

Mystical Experience in Annie Dillard's “Total Eclipse” and “Lenses”

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I. Mystical Experience and Literature

In her book *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard*, Sandra Johnson makes an interesting point right up front about the “illuminated moment” which is helpful in its own context. She says the classic illuminated moment, such as the mystical experiences described in St. Augustine and William Blake, in St. Paul’s conversion, Joyce’s epiphany and Proust’s involuntary memory, takes one of its forms as the “literary epiphany.” She notes especially Wordsworth’s “spots of time” and makes the interesting case that the description of a mystical experience, as we hear in Blake for example, differs from the literary epiphany. The modern poet — Wordsworth is just about the first, the originator of the modern literary epiphany, for Johnson — intends to *create* the illuminated moment for the reader, whereas the earlier writer attempts only to convey the fact that a vision occurred: “the literary epiphany works upon the reader, forcing him into

an experienced moment, while the vision is a literary moment experienced or ‘read’ by the reader from what could be deemed the ‘outside’ of the moment. The writer describes his vision; the reader recognizes the description but does not physically experience the vision” (Johnson 8). In other words, the visionary moment, like Blake’s, is “an insight shared with rather than created within the reader” (10).

This is a very helpful way to describe the difference between modern and earlier literature: Modern literature attempts to create an actual experience in the reader, rather than merely to sum up or describe or imitate an idea or experience of the author. A poem is not merely an experience clothed in words, but is an experience fired by words themselves. One of Johnson’s general points is that Annie Dillard is clearly a romantic writer— working with the seemingly antique literary themes of Wordsworth, Thoreau and Emerson — but firmly a modern in the sense that she does not merely

describe but seeks to create the illuminated moment in her readers.

This seems fair and true enough in a postmodern, poststructuralist critical context — that is, it's true if we focus our interpretive attention on words and their arrangements, to the exclusion of interpretations or descriptions of the essences of the original experiences themselves, whether the reader's experience or the author's prior experience. But in the context of mystical literature per se, Johnson's focus on the words and the reader's experience — the literary epiphany — is inadequate because it creates a somewhat misleading sense of the parameters of the actual (as opposed to the literary representation or re-creation of) mystical vision. It's well, therefore, to clarify an area of Johnson's discussion that her purposes and focus force her to juggle; in doing this, we can clarify Annie Dillard's place in mystical literature.

Trouble arises in Johnson when she says the "illuminated moment" can be divided into five types: "the experience of the 'sublime,' the mystical experience, the conversion, the vision, and the epiphany" (6). In this way of analyzing mystical illumination, the "mystical experience," "vision" and "epiphany" obviously occupy the same relative ground, the way Ford, Chevy, GM and Saturn are all

types of automobile. But a look at Johnson's definitions reveals a problem. The epiphany, for example, is Wordsworth's literary creation of his sense of "spots of time"; it is an experience evoked for the reader. Johnson gives as an example of "vision," on the other hand, Blake's effort to convey what he saw — "a World in a Grain of Sand" for example. It is helpful to say that Wordsworth creates the moment while Blake simply describes it; but these two subjects as actual *experiences* are qualitatively different.

Among Johnson's five kinds of illuminated moment, only one of them, Blake's vision, includes a sense of unity of the cosmos and self; but while Wordsworth re-creates his "spots of time" with some power, W.T. Stace points out in *Mysticism and Philosophy* that "a dim feeling or sense of a 'presence' in nature" (86) is not a developed mystical experience, but a different kind of illumination. A true mystical experience is radically different from various kinds of illumination, as both Stace and Evelyn Underhill show.

In Stace's terms, the key to the problem of what constitutes a mystical experience is the experiencer's sense of having unified with his or her surroundings. This union happens in one of two ways. The mystic may experience a "unifying

vision” of reality, in which the person experiencing the vision senses that he or she has unified with the surroundings, maintaining a personal consciousness and awareness. Stace calls this the “extrovertive” vision, or the vision of nature. A second kind of mystical experience occurs when the person experiences a “unitary consciousness”; the person’s consciousness unifies with, or essentially *becomes*, God or the universal consciousness (however you define or experience this). Stace calls this the “introvertive” vision. This describes an experience of considerably greater intensity than Johnson’s definition of the “mystical experience” as a fleeting, “sudden and intense” moment, exhilarating or painful, that brings a new personal awareness—unification, as mystics through the ages indicate and Stace shows, is a different experience from momentary kinds of illumination.

Stace distinguishes the sense of unity from the sense of a presence, such as that conveyed by Wordsworth and Emerson. Evelyn Underhill, further, distinguishes the experience of union from other experiences of illumination by showing that mystics characteristically follow a five-stage path which begins with awakening (which is a form of conversion), proceeds to a stage of purification, then to a complex and multifaceted stage of illumination, which often leads to the Dark Night of the Soul,

which finally can culminate in the “unitive life,” life lived in full spiritual union with God, as saints, for example, and Sufi sheiks such as Rumi describe.

Johnson’s term “illumination” is not accidental and is clearly related to Underhill’s use of the word. In Underhill, the stage of Illumination has three main characteristics: 1) the joyous apprehension of the Absolute; 2) a great clarity of vision of natural phenomena in which everything appears as it is, infinite; and 3) an increase in energy of the intuitional or transcendental self, shown in auditions, dialogues with divinities, visions and even automatic writings (Underhill 240-41). The categories Johnson uses to discuss the “illuminated moment” all carry the characteristics outlined in Underhill’s stage of Illumination, except that Johnson does not adequately indicate how different the “vision” actually is. Blake’s writings reveal not just an apprehension of the Absolute and a clarity of vision of the grain of sand, but an experience of unity of the personal consciousness with the cosmos itself, as Arthur Clements points out in *Poetry of Contemplation* when he calls the poem that contains this image “one of the most beautiful and memorable expressions” of the extrovertive vision (Clements 174).

A literary epiphany, in these terms, does not

constitute the essential mystical experience. In the reader, the well-wrought epiphanic moment in a poem might trigger an awakening experience (Dillard, like Thoreau, makes much of the metaphor of awakening) or at its most effective might even evoke an apprehension of the Absolute, a potential no doubt inherent, for example, in the final cantos of Dante's *Paradiso*. But the essential mystical experience, as Stace and Underhill formulate it and Clements demonstrates in various poetic texts, is an experience of actual union, not merely an apprehension or observation, and no literary work can automatically trigger this—the experience of union, i.e., is commonly described as ineffable. Wordsworth's "spots of time" are illuminations, not visions of union. Johnson's category "mystical vision," in this sense, is misleading because it does not account for the unitary consciousness or unifying vision of reality and more or less equates it with other illuminative experiences.

From this perspective arises the question of whether Annie Dillard, apart from her genius for constructing the literary epiphany, reveals evidence of the experience of the unitary consciousness or unifying vision of reality. Or has Sandra Johnson indirectly but correctly concluded that Dillard's visions involve various kinds of illumination but not mystic union?

The answer is that Dillard writes of both illuminative experiences and sometimes, suddenly, the unitive experience. But her re-creation of the experiences is cast in a deeply modern milieu and tone, despite her clear connections with Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau. We can understand Annie Dillard as truly a "modern mystic," and speak of her writings and the experiences they evoke in precise and traditional mystic terms, but her experience of illumination and the unitive life is not the traditional experience we hear of from many of her predecessors. As Sandra Johnson helpfully explains, Dillard's literary techniques are distinctly modern, but moreover, so is her mysticism.

The mystical aspects of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* have been discussed at some length, most critics making reference to Dillard's description of the book as paralleling the traditional *via positiva* and *via negativa*. And while *Pilgrim* is filled with illuminative moments, two essays in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* clearly illustrate Dillard's experiential relation to the mystical experience. While *Pilgrim* purports to unfold a journey along the "way," essays in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* focus on particular moments which re-create and explore the facets of both the unitive and illuminative experiences.

It may be well to begin outside Dillard's writings with a fairly pure, straightforward example of the description of a unitive experience, in order to show how the experience is identified and to gain a point of comparison. The following passages come from "The Mind of a Scientist, the Heart of a Mystic," by Eunice Baumann-Nelson, a Penobscot Indian. She says:

"It was sometime in October 1951, and I was beginning my graduate work in New York City. I lived on Eighth Street, between Fifth and Sixth avenues, which is a really busy place with restaurants all over and all kinds of traffic. To get to class at New York University, I had to cross this street and go through Washington Square park.

