The most highly developed branches of the human family tend to produce a definite type of personality which refuses to be satisfied with what other men call 'experience', and is inclined, to "deny the world in order that it may find reality." These people occur in the east and the west, and in the ancient, mediaeval, and modern worlds. Their one passion appears to be a certain spiritual and intangible quest: a "way out" or a "way back" to some desirable state which alone can satisfy their craving for absolute truth. This quest, constitutes the whole meaning of life. Whatever the place or period in which they have arisen, their aims, doctrines and methods have been substantially the same. Their experience, therefore, forms a body of evidence, curiously self-consistent and often mutually explanatory, which must be taken into account before we can add up the sum of the energies and potentialities of the human spirit, or reasonably speculate on its relations to the unknown world which lies outside the boundaries of sense.

Under whatsoever symbols they have objectified their quest, none of these seekers have ever been able to assure the world that they have found, seen face to face, the Reality behind the veil. But if we may trust the reports of the mystics, and they are reports given with a strange accent of certainty and good faith, they have succeeded where all these others have failed, in establishing immediate communication between the spirit of man, and that "only Reality," which some philosophers call the Absolute, or God. This, they say, and here many who are not mystics agree with them, is the hidden Truth which is the object of man's craving; the only satisfying goal of his quest. Like geographical explorers the mystics are the pioneers of the spiritual world, and we have no right to deny validity to their discoveries, merely because we lack the opportunity or the courage necessary to those who would prosecute such explorations for themselves.

These matters are so remote from our ordinary habits of thought, that their investigation entails a definite preparation: a purging of the intellect. As with those who came of old to the Mysteries, purification is the gate of knowledge. We must come to this encounter with minds cleared of prejudice and convention, must deliberately break with our inveterate habit of taking the "visible world" for granted; our lazy assumption that somehow science is "real" and metaphysics is not.

Such a criticism of reality is of course the business of philosophy. Amateurs though we be, we cannot reach our starting-point without trespassing to some extent on philosophic ground. That ground covers the whole area of first principles: and it is to first principles that we must go, if we would understand the true significance of the mystic type.

Mysticism

by Evelyn Underhill
[1911]

Let us then begin at the beginning: and remind ourselves of a few of the trite and primary facts which all practical persons agree to ignore. That beginning, for human thought, is of course the I, the Ego, the self-conscious subject

which is writing this, or the other self-conscious subject which is reading it; and which declares, in the teeth of all arguments, I AM. Here is a point as to which we all feel quite sure. No metaphysician has yet shaken the ordinary individual's belief in his own existence. The uncertainties only begin for most of us when we ask what else *is ?*

To this I, this conscious self "imprisoned in the body like an oyster in his shell," come, as we know, a constant stream of messages and experiences. Chief amongst these are the stimulation of the tactile nerves whose result we call touch, the vibrations taken up by the optic nerve which we call light, and those taken up by the ear and perceived as sound.

What do these experiences mean? The first answer of the unsophisticated Self is, that they indicate the nature of the external world: it is to the "evidence of her senses" that she turns, when she is asked what the world is like. As the impressions come in, or rather those interpretations of the original impressions which her nervous system supplies, she pounces on them, she sorts, accepts, rejects, combines: and then triumphantly produces from them a "concept" which *is,* she says, the external world. With an enviable and amazing simplicity she attributes her own sensations to the unknown universe. The stars, she says, *are* bright; the grass *is* green. For her, as for the philosopher Hume, "reality consists in impressions and ideas."

It is immediately apparent, however, that this sense-world, this seemingly real external universe—though it may be useful and valid in other respects—cannot be *the* external world, but only the Self's projected picture of it. Very slight investigation shows that it is a picture whose relation to reality is at best symbolic and approximate, and which would have no meaning for selves whose senses, or channels of communication, happened to be arranged upon a different plan. The evidence of the senses, then, cannot be accepted as evidence of the nature of ultimate reality: useful servants, they are dangerous guides. Nor can their testimony disconcert those seekers whose reports they appear to contradict.

The conscious self sits, so to speak, at the receiving end of a telegraph wire. Therefore this message, though it may in a partial sense be relevant to the supposed reality at the other end, can never be adequate to it. There will be fine vibrations which it fails to take up, others which it confuses together. Hence a portion of the message is always lost; or, in other language, there are aspects of the world which we can never know.

