics/evelyn-underhill.

The Shalem Institute, www.shalem.org offers three posting relevant to Underhill: Carl McColmn, “After a Century, Why *Mysticism* Still Inspires, The Huffington Post; A You Tube interview of Dana Greene by Elizabeth Ward about Evelyn Underhill; “Adhering to God: The Message of Evelyn Underhill for Our Times” by Dana Greene.

PBS. “The Question of God: Evelyn Underhill,” www.pbs.org/question of God.

Short Course. “Evelyn Underhill: Foremother of Contemporary Spirituality.” August 21-24, 2014, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA Contact: richd@ctsnet.edu

Ann Loades has published: "Mysticism: The Energetic Love" in *Exploring Lost Dimensions in Christian Mysticism* L.Nestrop and S. Podmore eds Farnham; Ashgate 2013, pp. 117-129,

The following letter from Dana Greene was sent to all EUA associates. Please read and respond as you can. Your support is crucial and is greatly appreciated.

December, 2013

Dear Friend of Evelyn Underhill:

“There is a splendor burning in the heart of things.” These are the words of our companion and guide in the spiritual life, Evelyn Underhill. Recognition of Underhill’s contribution to the study and practice of the spiritual life has grown over the years as is evident in a recent statement by a pre-eminent scholar of mysticism and spirituality, Bernard McGinn, who recently wrote: “Evelyn Underhill remains the founding mother of the modern contribution of women to the study of mystical spirituality.”

Since 1989 The Evelyn Underhill Association (E.U.A.) has encouraged interest in the works of this extraordinary writer and mentor. The Association maintains a website (www.evelynunderhill.org) and annually produces an electronic newsletter and sponsors a Day of Quiet at the Washington National Cathedral. In 2011 the E.U.A. sponsored several events to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of Underhill’s pioneering study, *Mysticism*, a book which has never been out-of-print for the last century. These Association efforts are meant to deepen interest in Underhill’s contribution and to encourage others to disseminate her insights. We were able to sponsor these events because of generous gifts of support over the years. Because our continuing work is not fully self-supporting, we are turning again for financial assistance to those who recognize the importance of Evelyn Underhill in sustaining their life in the Spirit. Please consider making a contribution of whatever amount to the E.U.A. so that its work can continue. In advance know of our gratitude for your consideration of such a gift.

Tax deductible contributions may be made to The Evelyn Underhill Association and sent to Kathleen Staudt, Treasurer, EUA, and 9407 Spruce Tree Circle, Bethesda, MD 20814.

Sending blessings,

Dana Greene
President, E.U.A.

A Final Test of Holiness **by Merrill Ware Carrington**

Over the years, the annual Days of Quiet honoring Evelyn Underhill have offered the opportunity to explore many facets of her identity -- her work as a philosopher and biographer, novelist and poet, essayist and book critic. We have explored the evolution of her calling as a conductor of retreats and teacher of prayer. We have looked at her interfaith conversations and her courageous stand as a pacifist during the Second World War. We have learned about her marriage, her rather arid-seeming relationships with her parents, her travels, her sailing trips, her bookbinding, her gardening, her cats!

But the dimension of Underhill's life and work about which I've felt a particular ongoing curiosity is her role as what we would today describe as a spiritual director. (She was herself more inclined to speak of her "cases" or her "care of souls.") For those of us who think of Underhill as an inner companion and guide, it's tempting to try to imagine what it would have been like to know her as an outer companion in the life of the Spirit.

Beginning with the question "Why?", one might well ask, "What were the motivations, conscious and unconscious, that lay beneath Underhill's gradual embrace of her vocation as what Charles Williams called a 'mother of souls'?"

In exploring this question, a useful starting point might be a statement Underhill made at a 1933 retreat entitled *The School of Charity*. It is, for me, among the most compelling statements she ever wrote:

The final test of holiness is not seeming very different from other people, but being used to make other people very different; becoming the parent of new life.

This assertion speaks to us of a particular path, exemplified by Underhill in the last decade or two of her life, in which the goal of success or outward accomplishment takes a back seat to the intrinsic satisfactions of a vocation that fosters new life in others. One's own achievements, and the fame that might accompany them, become less compelling than participating in other people's full flourishing.

One is reminded here of 20th c. psychologist Erik Erikson and the stage of adult development characterized by what he called "generativity". At this point, at full maturity, the challenges and joys of being a mentor and guide for the next generation become a central concern. Though not all those who sought guidance from Underhill's were members of the next generation, the maturity of her wisdom was such that she was appreciated as a wise elder even by her contemporaries. In this sense she functioned as a parent to many.

What Underhill is saying in the quotation above has particular poignancy in light of the fact that she did not herself experience parenthood in a literal sense. (She had neither biological nor adopted children. It's unlikely she would have written 39 books and several hundred other published works had she had a houseful of children, even with the nanny and governess that would have been typical of someone in her social class in Edwardian England.

The reality is that Underhill seems to have had very little contact with children at all. And, late in life, when she was asked by a parish vicar to teach a group of 11 – 14 year olds about prayer, she admitted that she was "terrified" by the prospect.

