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The Oblique Light

Poetry and Peak Experience

Anne Ashworth

There's a certain slant of light...
Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -
We can find no scar,
But internal difference
Where the Meanings are.

(Emily Dickinson)

Quaker Universalist Group

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THE OBLIQUE LIGHT

THROUGH A CLAUDE GLASS DARKLY

The picturesque Traveller -
your eighteenth century aesthete -
contemplates his glass.
Elegant, cased, convex,
its black mirror cups
his over the shoulder view,
subduing strident colours,
harmonising tones,
encapsulating mountains
into a blue Claude.

The Picturesque Traveller
has dared the Lakeland peaks.
Perseus with polished shield!
He'll take Medusa.
Now through a glass darkly
he sees like Paul. But what -
sweet heaven! - what if he turned?

What if he turned? He would see Lakeland as it really is, in living colour, not as a dark two-dimensional simulation of a Claude Lorraine painting. And so startled would he be, this poseur who pursues his framed and darkened pictures, that he would cry *Sweet Heaven!* For - to steal a phrase - there is another world but it is this one¹, seen not in the oblique darkening of our all too customary Claude-glass perception, but in the oblique light of superordinate vision.

The world is a place of annunciations and epiphanies. There are moments of supreme but ineffable significance, when a light seems to strike obliquely across consciousness. Sharp as a laser beam, it cuts into, between, across all present assumptions and preoccupations. Powerful as a depth charge, it explodes common two-dimensional awareness, opening depths in the psyche to its invasive yet also warming and healing illumination.

This slanting light provides, as it were, fresh angles in the imagination. Incisive, it is nevertheless not analytic but synthetic, connecting matters that had seemed unrelated, offering the sense of a transcendent unity of being.

Some years ago, in the days before modern photocopiers, I had the charge of a machine that had to be operated in a tiny dark-room. The setting was a college library. Beyond the wall of the dark-room was situated the music department, and sometimes one had the benefit of background music. On an unremarkable day, immersed in routine tasks and certainly without any transcendental imaginings, I had been doing some photocopying, and held in my hand a bunch of keys. Beyond the wall, a piano was being played. It was not until after the ensuing altogether wordless experience that I realised the double meaning of the word 'keys'.

KEYS TO THE DARK ROOM

A bunch of keys fingered in a dark room.
A mind left out of gear.
Notes from a piano perforate the gloom:
some neighbour there
also fingering keys.
Connect these boundaries.

Chink of light on a key.
Metal coruscates.
New ultra violet lustre recreates
this rosary.

Searchlight under the brain plays through the hand,
oblique to reason in a transverse beam.
Manipulating fingers chord some dream
of earth: all ores, all metals understand.

Keys, keyboard, counterpoint.
Here at the pinnacle's a breathing point,
an equilibrium.
Confluence of many waters, gathered calm,
stilling of wind, of mind: a glider hovers.

Dazzled from the darkroom, how emerge?
Vulnerable, as from a shower, uncovered,
shaking startled drops, how merge
into the clothed crowd's story?
She steps as from a slow and measured dance.
Some, catching her glance,
flinch from encountered glory.

The oblique light

I first used the phrase 'the oblique light' many years ago for a wordless sense of opening and illumination that takes place in the psyche. Something like a beam of light seems to enter transversely, at an angle to both reason and emotion, producing its own lucidity. Others have known it in this form. Once, browsing in a secondhand bookshop, I opened at random a musty old book (I think a translation from Chinese, but cannot be sure) in which a far eastern Buddhist mentioned the experience and used this very image of an oblique or slanting light. I read the passage I had idly lighted upon with a thrilled sense of recognition; and have ever after regretted not buying the book.

The artist Laurence Whistler's engraved glass goblet, *The Slanted Light*, is perhaps another reference to the phenomenon. Is glass the most spiritual of artifacts?

GLASS

Things. What are Things for? Rilke understood.
First, to be named, he said, as never such naming.
Then, for transformation: reassembling
essences and elements of Things

as human mindstuff.
We are here to absorb, encompass.

No product of technology transfigures
more readily than glass.
No simpler, clearer analogue of heaven.

Take a bead,
a tumbler, wineglass, jar,
window, mirror, television screen,
telescope or microscope or camera:
all playthings of light.

Take a lamp, set it behind glass.
Set glass in front of glass.
Observe the angled beam.

Light through a pane of textured glass
bursts into bubbles.
On this side, drinking glasses on the sill,
amber-coloured, multi-faceted.
Layer on layer of transfigured glass.
Geologic strata in the mind
probed, revealed, invaded.
Ultrasonic beam that scans no words.
The oblique light.

Whistler, the glass engraver,
knew the oblique light.
A back-engraving on a goblet titled
The Slanted Light
depicts a very ordinary lane
pinned against sunrise.
Shadows silhouette a farm wall
from trees across a cart track.
One hillside lit and one as yet untouched
except for a first white bird.
Turn the goblet, slant the slanted sun,
drink the oblique light.

Turn *from* the goblet to transfigured earth
viewed in the slanted sacred light of heaven.

The oblique light is merely one form, or image, in which such transforming experiences may occur. But it does not seem as though one invents the image of light, or of obliquity, after the event, as metaphor. Rather,

one actually, and mysteriously, experiences the metaphor, feels the light and the obliquity. Perhaps this is akin to the mechanism of dreams, where we certainly experience symbolic forms as actual.

