

Willa Cather: Light and the Mystical Journey

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Integral to Willa Cather's philosophy was the notion that religion and art are the same.¹ They both demand the total devotion of the individual, making similar claims on him and offering similar rewards. Cather was conscious that the essential element of creative activity is desire. According to Edward and Lillian Bloom, Cather held that "desire is an inseparable part of the totality of creative genius, a stimulation for creation and self-revelation that dwarfs every other need."² The constant struggling and striving on the part of the artistic temperament periodically rewards the individual with moments of expanded consciousness and illumination. For Cather, as for other passionate idealists of whom she was fond such as Keats (for whom truth was beauty) and Ruskin (who felt that art was the highest expression of the divinity in man), moments of illumination are the inevitable, usually infrequent, but always deeply affecting rewards of artistic struggle for aesthetic fulfillment.

Because of her concern for the struggle and rewards of artistic endeavor—that is, for the artistic temperament to recognize and act upon its desire to attain total fulfillment—Willa Cather shares, in a liberal sense, many features of the mystics in their quest for ultimate knowledge and union with the Divine. Evelyn Underhill, in her *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, offers the following as phases of the mystical life³ (given in abbreviated form): (1) The awakening of the self to consciousness of divine reality. This is usually a joyous, exultant, and abrupt experience. (2) Purgation. This is a state of pain and effort—the attempt by the awakened self to eliminate by discipline and mortification all that stands in the way of progress toward union with the Divine. (3) Illumination. This is the awakening to knowledge of the divine reality. It includes many stages of contemplation, and is thus the contemplative state par excellence. It entails a vision of the absolute, a sense of the divine presence, but not a true union with it. It is a state of happiness. Underhill claims that this stage "is the largest and most densely populated province of the mystical kingdom" (*U* 286) involving many artists and seers who have tasted its splendors but never moved beyond it to union. (4) The dark night of the soul. This is the stage when the individual experiences the intensely painful sense of the Divine's absence. Moments of illumination and contemplation are usually lost, giving the self

¹ Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925) Cather writes: "Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had" (69).

² Edward and Lillian Bloom, *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1962) 130.

³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton 1926) 205-07. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *U*.

the terrible feeling that God has withdrawn. (5) Union. This is the goal of the mystics' quest. The self achieves oneness with the Absolute.

To say that Willa Cather "did not speak mystically" is not very accurate—about her own fiction-writing efforts "she had almost, she said bluntly, to dissolve into nature daily in order to be reborn to a task."⁴ On the other hand, it would be bold exaggeration to label her a mystic in the complete sense that Underhill describes. Certainly in her novels, however, especially when she is most concerned with the artistic temperament, she reveals some elements of mystic consciousness. As Underhill explains, "I do not care whether the consciousness be that of artist or musician, striving to catch and fix some aspect of the heavenly light or music, and denying all other aspects of the world in order to devote themselves to this. . . . Whether the higher reality be perceived in the terms of religion, beauty, suffering; of human love, of goodness, or of truth. However widely these forms of transcendence may seem to differ, the mystic experience is the key to them all" (*U* 533). Some of Cather's fictional characters did go through various stages of the mystical path and taste the mystical fruit. In order to depict some of these mystical moments, Cather used light extensively as a vehicle to emphasize the essence of these moments, and—according to Underhill—she used it to an extent that approximates mystic writers' use of it: "By a deliberate appeal to the parallels of such impersonal forces—Fire and Heat, Light, Water, Air—mystic writers seem able to bring out a perceived aspect of the Godhead, and of the transfigured soul's participation therein, which no merely personal language, taken alone, can touch" (*U* 503-04).

Cather uses light imagery, like the mystic writer, to excite in the reader the powerful, immediate feeling of the nature of the experience. Most significantly, light becomes the ultimate, preeminent imagery in Cather's novels to signify those moments of awakening and illumination. Appropriately enough, light for the mystic becomes the symbol of the ultimate reality: "The illuminatives, one and all, seem to assure us that its apparently symbolic name is a realistic one; that it appears to them as a kind of radiance, a flooding of the personality with new light. A new sun rises above the horizon and transfigures their twilight world. Over and over again they return to light-imagery in this connection" (*U* 298-99). This study will attempt to show that some of Willa Cather's characters perceive this as a manifestation of some ineffable reality, whether it be beauty, truth, religion, or goodness.