The sphere of our possible intellectual knowledge is thus strictly conditioned by the limits of our own personality. On this basis, not the ends of the earth, but the external termini of our own sensory nerves, are the termini of our explorations: and to "know oneself" is really to know one's universe. We are locked up with our receiving instruments: we cannot get up and walk away in the hope of seeing whither the lines lead. Eckhart's words are still final for us: "The soul can only approach created things by the voluntary reception of images.

Were such an alteration of our senses to take place, the world would still send us the same messages, that strange unknown world from which, on this hypothesis, we are hermetically sealed. But we should interpret them differently. Beauty would still be ours, though speaking another tongue. The bird's song would then strike our retina as a pageant of colour: we should see the magical tones of the wind, hear as a great fugue the repeated and harmonized greens of the forest, the cadences of stormy skies. If we realized how slight an adjustment of our organs is needed to initiate us into such a world, we should perhaps be less contemptuous of those mystics who tell us that they apprehended the Absolute as "heavenly music" or "Uncreated Light".

A direct encounter with absolute truth, then, appears to be impossible for normal non-mystical consciousness. We cannot know the reality, or even prove the existence, of the

simplest object. But there persists in the race a type of personality which does realize this limitation: and cannot be content with the sham realities that furnish the universe of normal men. It is necessary, as it seems, to the comfort of persons of this type to form for themselves some image of the Something or Nothing which is at the end of their telegraph lines: some "conception of being," some "theory of knowledge." It is doubtful whether any two selves have offered themselves exactly the same image of the truth outside their gates: for a living metaphysic, like a living religion, is at bottom a strictly personal affair—a matter, as William James reminded us, of vision rather than of argument. Nevertheless such a living metaphysic may, if well founded, escape the stigma of subjectivism by outwardly attaching itself to a traditional School.

Naturalism or Naïve Realism

Naturalism states simply that we see the real world, though we may not see it very well. What seems to normal healthy people to be there, is approximately there. It congratulates itself on resting in the concrete; it accepts material things as real. In other words, our corrected and correlated sense impressions, raised to their highest point of efficiency, form for it the only valid material of knowledge: knowledge itself being the classified results of exact observation.

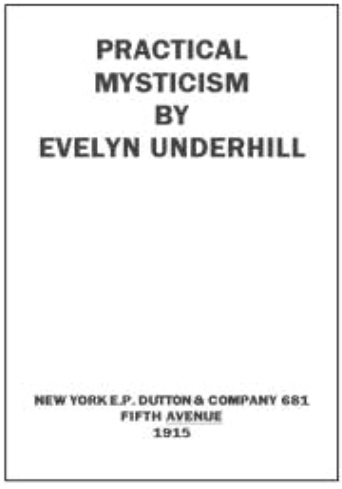
Such an attitude as this, may be a counsel of prudence, in view of our ignorance of all that lies beyond: but it can never satisfy our hunger for reality. It says in effect, "The room in which we find ourselves is fairly comfortable. Draw the curtains, for the night is dark: and let us devote ourselves to describing the furniture." Unfortunately, however, even the furniture refuses to accommodate itself to the naturalistic view of things. Once we begin to examine it attentively, we find that it abounds in hints of wonder and mystery: declares aloud that even chairs and tables are not what they seem.

The idea "house" is now treated by me as a real house, and my further observations will be an unfolding, enriching, and defining of this image. But what the external reality is which evoked the image that I call "house," I do not know and never can know. I may of course call in one sense to "corroborate," as we trustfully say, the evidence of the other; may approach the house, and touch it. Then the nerves of my hand will be affected by a sensation which I translate as hardness and solidity; the eye by a peculiar and wholly incomprehensible sensation called redness; and from these purely personal changes my mind constructs and externalizes an idea which it calls red bricks.

Science herself, however, if she be asked to verify the reality of these perceptions, at once declares that though the material world be real, the ideas of solidity and colour are but hallucination. They belong to the human animal, not to the physical universe: pertain to accident not substance, as scholastic philosophy would say. "The red brick," says Science, "is a mere convention. In reality that bit, like all other bits of the universe, consists, so far as I know at present, of innumerable atoms whirling and dancing one about the other. It is no more solid than a snowstorm.