There are other lights. We have the light of reason and the light of love, both of which should be nurtured. These lights we can call on at will, we can diligently encourage them to increasing brightness. It is not so with the oblique light. It does not come at our call. Yet it may be that we can increase our readiness to receive it; and afterwards, school ourselves to view the world differently because of it.

'It's not what we see but how we look at it.' That is a cliché because it is true. We cannot by act of will elect to see by the oblique light, but we can in recollection be aware of the new intensity of seeing it made possible, and seek by diligent attention to practise that in common living. We can educate our alertness. We can expect the unexpected, but without disappointment when it fails to come, and without thought of having a right to it.

The oblique light is an 'as if' experience. It comes in the form of a metaphor, though one actually experienced. In what Wordsworth called 'the light of common day' which is most of our time - we can employ a secondary 'as if', continuing to pay that quality of attention to things or people 'as if' they were seen in the radiance of that unbidden oblique light. To have been jolted into seeing with intensity may persuade us to teach ourselves how to look harder. It is a worthwhile discipline. I wish I were better at it.

Ecstatic or 'peak' experiences

The sudden shaft of light, the stab of pain, the surge of joy which no biology or psychology can explain away, yet which the religions cannot adequately name - whence do they come? Why do they come? What triggers them? There is simply too much religious experience in the history of humankind to be dismissed with a puff of Freud and a squirt of Jung, though those thinkers and others may help us to make sense of some of it. Jung indeed took spiritual experience very seriously indeed, recognising in the symbolism of religions and dreams the deep archetypes common to humans in their profoundest being. To explain is one thing, to explain away is quite another. These experiences are given data, and cannot be left out of the total of human consciousness without invalidating that total. So how are we to

interpret them? Where do they come from? Can they be deliberately engendered? Should they be? What effects do they have? Are they valuable, dangerous, or neutral?

The phrase, 'peak experience', has passed into common speech, and rightly so. The metaphors of height are recognisable by most people. We speak of 'a lift of the heart', 'a raising of the spirit', of being 'on cloud nine'. At a certain extreme intensity, such liftings may be once-in-a-lifetime experiences, remembered for years, sometimes having profound effects on the individuals who lived them. For some, they may be associated with nature, for others with art or music, for others with human love or with religious faith.

There is plenty of literature on the subject. Much of this has been helpfully surveyed for Universalist readers by Jack Mongar, whose Quaker Universalist Group Pamphlet no.16, *A Universal Sense of the Numinous*², provides such an instructive background to the present essay that there is no need to go over the same ground. Mongar refers to psychologists such as William James and Abraham Maslow, as well as to mystics, physicists, our Quaker forerunners and the researchers of the Alister Hardy Research Centre. At greater length, Ralph Hetherington's 1975 Swarthmore Lecture, *The Sense of Glory* (now, alas! out of print - but do enquire for it diligently³) engaged boldly with the psychological study of peak experiences.

Such books are of immeasurable use in verifying the validity of ecstatic experience, and in comparing the many forms it may take. But no academic study can open the curtains, let in the oblique light. For myself, I am grateful to those thinkers who study the phenomenon. I read them with pleasure. Indeed, there is a kind of greed for such reading which may too easily become a substitute for living 'in the Life'. I hope that this essay will not be misused in that way. Its intention is indeed to ask questions - though not necessarily to answer them - but primarily to engage with the experience itself. I have only one direct mode for that: poetry. Visual art and music, equally, may respond directly to 'peak experience'. Poor limping scholarship must always follow respectfully behind.

Artists and poets are credited with heightened sensitivity, but perhaps they are only different from others in two ways: they can express something of their vision; and because of that they pay more attention. On the other

hand, it may be objected that poets and artists ~~use~~ their equipment, whereas saints and mystics do not try to make capital out of it. Is that a purer approach? Probably; but I am only a poet.

Annie Dillard, a scientist with a religious sense of wonder, suggests that as infants we are most astonishingly set down here and begin at once upon our required function to explore the place⁴. Scientists, artists, poets and mystics remain infants in this sense, always exploring, always astonished, always ready to behold the burning bush. But it is only gradually that we learn to relate our sporadic illuminations to a greater Oneness.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard relates how a blind girl, after an operation in which she recovered her sight, saw what she described as a tree with lights in it - presumably flowers or fruit. The author goes on (and here the prose becomes poetry):

The girl who was no longer blind saw 'the tree with the lights in it.' It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar ... charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire... It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power... I was still ringing, I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and, mostly, goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack.⁵

Later in the book, Dillard speculates:

The question from agnosticism is, Who turned on the lights? The question from faith is, Whatever for?⁶

Who turned on the lights?

What is it? Is the oblique light experience a religious experience? We may say, for the sake of definition, that religious experience is 'spiritual

experience in a religious context'. The oblique light experience may occur in any context; it has of itself no specific religious content. But if awe, wonder, a sense of connectedness and of depth-of-self be religious, then this is. Not that it matters what we call it: it is the quality and effect of such moments that matter. Researches at the Alister Hardy centre show that a religious mind-set is certainly not a prerequisite, nor a religious interpretation the only one, for unusual spiritual experiences. Certainly, religious expectations may colour the shape of the experience. One would not expect a Jew to 'see' the Virgin Mary.