In *The Song of the Lark* we can see that the stages in Thea Kronborg's struggle for artistic awareness bear some resemblance to mystical stages. Thea's awakening to her creativity is augmented by light. In one passage we find Thea "shaken by a passionate desire"⁵ after hearing the artist Wunsch talk about the artistic "secret" that she holds within her. She then wanders out into the sand dunes, amongst the glittering lizards. She watches the sand dunes "changing all day long, yellow and purple and lavender" and realizes "that there was something about her that was different. . . . Sometimes she hunted for it and could not find it; again she lifted her eyes from a book or stepped out-of-doors, or wakened in the morning, and it was there—under her cheek, it usually seemed to be, or over her breast—a kind of

⁴ Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (1953; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967) 7; 49.

⁵ Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943) 99. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *SL*.

warm success. And when it was there, everything was more interesting and beautiful, even people" (SL 100). During her brief excursions to the brilliant hills, she receives elusive glimmers of the creative artistic striving within her.

After talking with Dr. Archie about the possibilities of becoming an artist, "she ran for a long while about the white, moonlit streets, looking up at the stars and the bluish night, at the quiet houses sunk in black shade, the glittering sand hills" (SL 177). At home on those nights she drags her mattress to the window and lies thinking in the moonlight: "Life rushed in upon her through that window—or so it seemed. In reality, of course, life rushes from within, not from without. There is no work of art so big or so beautiful that it was not once all contained in some youthful body, like this one which lay on the floor in the moonlight, pulsing with ardour and anticipation" (SL 177). Thea is a quickening to her artistic impulse like many mystics who have gone through periods of restlessness and uncertainty before being awakened—periods when "the deeper mind stirs uneasily in its prison and its emergence is but the last of many efforts to escape" (U 216).

It is at a concert that Thea experiences her moment of awakening. On the day of the concert, the morning "shone like a holiday, and for her it was to be a holiday. There was in the air that sudden, treacherous softness. . . . At such times beauty is necessary" (SL 249), and Thea seeks that beauty in a Dvorak concert. "She had been to so few concerts that the great house, the crowd of people, and the lights, all had a stimulating effect" (SL 250). So stimulating, indeed, that they perhaps contribute to her moment of awakening when memories of sunlit sand hills and lands combine with the emotional suggestiveness of the music to give her the enlightenment; she "knew . . . what she wanted" (SL 251) out of life at this time.

Upon leaving the concert hall and encountering the dark, dreary night and the miserable, common people around her, Thea seems to enter the purgative stage: "As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height" (SL 254). Thea throws herself into her music, dedicating all of her time to practice and struggle, frequently experiencing setbacks and disappointments.

Following the archetypal pattern of Jesus Christ who went to the desert to be illuminated as to his identity and purpose, Thea goes to the desert (at Panther Canyon) to receive her message. Ray Kennedy had told her, "when you sit in the sun and let your heels hang out of a doorway [on the cliff-dweller's grounds] that drops a thousand feet, ideas come to you" (SL 149). So it is in the brilliant cliffs that her thoughts are cleared and her knowledge of her artistic desire made lucid. During the early part of her stay there, the quiet, sun-filled days allow her to contemplate the mysteries of ancient civilization and the beauty of nature. Gradually "her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a colour, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas" (SL 373). She feels a metaphysical blending with nature, as if she were a moonflower, "and had opened up in the white flowers every night" (SL 374). Her expanding faculties of perception are made more acutely aware of things which she has not noticed before; "she experienced them physically and remembered them as if they had been a part of herself"

(SL 374). What becomes part of her personality are memories filled with light: "There were memories of light on the sand hills, of masses of prickly-pear blossoms she had found in the desert in early childhood, of the late afternoon sun pouring through the grape leaves." At night when she dreamed about the canyon, her thoughts were on "yellow rocks baking in sunlight" (SL 374, 375). Even in the pool where she bathes, she is acutely receptive to the suggestive quality of the light playing on the water: "The glittering thread of current had a kind of lightly worn, loosely knit personality, graceful and laughing" (SL 378).

In that sunny pond comes her moment of illumination wherein she perceives the role of art to be an effort to capture life itself, life as the "shiny, elusive element": "One morning, as she was standing upright in the pool, splashing water between her shoulder-blades with a big sponge, something flashed through her mind that made her draw herself up and stand still until the water had quite dried upon her flushed skin. The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?" (SL 378). Thea's moment of illumination in which life itself is perceived as a shiny, elusive element is strikingly akin to the mystical concept of "the divine nucleus, the point of contact between man's life and the divine life" which has given many names, such as "the spark of the soul" and "this immortal spark from the central fire" (U 66). The ineffable quality of Thea's experience is thus brought to us in light imagery; Thea's "spark of the soul" is that elusive quality of life which she wants to capture in her artistic endeavors.