"This one day I was going to a late afternoon class, and when I stepped off the curb something happened. In the time from when I stepped off the curb to when I got to the other side of the street, this thing happened, and it was as though I had lived all my life with a blindfold on, and it had been ripped away in that instant. Or maybe, it's hard to find words for it, it's as if I had lived in a dark cave all my life and had suddenly come out into bright sunlight. It was instantaneous, and I mean there was not time; I couldn't time it, but it must have been very short by our usual way of reckoning, because by the time I got to the other side of the street it was over. I walked a short block to Washington Square and entered the park. I was cutting across diagonally when I looked up for some reason. All I saw were these dark branches of trees against a blue sky, and it reminded me somewhat of the type of Japanese and Chinese paintings that they do with these outlines of trees. I stopped and thought, 'My, how beautiful, what glory, and it's been around me all my life and I've never seen it.' ...

"[Later] I read Suzuki's Zen Buddhism and hit the jackpot — I recognized my experience in the description of satori, or enlightenment. I realized

from my anthropological training that the 'mystical experience' and satori were identical...

"[W]hat had happened to me during that experience, when I stepped off the curb on Eighth Street, was a sudden recall of that early, limitless, boundless experience of nonseparatedness ... Somehow, I believe, something must have triggered it for me, but I have no recollection of what it may have been. All I remember vividly is the knowledge thrust upon me that I was one with all — humans, animals, the Moon, Sun, stars, universe. There was no separation between me and them. At the time, however, I had no way of explaining to myself or to anyone else what had happened to me, except that it had brought about the feeling of oneness with all.

"Now we know that connectedness does exist—that we are, in fact, connected to everything. It was known about, acknowledged, and acted upon by traditional Native Americans. My ancestors knew that we are related to ... everything. ... My experience had given me an unshakable conviction of my connectedness."

(Baumann-Nelson 73-76)

The key statement occurs toward the end of these passages, but in the terms Clements adapts from Stace and Underhill, several other factors clearly mark this experience as mystical, in the sense that it includes a unifying vision of reality. "I was one with all," she says; "a sudden recall of that early, limitless, boundless experience of nonseparatedness" characterized her vision. Baumann-Nelson, true to Johnson's outline, makes little effort in this narrative to re-create the experience, but instead simply declares flatly, like Blake, that she felt she had unified with everything.

This is the unifying vision (or as Clements says, using W.H. Auden's four classifications of mystical experience, the "Vision of Dame Kind" or nature) in which the experiencer feels she is at one with, or in effect has *become* her natural surroundings: "I was one with all."

Further, Clements and Stace call attention to the fact that a number of other characteristics often appear in descriptions of the experience. One of these is a greatly heightened sense of objectivity or reality; in Eunice Baumann-Nelson's experience, she feels that a blindfold "had been ripped away in that instant," and goes on to make the analogy that it was "as if I had lived in a dark cave all my life and had suddenly come out into bright sunlight," an image exactly parallel to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, one of the earliest and most powerful literary descriptions of the mystical experience. Her remarks on the beauty of the trees in the park reflect the essence of this as an aware, extrovertive experience of nature, rather than of her inner consciousness, and the sense of great beauty parallels the feelings of "blessedness, joy, peace, happiness" often described in mystical experiences (Clements 7). Finally, Baumann-Nelson says in passing that "it's hard to find words for it" and "I had no way of explaining to myself or anyone else what had happened"; these remarks square with the frequent statement that the

mystical experience is ineffable, that words are totally inadequate to convey what has happened.

This is a classic description of the mystical experience. It is like hundreds of other descriptions of the experience and could have been recorded before Wordsworth or Blake; its only modern features inhere in its city setting and in passages not quoted here which propose — more than 40 years after the experience — a scientific explanation for what happened (without denying the reality or value of the experience in any way). Annie Dillard in her essays describes the same experience, but with a tone and mood — and an interpretive recreation — that could not have occurred before Wordsworth.

II. "Total Eclipse"

The essays "Total Eclipse" and "Lenses" from *Teaching a Stone to Talk* offer clear glimpses into two aspects of Annie Dillard's mysticism. In some ways vastly the more complex of the essays is "Total Eclipse," and by way of literary evaluation and appreciation we might say this is one of the truly remarkable works of American literature in the twentieth century, though the purpose here is not to make that case. Instead, the purpose is to try to place "Total Eclipse" in the context of the mystical

literary tradition.

Literally, “Total Eclipse” narrates the speaker’s¹ journey to central Washington state in February 1979 to watch a total eclipse of the Sun. The narrative begins in the cheap hotel where the speaker and her husband spent the night under a particularly gauche but startling painting of a clown with vegetables for body parts. She flashes quickly back to the previous day’s drive eastward over the Cascade Mountains and their arrival at the seedy hotel, and then narrates the early morning drive to the hills and the scene where they set up with dozens of other people to view the eclipse. She gives a detailed account of the eclipse itself, and of her intense experience during the eclipse, retelling this part several times and emphasizing different observations, ideas and images in an effort to make sense of what she has seen and experienced. The essay concludes with a sort of aftermath scene in a local diner, refers again to the hotel, and indicates a sense of relief in the few sentences devoted to the drive home.

The story is fairly simple, but let’s be straightforward: The narrative comprises a thicket of images, and while the essay creates a profound effect that Poe, the quintessential modernist, would likely have admired, it’s difficult to summarize

exactly what she is talking about. The eclipse frightens her and most others at the scene. She has tremendous difficulty finding words to describe, or explain, or re-create exactly what she experienced — an indication we may be in the vicinity of a mystical experience. She seems at points to experience literal lapses of time, in the sense that she experiences bewildering confusions of remembering and forgetting, including recollections of previous lifetimes. The narrative is filled with similes and images which play against and correspond with each other at intuitive levels difficult to analyze. A reliable critical statement of their connectedness is difficult to make, and perhaps would be damaging to the essay even if a concise summary or formula could be invented to sum up the essay’s main theme or effect.

But there is a clear sense, given the essay’s peculiar unity, that all the imagery coheres through correspondences of various kinds. The word “correspondences” is not arbitrary. In the nineteenth century (notably, Thoreau’s time), a dominant mode of occult thought involved the idea that every physical object or being has a corresponding reality in the spiritual world, or in some abstract dimension, or in the next planes of existence, or on intellectual and emotional levels — however you choose to speak of it. Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondances” discloses the nineteenth century literary understanding of the reality — sensed by mystics and poets — that is not of our familiar spacetime. It is a sensibility frequently described in the perennial philosophies and theologies from Plotinus and Origen to the eighteenth century religious philosopher Emanuel

Swedenborg, whose reshaping and updating of the idea influenced writers as diverse as Baudelaire, Emerson and Henry James.

In the nineteenth century the idea of correspondences surfaced in a number of different ways. Emerson's understanding, for example, appears in a phrase like "a fact is an Epiphany of God." In another sense, the Hermetic philosophy traditionally approached reality with the idea that particular things correspond or resonate with each other, and so the idea of correspondences is present in the Hermetic arts and practices—particularly, we need to note, in alchemy. Most alchemists do not describe not the unitive mystical experience, but instead the process or way involved in achieving the unitive life; alchemists tend to seek knowledge as a way to spiritual enlightenment, but don't often describe mystical union. The transmutation of lead into gold is a metaphor: a process in nature which corresponds to the abstract process of the preparation and purification of the soul in readiness for, hopefully, a permanent mystical experience. The idea that there is a "way" or a path toward spiritual enlightenment is also an element of the perennial philosophy, and is spoken of by mystics ranging down the millennia, from Buddha, to Plato, to Christ, Plotinus, Rumi and Dante. Alchemy's — and Hermeticism's — links with the mystic experience involve the idea that there are ways or

practices which can lead to enlightenment, and the idea that there are correspondences between the natural world and the abstract or spiritual worlds.

In the modern age, we can speak of the images in a literary text "corresponding" with each other,² and this is the first tenuous link between "Total Eclipse" and a Hermetic or very generally mystical underpinning. But further, one of the most striking and telling images in "Total Eclipse" corresponds clearly to alchemy and its processes. Early in the essay, after a number of depictions of descent — the speaker and her husband "descended several thousand feet into central Washington" and "lost altitude" during the drive while she "watched the landscape innocently, like a fool, like a diver in the rapture of the deep," and came through a tunnel excavated under a recent avalanche (86) — the speaker lies in bed remembering an article about gold mining:

In South Africa, in India, and in South Dakota, the gold mines extend so deeply into the earth's crust that they are hot. The rock walls burn the miners' hands. The companies have to air-condition the mines; if the air conditioners break, the miners die. The elevators in the mine shafts run slowly, down, and up, so the miners' ears will not pop in their skulls. When the miners return to the surface, their faces are deathly pale. (87)

No reference to alchemy is readable yet here, really, except in the implication that the miners seek gold. But the image is striking and occurs to her,

significantly, when she is in bed, a time of dreaming.