Were you to eat of Alice-in-Wonderland's mushroom and shrink to the dimensions of the infra-world, each atom with its electrons might seem to you a solar system and the red brick itself a universe. Moreover, these atoms themselves elude me as I try to grasp them. They are only manifestations of something else. Could I track matter to its lair, I might conceivably discover that it has no extension, and become an idealist in spite of myself. As for redness, as you call it, that is a question of the relation between your optic nerve and the light waves which it is unable to absorb. This evening, when the sun slopes, your brick will probably be purple, a very little deviation from normal vision on your part would make it green. Even the sense that the object of perception is outside yourself may be fancy; since you as easily attribute this external quality to images seen in dreams, and to waking hallucinations, as you do to those objects which, as you absurdly say, are *'really there.'"*

Further, there is no trustworthy standard by which we can separate the "real" from the "unreal" aspects of phenomena. Though for practical purposes we have agreed that sanity consists in sharing the hallucinations of our neighbours. Those who are honest with themselves know that this "sharing" is at best incomplete. By the voluntary adoption of a new conception of the universe, the fitting of a new alphabet to the old Morse code, what we might call 'acquiring knowledge', we can and do



change to a marked extent our way of seeing things. We build up new worlds from old sense impressions, and transmute objects more easily and thoroughly than any magician. Only the happy circumstance that our ordinary speech is conventional, not realistic, permits us to conceal from one another the unique and lonely world in which each lives. Now and then an artist is born, terribly articulate, foolishly truthful, who insists on "Speaking as he saw." Then other men, lapped warmly in their artificial universe, agree that he is mad or, at the very best, an "extraordinarily imaginative fellow."

Moreover, even this unique world of the individual is not permanent. Each of us, as we grow and change, works incessantly and involuntarily at the re-making of our sensual universe. We behold at any specific moment not "that which is," but "that which we are", and personality undergoes many readjustments in the course of its passage from birth through maturity to death. The mind which seeks the Real, then, in this shifting and subjective "natural" world is of necessity thrown back on itself: on images and concepts which owe more to the "seer" than to the "seen." But Reality must be real for all, once they have found it: must exist "in itself" upon a plane of being unconditioned by the perceiving mind. Only thus can it satisfy that mind's most vital instinct, most sacred passion, its "instinct for the Absolute," its passion for truth.

You are not asked, as a result of these antique and elementary propositions, to wipe clean the slate of normal human experience, and cast in your lot with intellectual nihilism. You are only asked to acknowledge that it is but a slate, and that the white scratches upon it which the ordinary man calls facts, and the Scientific Realist calls knowledge, are at best relative and conventionalized symbols of that aspect of the unknowable reality at which they hint. This being so, whilst we must all draw a picture of some kind on our slate and act in relation therewith, we cannot deny the validity, though we may deny the usefulness of the pictures which others produce, however abnormal and

impossible they may seem. Yet as the theologian claims that the doctrine of the Trinity veils and reveals not Three but One, so the varied aspects under which the universe appears to the perceiving consciousness hint at a final reality, or in Kantian language, a Transcendental Object, which shall be, not any one, yet all of its manifestations; transcending, yet including the innumerable fragmentary worlds of individual conception. We begin, then, to ask what can be the nature of this One; and whence comes the persistent instinct which, receiving no encouragement from sense experience, apprehends and desires this unknown unity, this all-inclusive Absolute, as the only possible satisfaction of its thirst for truth.

Concept of Being, Idealism

This second tradition takes us far from the material universe, with its interesting array of "things," its machinery, its law, into the pure air of a metaphysical world. Whilst the naturalist's world is constructed from an observation of the evidence offered by the senses, the Idealist's world is constructed from an observation of the processes of thought. There are but two things about which we are sure: the existence of a thinking subject, a conscious Self, and of an object, an Idea, with which that subject deals. We can know, both Mind and Thought. What we call the universe is really a collection of such thoughts. Reality, says Objective Idealism, is the complete, undistorted Object, the big thought, of which we pick up these fragmentary hints: the world of phenomena which we treat as real being merely its shadow show or "manifestation in space and time."

According to the form of Objective Idealism here chosen from amongst many as typical, for almost every Idealist has his own scheme of metaphysical salvation, we live in a universe which is, in popular language, the Idea, or Dream of its Creator. All life, all phenomena, are the endless modifications and expressions of the one transcendent Object, the mighty and dynamic Thought of one Absolute Thinker, in which we are bathed. This Object, is interpreted by the senses and conceived by the mind, under limitations which we are accustomed to call matter, space and time. But we have no reason to suppose that matter, space, and time are necessarily parts of reality; of the ultimate Idea. Probability points rather to their being the pencil and paper with which we sketch it. This supreme unity is hinted at dimly by illusory appearances that make up the widely differing worlds of "common sense," of science, of metaphysics, and of art . This is the sense in which it can truly be said that only the supernatural possesses reality, all the rest is the world of appearance which our receiving instrument manufactures.