Ecstatic mind-states may be truly universal, and indeed may be the basic data of all religious constructs. However, to assert their universal character is not to claim that everyone experiences such states. More guardedly, I would suggest that in principle any human being sufficiently awake and open is capable of some kind of transfiguring experience. It is unfortunately the case that ill-health, misery, fear, violence, indeed simply the mindless ordinariness of trivial living, may all make such states impossible. But this potentiality surely lies close to what Quakers claim as the availability to all of the divine light, and to the emphasis placed especially by Quaker Universalists on spiritual awareness being accessible to everyone of any religion or none.

Suppose, for the sake of starting the exploration without preconceptions, we reject theories of an external supernatural invasion producing so-called 'peak experiences' or transcendent consciousness, what possibilities are left? Daphne Hampson speaks of a 'thin membrane' around individuals, so thin as to be permeable to others⁷. Such permeating may take place, for instance, in Quaker Meeting for Worship or in intercessory prayer, as well as in intimacies of all kinds. Such permeability may make us more open to ecstatic experiences. It might explain why some are temperamentally more prone to them; and it may be that the permeability can be increased by exercise. Jungian theories of a collective unconscious may have some bearing on this also. Participation in Meeting for Worship is certainly no guarantee of ever being seized by the oblique light, but it does open the spiritual pores. Just occasionally the magic moment occurs actually in Meeting. In *Findings: an enquiry into Quaker religious experience*, Jack Wallis provides an anonymous account of one such:

I saw myself as an instrument of perception, taking in the world around me, and able, in a way that was quite overwhelming when I thought of it, to discern the divine in so much of life. All I could do was bring that joy back to the source from which it had come. And then, in a flash, it came to me: the Source and Perception are one. The miracle that I, a sentient being, could perceive the greater whole was grounded in the Source itself. The Source was, somehow, mirroring itself, or extending itself, through the agency of perception. The enigmatic, profound Hindu words 'That thou art', or 'Thou art That', came to mind. The separateness was illusory in the act of perceiving we were inextricably bound up with the fount and origin of all that was.⁸

But more often peak experiences occur in solitude. The corporate activity of Meeting for Worship can therefore account for very few such openings, and even for those few can only serve as a trigger. We are returned to the questions: what are they, where do they come from, why do we have them? Testing the 'nothing but' approach, let us interrogate some reductionist views.

These ecstatic moments are not a phenomenon of the manic stage of manic depression. They are much more likely to happen in periods of calm than in excitement, and though they may leave a temporary euphoria, their effect, if genuine, is to strengthen sanity and equilibrium.

Nor are they flashes of intuition. Though I personally have experienced many 'magic moments' I have almost never felt aware intuitively of any specific item of knowledge; for intuition reveals, or seems to, significant facts - that someone is in danger, that a problem is solvable by a certain line of enquiry, that a cheerful person is in fact miserable. The difference between this and ecstatic illumination is the difference between *savoir* and *connaître*, knowing-that and claiming close acquaintance. The legacy of an oblique light experience is a nonspecific sense that something about life is so indefinably lovely and wonder-inducing that it provides strength for more confident living.

Chemical reactions may account for some peak experiences. Drugs can induce them. Post-traumatic euphoria is fairly common, and (I have been told) is perhaps accounted for by endorphins in the brain. Do such explanations 'explain away', or merely explain the physical mechanisms involved? Could altered chemical brain states actually allow us to see more

clearly and deeply than we can in the light of common day? When the disciples saw Jesus transfigured, were they hallucinating or seeing him as he really was? The limitations of human sensory perception are now recognised. There are colours beyond the spectrum we see, sounds whose frequencies our ears cannot receive. Our experience of time passing is at a different rate from animals much smaller or much larger than ourselves. Similarly our understanding is limited. Is it preposterous, then, to allow that occasionally these boundaries may be momentarily crossed, offering a glimpse of a dazzling beauty beyond our normal knowing?

Years ago I had the misfortune to be run over by a motor coach. To be sure, this cannot be recommended, yet at the time and afterwards it provided more than one significant experience of the oblique light type. Was it the altered chemical state of my brain? If so, does it matter? Not to me, for the lessons learnt have been life-changing. Was it the prayers of many friends around the country, only made known to me later, on which I was, as it seemed, carried like a hovercraft on a cushion of air? If so, it may be that there are unseen networks or power-grids operating between human beings which can at times give access to higher states of consciousness.

In the first of the poems that follows, I describe the first, immediate experience: the time spent lying by a roadside waiting for an ambulance. Conscious though unable to see, I was supremely aware of the brilliant August sun. The sun is literally the source of all energies on earth, and I consciously felt its light and fire actively summoning me to 'choose life', as the ancient Israelites were exhorted. Lying helpless in dust and grit, I recalled with a fresh and experiential knowledge Blake's golden guinea.

ROAD ACCIDENT : SUNNY AFTERNOON

What, it will be questioned, when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea? O no no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, Holy Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!

(William Blake, *The Vision of Judgment*)

One is not aware of the camber of the street
or its hardness. Only the closest of perception
operates here: fingers in dust and grit.