The next paragraphs emphasize the familiar and unfamiliar, as in the morning the couple set off on the adventure, which is like “a hundred” others they have had; they are accustomed to and “adept” at this familiar, comfortable routine. They then ascend — in contrast to the descent of the previous day’s journey — to find an appropriate place to wait for the eclipse. In a characteristic minor but paradoxical detail, the speaker points out that they are “sweating in the cold” as they climb, an indication that things are not as one normally expects them to be.

From the top of the hill, the view of the Yakima valley is gorgeous — “a Shangri La. All its hundreds of low, golden slopes bore orchards,” the speaker tells us, and we may or may not, in the welter of imagery, note the recurrence of gold in the image. The scene is so beautiful that it bends a little out of the everyday: “Distance blurred and blued the sight, so that the whole valley looked like a thickness or sediment at the bottom of the sky,” and a few phrases on, we hear of “empty lowlands blued by distance, and Mount Adams. Mount Adams was an enormous, snow-covered volcanic cone rising flat, like so much scenery.” The next paragraph

begins: “Now the sun was up. We could not see it; but the sky behind the band of clouds was yellow, and, far down the valley, some hillside orchards had lighted up” (88).

Now on the face of it, this is simply a very richly detailed description of a landscape seen at an unusual moment. But notice repetitions of color: The word “blued” is given twice, and the “golden slopes” are soon overhung by yellow clouds where “hillside orchards had lighted up.” The fact that the orchards make things golden could easily suggest Yeats’ “golden apples of the sun,” and indeed, the following paragraph’s first image is of the Sun, the yellow clouds placed in context with the orchards again, inviting us to remember the golden slopes a few sentences earlier. The Sun is an alchemical symbol of divine perfection; it corresponds with gold and is, after all, the central interest of the speaker’s journey to Washington.

The close repetition of the word “blued” is curious because normally “blue” is not used as a verb. But here the passive voice suggests that the blue *acts on* the whole scene, as if it is transforming the visible landscape. In modern literature, perhaps the most astonishing and pervasive use of the color blue as a symbol occurs in Wallace Stevens’ poetry, where it almost always indicates the human

imagination or the activity of the imagination. In Stevens, the imagination is a powerful, transforming, creative faculty. And indeed, Stevens is mentioned by name later in the essay (99). When the distance “blued” the empty lowlands in Dillard’s image, there is a sense that a transformation is occurring: The inner imagination is at work.

This subtle ecology of images gathers force and complexity as the diction emphasizes that Mount Adams is a “volcanic cone.” Volcanoes, of course, originate in the deep, hot bowels of the Earth, the place where the gold miners, whom she had mulled the previous night, do their work.

This imagery sets the stage for the description of the eclipse, and moreover, for the depiction — or re-creation — of what happens in the speaker’s psyche. Her imagination is already at work on the scene — which is to say, she is about to descend to a spiritual, or psychic, or psychological internal place in order to carry back gold, if possible, from a place where the rock walls burn, remembering that the gold miners emerge from the mines with deathly pale faces, as if harrowed by their experience. My word “harrowed” evokes the traditional Christian sense of hell, a place of heat and suffering. In alchemical terms, this is spiritual work. The speaker of the essay has made her way

here to put herself “in the path of the total eclipse” (85), a natural occurrence which she hopes will clarify something for her: Her motivation for observing nature in “Living Like Weasels” is “to learn, or remember, how to live ... I would like to live as I should” (15). And in Dillard’s perspective, “You take a step in the right direction to pray” (“Teaching a Stone to Talk” 76), which is to say, turn your attention to God. Her way or path to enlightenment (not her phrase, but that of the perennial philosophy) is to learn from nature; her observing journey is like alchemical work, involving a search for gold which may mean some considerable peril in the depths of the mine. She ascends the gorgeously beautiful Yakima valley hillsides — she moves toward heaven — and their gold color reflects their spiritual possibilities; but the landscape is about to be transformed in wholly unexpected ways.

A foreshadowing of this unfamiliar transformation occurs when, after the colors woven so richly into the previous pages’ descriptions, the Sun “cleared the clouds” and “Near the sun, the sky was bright and colorless. There was nothing to see.” (89). Since there is no formal beginning to the eclipse, the speaker feels she should have known she was “out of [her] depth,” the word “depth” resonating clearly with the descent through the

avalanche tunnel and the gold mining imagery, and unfolding an uncomfortable paradox in which a sense of downwardness inheres in moving upward. As the eclipse quietly begins, we learn that the speaker observes it through welders' goggles, an incidental but resonant image recalling the heat and danger, again, of the gold mines. The images' correspondence tightens as the narrative progresses.

In the next paragraph, the eclipse is tentatively described in a couple of analogies: "Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him, or as flying in an airplane does to falling out of an airplane" (89). The experiences correspond to each other in these ways, as all similes make clear. And in the following sentences, the correspondences gather the complexity of the previous pages' imagery: "We have all seen a sliver of light in the sky; we have all seen the crescent moon by day" (90). Now the comparison extends to the Moon, and the word "sliver" is clearly not accidental: It's a slight rearrangement of the letters in "silver," which explicitly corresponds to light, and specifically moonlight: Yeats' silver apples of the moon. There is a great difference, alchemically, in the significance of silver and the significance of gold: Silver corresponds to a stage along the way, but gold corresponds to the perfection achieved.

The Sun is the perfect being, and the Moon, its inferior, is about to eclipse it.

As the early stages of the eclipse progress, eventually "the sky to the west deepened to indigo, a color never seen" (91). The correspondence to Stevens' blue imagination continues but changes, here, and becomes unfamiliar; something wholly unexpected is transpiring:

Stuck up into that unworldly sky was the cone of Mount Adams, and the alpenglow was upon it. The alpenglow is that red light of sunset which holds out on snowy mountaintops long after the valleys and tablelands are dimmed. "Look at Mount Adams," I said, and that was the last sane moment I remember. (91)

The whole scene has become unfamiliar, a condition different from the couple's earlier confidence in their routine. A few hours earlier, they were "adept"—a word indicating advancement in certain kinds of spiritual pursuits — at handling the everyday, but as the eclipse gathers force, they enter a place — which amounts to a state of consciousness — so different that it seems insane. The alpenglow is described as something seen at sunset, yet this is early morning — the time, it might be noted, of awakening. Further, the redness indicates, in alchemical terms, the final result of the work (Burckhardt 183); the reference in the essay is to the alpenglow's appearance at sunset, as the day culminates, but in Dillard's situation, everything is

changing places: Things that are familiar are becoming unfamiliar, the sky is now a blue “never seen” — the imagination is about to engage in activities not normally within its range.

Titus Burckhardt gives this synopsis of alchemical color symbolism:

... ‘blackening’ (*melanosis, nigredo*) of the *materia* or ‘stone’ is followed by bleaching (*leukosis, albedo*), and this, in turn, is followed by ‘reddening’ (*iosis, rubedo*).

Black is the absence of colour and light. White is purity; it is undivided light — light not broken down into colours. Red is the epitome of colour, its zenith and its point of greatest intensity. This ordering of things becomes even more evident if, between white and red, a whole series of intermediate colours, such as lemon-yellow, yellow-ochre, and bright red is inserted, or again, if one speaks of a ‘peacock’s tail’ of gradually unfolding colours.

(*Burckhardt 182*)

In “Total Eclipse,” we are clearly experiencing an unfolding of colors; the absence of color and light is the key sensory image, in many ways, in the experience of an eclipse, and we have moved through yellow and gold imagery, and at the point of sunset, red. A movement is taking place in the colors themselves, corresponding in general terms to movements in spacetime, perception and the consciousness of the speaker.

As the eclipse gains momentum in her eyes, images of color and light cohere what has gone

before in an intense, important paragraph:

I turned back to the sun. It was going. The sun was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were platinum. Their every detail of stem, head, and blade shone lightless and artificially distinct as an art photographer’s platinum print. This color has never been seen on earth. The hues were metallic; their finish was matte. The hillside was a nineteenth-century tinted photograph from which the tints had faded. All the people you see in the photograph, distinct and detailed as their faces look, are now dead. The sky was navy blue. My hands were silver. All the distant hills’ grasses were finespun metal which the wind laid down. I was watching a faded color print of a movie filmed in the Middle Ages; I was standing in it, by some mistake. I was standing in a movie of hillside grasses filmed in the Middle Ages. I missed my own century, the people I knew, and the real light of day. (91)

In this paragraph, as the sun disappears, everything goes wrong. We move from the previous images of red and gold to platinum, a precious metal of the modern age whose color has “never been seen on earth,” meaning it is something deliberately teased out by human beings; its artificiality is underlined by the simile of the photographer’s print, a copy of a copy of a natural object. We are specifically alerted to the fact that the color is metallic — in the same company as gold and silver — and as the unearthly color is established in the description, the narrative begins to bend backward in time: The hillside resembles a nineteenth-century photograph in which all the people are long since dead. The grasses then are actually identified with “finespun metal,”

and the speaker says she is watching a movie filmed in the Middle Ages; in fact she feels she is standing in the movie. By some kind of artifice, the transformed appearance of the landscape has caused her to feel she has slipped her place in time. The Middle Ages, probably not coincidentally, is the time particularly associated with alchemical activities.