There is this to be said for the argument of Idealism: that in the last resort, the destinies of mankind are invariably guided, not by the concrete "facts" of the sense world, but by concepts which are acknowledged by every one to exist only on the mental plane. In the great moments of existence, when he rises to spiritual freedom, these are the things which every man feels partake more of the nature of reality than any "fact" could do; and man, dimly recognizing this, has ever bowed to them as to immortal centres of energy. Religions as a rule are steeped in idealism: Christianity in particular is a trumpet call to an idealistic conception of life..

In Idealism we have perhaps the most sublime theory of Being which has ever been constructed by the human intellect: a theory so sublime, in fact, that it can hardly have been produced by the exercise of "pure reason" alone, but must be looked upon as a manifestation of that natural mysticism, that instinct for the Absolute, which is latent in

man. But Idealism fails to find in practice the reality of which it thinks so much and in the words of St. Jerome which marked the distinction between religion and philosophy, "Plato located the soul of man in the head; Christ located it in the heart." That is to say, Idealism, though just in its premises, is stultified by the exclusive intellectualism of its own methods: by its fatal trust in the squirrel-work of the industrious brain instead of the piercing vision of the desirous heart. It interests man, but does not involve him in its processes. Hence the thing that matters, the living thing, has somehow escaped it, and its observations bear the same relation to reality as the art of the anatomist does to the mystery of birth.

Philosophic Scepticism

This is the third Theory of Being to be considered. This is the attitude of those who refuse to accept either the realistic or the idealistic answer to the eternal question. Confronted in their turn with the riddle of reality, they reply that there is no riddle to solve. We of course assume for the ordinary purposes of life that for every sequence a: b: present in our consciousness there exists a mental or material A: B: in the external universe, and that the first is a strictly relevant, though probably wholly inadequate, expression of the second. The bundle of visual and auditory sensations, for instance, whose sum total I am accustomed to call Mrs. Smith, corresponds with something that exists in the actual as well as in my phenomenal world. Behind my Mrs. Smith, behind the very different Mrs. Smith which the X rays would exhibit. There is, contends the Objective Idealist, a transcendental, or in the Platonic sense an ideal Mrs. Smith, whose qualities I cannot even guess; but whose existence is quite independent of my apprehension of it. But though we act on this hypothesis, it remains only a hypothesis; and it is one which philosophic scepticism will not let pass.

The external world, say the sceptical schools, is a concept present in my mind. If my mind ceased to exist, so far as I know the concept which I call the world would cease to exist too. The one thing which for me indubitably *is,* is the self's experience, its whole consciousness. Outside this circle of consciousness I have no authority to indulge in guesses as to what may or may not Be. Hence, for me, the Absolute is a meaningless diagram, a superfluous complication of thought. Every effort made by philosophy to go forth in search of it is merely the metaphysical squirrel running round the conceptual cage. In the completion and perfect unfolding of the set of ideas with which our consciousness is furnished, lies the only reality which we can ever hope to know. Far better to stay here and make ourselves at home: only this, for us, truly is.

This purely subjective conception of Being has found representatives in every school of thought: even including by a curious paradox, that of mystical philosophy, its one effective antagonist. Thus Delacroix, after an exhaustive and even sympathetic analysis of St. Teresa's progress towards union with the Absolute, ends upon the assumption that the God with whom she was united was the content of her own subconscious mind. By its utter denial not merely of a knowable, but of a logically conceivable Transcendent, it drives us in the end to the conclusion of extreme pragmatism; that Truth, for us, is not an immutable reality, but merely that idea which happens to work out as true and useful.

Logically carried out, this conception of Being would permit each man to regard other men as non-existent except within his own consciousness: the only place where a strict scepticism will allow that anything exists. Man is left a conscious Something in the midst, so far as he knows, of Nothing, with no resources save the exploring of his own consciousness.

Philosophic scepticism is particularly interesting to our present inquiry, because it shows us the position in which "pure reason," if left to itself, is bound to end. It is utterly logical; and though we may feel it to be absurd, we can never prove it to be so. Those who are temperamentally inclined to credulity may

become naturalists, and persuade themselves to believe in the reality of the sense world. Those with a certain instinct for the Absolute may adopt the more reasonable faith of idealism. But the true intellectualist, who concedes nothing to instinct or emotion, is obliged in the end to adopt some form of sceptical philosophy. The horrors of nihilism, in fact, can only be escaped by the exercise of faith, by a trust in man's innate but strictly irrational instinct for that Real "above all reason". The intellectual quest of Reality, then, leads us down one of three blind alleys: (1) To an acceptance of the symbolic world of appearance as the real; (2) to the elaboration of a theory also of necessity symbolic—which, beautiful in itself, cannot help us to attain the Absolute which it describes; (3) to a hopeless but strictly logical scepticism.