Head in a stranger's lap seems an extension
of metamorphosis, this body shape
altered, dissolving, held here in suspension.

Day shuts up like a fan, having no scope.
We were going, will not arrive. No destination.
It is not the fear, not yet the lack of hope -
but a deft nailing down, without emotion,
the future boarded in. Mid afternoon,
hiccough in time, a pause in earth's rotation.

Narrowed to this: sans sight, sans speech; a known
hand clutched; distorted limb on a shopping bag;
intercourse restricted to a moan.

And all around, that heavenly host of Blake -
the arrow heads of solar energies -
dance in the disc of sun, crying *Awake*,

sharply refuting pain's impieties,
thrusting, piercing, summoning with voice
of many waters, many witnesses

(that cloud encompassing): proclaiming choice.
Assembled Israel, choose this day, stand free,
choose life. Did frightened Danae not rejoice
under the golden shower's epiphany?

Sometimes, it seems, traumatic events may precipitate states of heightened awareness. Later, in the weeks of recovering, I felt I had visited a sacred dimension, a 'far country', but found this impossible to communicate except in poetry. This was not a flash of oblique light, a momentary peak, but rather a fairly continuous plateau of spiritual sensitivity and openness to the transcendent.

A FAR COUNTRY

I have been to a far country.
How can I make report?

I do not know its name.
Ignorance shames me.

They question me with eyes.
How do you feel? they say.
But they mean,

What was it like?
That far country -
do you bring good news from there?
Do they have laws or is there anarchy?
How do you travel?

I answer them with eyes.
I feel quite well, I say.
But I mean,

How can I tell you?
That far country -
its colours are not in our palette.
The grass is on fire with love
till mountains shimmer in smoke
yet a bush is not consumed.
Savage, its breakers dash you against rocks
but without a sound,
and this is the sea's love dance.
Words are torn and burnt
in a consuming Yes.

Laws? There are no laws
but it is not anarchy,
that torrent's rage, that still pool of love.
And all the news is good.

You have to travel on silence.
I know no package tours,
can offer you no tickets;
they are not transferable.
If there are regulations for passengers
I have no copies.

I answer them with eyes.
I look at them with love.
But then I fear to scorch them
and draw a curtain quickly across my face
and pretend I am not well
and again I am ashamed.

Ashamed of ignorance: what do I have to tell?
Ashamed of silence: where have my words gone?
Ashamed of curtains: why do I crouch and hide?

How can I say, he is burning my words away?
How can I say, his love is a fire of silence?
How can I say, I do not know his name?

In spite of the trauma, in spite of the helpless inability to communicate, the resulting inner strength and the subsequent enhanced love of life remain indubitable. This kind of sacred experience is not conducive to asceticism; rather, it is life-affirming, leaving a high sense of rejoicing in the richness of the world.

In what fields of human experience or understanding can we locate moments of seeming nonrational enlightenment? Not in that of mental derangement, since it is an experience, and leaves a residue, of calm and supreme sanity. In the aesthetic area, then, or the mystical, or somewhere in the overlap between those two? This seems likelier. Or is it indeed *sui generis*, not amenable to categorising? I do not know, and the taxonomy hardly matters, except that theology would like to claim that these openings in the psyche are evidence of divine incursion. When writing *A Far Country* I recall how instinct and integrity demanded that I should defend the oblique light from theological appropriation:

How can I say: I do not know his name?
Even as I wrote that line I was aware that the very pronoun 'his' was a compromise, a half capitulation to god-talk. 'Her' would have been just as bad.

Perhaps after all these are no more than mechanical blips in the state of the brain. What then? It is what one makes of them afterwards that

matters. Let us say, for the sake of argument - and often my natural scepticism leaps at reductionist answers - let us say that the oblique light is indeed a nothing, a bagatelle, a transient and meaningless phenomenon. Very well. Let us add (to be even more provocative!) that there is apparently no discoverable pre-ordained or even evolutionarily emergent Meaning of Life. So... since humans are meaning-seekers, we must create significance for ourselves. Why not use what **feels** significant? We create our own meanings; so if this **feels** meaningful let it be so, let it inspire subsequent living, let the experienced form become a guiding metaphor to be lived out.

The Perennial Philosophy

We are indivisibly body and spirit. Since all matter is ultimately of one substance, it is perhaps unsurprising that many experiences of this type are reported in terms of a feeling of unity with all things. Danah Zohar offers actual evidence from quantum physics for this⁹. I am no physicist and cannot judge her theory, but find it intriguingly persuasive. All things, including our complex mind/body states, are ultimately made of wave/particles. If then all is ultimately the same stuff, why should not consciousness be a built-in constituent - even perhaps a proto-consciousness potential in sticks and stones? We know that human consciousness carries 'lower' forms of consciousness such as those available to amoebae, worms or ants. May it not then carry 'higher' forms of awareness? And when electrons behave as waves, the wave patterns mingle. This, suggests Zohar, may be the physical basis of interrelational psychology. When lovers declare that they **are** each other, when nature mystics claim a unity with earth, are they perhaps not using metaphor but stating physical fact?