There is no way around the fact that this was

an area of significant un-lived life. We all have such lacunae, gaps in our experience, roads not taken. If we don't have children, we miss out on one set of rewards and challenges. If we do have children, we may be, or at least we feel, blocked from another set of possibilities, for instance, the solitary life of prayer – or the opportunity to be a writer as prolific as Underhill!)

Children were not a part of Underhill's life, but it is also the case that she brought a dedication and tenderness of concern to the care of the souls in her charge that was undeniably maternal. And this, no doubt, was at least a part of why the ministry of spiritual direction held so much meaning for her.

She had few direct opportunities to learn what children can teach us about life with God and she knew little about caring for children, day to day, but in the matter of parenting new life in others, in a symbolic sense, she seems to have had perfect pitch.

Underhill's work as a mother of souls was very much a "final test of holiness." In one sense, on a theoretical level, she knew everything there was to know about holiness. But it was in her relationships with her directees that her ideas about the nature of holiness were held up to scrutiny and passed through the mesh of daily circumstance. This was where her ideas about the life of faith, the co-inhering persons of the Trinity, and the meaning of the Incarnation, for example, demanded translation into the concrete details of individual lives. Here, holiness ceased being a lyrical abstraction and became a moment-by-moment challenge -- for her directees and also for herself.

So **who** were the individuals whose lives offered Underhill the final test of holiness?

It seems that all of the souls under her care on an individual basis were women, and most were

unusually well educated, especially for the early 20th century. Some were inquirers who sought her out by mail after reading one of her books. Some were retreatants who became directees, others were friends who sought her out with questions of a focused spiritual nature.

Another dimension of the question of Who? is that, over time, Underhill seems to have understood her directees as her family. Because of the nature of her marriage, it seems almost inevitable that she would seek intimacy elsewhere. She and Hubert seem to have had a companionable, congenial life together, but they were in no sense soul mates. And while the mother and father of this only child educated at home until the age of 13 were probably no more reserved or remote than many British parents of their day, it seems unlikely that they would have offered her an easy, reliable or life-giving sense of family. Underhill appears to have related to her directees as if they were sisters or cousins or nieces, as well as friends, and she seems to have cherished them for the connection they made her feel with the larger human family.

When and Where?

The first person, in a chronological sense, who might be understood as a directee, Margaret Robinson, came to Underhill by mail when Underhill was not even thirty. Though already possessing enormous knowledge about the great mystics, Underhill was understandably a bit tentative in offering advice, given her relative lack of experience with Christian contemplative practice – and with life itself. This particular relationship continued for many years in the form of written correspondence, but it was not until mid-life and the emergence of her vocation as a conductor of retreats (and after having begun formal spiritual direction with Baron von Hugel) that her identity as a Mother of Souls truly blossomed. She began to see her

“cases” in person, as well as write to them, both within the retreat context (in “interviews” scheduled between the three addresses she gave each day) and also, though only very occasionally, at her home.

How did Underhill pursue what some have termed the art of spiritual direction?

It’s clear through her letters that as a spiritual director Underhill possessed much warmth and humor. She displayed compassion and unforced concern, “shrewdness and simplicity” (T. S. Eliot), “pithiness and practicality” (Mary Brian Durkin). At the same time, she did not hesitate to be prescriptive and she could be firm to the point of sternness. On at least one occasion she made a directee feel bit scolded. But in general, according to Charles Williams, she “eased her students as much as she urged them.”

Underhill could be a bit gossipy and, because many of her directees knew each other, she seems a bit less careful than she might have been about mentioning one of them to another. From today’s perspective, one could easily have concerns about the issue of confidentiality and the blurring of relational boundaries.

Reading between the lines of Underhill’s responses to her directees, however, one senses that they trusted her enormously and felt comfortable confiding their doubts and insecurities. And, as much as she offered substantial food for thought and very specific guidance, it appears that it was her personality, her being itself that mediated something tremendously encouraging, and, to use an overused word, inspiring. Unquestionably, she was an embodiment of the assertion that Christianity is more easily “caught than taught.”

In trying to imagine what it might have been like to sit in her presence, one is assisted by a couple of very telling descriptions.

Here is one friend, writing of her first meeting with Underhill:

As I entered, she got up and turned round, looking so fragile as though ‘a puff of wind might blow her away’ might be literally true in her case, but light simply streamed from her face illuminated with a radiant smile... (Williams, p. 37)

And from her admirer, Charles Williams:

If the present writer has seemed, here and there, to say a little less than he might about her writing, it is because that, on the whole, it was the least (though no doubt a valuable) part of her intense vocation. Her vocation was rather to be – a guide? No; say rather, in the end, a light. The light might, and certainly did, illuminate and guide, but first it merely shone. This light she was.... (p. 44)

With What Content?

For all the vast knowledge at her disposal, a great many of Underhill’s letters to her directees involve attention to small scale worries and immediate challenges as opposed to references to the overarching themes of Christian tradition -- family conflicts, illness, demands and decisions related to work or employment, dissatisfactions with parish life. Occasionally Underhill’s correspondents had explicitly theological concerns or requests for guidance in the practice of prayer.