Science cannot even divide with a sure hand the subject and object of thought, though its business with phenomena and our knowledge of them is idealist at heart. It has become accustomed to explain that all our ideas and instincts, that pictured world that we take so seriously, ministers to one great end: the preservation of life, and consequent fulfilment of that highly mystical hypothesis, the Cosmic Idea. Each perception serves a useful purpose in this evolutionary scheme: a scheme, by the way, which has been invented by the human mind, and imposed upon an obedient universe.

By vision, hearing, smell, and touch, says Science, we find our way about, are warned of danger, obtain our food. The male perceives beauty in the female in order that the species may be propagated. It is true that this primitive instinct has given birth to higher and purer emotions; but these too fulfil a social purpose and are not so useless as they seem. Man must eat to live, therefore many foods give us agreeable sensations. If he overeats, he dies; therefore indigestion is an unpleasant pain. Certain facts of which too keen a perception would act detrimentally to the life-force are almost impossible of realization, for example, the uncertainty of life, the decay of the body, the vanity of all things under the sun. When we are in good health, we all feel very real, solid, and permanent; and this is of all our illusions the most ridiculous, and also the most obviously useful from the point of view of the efficiency and preservation of the race.

But when we look closer, we see that this brisk generalization does not cover all the ground, indeed, it is more remarkable for its omissions than for its inclusions. Récéjac has said "from the moment in which man is no longer content to devise things useful for his existence under the exclusive action of the will-to-live, the principle of (physical) evolution has been violated." Man has been called a tool-making animal by utilitarian philosophers, it is the highest praise they know how to bestow. More surely he is a vision-making animal, a creature of perverse and unpractical ideals, dominated by dreams no less than by appetites. He moves towards some other goal than that of physical perfection or intellectual supremacy, is controlled by some higher and more vital reality than that of the determinists. We are driven to the conclusion that if the theory of evolution is to include or explain the facts of artistic and spiritual experience, it must be rebuilt on a mental rather than a physical basis.

Even the most ordinary human life includes in its range of fundamental experiences, violent

and unforgettable sensations, forced on us as it were against our will, and for which science finds it hard to account. These experiences and sensations, and the hours of exalted emotion they bring fulfil no office in relation to her pet "functions of nutrition and reproduction." The large place which they fill in the human world of appearance, is a puzzling circumstance for deterministic philosophers who can only escape from the dilemma by calling these things illusions, and dignifying their own more manageable illusions with the title of 'facts'.

Amongst the more intractable of these groups of perceptions and experiences are those we connect with religion, with pain and with beauty. All three, possess a mysterious authority far in excess of those feelings, arguments, or appearances they may happen to contradict. If the universe of the naturalists were true, all three would be absurd and never treated with reverence by the best minds.

Religions

I need not point out the hopelessly irrational character of all great religions: which rest, one and all, on a primary assumption that can never be intellectually demonstrated, much less proved: the assumption that the supra-sensible is somehow important and real, and is intimately connected with the life of man. This fact has been incessantly dwelt upon by its critics. Yet religion pushing to extremes that general dependence on faith which we saw to be an inevitable condition of our lives, is one of the most universal and in-eradicable functions of man, although it constantly acts detrimentally to the interests of his merely physical existence, and opposes "the exclusive action of the will-to-live," except in so far as that will aspires to eternal life. Evolutionarily it begins as magic; it ends as Pure Love. Why did the Cosmic Idea elaborate this religious instinct, if the construction put upon its intentions by the determinists be true?

The Problem of Suffering

The mental anguish and physical pain appear to be the inevitable result of the steady operation of "natural law" and its voluntary assistants, the cruelty, greed, and injustice of man. Here, it is true, the naturalist can point to some amongst the cruder forms of suffering which are clearly useful to the race: punishing us for past follies, spurring to new efforts, warning against future infringements of "law." But he forgets to explain how it is that the Cosmic Idea involves the long torments of the incurable, the tortures of the innocent, the deep anguish of the bereaved, the existence of so many gratuitously agonizing forms of death. Also there is the stranger fact that man's capacity for suffering tends to increase in depth and subtlety with the increase of culture and civilization, even more mysterious, it seems that some have accepted it eagerly and willingly. They have found in Pain, the grave but kindly teacher of immortal secrets, the conferrer of liberty, even the initiator into amazing joys.