All this squares with the Perennial Philosophy and the Hindu *Tat tvam Asi*, the insistence that the true human Self, Atman, is of the same substance as the cosmic Self, Brahman. The Perennial Philosophy recurs throughout history, arrived at from various starting points. The religious intuition of the *Upanishads*, the reasoning of a Schopenhauer, the physics of our own day, all reach similar conclusions. If, therefore, we are part of a normally unknowable Oneness, it is at least plausible that there occur from time to time chinks in our ignorance, moments of inexpressible vision and connectedness. Many reports of peak experiences indicate a sense of unity with all that exists.

Such a moment came to me in a park in autumn. Caught up in the scene, I became conscious of the underground roots of trees and plants interlaced in the subterranean darkness yet giving rise to all that diversity above ground, as though the whole were indeed the earth goddess. In Greek mythology, that goddess is Demeter, whose daughter Persephone disappears underground in winter. The Greeks also imagined the Furies propitiatingly called the Kindly Ones, the Eumenides, as terrible underground powers. For a moment, amid the ambiguities of autumn, the beauties and the horrors of earth's cycle were all one. Later, my stimulated mind full of connecting energies, I related all this to the Christian sacrament of bread and wine.

THIS IS MY BODY

- I -

This is my body, said Demeter, briefly.
She wasn't given to words.
Her tapering toes said it
curling along roots,
nuzzling moles and voles,
tapping the phosphates of the Eumenides
(who were not word women either -
liturgical dance, perhaps,
under their brown ceiling).

This is my body, said Demeter's fingers,
threading sunstruck cornstalks,
tips extended, feathered nerve endings
reduplicated, pliant.

And this, combing out her hair thinnings:
keys to new sycamores,
conkers, elderberries.
I am laying down layers of coal.

Mother, prattled Persephone,
why do things keep falling?
Why won't the corn stay green? And Mother, listen, feel -

something underground
is stamping, heaving, chanting.

*Corn is mown
and corn is ground.
Ground is torn
and earth turns round.
This is my body
baked as bread,
Demeter said.*

- 2 -

This is my body, said the man, briefly.
He had been given to words.
Words were given to him.
He had given away his words.

Now, running out of stock
and out of time
and almost out of flesh
 (they were yapping, snapping, seething
 under the reaped furrows,
 after his blood, the Furies) -
this is my blood, he added hastily,
willing it all to friends.

Rabbi, babbled Thomas,
how can we know the way?
Shall we all go under?

*Earth is food
and earth is wine.
Motherhood
and fall are mine.
This is my body
baked as bread,*
the man about to be buried said.

A retrospective light

In that instance, during the actual ecstatic experience I thought of, or felt part of, the earth mother. In its wake, still making connections, I added the Christian symbolism and made the poem. Sometimes, however, it is only years later that we realise how we were vouchsafed an opening; or, perhaps, at the time 'we had the experience but missed the meaning', as Eliot put it¹⁰. It is as though the angel of annunciations had proclaimed the gestation of a later understanding. If we do not recognise the light, or what it illuminates, at once, we may recognise - re-cognise - it when we are ready.

ANNUNCIATIONS

So many girls and angels!
Florence, Sienna, Rome - city after city,
church after church, predictable commissions.
Did painters weary of placarding old news,
the same surprise, the same visitation?

No doubt they took it for granted,
as we must grant our duplicated high streets,
their cloned hoardings grinning known products.
Rhythm of repetition reassures us.
Churches and billboards should be undistinguished.

Not that they didn't vary:
the girl demure, the girl devout, the girl
appalled, resigned, questioning - all the gradations
finely sifted by an advisory board
of text tasters, scripture sipping experts.

Then consider the angels,
some male, some female, some androgynous,
Titian's tiptoeing like a panto fairy;
Bellini's stylised, crumpled into air,
a function of light; Lippi's a nervous child.

Where did they get their models?
Girls, then as now, were all mothers of promise,

boys ran errands, ambassadors were received.
Ave might be How d'you do or Hi.
Typists tell their phones *Ecce ancilla*.

They were wrong, though, about the garden,
the hortus conclusus, chastity's enclosure,
where Leonardo's Lady, for instance, sits.
It doesn't do to hedge annunciations.
Confinement's not the word for giving birth.

It still goes on, of course,
the same old commonplace divine intrusion,
too hackneyed to tick off - like dawn and spring,
larvae and eggs and notions in the night,
faces at discos and the maths of physics.

Quite often it's a nuisance,
this unsolicited insemination,
embarrassment of life larger than life.
Too tired, too ordinary to aspire to Mary,
we won't acknowledge even telegrams.

Refuse to admit the angel.
Admit nothing. Insist on a solicitor.
You can't afford to open ticking parcels.
You're done for if you say *Be it unto me*:
annunciations sprout in every garden
and even strong rooms can't be angel-proofed.

A light to inspire terror?

So often, too often, we cower and flinch, longing to be angel-proof.
Oh preserve us from mysterious awakenings, from living too intensely! What
might such liftings demand of us? 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of
the living God.'¹¹ The bountiful earth mother is bound up with the Furies.

FUGITIVE

*Thou hast beset me behind and before,
and laid thine hand upon me.*

Psalm 139

I lurch away from light.
My shadow falls ahead of me.
A second shadow lengthens from behind.
Turning I find
no-one in sight.
Only the glare dazzles me.