As the speaker looks at her husband, she sees “on his skull the darkness of night mixed with the colors of day” (91-92), the word “mixed” echoing, again, an alchemist’s activity. “My mind was going out,” she says; “my eyes were receding the way galaxies recede to the rim of space. Gary was light-years away ...” (92). The correspondence between the motion of her eyes and galaxies in her simile becomes a full-blown metaphor as she says, in turn, not that Gary *looks* like he is light-years away, but that he *is* light-years away: This description is not merely a fantasy or an approximation, but the experience has a reality of its own. “He smiled as if he saw me; the stringy crinkles around his eyes moved,” we learn, and the “stringy crinkles” correspond unmistakably to the picture of the vegetable-faced clown in the hotel room. The implication here is that the familiar categories of time and place are breaking down, crossing over each other and, to some extent, becoming each

other.

This sense is expanded in the next sentences as the speaker describes the whole scene not as a present event, but as a recollection: “The sight of him, familiar and wrong, was something I was remembering from centuries hence, from the other side of death: yes, *that* is the way he used to look when we were living” (92).

Her sense of time then warps subtly back to the present: “I could not hear him; the wind was too loud. Behind him the sun was going. We had all started down a chute of time.” Time itself now corresponds to the mine shaft of the gold miners. We now can easily feel that she is likely to return, if she returns intact, or at all, with ghastly pale face — an image foreshadowed not only in the language of her recollection of the article on mining, but also in the colorless sky near the Sun and the platinum grasses. The imagery takes on an interconnectedness (I use this word from modern physics advisedly, here) like an ecology; everything seems to correspond to everything else, at this level.

“Gary was chuting away across space ... The skin on his face moved like thin bronze plating that would peel,” the reference to bronze introducing a new sense to both the alchemical metals and to the collapse of time. The ages of human history are

traditionally gold, silver, bronze and iron, and so we find ourselves at a bronze stage, here: The next paragraph depicts images from a literal past life on the Zagros Mountains above the Euphrates valley. The Cascades and the Yakima valley have transformed in the speaker's vision to the ancient Middle East. And "bronze" implies not only an epoch, but an alloy of metals, suggesting that the mind or imagination is engaged in feverish alchemical activity trying to find some point of purity or agreement or unity between these corresponding sensibilities.

The next long paragraph describes the moment of totality in the eclipse. People scream, and the sky snaps "over the sun like a lens cover" (93), recalling the simile of the photographer's print, and implying the artificial-seeming nature of perception itself at such a moment. Simultaneously, "The hatch in the brain slammed," indicating a correspondence between the Sun and the mind itself, a metaphor used variously by mystics as diverse as Plotinus and Kepler.

Next occurs the powerful and illuminating imagery of the moment itself, as she recalls and re-creates it:

In the night sky was a tiny ring of light. The hole where the sun belongs is very small. A thin ring of light marked its place. There was no sound. The eyes dried, the arteries drained, the lungs

hushed. There was no world. We were the world's dead people rotating and orbiting around and around, embedded in the planet's crust, while the earth rolled down. Our minds were light-years distant, forgetful of almost everything. Only an extraordinary act of will could restore us to our former, living selves and our contexts in matter and time. We had, it seems, loved the planet and loved our lives, but could no longer remember the way of them. We got the light wrong. In the sky was something that should not be there. In the black sky was a ring of light. It was a thin ring, an old, thin silver wedding band, an old worn ring. It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone. There were stars. It was all over. (93)

The "tiny ring of light" strongly echoes Henry Vaughan's image in "The World":

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless
light,
All calm, as it was bright
(*Vaughan 231-33*)

Vaughan's ring is great, Dillard's is tiny, and this signals there is some fundamental difference between Dillard's experience and Vaughan's. But like Vaughan, Dillard's vision of the ring has a calmness: "There was no sound. ... the lungs hushed," and it has something intimately to do with eternity, given the overwashes of time already described in the essay. For Vaughan, indeed:

And round beneath it, Time in hours,
days, years
Driv'n by the spheres

Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the
world

And all her train were hurl'd

Time in these lines is driven “like a shadow,” and a few pages later Dillard describes in detail the screams of the spectators who see “a wall of dark shadow come speeding” at them (100). Also parallel with Vaughan’s imagery is the speaker’s sense that her mind is going out, her eyes receding, perhaps being “hurl’d” like galaxies. The “hurl’d”/“driven” imagery deepens when the speaker explains that “We were the world’s dead people orbiting and rotating around and around, embedded in the planet’s crust, while the earth rolled down.” This diction clearly corresponds to Wordsworth’s Lucy “[r]olled round in earth’s diurnal course,” emphasizing and broadening the sense of eternity and death in its possibilities of emptiness and rebirth. The last few sentences of the paragraph explore the image of the ring, referring to it as a “silver wedding band” and emphasizing its oldness and wornness. Vaughan’s poem, after rehearsing the mundane lives (of “madnes”) of a statesman (whose “Condemning thoughts (like sad Eclipses) scowl/Upon his soul”), a miser and an Epicure, ends similarly, on a traditional Christian note:

This Ring the Bride-groome did for none provide

But for his bride.

If we take this indication literally, then Dillard’s ring of light is provided for her salvation, in a Christian sense familiar to her. But in saying so, we note distinct differences between the uplifting imagery and tone of Vaughan’s poem, and the stark, terrified mood of “Total Eclipse.” To the essay’s speaker, the ring is “a morsel of bone,” echoing the sense of death and loss intimated in the allusion to the Lucy poem. “We got the light wrong,” she says, like photographers who have not adjusted to conditions appropriately and made a poor image. At the end of the passage, the speaker’s overwhelming sense is that “It was all over.”

Clements, in commenting on Vaughan, makes the observation that “in contemplative tradition, there are two worlds: the perfect, natural world, including creatures and objects, and created by God and by God in the redeemed person; and the fallen world fabricated by man’s conceptualizing ego, an artificial, prideful, and illusory world” (Clements 154). In “The World,” Vaughan’s Statesman, miser and Epicure are of the fallen world, but the ring of light is a vision of the pure, perfect world; those who “soar’d up into the Ring,” Clements says, “are at one with the ring, like Dante’s doxology of all Paradise” (165). Dante’s

“doxology” is the introverted vision, the vision of God or the experience of the unitary consciousness. Vaughan’s vision is of the perfection of God’s creation.

While Vaughan’s poem embodies the unification of its speaker in a vision of the wholeness of reality and the speaker’s place in it, Dillard’s speaker, by contrast, feels distant: “Our minds were light-years distant, forgetful of everything.” Remembering that only a few hours earlier she and Gary felt “adept” in the familiar routines of everyday life, they now are face to face with something so unfamiliar that it seems insane; it’s clear to her that something has gone wrong — “We got the light wrong,” an image corresponding, perhaps, to the sense that they had been mistaken about how things, in reality, are. In the context of Vaughan’s poem, such an admission is hopeful, though, because for his speaker, it is “fools” who

... prefer dark night
Before true light,
To live in grotts, and caves, and hate the
day
Because it shews the way,
The way which from this dead and
dark abode
Leads up to God,
A way where you might tread the Sun,

and be
More bright than he.

The imagery here strongly suggests Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, in which Socrates’ character, breaking his bonds inside the cave, comes out into the blinding sunlight, a figure of the perennial “way.” Further, when the person who has seen the daylight returns to the cave, he is thought insane by those still shackled in front of the wall, watching the shadows of puppets parade before them. Dillard’s speaker clearly is looking straight into the utterly unfamiliar, the eclipsed Sun itself; the “last sane moment” she remembers occurred as she noticed Mount Adams, and the rest looks insane. She is in the midst of the classic awakening, corresponding to the blinding of the character in Plato’s Allegory.