Those who "explain" suffering as the result of nature's immense fecundity, a by-product through which the fittest tend to survive, forget that even were this valid and complete, it would leave the real problem untouched. The question is not, whence come those conditions that provoke in the self the experiences called sorrow, anxiety, pain but, why do these conditions *hurt* the self? The pain is mental; a little chloroform, and though the conditions continue unabated the suffering is gone. Why does full consciousness always include the mysterious capacity for misery as well as for happiness—a capacity that seems at first sight to invalidate any conception of the Absolute as Beautiful and Good? Why does evolution, as we ascend the ladder of life, enhance rather than diminish the capacity for useless mental anguish, for long, dull torment, bitter grief? Why, when so much lies outside our limited powers of perception, when so many of our own most vital functions are unperceived by consciousness, does suffering of some sort form an integral part of the experience of man? For utilitarian purposes acute discomfort would be quite enough; the Cosmic Idea, as the determinists explain it, did not really need an apparatus which felt all the throes of cancer, the horrors of neurasthenia,

the pangs of birth. Still less did it need the torments of impotent sympathy for other people's irremediable pain the dreadful power of feeling the world's woe. We are hopelessly over-sensitized for the part science calls us to play.

Pain, however we may look at it, indicates a profound disharmony between the sense-world and the human self. Pessimist and optimist here join hands. But whilst the pessimist, resting in appearance, only sees "nature red in tooth and claw" offering him little hope of escape, the optimist thinks that pain and anguish, which may in their lower forms be life's harsh guides on the path of physical evolution, in their higher and apparently "useless" developments are her leaders and teachers in the upper school of Supra-sensible Reality. He believes that they press the self towards another world, still "natural" for him, though "supernatural" for his antagonist, in which it will be more at home. Watching life, he sees in Pain the complement of Love: and is inclined to call these the wings on which man's spirit can best take flight towards the Absolute. A Kempis calls suffering the "gymnastic of eternity," the "terrible initiative caress of God"; recognizing in it a quality for which the disagreeable rearrangement of nerve molecules cannot account. Sometimes, in the excess of his optimism, he puts to the test of practice this theory with all its implications. Refusing to be deluded by the pleasures of the sense world, he accepts instead of avoiding pain, to becomes an ascetic. The convinced naturalist falls back upon contempt, that favourite resource of the frustrated reason, and can only

regard him as diseased.

Pain plunges like a sword through creation, leaving on the one side cringing and degraded animals and on the other heroes and saints. It is one of those facts of universal experience that is peculiarly intractable from the point of view of a merely materialistic philosophy.

Music and Poetry

The qualities of beauty and of rhythm, the evoked sensations of awe, reverence, and rapture, are almost as difficult to account for. The question *why* an apparent corrugation of the Earth's surface, called for convenience' sake an Alp, coated with congealed water, and perceived by us as a snowy peak, should produce in certain natures acute sensations of ecstasy and adoration, why the skylark's song should catch us up to heaven, and wonder and mystery speak to us alike in "the little speedwell's darling blue" and in the cadence of the wind, is a problem that seems to be merely absurd, until it is seen to be insoluble. We know not why "great" poetry should move us to unspeakable emotion, or a stream of notes, arranged in a peculiar sequence, catch us up to heightened levels of vitality: nor can we guess how a passionate admiration for that which we call "best" in art or letters can possibly contribute to the physical evolution of the race.

Here it is that we approach that attitude of the self, that point of view, which is loosely and generally called *mystical.* Here, instead of those broad blind alleys which philosophy showed us, a certain type of mind has always discerned three straight and narrow ways going out towards the Absolute: in religion, in pain, and in beauty. In many other apparently useless peculiarities of the empirical world and of the perceiving consciousness, some people insist that they recognize at least the fringe of the real. Down these three paths, as well as by many another secret way, they claim that news comes to the self concerning levels of reality which in their wholeness are inaccessible to the senses: worlds wondrous and immortal, whose existence is not conditioned by the

"given" world. Hegel, who, though he was no mystic, had a touch of that mystical intuition which no philosopher can afford to be without, said "Beauty is merely the Spiritual making itself known sensuously." In the good, the beautiful, the true," says Rudolph Eucken, "we see Reality revealing its personal character. They are parts of a coherent and substantial spiritual world." Here, some of the veils of that substantial world are stripped off: Reality peeps through and is recognized, dimly or acutely, by the imprisoned self.