I stumble towards the light.
All things are silhouette.
I need to shield my eyes with tinted glass.
The approaching face blanked from sight -
should I have known, have fled it?

I sit, hidden from light.
No shadow here, no stranger.
So whose the touch my shoulder flinches from?
Far from home,
out of sight,
am I never out of danger?

We fear the *mysterium tremendum*. This has always been the case.
Primitive peoples know the pressure of holy awe. Though it is good to be
released from their imaginary world of malevolent demonic spirits, in modern
civilisation we are, at the other extreme, so disconnected from earth that we
are hardly conscious of our fear. The (usually repressed) terror now is of
being confronted with the depth of our own nature. Spiritual experience is too
challenging, perhaps too truth-telling, for comfort in our flippant materialist
milieu. Hence the four commonest triggers of ecstatic experience have
become defence mechanisms. Art (which might allow the announcing ange
in) must be ironic, arch, postmodern; religion must be kept at arm's length;
human relationships are viewed with suspicion; and the natural world is to be
studied with as much scientific objectivity as can be mustered. And so when
the defences are breached, we are afraid; we do not know how to cope. We

cannot, as Eliot reminded us, bear very much reality. Yet the Hound of Heaven, whatever that be, is still in pursuit.

And how much we miss, refusing the angels! Would it not be enriching if instead we held ourselves open to invasion? For when that Hound runs us to earth - when the oblique lightning strikes - it hardly matters whether we had yearned for it or dreaded it. Bernini's amazing sculpture of Teresa makes it visual for us: pierced with the divine dart, the involuntary and only response is an ecstatic Yes!

AMBUSH

Yes,
it almost seems like loitering with intent.
The ambush set, at any corner waits
the sharp shock of a changed horizon, gates
swing open to reveal a new disguise.
How the slant lightning may invade your eyes
there is no preconception, till dilates
some close familiar thing with alien weights
of beauty, and the crouching seagulls rise,
crying and swerving with astonishment.
High rise
surprise
equates
ascension with assent.
Yes.

Can we search for the oblique light?

But how much control do we have over this kind of illuminating experience? Are there techniques which conduce to a state of readiness? Probably most meditative and aesthetic disciplines are of some help. Ralph Hetherington distinguishes usefully between meditation techniques which **open up** awareness of surroundings or objects focussed upon, and those which aim to **turn off** such awareness¹². Both may be of service, and it is probably a matter of temperament which one finds most helpful, either rapt attention or withdrawal of attention. I have found the former to be more rewarding. It seems to require what might be called 'the innocent eye', a

certain childlike curiosity and absorption; a sense of wonder. But the magic moment can never be commanded.

LOOKING THROUGH A ROSE

If you look through a rose
nothing may happen.
There is no guarantee you will reach the other side.
Give it a chance, though.

Respect its dignity.
Engage it slowly.
Creep your vision: careful clutch control.
Test the nerves at the end of your fingertip.
There may be electric contact. There may not.
If nothing happens
you could vary the background, connecting the rose with earth
or sky or paper or denim.
It may not help.
This may be the wrong light or the wrong rose
or the wrong day for you.
You will not be told in advance of the privilege
of being a lightning conductor.

You have nothing to bring but the hope.
Hard, hammering, hurtful hope.
If not today, tomorrow.
Tomorrow and another rose.

Try another rose tomorrow
and if you find tomorrow has no roses
try a leaf - and if tomorrow is winter
and you have no leaves, try frost
or a flame or a worm or a piece of dead wood,
a ribbon, a stone, a sunset; hunt the hope.
Then when it strikes you are ready
to conduct your lightning,
ride the oblique light
at an angle through your rose

to the far side
the clear side
where attar of Damascus gathers to a pool.

Ralph Hetherington goes on to quote some valuable advice from the mystic Evelyn Underhill.

All that is asked is that we shall look for a little time, in a special and undivided manner, at some simple, concrete and external thing. This object of our contemplation may be almost anything we please: a picture, a statue, a tree, a distant hillside, a growing plant, running water, little living things... Look, then, at this thing which you have chosen. Wilfully yet tranquilly refuse the messages which countless other aspects of the world are sending; and so concentrate your whole attention on this one act of loving sight that all other objects are excluded from the conscious field. Do not think, but as it were pour out your personality towards it: let your soul be in your eyes. Almost at once, this new method of perception will reveal unexpected qualities in the external world. First, you will perceive about you a strange and deepening quietness: a slowing down of our feverish mental time. Next, you will become aware of a heightened significance, an intensified existence in the thing at which you look. As you, with all your consciousness, lean out towards it, an answering current will meet yours. It seems as though the barrier between its life and your own, between subject and object, had melted away. You are merged with it, in an act of true communion: and you know the secret of its being deeply and unforgettably, yet in a way which you can never hope to express. Seen thus, a thistle has celestial qualities: a speckled hen a touch of the sublime.¹³

To pay this kind of attention, a certain care and delicacy is required. Some years ago a young poet related to me a conversation he had had with a Lakeland deerstalker. It made a powerful impression on me, as metaphor both for the art of poetry and also for the spiritual quest. (My description of the man is fictional.)

DEER CULL

"Not often, no. I want to make it clear
this is not sport."