She not infrequently recommends a bit of Augustine or Ignatius, Walter Hilton or Julian of Norwich, and, of course, her beloved von Hugel and his teacher, Abbe Huvelin.

What one notices most often is that a great many of Underhill’s correspondents, far more than might be common today, are seeking

holiness in the sense of *virtue* and are much pre-occupied, as Underhill was herself, with rooting out sins and imperfections, large and small. She clearly aims to calm the worried and to promote a sense of balance, but as we know from Dana Greene's collection of fragments from Underhill's journals, she was internally pre-occupied for many years with her own shortcomings. It would have been hard not to focus on this concern in others as well, but perhaps this was largely a reflection of a different era, an entirely different cultural context.

The bottom line is that in ways both pedestrian and grand, Evelyn Underhill offered her directees a quality that we today might call "mirroring", a process whereby one's interiority, one's core identity as a child of God is made more alive, more possible, as a result of being fully "seen" by another.

In feeling one's way into a sense of Underhill as a director, a last set of questions might be termed **Then vs. Now?** How did her approach differ from our own contemporary understanding of spiritual direction -- and what similarities existed, not only in comparison to the ministry of direction in our own day, but to the age-old Christian phenomenon going back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers. One can so easily imagine Underhill speaking the words attributed to one of those early wise ones: "Go into your cell and your cell will teach you everything"!)

Sadly, we have only the letters and a few descriptions from the souls in Underhill's care, but from what we have to go on, one has the sense that she understood her role as primarily one of conveying insight and information. Contemporary spiritual directors are encouraged to focus more on asking probing questions and on simple listening -- two people waiting on God, together, sometimes in silence. There

is much emphasis on what's referred to as the "locus of discernment", on allowing the process of discernment to be located in a fundamental sense within the directee.

As one seasoned monk-director has put it, "No adult should say should 'should' to another."

From the evidence available one gets the impression that Underhill not infrequently takes hold of the locus of discernment and assumes that she knows what's what and what should be. When she offers advice, she sometimes declares that a given decision is ultimately up to the directee, but one is left feeling that she doesn't entirely trust that her directees will, in time, find their own way. This is an easy trap to fall into as a director and in practice, the Holy Spirit has a unerring capacity to overturn the assumptions of an all-knowing Mother of Souls!

Some writers about spiritual direction, especially those influenced by Carl Jung and other 20th century depth psychologists, speak about the importance of the director, him or herself, being open to being changed, even transformed as a result of each and every encounter. The space between the director and directee is understood as an "interactive field" in which both individuals are affected by what is said. It's hard to know whether a dynamic of this kind was at work when Underhill met with her directees, but is probably less likely to occur when a direction relationship is carried on largely by mail.

On paper, Underhill seems to see herself, at least on the surface, as the one with "the goods", with the wisdom to convey, which is not unnatural or surprising, given the depth of her knowledge. And meanwhile, whether from temperamental reserve or cultural upbringing, she was disinclined to share her own concerns, anxieties, or life-frustrations. But it's clear that

over time, the souls under her care were of immense importance to her and may well have constituted the relationships of greatest mutuality in her life. She became increasingly comfortable in her role as a director and clearly felt immense loyalty and affection toward her “cases”. She may not have understood this as a transformation within an “interactive field”, but there’s no question that the souls whose new life she fostered were central to her own unfolding and, especially, to her sense of being less and less alone in the world.

This was delivered at the 2013 Evelyn Underhill Quiet Day.

For further reading:

Greene, Dana. *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.

Poston, Carol, ed. *The Making of a Mystic: New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Williams, Charles, ed. *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991.

The following was delivered at the 2013
Evelyn Underhill Day by Merrill Ware Carrington.

Evelyn Underhill's Theophanies: A Book of Verse

Nadia Delicata

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), a pioneer of the scientific study of mysticism and a spiritual master, tirelessly grappled throughout her life to express clearly and creatively the dynamic vitality of her own flourishing spirituality¹. Her earliest attempts are revealed in fictional writings composed in her youth, just as the journal written in her later years is a soul-bearing tribute to her quest for spiritual authenticity.

In this paper, I will attempt to study glimpses of Underhill's spiritual transformation through her little known, but, as I will argue, powerfully revealing, collection of poems, titled *Theophanies*³. Published after Underhill had established a strong reputation as a scholar of mysticism, the poetry contains snapshots of those interim years of personal spiritual metamorphosis from writer of esoteric fiction⁴ to scholar of mysticism to Anglican mystic, spiritual director and pacifist. Thus, ironically, the obscure *Theophanies* is an apt reflection of the unveiling "theophany" that is Underhill's own life.

Theophanies in context

It is the year 1916. Evelyn Underhill is forty-one years old.⁵ She has been married for nine years, and has already produced her most prolific works on mysticism.⁶ For all intents and purposes, she is successful and respected in her personal and professional life. Yet, uncommitted to any religious tradition, her heart is still wandering and her soul is restless seeking the serenity that only comes from the wisdom of attesting to and belonging within a community that searches for the truth. In particular, as the world around her is in its deepest crisis yet, her present is also highly volatile and uncertain.