The speaker of Vaughan’s poem experiences the unity and presents a figure of it, the ring, while in Dillard’s essay, the ring is a morsel of bone. In this passage, the speaker of “Total Eclipse” experiences not a unifying vision of all things, but an illumination, in Underhill’s terms. She has a “clarity of vision” of a natural phenomenon, and she clearly experiences an increase in energy of her inner self as she watches the grass turn platinum-colored and has a vision of a past life. Underhill also says that the most common form of illumination is to see God in nature; while Dillard’s speaker does

not say she sees God, the close parallel of the description of the eclipse with Vaughan's poem strongly suggests that she senses the divine.

But a comparison of Dillard's language and imagery to Baumann-Nelson's language and imagery shows clearly that no unifying vision occurs in this passage. Baumann-Nelson says "all I remember vividly is the knowledge thrust upon me that I was one with all," while the remark most closely related to this in Dillard's passage is that her mind felt light-years distant. Later she says: "What I saw, what I seemed to be standing in, was all the wrecked light that the memories of the dead could shed upon the living world. We had all died in our boots on the hilltops of Yakima, and were alone in eternity" (97), "alone" being the key sensibility in this context.

Even more interesting, while Baumann-Nelson describes the classic sense of "blessedness, joy, peace, happiness" (Clements 7) when she "stopped and thought, "My, how beautiful, what glory, and it's been around me all my life and I've never seen it,"" Dillard feels everything has gone insane. In one sense this experience is outside the bounds even of Underhill's outline of the illuminative experience, as her first characteristic of illumination is "a joyous apprehension of the Absolute" (Underhill 240). But Dillard's experience,

as indicated in the discussion of Plato above, involves an awakening into a different reality, and there is a very good reason why there is no joy in her experience: Her consciousness is so deeply and habitually ensconced in the familiar and the everyday — the world in which she and Gary are so "adept" — that she has no preparation for the starkness of this occurrence. In a sense she at this moment is not ready for the realization that there are, in Clements' words, "two worlds: the perfect, natural world ... created by God ... and the fallen world fabricated by man's conceptualizing ego, an artificial, prideful, and illusory world." She has gone down into the gold mine and her face is literally turning pale, with a clear sense (in the allusion to Wordsworth's Lucy) of the nearness of death — "deathly pale" as everything turns the color of platinum. The natural world created by God in its reality is something totally unfamiliar, quite different from the illusory world the speaker has artificially conceptualized — "We got the light wrong."

The speaker of the essay is not far enough along the mystic way to achieve the unitive life, in Underhill's terms. Her experience of the illumination as something terrifying, furthermore, is a distinctly modern sensibility. It implies that human beings have removed themselves so far from

the actualities even of nature, that even when the actualities are revealed (“infinite,” as Blake said), they seem so shockingly distant and unfamiliar that the imagination is hard-pressed just to retain its sanity. The order that human beings have so adeptly, but artificially outlined for the world is illusory, and it is shocking and frightening for a person of the modern age to glimpse reality. This view of nature is both romantic, in the sense that romanticism presses for a renewed and closer relationship with nature, and mystical in the terms outlined by Clements. The fright and sense of loneliness and distance is distinctly modern: “Human kind,” T.S. Eliot said decades earlier, “cannot bear very much reality.” In “Total Eclipse,” we get a feel for just exactly how far removed we *really* are from God.

The next section of the essay begins, “It is now that the temptation is strongest to leave these regions” (93), indicating the desire to escape and return to what is familiar, which we learn later in the essay is exactly what happens when the eclipse ends. “We have seen enough; let’s go. Why burn our hands any more than we have to? But two years have passed; the price of gold has risen. I return to the same buried alluvial beds and pick through the strata again,” this opening paragraph tells us. She is about to rehearse the event again, a way of

returning to the mine because the gold seems now more valuable than ever. Now the alchemical process involves not setting out on a literal journey to the site of the eclipse, but an act of imagination which will be, not merely a remembrance, but a re-creation of the event, in Sandra Johnson’s terms. This activity carries distinct overtones of Stevens’ idea that the imagination plays a powerful role in the development of reality, and it also points toward Dillard’s own activity of writing as a technique in making one’s way. Remembering and re-creating in writing is an exercise of the imagination parallel to the alchemical process of transforming the lesser metals into gold. The mining occurs in the mind.

The speaker recounts the terror of the moment of the eclipse, and then says that “The meaning of the sight overwhelmed its fascination,” a strange sentence, then: “It obliterated meaning itself” (94). A few sentences later: “For what is significance? It is significance for people. No people, no significance. This is all I have to tell you.” This echoes Stevens’ idea that “The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man’s truth is the final resolution of everything” (Stevens 175). This seems to butt against the earlier implication that the human ego has created an illusory, distant, inaccurate picture of “reality” compared to the

perfect creation of God, but the next paragraphs show that the problem of the imagination and the alienation engendered by modern scientific rationalism is far more complex than such a simplistic criticism might suggest:

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned. The world which lay under darkness and stillness following the closing of the lid [i.e., literally the totality of the eclipse] was not the world we know. ... The lenses of telescopes and cameras can no more cover the breadth and scale of the visual array than language can cover the breadth and simultaneity of internal experience. (94-95)

The word "psychology" indicates that the mining has indeed, on one level, been in the mind. The rest indicates clearly that humanity's resources — science, technology, even language — are inadequate to explain, or probably even re-create, the essential experience of "the unified field," in this case a phrase from modern physics which implies the unity of the universe itself — "unity," again, being the key word in any mystical discussion. Her figure of the "substrate" at the lowest possible point recalls her use of the idea of "holy the firm" in her earlier book (of that title):

Esoteric Christianity, I read, posits ... a created substance lower than metals and minerals on a "spiritual scale," and lower than salts and earths, occurring beneath salts and earths in the waxy deepness of planets, but never on the surface ... and it is in touch with the Absolute, at base. ... The name of this substance is: Holy the Firm.

(*Holy the Firm* 68)

In "Total Eclipse," the gold sought by the miners (by now a deeply metaphorical figure) corresponds to the place in the psyche or spirit which is in contact with the Absolute. This reality is discernible through or at the interconnections of people — "our ... inexplicable caring for each other, and our life together here" — and not in scientific or technological or linguistic descriptions or even recreations. We might paraphrase this by saying that meaning is contextual, and we touch the meaning — or even the unity — of the universe through our human interconnectedness; or further, through our "caring," which is Dillard's term here for the classic mystical sense expressed by Plato, Plotinus, Christian and Islamic mystics, and the perennial philosophy in general, that love binds the universe. The word "caring" is weak in comparison to the traditional word "love," and reflects the fact that the speaker of the essay has not had the unifying experience, but has glimpsed the edge of it and seen how far our construction of the everyday world is

from the “real” world — seen how far away, and yet glimpsed also the point of contact with the Absolute.

To say that the meaning sensed here is contextual is a way of saying that things correspond to each other. But in mystical terms, the meaning can only be experienced, not observed or re-created or even spoken of. One way is the way down, into the psyche, a terrifying journey which you could figuratively, like Emperor Louis of Bavaria in 840 upon seeing the Sun disappear from the sky, drop dead of. The mystic way and its revelations are harrowing.

This section ends with another view of the moment of the eclipse, and in the face of this vast, unfamiliar and frightening occurrence of nature, the comfortable everyday understanding of things breaks down; and as familiar understanding breaks down, everything else seems to break down as well: “we cared for nothing. We remembered our living days wrong. ... If there had ever been people on earth, nobody knew it. The dead had forgotten those they loved. The dead were parted from one another and could no longer remember the faces and lands they had loved in the light” (97).

The whole familiar context — which means “our ... inexplicable caring for each other, and our

life together here” — is lost, when one is jolted out of the artificial, egoic world into the reality of the natural world. Reality is not as it appears in our everyday perceptions and constructions: Our caring for each other is not what we think it is because that part is lost at death, and, perhaps, the caring which is the touchpoint with the Absolute is much larger and more enduring than we perceive. Man’s truth is a resolution, indeed, because it creates context and meaning; but when it confronts the cosmos itself, it turns out to be extremely frail. This is a romantic sensibility in its treatment of the universe as a greater power, in a sense, and further, a modern sensibility in its almost existential feelings of aloneness, alienation and, perhaps, dread. The cosmos is not the way we — as adept citizens of the scientific world — think it is, and we are not — in the classic mystical sense — who we think we are.

The next section begins with the sentence, “We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up” (97), and continues: “As adults we are almost all adept at waking up ... it is a transition we make a hundred times a day, as, like so many will-less dolphins, we plunge and surface, lapse and emerge.” The word “adept” corresponds directly to that moment earlier in the essay of checking smoothly out of the hotel, and the dolphins, as a traditional sign of rebirth or

reincarnation (in the way Yeats used them, for example, in his poem “News for the Delphic Oracle”), suggest that the awakening is repetitive and almost humdrum. The idea of awakening also strongly echoes Thoreau’s remark: “I have never yet met a man who was quite awake” (*Walden* 90).