Récéjac only develops this idea when he says "If the mind penetrates deeply into the facts of aesthetics, it will find more and more, that these facts are based upon an ideal identity between the mind itself and things. At a certain point the harmony becomes so complete, and the finality so close that it gives us actual emotion. The Beautiful then becomes the sublime; brief apparition, by which the soul is caught up into the true mystic state, and touches the Absolute. It is in this sense also that "beauty is truth, truth beauty".

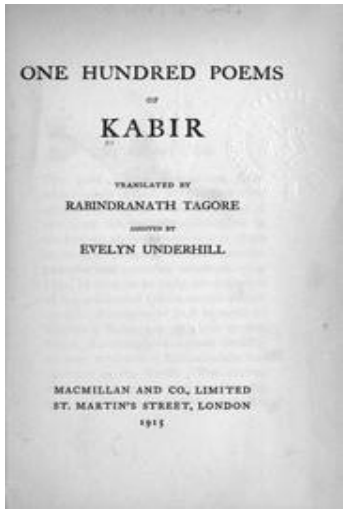
"Of Beauty," says Plato in an immortal passage, "I repeat again that we saw her there shining in company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense. For sight is the most piercing of our bodily senses: though not by that is wisdom seen; her loveliness would have been transporting if there had been a visible image of her, and the other ideas, if they had visible counterparts, would be equally lovely. But this is the privilege of Beauty, that being the loveliest she is also the most palpable to sight. Now he who is not newly initiated, or who has been corrupted, does not easily rise out of this world to the sight of true beauty in the other. . . . But he whose initiation is recent, and who has been the spectator of many glories in the other world, is amazed when he sees anyone having a godlike face or form, which is the expression of Divine Beauty; and at first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him. . . ."

Most men in the course of their lives have known such Platonic hours of initiation, when the sense of beauty has risen from a pleasant feeling to a passion, and an element of strangeness and terror has been mingled with their joy. In such moods of heightened consciousness each blade of grass seems fierce with meaning, and becomes a well of wondrous light: a "little emerald set in the City of God." The seeing self is indeed an initiate thrust suddenly into the sanctuary of the mysteries: and feels the "old awe and amazement" with which man encounters the Real. In such experiences, a new factor of the eternal calculus appears to be thrust in on us, a factor which no honest seeker for truth can afford to neglect; since, if it be dangerous to say that any two systems of knowledge are mutually exclusive, it is still more dangerous to give uncritical priority to any one system.

Why, after all, take as our standard a material world whose existence is affirmed by nothing more trustworthy than the sense-impressions of "normal men"; those imperfect and easily cheated channels of communication? The mystics have never been deceived by phenomena, nor by the careful logic of the industrious intellect. One after another, with extraordinary unanimity, they have rejected that appeal to the unreal world of appearance that is the standard of sensible men: affirming that there is another way, another secret, by which the conscious self may reach the actuality which it seeks. They accept as central for life, those spiritual messages which are mediated by religion, by beauty, and by pain and find in that very hunger for reality, the mother of all metaphysics, an implicit proof that such reality exists beyond the ceaseless stream of sensation which besieges consciousness. "In that thou hast sought me, thou hast already found me," says the voice of Absolute Truth in their ears. This is the first doctrine of mysticism. Its next is that only in so far as the self is real can it hope to know Reality: like to like speaks: *Cot ad cot loquitur*. Upon the propositions implicit in these two laws the whole claim and practice of the mystic life depends.

In this seeking we are not wholly dependent on that homing instinct. For some, who have climbed to the hill-tops, that city is not really out of sight. The mystics see it and report to us concerning it. Science and metaphysics may do their best and their worst: but these pathfinders of the spirit never falter in their statements concerning that independent spiritual world which is the only goal of "pilgrim man." They say that messages come to him from that spiritual world, that complete reality which we call Absolute. We are not, after all hermetically sealed from it. To all who will receive it, news comes of a world of Absolute Life, Absolute Beauty, Absolute Truth, beyond time and place: news that most of us translate—and inevitably distort in the process—into the language of religion, of beauty, of love, or of pain.