The Great War, the war that was to end all wars and be resolved in a few months, was leaving its toll, as years of atrocities and deaths were now penetrating the consciousness of those left at home distant from the trenches. The Evelyn Underhill who in her youth knew herself as a neo-Platonist, intrigued with the supernatural, fascinated with mysticism, is now fast approaching her own chemic transformation, to be reborn as Underhill the Anglican teacher, the spiritual director, and in later years, the pacifist.

Theophanies: A Book of Verses,⁷ her second collection of poetry, was published amidst this personal and communal impasse. *Theophanies* was a thin volume, just as its influence, it seems, was also destined to remain sparse. Through her first book of verses *Immanence*,⁸ a collection of poems that had been previously published in magazines, Underhill had established some reputation as a mystical poet. Indeed, a few of her writings were published in various anthologies of the early twentieth century. Yet all these collections included poetry from her earlier work published in *Immanence*. None that I know of were from *Theophanies*. Ironically, *Theophanies* was destined to remain hidden from the public, or at least, not to be as well read as her other works.

Furthermore, even contemporary Underhill scholars are less than enthused by the collection of verses. Dana Greene notes that *Theophanies* "substantiates that although she [Underhill] was considered a good religious poet in her time, her work is not of lasting value. Suffused with philosophical vitalism and focused mostly on nature, her poetry is dated and has little

power.¹⁰ A similar criticism has been echoed by Staudt: “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.”¹¹ Armstrong goes so far as to say that “by the time we reach the last poem of *Theophanies* Evelyn was ready to abandon verse altogether and to admit that she had not added much to the harmony of the whole.”¹² Even Cropper, who reminds us of Underhill’s enigmatic reply “it is too easy” when asked why she never wrote any more poetry after *Theophanies*, believes that “she could not put her deepest self into her poems” or “did not consider it worthwhile to purge them as true poems must be purged.”¹³

Margaret Cropper’s observation inevitably compels us to ponder the true value of poetry and to question whether Underhill’s verses in *Theophanies* are imbued or not with the spirit of self-expression, honesty, openness and vulnerability that poetry demands.¹⁴ Unlike fictional prose where the author can hide behind various characters and explore the ambivalence and complexity of her thought by voicing opposing views through different characters,¹⁵ poetry is a single voice, a unique expression, where the poet necessarily understands, sifts through and articulates creatively, a profound human experience which has universal value. Moreover, while academic writing, Underhill’s *forte* necessitates detachment and sobriety of the mind, poetry is the fruit of the pains or ecstasies of the soul. Poetry cannot be detached or purely cerebral, and while it relies on words, it seeks to transcend them through the creative power of metaphor. (The word “metaphor,” itself, of course, is a metaphor for this “leap of” the mind.) In other words, poetry is the agonizing effort of translating to and sealing through the written word that which is ineffable. It is the process where the human soul is strengthened

Through being probed in its nakedness and vulnerability and urged to assent to truth through conviction.¹⁶

As such the subject of mysticism, ineffable in its essence and profoundly penetrating in its influence on the human soul, is ideal for poetic contemplation. And “theophany”—quite literally “an appearance of God,” a “visible manifestation”¹⁷ of transcendence in immanence—the ultimate religious experience, is an essential theme to ponder. It is mysticism in the truest sense of the word,¹⁸ where the creature is directly in contact with the Creator; where the subject can lovingly contemplate Ultimate Reality. Thus the very title of this collection of poems represents Underhill’s profoundest beliefs about transcendence and the divine. First and foremost, it is the bold statement that God *can* be “seen” and contemplated.¹⁹ The quote from John Scotus Erigena on the covering page of the book, “Every visible and invisible creature is a theophany or appearance of God” is the leitmotif that underlies not only this collection of poetry, but also Underhill’s lifetime beliefs evident through her dedication to the study of mysticism and spirituality. Secondly, the fact that Underhill titles her work *Theophanies*, in the plural, attests to her conviction that no one, single manifestation of God is sufficient. Rather, God is revealed in numerous, diverse, possibly even seemingly contradictory aspects of human existence. As Ignatius of Loyola’s mysticism in action teaches, we are called to find God “in all things”—even the most difficult or surprising.

Consequently, *Theophanies* can in itself be interpreted as a gradual unfolding of human experiences and situations where God is manifested to his creatures. More specifically, it can be seen as the gradual unfolding of Underhill’s *own* internal transformation as her imaginary of the divine is purified; from an impersonal and

extrinsic interest in the otherworldly, to a more all-encompassing and personal interest rooted in discovering God in the here and now. The impersonal divine of her youth is gradually revealed as the personal God who accompanies humanity in its suffering. The Transcendent God becomes known as the God who becomes incarnate and suffers for us. Indeed, the first half of the poems in the anthology seem longer and more akin to the epic literary style,²⁰ more heavily verbose, yet lacking in clarity, reflecting perhaps implicit image of God that is likewise grandiose but still impersonal. On the other hand, the latter half of the anthology includes poems that are shorter, simpler, crisper, yet more profound in meaning, and more personally engaging to the reader. These could reflect a greater clarity, sharpness, even humble familiarity with God that Underhill discovers in later years.²¹ Thus, I believe it is worth considering that the change in style could also be reflecting the gradual shift in sensitivity of the poet, as Underhill herself is transformed from merely desiring authenticity, to becoming more authentic, grounded in her experiences and more discerning in her expression. And while Underhill's verses might lack poetic skill and imagination, insofar as they are an authentic reflection of the inner transformation of her soul, they are also genuine poetry: true in spirit if not beautiful or masterful in technique or expression.