The sense is deliberately ambiguous, however. We might understand it in Thoreau’s sense of moral or spiritual awakening. But in the hands of a modern, like Dillard, the traditional spiritual meaning gets turned inside out: We teach our children to awaken to the everyday world, where our wakefulness is a kind of semiconsciousness. “We live half our waking lives and all our sleeping lives in some private, useless, and insensible waters we never mention or recall. Useless, I say. Valueless, I might add—until someone hauls their wealth up to the surface and into wide-awake city, in a form that people can use” (97-98). “Wide-awake city” refers to the community where we live and exchange thoughts, ideas and stories—on the surface, the everyday world in which we try to educate our children to function well. Those who go up into the light, like Socrates’ cave dweller, or into the darkness, like the speaker of the essay to the eclipse, or down into the mines, are the ones who can create a context in which to place their findings, and make them useful for

others, since “our ... inexplicable caring for each other” is “given,” our unavoidable connection to reality.

Is the waking world the traditional mystical or spiritual world, or is it the everyday world? The next passage relates the speaker’s return to the “awake” world as she interacts with other people at breakfast in a roadside restaurant. There is a clear sense in the imagery that she has come back to the everyday world, and is relieved to do so. Her experience with the eclipse, so far, is ineffable for her, as she listens to other people excitedly recounting what they saw. Then, “a boy in a blue parka ... said to us, ‘Did you see that little white ring? It looked like a Life Saver ... up in the sky’” (98).

For the speaker of the essay, the boy “was a walking alarm clock. I myself had at that time no access to such a word. He could write a sentence, and I could not.” Language, which previously we have heard cannot “cover the breadth and simultaneity of internal experience,” gives a familiar frame and appearance to the ring of light. The phrase “Life Saver,” of course, is pregnant with the idea of candy, something sweet and easily palatable, and also with the idea of salvation in Vaughan’s Christian terms. The light is a true Life Saver of the

spirit, although the boy is speaking only of its literal appearance like a piece of candy.

The Life Saver is a life saver for the speaker of the essay; it nudges her back to the familiar, everyday world where she feels comfortable and unthreatened by anything as stark (and probably real) as the eclipse. Language, here, serves not the alchemical journey, as implied earlier, but instead serves the mundane, half-awake world. “All those things for which we have no words are lost” (99) she tells us, and the recurring figure of a child’s beach bucket and shovel clearly indicates the innocent and even naive way we use language to keep ourselves firmly grounded in our play, safe from the sense of total unfamiliarity experienced at the moment of the eclipse.

The next paragraph puts everything into a distinctly modern, inside-out perspective. She quotes Wallace Stevens as saying, “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never,” which seems reasonable enough, given the constant exploring and activity of the mind: “The mind wants the world to return its love, or its awareness; the mind wants to know all the world, and all eternity, and God” (99) — except that this image of an unsatisfied mind runs directly counter to Plato’s idea that only the mind can be satisfied because it can experience the eternal, while

the body is never satisfied because it is constantly filling and emptying itself, always becoming.

Dillard pushes this further: “The mind’s sidekick, however, will settle for two eggs over easy. The dear, stupid body is as easily satisfied as a spaniel ... It is everlastingly funny that the proud, metaphysically ambitious, clamoring mind will hush if you give it an egg.”

What’s that?

An egg?

begins Samuel Beckett’s poem “Whoroscope” (Beckett 1), parodying Descartes’ love of carefully prepared omelets and going on to make a hash, so to speak, of the classic tug of war about the nature and workings of the cosmos between the proponents of science (like Galileo) and the proponents of the church (like St. Augustine). Descartes corresponds metonymically in philosophy to the rationalist view of the world which gave rise to modern science, and which has insisted for several centuries that observable data offer the only acceptable clues to the nature and operations of reality, a view which romanticism implies created the sharp sense of separation from nature we feel in modern times. Descartes and his egg — the comforts of the Earth — seem in Dillard’s terms much the safest and closest and most satisfying to us. While “the mind

reels in deep space,” the body methodically continues its sensory work. “The restaurant was a halfway house, a decompression chamber” (100), the speaker says. She then goes on to recount the 1,800 mile per hour shadow which engendered the screams, and makes the clear point that, despite people’s terror, it was only an example of “the universe as a clockwork of loose spheres flung at stupefying, unauthorized speeds” (101) — “clockwork” implying the mechanistic view of nature that Newton, a few decades after Descartes, framed for modern science. The word “unauthorized” reverberates with two powerful sensibilities. One is the scientific view that there is no evidence of an all-powerful creator or “author” behind nature; the other is that there is no writable word for the speed at which the planets travel, and since there is no word for it, the reality of it is lost, as we heard earlier. By the late twentieth century, science has no way of making clear to us how fast the Moon travels, and so it is not within the range of our everyday experience. When the spectators meet it on the hilltop, the reality shocks spontaneous screaming from them.

Not just traditional Platonic metaphysics, but everything has come undone and upside down. Moving toward a conclusion, the speaker of the essay points out the obvious but startling fact that

the eclipse caused darkness in the morning, a time of light and awakening. It is “eerie as hell” (101) that motorists had to turn on their lights at that time.

The essay ends with a quick rehearsal of the reappearance of the familiar Sun, and she points out, “we all hurried away. We were born and bored at a stroke. ... We never looked back” (102-103). And finally: “From the depths of mystery, and even from the heights of splendor, we bounce back and hurry for the latitudes of home” (103). All in all, the experience has been a brush with mystery and splendor which frightened her back to the everyday, the world science has carefully and safely constructed for us, and the speaker, not fully enlightened like Plato’s cave dweller who came into the sunlight, scrambles back to the comforts of the cave.

The speaker’s fear and disorientation compels her hastily back to the everyday world so that a union with reality does not take place. The experience has been in Underhill’s sense an illumination — in a distinctly modern mode, fragmenting and frightening rather than joyous.

III. “Lenses”

God is nothing like what we comfortably

believe. In “Total Eclipse,” the speaker is so comfortable in the everyday world that a glimpse of reality — even just the actual, experienceable speed of the Moon — is terrifying. A way of generalizing about this is to say that since modern culture does not, in its insistence on rationalist science, admit any reality but the material, it also does not prepare us for any other reality, and so the mystic’s difficulty of unifying the spiritual and physical worlds is compounded. A sentence from Joseph Keller’s article “The Function of Paradox in Mystical Discourse” helps sum up this idea: “The degree to which ... stimuli accompany the unitary conviction which is the heart of the [mystic] experience and is nonsymbolic is a matter of temperament and culture.” (12) The modern mystic faces God and his unfamiliar manifestations without help or preparation from her culture — even, in fact, having been misled to some extent by science’s insistence on the primacy of the things of this world.

But as a naturalist in the lineage of Thoreau, Dillard’s modern devotion to the examination of the natural world is not merely a wild goose chase. In the essay “Teaching a Stone to Talk” she mentions she has been “reading comparative cosmology”; this approach to the cosmos through science implies that her search, after all, presumes a certain understanding can come through the material

world. Put another way, her approach assumes there is a correspondence between physical objects or beings, and realities in the spiritual world. A study of the cosmos could yield clues about God, in other words, in keeping with observations like Plotinus’ — long before Swedenborg — that “Things here are signs” (*Enneads* VI.9.11), and Emerson’s that “a fact is an Epiphany of God,” and Thoreau’s exhortation, “Let us not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth” (“Natural History of Massachusetts” 71). In *Holy the Firm* she alludes to this sense of correspondence in her examination of the phrase “God’s works made manifest” (60), and discloses her view like this:

Time and space are in touch with the Absolute at base. Eternity sockets twice into time and space curves, bound and bound by idea. Matter and spirit are of a piece but distinguishable; God has a stake guaranteed in all the world. And the universe is real and not a dream, not a manufacture of the senses ...

(*Holy the Firm* 71)

The material world is, after all, experienced here and now: However elusive, brutal and irrational it seems, suffering like that of burn victims Julie Norwich (in *Holy the Firm*) and Alan McDonald (in “The Deer at Providencia”) exists and has a place in the cosmos. The world we live in is the place we make our search, and one way of searching comprises cosmology and the other sciences.