In her novel *Lucy Gayheart*, Willa Cather attempted to describe the ineffable quality of Lucy's epiphany through the suggestive use of light imagery. The star which "flashed" a message to Lucy gives her the brief, momentary knowledge of a new level of reality: "That point of silver light spoke to her like a signal, released another kind of life and feeling which did not belong here."⁶ That flash of an illuminating message which she receives into her consciousness is overpowering—"it was too bright and too sharp. It hurt, and made one feel small and lost" (LG 12). Like a mystical awakening, Lucy's brief awakening "takes the form of a sudden and acute realization of splendour and adorable reality in the world" (U 215). The fact that her sudden moment is "too bright and too sharp" has great mystical significance since "an actual sense of blinding radiance is a constant accompaniment of this state of consciousness" (U 216).

Lucy undergoes a second awakening experience, this time of a more disturbing nature, during a recital given by Sebastian. Sebastian is singing the words of a Schubert song, filled with light imagery, which echoes to an extent the experience of Lucy's first epiphany under the star: "*In your light I stand without fear, o august stars! I salute your eternity.* That was the feeling" (LG 29). The indescribable feeling instigated by those words is further conveyed through light imagery: "In its calmness and serenity there was a kind of large enlightenment, like daybreak" (LG 30).

⁶ Willa Cather, *Lucy Gayheart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935), p. 11. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will appear in the text after the abbreviation LG.

However, the calm and serenity which gave Lucy the feeling of "large enlightenment" soon gives way to feelings of profound tragedy. Sebastian sings five melancholy songs which produce in Lucy feelings about the "dark beauty" of Sebastian's voice (LG 30). Cather suggests the profoundly disturbing nature of these feelings by the use of light imagery: "It [the dark beauty] was as simple as that—like light changing on the water. When he began *Der Doppelganger*, the last song of the group . . . it was like moonlight pouring down on the narrow street of an old German town. With every phrase that picture deepened—moonlight, intense and calm, sleeping on old human houses; and somewhere a lonely black cloud in the night sky. *So manche in alter Zeit?* The moon was gone, and the silent street.—And Sebastian was gone, though Lucy had not been aware of his exit. The black cloud that had passed over the moon and the song had obliterated him, too" (LG 30).

Furthermore, by using the visual element of light to describe the aural element of sound, Willa Cather is here using a form of synesthesia. The combination of two disparate conceptual dimensions produces a new aesthetic synthesis and hints at Lucy's new kind of total, mystical reality. Claire Wade states that when "sound and sight are married, the experience becomes simultaneously analytic and synthetic. . . . A total kind of exceedingly unusual and incomprehensible reality is created where universal opposites of an abstract conceptual nature are fused."⁷

Lucy's experience, augmented by the quality of synesthesia, makes her realize "she was struggling with something she had never felt before. A new conception of art? It came closer than that. A new kind of personality? But it was much more. It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water. As she sat listening to this man the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now" (LG 30-32). Although normally an awakening, in the mystical sense, is a realization of a splendor and wonder in the world, it can sometimes take the form of an acute realization of the opposite, of "the divine sorrow at the heart of things—never before perceived" (U 215-16).

Finally, Jim Burden's mystical kind of experience in the pumpkin patch in *My Ántonia*, wherein he feels under the comfortable warmth of the sun a sense of unity with nature, is also noteworthy for the way light imagery works to emphasize his experience. Jim describes his first impulse: "to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world. . . . The light air about me told me that the world ended here: only the ground and sun and sky were left, and if one went a little farther there would be only sun and sky, and one would float off into them."⁸ Afterward he sits down on the ground: "I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate,

⁷ Claire Wade, "Contributions of Color and Light to Differing Levels of Reality in Novels of Joris Karl Huysmans," *Symposium* 18 (1974): 377. Wade's analysis of synesthesia is derived from Erwin W. Strauss, "Aesthesiology and Hallucinations," in *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958).

⁸ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954) 16. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *MA*.

that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep" (MA 18). The extent to which Jim's sunny experience is truly mystical is perhaps debatable, for it seems he expresses only an intuition of a happy union with the universe, a union which he perceives as a possibility after death. William James might proffer, "apart from anything acutely religious, we all have moments when the universal life seems to wrap us round with friendliness."⁹ Nevertheless, Jim's act of lying under the sun is what engendered the feelings in Jim's highly receptive consciousness, and his intense experience makes us aware of his finely tuned aesthetic sensitivity, his almost mystical susceptibility to the impact of light.

The sensitive, artistic temperament has much in common with the mystic, sharing in similar moments of profound perceptual awakenings and illuminations. For Willa Cather's characters, as for the mystics, light in various forms accompanies these moments, sometimes acting to incite the experience, but always serving to flavor it so that the perceiving individual feels he recognizes a fringe of the real.

⁹ William M. Curtin, "Willa Cather and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*," *Renascence* 27 (1975): 116.