It is also worth pondering how the years between 1912 and 1916 are also developmentally significant for Underhill. She transitions from being a young adult to a mature woman, at the same time that the world is in its darkest night. Hints of this transformation are evident even in the different kinds of 'theophanies' or manifestations of God that recur throughout the anthology. Most theophanies reflect stereotypical spiritual journeys and experiences that the 'young' Underhill was fascinated by and had repeatedly

explored in her early fictional works and scholarly endeavours. Thus, they can be interpreted to reflect Underhill's own early neo-Platonic spiritual stages, where she is still strongly dualist and otherworldly, and is reluctant to be grounded in an experience of the divine touching her in the messiness of the created realm. Yet later theophanies deal specifically with such incarnational messiness, suggesting a spiritual transformation in the poet herself that blossoms and is confirmed in her later years. In turn, the means of transformation, her Philosopher's Stone if you will, is the experience of the Great War, a paradoxical 'theophany' which not only made Underhill "go to pieces,"²² but also made her focus more on how God is present in this world in the experiences of human suffering. Through pain and death, peaking in 1917 with the death of her two cousins and the terminal illness of her best friend Ethel Barker, Underhill experienced a dark night of the soul,²³ a veil of darkness which was to accompany her till 1920 when she committed herself to Anglicanism²⁴ and to the study of spirituality.²⁵

Pondering *Theophanies*

Thus the poems and shifting "theophanies" can roughly be categorized under two umbrellas. The earlier other-worldly themes, and the more mature incarnational themes. The most obvious, and thus the most primitive theophany in the collection is nature mysticism, a recurrent theme in all of Underhill's earlier writings.²⁶ A variety of poems in *Theophanies* deal specifically with this theme, including: 'Mountain Flora,'²⁷ 'In The Train,'²⁸ 'The Tree,'²⁹ 'Primavera,'³⁰ 'Flooded Fields,'³¹ 'Nature,'³² and 'Thought's a Strange Land.'³³ Nature also plays a significant role in most of the other poems in the collection, including "Thrushes,"³⁴ where the theme of God's motherhood is represented by the mother thrush, 'March Music'³⁵ where nature is celebrating her own liturgy, and 'Beyond the Garden'³⁶ where nature becomes

equated with the sensory world, ensaring the poet away from Reality.

Other theophanies typical of the youthful Underhill are those that reflect “the three great classes of symbols,” the “three principal ways in which man’s spiritual consciousness reacts to the touch of Reality.”³⁷ Articulated with precision in *Mysticism*, yet also hinted at in her novels,³⁸ the craving of the pilgrim for a lost home, the craving of the heart for its lover and the craving for inner purity and transformation are all reflected to different degrees in the poems of *Theophanies*. The pilgrim motif is evident in poems like ‘Nebula and Nest,’³⁹ contemplating a voyage across the cosmos; ‘Continuous Voyage’⁴⁰ which recalls Underhill’s own sailing trips; and ‘The Summit’⁴¹ where the pilgrim’s struggle to reach the summit of the Divine echoes the mystic’s desire of advancing along the spiritual path in search of Union with Reality.

The love motif is evident in poems where passionate, physical love becomes intertwined with the notion of sacrifice. For Underhill, love could not be separated from the parallel pole of sacrifice, as was evident in Constance’s sacrifice in *The Column of Dust* or in Paul and Catherine’s love relationship in *The Lost Word*, and perhaps even in her own life, when she sacrificed her desire to become a Catholic for her future husband. In *Theophanies*, ‘Dynamic Love,’⁴² ‘Night on the Mountain’⁴³ and ‘Thoughts about Heaven’⁴⁴ epitomise Underhill’s belief that love of God is personal as well as passionate, whilst ‘A London Flower Show’⁴⁵ and ‘Friday Night’⁴⁶ celebrate self-sacrifice as the ideal kenotic love that imitates the sacrifice on the cross, pondered in ‘The Voice from the Cross.’⁴⁷