The way of modern science as a legitimate, if complicated and hazardous, entry into the mystic way finds a focus in “Lenses.” The vision that the speaker of this essay experiences is far more lucid and conventional — less troubling — than the events of “Total Eclipse.” The essay opens with a playful discussion of the difficulties of looking through binoculars and microscopes, instruments of, simultaneously, science and vision. It is apparent immediately that “Lenses,” like its potential companion piece “Mirages,” is about ways of seeing.

The microscope gave the speaker of the essay particular difficulty when she was a child because of the paradoxicalities of its operation: seeing into the lens through only one eye while keeping both eyes open, shoving the slide to the right to see what is happening on the left. But she mastered these paradoxes, presumably, by setting up a laboratory in her basement where she peered at “translucent” microscopic life seen through a slide from light reflected off a mirror.

You watch these swaying yellow, green, and brown strands of algae half mesmerized; you sink into the microscope’s field forgetful, oblivious, as if it were all a dream of your deepest brain. Occasionally a zippy rotifer comes barreling through, black and white, and in a tremendous hurry. (105)

When the microscope’s five-watt bulb burned out, she replaced it with a seventy-five-watt bulb and

stared into its light “magnified three hundred times and focused into my eye. It is a wonder I can see at all. My eyeball itself would start drying up; I blinked and blinked” (106). Her eyeball, as it happens, was suffering the early stages of the same fate as the drops of water she examined. The seventy-five-watt bulb heated the slide like a grill and:

At once the drop of pond water began to evaporate. The creatures swam among algae in a diminishing pool. ... I had about five minutes to watch the members of a very dense population, excited by the heat, go about their business until — as I fancied sadly — they all caught on to their situation and started making out wills.

I was, then, not only watching the much-vaunted wonders in a drop of pond water; I was also, with mingled sadism and sympathy, setting up a limitless series of apocalypses. I set up and staged hundreds of ends-of-the-world and watched, enthralled, as they played themselves out. Over and over again, the last trump sounded, the final scroll unrolled, and the known world drained, dried, and vanished. (106)

Now this humorous but ironic story of childhood “ignorance” (105) is easily read as an allegory of modern science’s effects on the Earth. While the scientists observe, absorbed (“half mesmerized”) in their fascination for and love of nature, their technology creates a situation that disrupts and destroys it. The speaker’s eyeball becomes, in this reading, a figure not only of the curious, careful eye with which science views the

world, but also of its determined participation in its own self-destruction.

When the latter part of the narrative identifies the destruction of the drops of water with apocalypses in which “the last trump sounded,” the religious implications are clearly evoked; the tone is humorous, but in the allegorical reading, the situation in the macroworld — where hundreds of species are going extinct as a result, at least in part, of human activities — may indeed be this serious and have moral and ultimately religious implications. If so, the speaker’s eyeball echoes distantly — or perhaps not so distantly — Emerson’s “transparent eyeball,” by which figure he sees himself as “part or parcel of God.” The instruments of science affect the ability of the eye to perceive, and that perception would involve, in Emerson’s terms, the awareness of the circulation of “the currents of the Universal Being ... through me” (Emerson 4). In this case the issue is science’s effect on the environment, and therefore the self. The extended implication is that damage to the environment, especially the wholesale destruction of the environment (for whatever reason), is damaging to the self. In the end the issue is intimately related to the mystical sensibility because human beings — the self — are part and parcel of, or one with — unified with — nature. “How I loved that deep, wet world where the colored algae waved in the water and the rotifers swam!” she says enthusiastically and, perhaps, tragically. Science’s methods of interpreting nature are critically hazardous.

The narrative of the microscope ends there, and the next section begins with a completely unexpected image: “But oddly,” she says, “this is a story about swans” (106). We learn that we have left the microscope and the world of the speaker’s childhood, for binoculars and the world of the speaker’s adulthood — from the small world to the

large world. The literary transition from childhood to adulthood appears within a few sentences when the speaker, telling us about Daleville Pond which “holds a lot of sky,” says: “I used to haunt the place because I loved it; I still do” (107). The Child is mother of the Woman, no doubt, with days bound each to each by love of the world, “natural piety” in Wordsworth’s terms.

Instead of peering through a microscope and scorching her eye and the tiny universes of water, she is looking through binoculars at the sky, “crossed by the reeds which blew before my face whichever way I turned.” She sees a pair of whistling swans, apparently an unusual sight in Virginia, and as she watches, her description of them widens and widens:

Through binoculars I followed the swans, swinging where they flew. ... Their wingspan was six feet; they were bigger than I was. They flew in unison, one behind the other; they made pass after pass at the pond. I watched them change from white swans in front of the mountain to black swans in front of the sky. In clockwise ellipses they flew (107-8)

The imagery here evokes a sense of largeness and expansiveness, appropriate to the majestic sight of the swans themselves, and also to the fact of their inhabiting the sky as opposed, in this context, to a drop of water. If pushed a little farther upward, the image of flying in ellipses implies planets, which

Kepler discovered, at the beginning of the scientific age, move in elliptical rather than circular orbits.

Following directly on the mention of the ellipses, the speaker says: “As I rotated on my heels to keep the black frame of the lenses around them, I lost all sense of space” (108). The words “rotate,” “black” and “space” all create a sort of symbolist context — or ecology — for “ellipse” and the idea of planets moving in the cosmos. The speaker’s loss of all sense of space parallels the “half mesmerized” viewer of the microscope. As in “Total Eclipse,” the normal, familiar world is dispersing before her eyes. “If I lowered the binoculars I was always amazed to learn in which direction I faced — dazed, the way you emerge from a movie and try to reconstruct it, bit by bit” (108).

By this point, she is passing beyond the familiar world, and an echo of Vaughan’s “The World” returns, with imagery suggesting not only the spiritual, but our modern sense of what deep space and its activities consist of: “I lived in that circle of light, in great speed and utter silence.” The next images indicate that the world seen through the binoculars resembles the world seen through the microscope:

When the swans passed before the sun they were distant — two black threads, two live stitches. But they kept coming, smoothly, and the sky deepened to blue behind them and they took on

light. (108)

The image of the “threads” aligns itself with the earlier image of the swaying “strands of algae,” and as they take on light there is the sense that, like the algae, the swans are translucent. The sky “brightened to yellow behind them and the swans flattened and darkened and diminished as they flew. Once I lost them behind the mountain ridge; when they emerged they were flying suddenly very high, and it was like music changing key” (108). Their going out of the binoculars’ field parallels the microscopic organisms’ flight along the slide which has to be shoved sideways to bring them back into view. The swans fly higher and higher, and the simile of music changing key rings with the motion of the planets, a reminder of the harmony of the spheres, which Kepler was seeking when he determined the planets move not in circles but ellipses. It is probably worth noting that Kepler did most of his work without the benefit of a telescope.

In the last paragraph, the speaker unfolds the full vision, and again, as Sandra Johnson observes, the moment is created, not told:

I was lost. The reeds in front of me, swaying and out of focus in the binoculars’ circular field, were translucent. The reeds were strands of color passing light like cells in water. They were those yellow and green and brown strands of pond algae I had watched so long in a light-soaked field. My eyes burned; I was watching algae wave in a shrinking drop; they crossed each other and parted wetly. And

suddenly into the field swam two whistling swans, two tiny whistling swans. They swam as fast as rotifers: two whistling swans, infinitesimal, beating their tiny wet wings, perfectly formed. (108-9)

The reeds are not only parallel to the strands of algae, but identical with them, here. This identity binds the speaker's childhood to her adulthood, essentially unifying her life and time itself into a single moment. The swans, then, in their motion across the field of the speaker's view, are like the rotifers "infinitesimal," a word which not only identifies the swans and rotifers, but which places everything in relation — the rotifers are infinitesimally small in comparison to our macroworld, and the swans are infinitesimally small in comparison to the whirling planetary cosmos; and this means the speaker herself is infinitesimally small in her place between, or rather in the micro and macro worlds that have become one world. A drop of water and the sky over (and in) Daleville Pond are the same: whole universes, one inside another, like childhood inside adulthood — or the other way around, it doesn't matter at this point. At this point the speaker is experiencing a unifying vision of space and time.

This vision is not invested with the terror and fear of the illumination in "Total Eclipse." It has more in common with a vision depicted in *Holy the Firm* in its apprehension of the reality and —

implicitly — beauty of things; that sense of reality or objectivity is a more conventional and predictable feature of the mystical experience, as Stace and Clements observe. "Each thing in the world is translucent, ... and moving, cell by cell," she says in *Holy the Firm* (65). In the midst of the re-creation of this latter vision she envisions Christ being baptized (again, a more conventional image from Christian mystical writings) and in the water running off his back:

Each bead is transparent, and each has a world, light and alive and apparent inside the drop: it is all there ever could be, moving at once, past and future, and all the people. I can look into any sphere and see people stream past me, and cool my eyes with colors and the sight of the world in spectacle perishing ever, and ever renewed. I do; I deepen into a drop and see all that time contains, all the faces and deeps of the worlds ...