His firm unhurried air
seemed absent minded, concentrated too.
A stolid certainty appeared, withdrew
as soon as glimpsed. A man easy to know
and yet you'd never know him.

"As to how
I go about it... well, I choose a night -
I'm wrong almost as often as I'm right,"
he added half apologetically.
"Weather, you know, and moon, and usually
we have an inkling where they're on the move
and how the wind sits. How much time we have
to give to it - now, that's a different matter.
When the time's ripe you've got to go. You'd better
forget you're owed some sleep. It's not a game
for union men or those with clocks at home.
Start about two a.m. Two or three hours
you must allow before the dawn. Of course
most of it's doing nothing, not exciting:
a second's action for a night of waiting.

Seamen and shepherds, so they say, have eyes
limpid with distance. Hillman as he was
you wouldn't quite say that. Dark watchfulness
alters a daytime look, perhaps must stress
peripheral attention more than sight.
The face was noncommittal, holding hints
of territory defended and of points
not mapped yet. Had he secret passages,
interior ways, encoded messages?

"Come with me, poet? Well now, I don't know."
He appraised me slowly. "What you'd have to do
is travel light. Go without preconceptions.
No heavy gear, no maps, no expectations.
Dark clothes I wear, and shoes with rubber soles.
It's work, I tell you. Got to learn the skills.
You crunch a leaf or snap a twig, you've lost
your quarry and your night, and that's a waste."

What happens when you sight them?"

"Not a lot.

You make a tiny movement to alert one animal. It lifts its head. You shoot at once, and kill just one. Aim for the heart, a head wound's not enough. The herd will scatter."
"Just one?"

"One at a time. The rest don't matter, they're not your business."

"When you come down hill into the morning, tell me how you feel Elated? Cleansed? Triumphant?"

Had he heard my question? Yes. At last he answered, "Tired."

There is of course a deliberation about the deerstalker's shot which is inappropriate as an analogy for ecstatic experience. Yet that kind of approach, that casting away of preconceptions, that dedicated attention, can dispose one to be receptive when the moment comes.

And later, if something has once been seen in the oblique light, so that it acquires connective significance, that significance need not be lost. We have seen the thing, truly seen it, paid it our deepest attention. It has as it were been revealed to us in Eden freshness. Having connected ourselves with it, we can now follow its connections with much else. In reflective mode, we find ourselves better equipped for the discipline of seeing the thing, or idea, steadily and seeing it whole.

TO SEE A STATUE

To see a statue, don't be statuesque. Adopt no stance, prefer no attitude, settle no distance. Circumambulate, describe a circle. Accept that all angles are right angles, have rights; all measurements are fractions. (Describe a sphere.)

To see a statue, use a normal moonlight and dawn and dusk and lunar lunacy and neon glare and candles. Change the wattage. (Describe a - what?)

A nude from life has more dimensions than Michelangelo counted. Planes may shift. Life class is maybe theatre in the round. (Describe a Globe.)

Beggar description: let's go walkabout, extend perception. Art must have more eyes than Argus-Leonardo. Spin the globe.

Why write about it?

Why write about ecstatic moments? Because they intrigue and excite me. Because, looking back over sixty years, no memories are more to be treasured. Because, evanescent as thistledown, they yet hint at vital messages from ... oh, from where? A parallel universe? A transcendent heaven? A dimension of understanding deep in the psyche? They seem to carry an uncanny authority. Teasingly, by hints and indirections, the oblique light dances ahead; unpredictable, ungraspable, but of such worth that it compels a lifetime's devotion.

But in a religious group's publication, are peak experiences worth writing about? In a world of hate and love, grief and fear, work and war, art and science and philosophy, are these moments not merely trivial? They cannot make me less cold-hearted, less selfish, can they?

Stop. Perhaps they can. They promote an attitude of awe, a reverence towards the world and its marvellous diverse richness. If such moments accentuate the sense of belonging, of the oneness of all life, then to exactly that extent, surely, the capacity for compassion is increased.

But in a world of acute suffering, is it even legitimate to focus on being surprised by joy? Not for a moment do I devalue pain, horror, affliction or conflict. Yet the very fact that we rail against this darkness means that we do know the possibility of light. Anguish is agonising because life could be otherwise, and sometimes is. Much, perhaps most writing must concern

itself with suffering, and perhaps should. But if most prophets cry *Woe!*, a few at least may, and should, cry *Joy!* Ted Hughes, in *Skylarks*¹⁴ suggests that both cries are equally necessary:

I suppose you just gape and let your gaspings
Rip in and out through your voicebox
 O lark...
O song, incomprehensibly both ways -
Joy! Help! Joy! Help!
 O lark

Thomas Traherne, that most luminous of mystical writers, is the supreme prophet of light and joy.

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold... The city seemed to stand in Eden.¹⁵

Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven, see yourself in your Father's Palace; and look upon the skies, the earth and the air as Celestial Joys.¹⁶

Why are these quotations so well loved? Surely because this is a near-universal experience. Reading Traherne, we recognise it, identify with it.

No, I am not ignoring pain. Simply, this essay restricts itself, for once, to focussing on joy and illumination; on saying simply: Attend to them, they are worth it.