The theme of transformation however, is perhaps the most powerful of these early theophanies and the one where a more mature Underhill starts emerging from her incubatory cocoon. For while the motifs of nature, love and mystical pilgrimage are amongst Underhill’s favourites, they are also safe, relatively cliché and impersonal, reflecting her neo-Platonic philosophy without stretching her enough to really expose her deepest vulnerable self. Indeed, it is “easy”

to experience God in the beauty of nature, in the stillness, harmony and solitude of the ‘cloistered’ life,⁴⁸ in the imaginary ponderings on eternal love and metaphysical travels. Yet in *Theophanies* Underhill also reflects unceasingly on the mystery of humanity’s ultimate transformation: that from life to death, from death to afterlife. This cycle of creation, destruction and recreation becomes thus the ultimate theophany—and the hardest to accept. For how can a God of life, a God who gives life, be manifested in horror, in pain, in evil, in destruction, in war, in death? This theophany is raw and blatant because it touches the messiness of ordinary life. And Underhill’s ambivalence, her struggle to make sense of mortality, is evident in ‘Heaven – Purgatory – Hell,’⁴⁹ her Danteque ruminations on the afterlife; ‘Apocalypse’⁵⁰ where John is witnessing the dance of life and death, of beginning and end; in ‘Lila, the Play of God’⁵¹ where the poet grapples with the problem of evil in this world; and in ‘The Secret People’⁵² where she ponders the secret life of the dead.

This imagery of death leads us to the most powerful poems in this collection. Two particular theophanies are particularly revelatory of the Underhill who is herself undergoing transformation, becoming acutely aware of her transience. These are the image of death, powerful in ‘Fell Asleep,’⁵³ ‘The Day Before,’⁵⁴ ‘The Last Ignorance’⁵⁵ and ‘Death’;⁵⁶ and the image of war which seems to have filled her thoughts throughout the years 1914 to 1915 and is thus represented in the last six poems of the collection: ‘The Naval Reserve,’⁵⁷ ‘England and the Soldier,’⁵⁸ ‘Candlemas 1915,’⁵⁹ ‘Any Englishwoman,’⁶⁰ ‘The Return’⁶¹ and ‘Non-Combatants.’⁶² The style of the latter poems conforms very much to First World War poetry, reflecting the ambivalence of a strong nationalistic sentiment and disgust with the horror of death. Together with the ‘death’ poems they also seem to bring out the fears, doubts and pain of the vulnerable (and more deeply human and compassionate) Underhill.

Yet interspaced and contrasting with these later dark poems are three profound reflections on the desire to be in God, to hope, even in the midst of this chaos. Together with 'Death' and 'On Reading Dostoïeffsky,'⁶³ the three poems 'Communion in Darkness,'⁶⁴ 'Divine Ignorance'⁶⁵ and 'Nihil Longe Deo',⁶⁶ reflect most profoundly Underhill's sense of being in God, even while she struggles with trusting and resting completely in this implicit knowledge. Human nature and thus Underhill's own nature grounded in this world, is probed and found to be deserving of being an authentic theophany.

'Nihil Longe Deo' – 'Nothing is Far From God' is I believe, the backbone that holds *Theophanies* together, since it is the profound musing of a soul who despairs, yet knows and trusts that God is present in all misery and beauty:

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

In this quadrant we find an evocative and feminist image of the Motherhood of God. It is a tender image, of infants holding their Mother tightly, afraid of letting go, afraid of being alone. Yet it is also a dark image as the blindness of the infants makes them "rage" and "despair". It is a reflection of our human condition: our desire of holding tight to a sense of security, even though our narrow-sightedness might frustrate us and lead us to despair. It is in the letting go, in the "waking up," when we open our eyes and free ourselves of our chains of fear that we can see God all around us, that we can know we are "already blessed." Thus our home becomes the whole cosmos, and as toddlers we can boldly take our first steps, confident that we are never distant from God's love.

This sense of being ever grounded, at "home" in the Divine is palpable in the poem 'Death'. It is a dramatic poem, relying on the symbolism of drowning in a furious ocean to represent the perils of life. Yet even so, the poet is determined not to despair, since she knows that the life she has is merely a gift, and that even if she is "spent," she will always belong to God's household. Thus, coming and going become irrelevant categories, just as living and dying are merely diverse ways of being "home."

*Still, if it be so
I am content
To give back the life lent,
To return whence I come;
And naked and spent,
To cease in my home.*

The next two poems are also about knowing God, but this time they present a powerful contrast between his immanence and transcendence, and between those who know God and those who are blind to his presence. 'Communion in Darkness' echoes the cry of the woman in Canaan who begged Jesus that even the dogs eat of their master's crumbs and leftovers. The "blind," those "who may not understand the intricate machinery of grace," even they have a right to know of God's immanent presence in the world. Their desire is greater than their limitations and as such she begs God that he grants their wish of being touched by the Divine.

The opposite dynamic is present in 'Divine Ignorance (A Saint Speaks).' The saint's prayer is not to see or to touch, but to be blind and deaf to God's Mystery, to God's transcendence. The saint merely desires to belong to that Mystery, to be in the tension of knowing yet not knowing, of "torment" yet also "joy":

*The anguish of thy sacred dark caress,
Thy love beyond our span,
Self's loss in thine excess:
There be the torment and the joy of man.*

Interestingly, in both these poems Underhill uses the third person,⁶⁸ distancing herself from both images. Yet the reader wonders where she sees herself in these contrasting scenarios. Is she one of the blind who desire to feel the touch of God, knowing full well that she can never really see? Or is she one of the seers, one of the saints who have tasted the beauty of God yet desire him to remain clouded in Mystery? Is she a mystic, or is she still waiting for her ultimate theophany? Perhaps none of these images apply to Underhill: perhaps, however, both apply to her, and she, like the rest of us, dwells in this space of flux where we know yet do not know, where we see yet do not see, where we believe, yet are tormented with doubt. Uncertainty and brokenness are after all part of our human condition.