(*Holy the Firm* 67)

This imagery from *Holy the Firm* is obviously similar to that of "Lenses" in the sensibility evoked through the water imagery, with the similar implication that the speaker is in the midst of a classic mystical experience.

When the speaker of "Lenses" says simply, "I was lost," the implication is multidimensional because it refers not only to her loss of "all sense of space," but also to the perennial view that to attain heaven, one must lose oneself,³ a sense inherent in

the unifying vision in which all sense of separation vanishes. She is lost, further, in the sense that her observations have helped boost her beyond the apparent multiplicity of the natural world; she is lost to this world, or perhaps inversely, paradoxically, that world is lost to her — it amounts to the same thing if she is unified with it.

This paradox is figured in the fact that her “eyes burned”: The outward sense is that her childhood and adulthood have fused and her observation through the binoculars “burned” her in somehow the same way that her observation through the microscope burned her eyeball. But the burning eye of the adult occurs in the context of a unification or — more via its opposite — creation. The “burning” here is the burning of transfiguration, akin to the line from Rimbaud’s poem, “L’Éternité,” which served as the title of James Ramsey Ullman’s novel, *The Day on Fire* (which the speaker of *Holy the Firm* mentions), and to “the bay transfigured ... and ... on fire” in *Holy the Firm* (66). In “Lenses,” the figure relates to the scientific instruments which in childish hands destroy not only the world but the self and its capacity to see — including the spiritual seeing indicated by Emerson’s transparent eyeball; but it relates simultaneously to the instruments and observations of science which in mature hands serve not to destroy the world out of feverish and

ignorant curiosity, but to create a context for experiencing the world and thus bind it together, simultaneously binding the self — child and woman — with the cosmos as well. In keeping with Emerson and Thoreau’s view of the correspondent significance of “facts,” “Lenses” discloses the possibility of the scientific method as a legitimate trail along the mystic way. But clearly, there are more and less responsible uses of scientific methods — profoundly unifying, as Kepler intended, and profoundly hazardous, as the apocalypses on the microscope slides imply. The mature mind sees through the facts of the natural world to the unity of the dizzying span of the cosmos.

Interestingly, most of the accompanying aspects of the mystical experience, as described by Stace and Clements, are not overtly present in “Lenses.” No reference is made to a particular sense of reality or objectivity; to feelings of joy, blessedness or peace; to a sense of holiness or divinity; nor to any sense of the experience’s being ineffable.

But this is where Sandra Johnson’s observations about Dillard’s modernity as a writer are helpful. In the pre-Wordsworthian method of speaking of the epiphanic experience, the writer mainly attempts to outline the experience and often

simply states outright that words are inadequate to convey or even approximate the reality or intensity of the experience. After Wordsworth, the modern poet attempts not to describe or outline an experience, but to use words to create or at least approximate the experience itself. In “Lenses” we get no direct reference to feelings of objectivity, blessedness, holiness or ineffability because we are meant to live as deeply as possible in the moment itself, not in observations or comments about the experience. To state that the experience could not be adequately described because it is ineffable would disrupt and dissolve the reality created through the last paragraph’s imagery.

In fact, several characteristic mystical figures are implicit in the experience. In the idea that the speaker is “lost,” as mentioned above, is the perennial religious sense that one’s life is simply an extension of the large universal life. Similarly, the last paragraph is soaked in water imagery, which recalls the baptism imagery from *Holy the Firm*, and also the sense that water is a general symbol of the spirit, as in the drip drops at the end of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*; divinity is immanent in Dillard’s words. The wet wings of the swans are “perfectly formed,” an echo of the circular perfection of spheres Kepler believed the universe must have; the binoculars, we are likewise apprised, have a

“circular field,” lofting us toward holiness. And there is surely a great sense of “reality” in these images: The view of the swans and the identification of them with the rotifers, the identification of the reeds with the algae, are startlingly vivid and powerful, and paradox inheres in those identities. The sense of natural wholeness and unity is generated, created, in this essay, not merely shared with the reader.

The classic experience of mystical union is indeed still available in the modern world, but in a context unique to the culture and temperament of our age.

* * *

Annie Dillard’s essays imply that the mystical vision in our age is extremely problematic because we are so far removed — through our scientific materialism and our extraordinary comforts — from the divine. Because of this distance, the divine, when encountered, takes wholly unexpected and ultimately terrifying shape, as depicted in “Total Eclipse” and other essays, such as “A Field of Silence.” In the essay “Teaching a Stone to Talk,” Dillard fairly straightforwardly wonders where in the world God has gone, along with any possible meaning for human life. In that essay, the neighbor who is reputedly trying to teach

a stone to talk is a figure of the modern sense that reality inheres in the natural world, simultaneously a 'pantheistic' and 'pan-atheist' (roughly, 'scientific') disposition that expects the spiritual or divine to manifest itself in recognizable and familiar natural ways; God's persistent silence is bewildering and deeply uncomfortable.

And yet at the same time, like contemplative writers throughout the ages, Annie Dillard provides pointers toward the hope of contact with the divine in this profoundly difficult age. She generates a sense of the deep paradoxes of existence and our own frailty, particularly our desire to remain comfortably half-awake in our material comforts. The speaker of "Total Eclipse" is well aware of the need to throw off conventional notions of who or what God is and how that being or existence might appear to us. The need looks at first dehumanizing — evoking fright instead of comforting language, and showing the speaker of the essay death where one would expect metaphors of living, human contact. The modern disposition receives these unfamiliar and horrifying sensibilities with fright and terror, and science, in its rage to order the material world, makes it blindingly easy for us to retreat from the holy to our comfortable homes — from the brilliant sunlight back to the cave of shadows. But the pointer is the speaker's awareness

of her own fears and weakness for familiar material comforts. Eventually, one realizes in the course of the book, the silence is what there is to listen to.

And while "Total Eclipse" results in a fleeing from the brush with the unfamiliar world, "Lenses" unfolds — in modern figures — the classic unifying vision of reality, indicating that the careful observation of the physical world can bring into focus the nature and indeed the experience of reality in its wholeness. Scientific method, despite its dangerous effects, has its value because the natural world is enormously present and alive; like the extrovertive mystics before her, Dillard encounters the divine in nature.

"Nature will respond in accordance with the theory with which it is approached," said David Bohm (6) in his influential efforts to make sense of the paradoxical findings of modern physics. For the purposes of this literary discussion, we might make his statement more specific and say: If approached with the idea that things correspond, the world illuminates. From the point of view of Thoreau and Dillard, modern naturalists, the scientific method provides a way of focusing intently enough to see through the translucent objects of the material world. This, after all, is what the perennial philosophy has taught all along: The world and its

apparent parts are unified, not multiple, and you need only shift your frame of reference to realize and live in that unity. Blake's words sum this up: "All deities reside in the human breast."

Like the lenses of binoculars and microscopes, the human heart is a lens shaping reality; and so is language. Dillard's essays make the mystical experience, in its modern complexities, available in the same way binoculars make the whistling swans visible—as glimpses and entryways, not just of the sense of a presence, but of the experience of the whole. Joseph Keller sums up Dillard's modernity, her mysticism and their focus in her writing in saying, "the artist's work unifies the fields of here and eternity as the work of *Holy the Firm* joins all to God" (13). Annie Dillard's essays sit squarely in the age-old contemplative tradition, but speak directly from and to our own time.

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Notes

¹ Presumably the speaker of the essay is Annie Dillard herself. But her self-proclaimed predilection for writing narratives implies deliberate fictionalization of events and characters. For example, what might have been the same actual incident is cast in different settings with different emphases in *Holy the Firm* and "A Field of Silence"—in one essay the speaker describes a mystical experience while carrying the wine for church, and in the other, the speaker describes what sounds like the same experience in a barnyard. Since the same incident is apparently fictionalized in different settings, it seems, in a strict interpretive sense, more accurate to refer to the "speaker" of the essay, as a character, rather than to the author herself.

² Hugh Kenner in his important book on modernism, *The Pound Era*, points out Thoreau's view of a text as "an ecology of words." From this perspective, of course, all poetry is mystical, and as Sandra Johnson deftly observes of Dillard, "in general her language is experienced like poetry, rather than read like prose" (Johnson 2).

³ Thinking, for example, of "those who lose their life for my sake ... will save it" (Mark 8:35), or of Rumi's good-humored exhortations to give up everything.

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