Effects and outcomes

Are there dangers, though, in pursuing this elusive will-o'-the-wisp light? The medieval author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* very properly warned against a seeking after spiritual sensation for its own sake. Such a search too easily turns into self-indulgence, a source of self-congratulation. For some it may lead to a mistaken withdrawal into solipsism instead of to a warmer, wider embrace of life. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, who coined the term 'peak-experience' warns sternly against seeking such moments for their own sake. Such a search, he suggests, may sidetrack the unwary into the esoteric

and exotic, requiring ever stronger stimuli to trigger the flash of light. It may shut people off from moral demands and persuade them that peak experiences provide the only way to truth, so that other verifications of the validity of such experiences are discounted¹⁷.

Over against this, a critic who read an earlier draft of this paper comments that a warning not to be motivated by the hope of enjoyment when laying oneself open to supremely wonderful experience is like telling a parched man in a desert that when he finds water he must not enjoy it. The critic is right, but so also is Maslow - for this is a search not for hedonistic satisfaction but for the assuaging of a primary spiritual thirst.

Happily, though, ecstatic experience seems more often to issue in a sense of unity with others and with earth, which soon translates into positive goodwill and love. Peak experiences leave the receiver with a certain strength and steadiness, and with a heightened enjoyment of the world. There is also a valuable residue of awareness of mystery, of a dimension of depth within the commonplace. All this is to be valued.

Josephine Teagle, in her Quaker Universalist Group pamphlet¹⁸, distinguishes between 'mystical' and 'peak' experiences by their effects, the latter being evanescent but mystical awareness being permanently life-changing. It seems more likely to me that these experiences differ not in kind but in degree, and that their consequences depend partly on our psychological and spiritual state beforehand (apparently those who experience the numinous when in a state of depression find it dark and fearsome rather than a source of light and joy), partly on our later responses.

In childhood, before ever I was exposed to religious influences, I was aware of something like the oblique light. Having no language for it, but connecting it somehow with poetry, I invented for it the phrase 'the lyric thrill'. Later, I looked to religion to provide a word-vehicle for such deeply felt modes of wonder. But never have I been able, in honesty, to separate the religious and aesthetic modes. Rather, I feel them as being on a continuum, just as peak experience is itself at one end of a continuum which takes in common mindfulness. Quakers do not distinguish between the sacred and the secular, affirming that all experience may be holy. The intrinsic holiness of a peak experience is easy to recognise. Its continuing holiness depends upon how one treats it, responds to it, learns from it.

Light on the mystic mountain

Allison Peers, writing of St John of the Cross¹⁹, employs the image of mountain peaks as the dwellings of the advanced mystics. Most of us, she suggests, can be inspired by such people and their experiences, at least to the point of being willing to potter a little on the lower slopes. Artists and poets, too, may stimulate us to see with fresher eyes, to understand with deeper enlightenment. Indeed it is not given to many to be peak dwellers. But we could all, exploring the lower slopes, discover connections, become more open to the oblique light on the mountain - saints, prophets, poets and plainmen together.

(In the following poem I have used Anglo-Saxon-type alliterative lines to suggest a timeless space.)

MOUNTAIN

Once was a holy mountain,
a once and always mountain.
There came to climb the mountain
three wise men.

A prophet first, sturdy and strong of stride,
sure on the rocks, shouting the right road,
beckons behind, bidding the backward men.

Heedless, a poet potters among paths,
trying attractive tracks between trees,
turns aside for waterfalls, wanders away.

A Zen student starting the steep way
only seems to see his sandalled feet,
counts his paces, disciplines his progress,
absolutely absorbed in mere motion.

Seer and singer and sage or simpleton
tackle a tall mountain.

Noon. The sun sparkles the saffron robe,
grills the preacher in his goatskin garment,
burn the bearded rhymer where he basks.
He turns tail, seeking sheltered shade,
glad of a canopy of cool green
over a watercourse. The way winds
(does he observe?) down to a cliff drop.
It draws, it drags. The poet hesitates,
pulls out of his pocket pen and paper.

Higher - halfway, perhaps - the harder prophet
finds his refuge readily in rock
and from the corrie calls to his companions.
Words wend with the wind, reverberate.

The novice notices nothing, neither halts
nor perceives the peril of high noon.
Flexing his toes, he feels the full flesh
ripple over rounded pebbles on his path.
Light layers the mountain.

In his coomb the artist closely cons
patterns of ribbed bark and bare roots.

From his cave the seer scans the skyscape.

High on the hill, without haste or hunger,
head bent, the third affirms a fixed focus.
Cliff and crag in sunlight, cloud on summit.
The mute traveller now traces a track
into the veiled void, fades from view.

Over the soothsayer's seat a curlew cries.

Low in the bard's grotto grasshoppers grate.

Climber in cloud hears his heart and breath.
Ears eavesdrop the mountain.

Evening. Out of the mist the mad monk
treads down, down, duly deliberate.
Saffron robe reflects a saffron sky
suffused with sunset. Poet and prophet ponder
the inscrutable eye behind the innocent eye:
no glance, no greeting, no gesticulation.
Did he divine the mountain?

Wondering, the wordmen follow a falling footway.
They sense and seize a something out of silence
to string a sentence on (what else wanting?),
both privately proud, themselves plainmen,
to share a saint's mountain.

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