This unrest of brokenness, yet wed with the promise of redemption, becomes even more palpable in the sonnet 'On Reading Dostoïeffsky'. This poem, one of a series of writings where she muses on writers or people whom she knew or studied personally and who presumably touched her life,⁶⁹ can be seen as a meditation on the flawed human condition, and yet even through this brokenness, God's "face" is remarkably witnessed:

It is a poem of sharp contrasts yet also of humility. For it is the "sordid" man that is also "holy" and it is "mire" that is also "mind". God can truly manifest himself in all things, even the weakest of human traits, even the sorriest of human states, even through Underhill's own struggle for growth and fulfilment.

Conclusion

Theophanies takes the reader on a journey of transformation that reflects the poet's own. This moment of creative tension in Underhill's life reflects personal anguish that promises resurrection. Underhill seems ready to let go of the relative comfort of her neo-Platonic themes, to ponder real, messy questions about human existence. As many of her critics would say, she may not have added substantially to artistic beauty, yet the true work of art was her gradual maturity, her hard work of faith, immortalised in the Church, where she continues to be pondered, studied and lived. She proved to be a real theophany, a true image of the Divine, because she dared to see God's grace permeating all creation. In her own words:

"[I]f I didn't think the whole of life was the work of the Holy Spirit, I should give everything up. It is the centre of my creed: so vivid that the things which seem to be so disgust-

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¹ I develop this argument in the article "Evelyn Underhill's Quest for the Holy: A Lifetime Journey of Personal Transformation," *Anglican Theological Review* 88 no. 4 (2006): 519-536. This paper is an application of that argument.

² Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Dana Greene (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1993).

³ Underhill, Evelyn, *Theophanies: A Book of Verses*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1916).

⁴ Underhill's five short stories, "The Death of a Saint," "The Ivory Tower," "Our Lady of the Gate," "The Mountain Image" and "A Green Mass" were all published in *The Horlicks Magazine* vol. 2 in 1904. In the same year she also published her first novel *The Grey World* (London, William Heinemann). Her second novel *The Lost Word* (London, William Heinemann) was published in 1907. Her last novel, *The Column of Dust* (London: Methuen) was released in 1909. The beauty of architecture is the central motif of *The Lost Word*, while hermeticism and magic underlie the theme of *The Column of Dust*. Art is explored in *The Grey World*, "The Death of a Saint" and "The Mountain Image," while "A Green Mass" can be described as a creative reflection on the liturgy with pantheistic undertones.

⁵ Underhill married Hubert Stuart Moore in 1907. Charles Williams, "Introduction," *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 10.

⁶ *Mysticism* was first published in 1911, *The Mystic Way* in 1913, and *Practical Mysticism* in 1914. Armstrong, Christopher, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941): An Introduction to Her Life and Writings, (London: Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1975), 294-295.

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Theophanies: A Book of Verses*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1916).

⁸ Evelyn Underhill, *Immanence: A Book of Verses*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1912).

⁹ Both Armstrong, 170 and Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*, (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 157 mention how Underhill's poetry was quoted in H. N. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, vol. 5 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 255-260.

Other volumes that include poetry from *Immanence* are: D.H.S. Nicholson and A.H.E. Lee, *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917) with the poems 'Immanence', 'Introversion', 'Uxbridge Road', 'Regnum Caelorum Vim Patitur' and 'Corpus Christi'; C.M. Hill, *The World's Great Religious Poetry* (New York: MacMillan, 1931) with 'Introversion', 'Supersensual' and 'Theophany'; and Thomas Walsh, *The World's Great Catholic Poetry* (New York: MacMillan, 1943) with the poem 'The Lady Poverty'.

¹⁰ Greene, 58-59.

¹¹ Kathleen H. Staudt, "The Note of Failure in the Symphony of Grace: Reading Evelyn Underhill's *Theophanies*," *Evelyn Underhill Newsletter*, November 1993 (Online: <http://www.evelynunderhill.org/staudt1.htm>)

¹² Armstrong, 178.

¹³ Cropper, Margaret, *Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1958), 59.

¹⁴ Connolly, a writer and poet, succinctly puts it: a poem "presents a total experience that is accompanied by and results in delight. That total experience consists of several closely related elements: *emotional* activity motivated by an *intellectual* grasp of a situation that is *imaginatively* realised. Moreover, the total experience of a poem is presented in an artistic way, that is, in an appropriate design and style." In Francis X. Connolly, *Poetry: Its Power and Wisdom: An Introductory Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 12.