Possible knowledge need not be limited to sense impressions, to any process of intellection, or to the unfolding of the content of normal consciousness. Such diagrams of experience, it says, are hopelessly incomplete. The mystics find the basis of their method not in logic but in life: in the existence of a discoverable "real," a spark of true being, within the seeking subject, which can, in that ineffable experience which they call the "act of union," fuse itself with and thus apprehend the reality of the sought Object. In theological language, their theory of knowledge is that the spirit of man, itself essentially divine, is capable of immediate communion with God, the One


ONE HUNDRED POEMS
OF
KABIR
TRANSLATED BY
RABINDRANATH TAGORE
EDITED BY
EVELYN UNDERHILL
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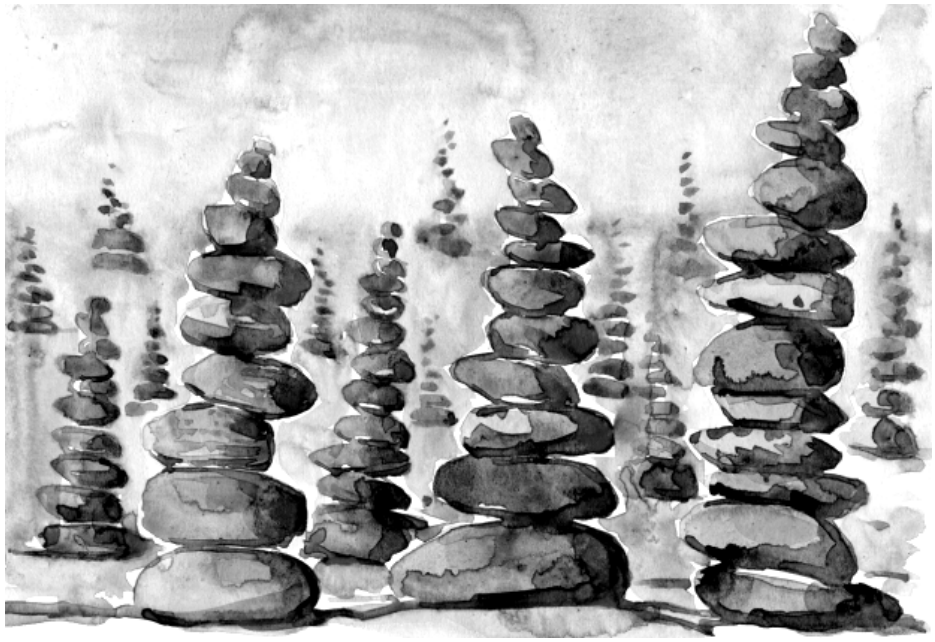
Reality.

Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. Hence whilst the Absolute of the metaphysicians remains a diagram—impersonal and unattainable—the Absolute of the mystics is lovable, attainable, alive. "Oh, taste and see!" they cry, in accents of astounding certainty and joy. "Ours is an experimental science. We can but communicate our system, never its result. We come to you not as thinkers, but as doers. Leave your deep and absurd trust in the senses, with their language of dot and dash, which may possibly report fact but can never communicate personality. If philosophy has taught you anything, she has surely taught you the length of her tether. One after another, idealists have arisen who, straining frantically at the rope, have announced to the world their approaching liberty; only to be flung back at last into the little circle of sensation. But here we are, a small family, it is true, yet one that refuses to die out, assuring you that we have slipped the knot. This is evidence which you are bound to bring into account before you can add up the sum total of possible knowledge; for you will find it impossible to prove that the world as seen by the mystics, 'unimaginable, formless, dark with excess of bright,' is less real than that which is expounded by the youngest and most promising demonstrator of a physicochemical universe. Examine us as much as you like: our machinery, our veracity, our results. We cannot promise that you shall see what we have seen, for here each man must adventure for himself but we defy you to stigmatize our experiences as impossible or invalid. Is your world of experience so well and logically founded that you dare make of it a standard? Philosophy tells you that it is founded on nothing better than the reports of your sensory apparatus and the traditional concepts of the race. Certainly it is imperfect, possibly it is illusion, it never touches the foundation of things. Whereas 'what the world, which truly knows nothing, calls "mysticism" is

the science of ultimates, . . . the science of self-evident Reality, which cannot be "reasoned about," because it is the object of pure reason or perception.'"

(Edited by Jackie Bortoft. An expanded version of this article is available at:
http://www.sacred-texts.com/myst/myst/myst04.htm
This is a chapter from her seminal book: Mysticism published in 1911)

Evelyn Underhill *(6 Dec.1875 – 15 June 1941) was an English Anglo-Catholic writer and pacifist known for her numerous works on religion and spiritual practice, in particular Christian mysticism. In the English-speaking world, she was one of the most widely read writers on such matters in the first half of the 20th century. No other book of its type—until the appearance in 1946 of Aldous Huxley's The Perennial Philosophy—met with success to match that of her best-known work, Mysticism, published in 1911.*



(Stone towers land art)