¹⁵ This is very much Underhill's style as reflected in her three novels *The Grey World*, *The Lost Word* and *The Column of Dust*. In these novels, where to varying degrees, the characterization is quite weak, the protagonists are mere puppets voicing Underhill's own message, and thus lacking an independent fictional existence, which is the mark of a great novelist.

¹⁶ For a reflection on poetry contemporary to Underhill's see Bremond, Henri, *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory* (London: Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1927), 1-6.

¹⁷ O'Collins, Gerald & Edward Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (Revised and Expanded Edition) (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 266.

¹⁸ Happold defines mysticism as “a consciousness of a *beyond*, of something which, though it is interwoven with it, is not of the external world of material phenomena, of an *unseen* over and above the seen.” Happold, F.C. *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 18-19. Incidentally on 38 Happold quotes Underhill’s own definition of mysticism from her book *Practical Mysticism*. She writes: “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality.”

¹⁹ We are reminded that the Old Testament states that no one can see God and survive (Ex 19:21; 33:20; Jgs 13:22), even though Moses himself is recorded to have experienced God in the burning bush.

²⁰ On reflecting on Theophanies, Armstrong notes: “Evelyn could never succeed in the epic vein. She would dearly have liked to translate into verse the white-hot passionate quest of the Plotinian soul for intelligible Beauty, the agony of longing, the joy of lovers’ meeting, the wonder of the shared beholding. But her muse was not cast in this mould. Despite her attempt to kick against this particular goad she probably understood her limitation” (172).

²¹ While the poems are not dated, the fact that their subject matter also shifts subtly from themes typical of Underhill’s early corpus (for instance, nature mysticism), to works that reflect more the contemporary political situation (war), might also suggest that they are published in a more or less chronological order. Nevertheless, irrespective of the actual pagination in the book, my argument rests more on the shift in the style and themes (rather than published order) of the poetry that in itself represents a subtle evolution of spirituality and theology.

²² Greene (56) quoted from E. Underhill to F. von Hügel, 21 December 1921, TS. *Underhill-von Hügel Collection*, St. Andrews University, Archives, St. Andrews, Scotland.

²³ Greene (70) comments that 1917 was one of the darker years for Underhill, and this was reflected in the fact that she published and wrote much less.

²⁴ Dana Greene (71-72) makes the interesting observation that: “While she [Underhill] believed that ‘[t]rue mysticism is the soul of religion,’ that it brought ‘fresh life’ to religion, she also believed that ‘like the soul of man, [mysticism] needs a body if it is to fulfil its mighty destiny.’ The future of mysticism lay in religious institutions, for ‘divorced from all institutional expression it tends to become strange, vague, or merely sentimental.” E. Underhill, “The Future of Mysticism,” *Everyman*, 12, no. 301 (20 July 1918): 336.

²⁵ Interestingly Underhill’s first major work after *Theophanies* is *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of Today* a series of lectures delivered in Oxford in 1921 and published in 1922. This work clearly marks the beginning of her emphasis on a more open concept of spirituality rather than the more restricted study of mysticism. Armstrong, 296.

²⁶ The short story *The Green Mass*, her novel *The Lost Word*, together with a variety of poems in her collection *Immanence* all explore the beauty of nature as a theophany.

²⁷ Underhill, *Theophanies*, 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 41.

³¹ *Ibid.* 46.

³² *Ibid.* 54.

³³ *Ibid.* 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 94.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 64.

³⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (12th Ed.) (Oxford: One World, 1999), 126.

³⁸ Heather Weir made the interesting observation that Underhill’s three novels reflect each of the mystic pathways: *The Grey World* is a narrative about the desire of the pilgrim; *The Lost Word* emphasizes the theme of lovers’ mysticism, whilst *The Column of Dust* reflects on the chemic transformation of the alchemists.

³⁹ Underhill, *Theophanies*, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 59.

⁴² Ibid. 3.

⁴³ Ibid. 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 52.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 39.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 75.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁴⁸ Medieval monasteries always had a beautiful garden, right in the middle of the building where God could be contemplated in peace and quiet, yet also away from the world.

⁴⁹ Underhill, *Theophanies*, 23.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 29.

⁵¹ Ibid. 34.

⁵² Ibid. 86.

⁵³ Ibid. 18.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 37.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 103.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 71.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 107.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 108.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 110.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 112.

⁶¹ Ibid. 114.

⁶² Ibid. 115.

⁶³ Ibid. 33.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 84.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 85.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 93.

⁶⁷ This is Staudt's translation of the title of the poem.

⁶⁸ Underhill uses the first person for 'Divine Ignorance,' yet she makes it clear that it is the 'saint' who is speaking and not the poet.

⁶⁹ Similar poems in *Theophanies* are: 'Philosophers,' (57.) 'A Portrait' (81) and 'William Shakespeare' (100). In all these poems she suggests that these individuals mirror the Divine in our lives, and are thus theophanies of God. In 'The Likeness' (62) she goes on to say that all God's children bear in fact this likeness to the Divine. We are in fact created in the image of God (Gen 1:26).

⁷⁰ Underhill, *Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, "To J.A. Herbert," 30 March, 1913, 143.