May Sinclair: Mystic Modern

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In her 1919 autobiographical novel *Mary Olivier: A Life*, British author May Sinclair (1863-1946) describes the sudden perception of an illuminated landscape that overwhelms the seven-year-old Mary/May:

> A queer white light everywhere, like water thin and clear. Wide fields, flat and still, like water, flooded with the thin, clear light; grey earth, shot delicately with green blades, shimmering. Ley Street, a grey road, whitening suddenly where it crossed open country, a hard causeway thrown over the flood. The high trees, the small, scattered cottages, the two taverns, the one tall house had the look of standing up in water.[1]

Seven years earlier, Sinclair had made such heightened awareness a key element of her short story "The Flaw in the Crystal." There the mystic healer Agatha Verrall experiences an unexpected and instantaneous change in the appearance of her rural surroundings:

> And yet it did not change. All the appearances of things, their colours, the movement and the stillness remained as if constant in their rhythm and their scale; but they were heightened, intensified; they were carried to a pitch that would have been vehement, vibrant, but that the stillness as well as the movement was intense. She was not dazzled by it or confused in any way. Her senses were exalted, adjusted to the pitch.
>
> She would have said now that the earth at her feet had become insubstantial, but that she knew, in a flash, that what she saw was the very substance of the visible world; live and subtle as flame; solid as crystal and as clean. It was the same world, flat field for flat field and hill for hill; but radiant, vibrant, and, as it were, infinitely transparent.[2]

Even more directly, if somewhat less dramatically, Sinclair relayed her own experience of sublime beauty without the mediation of a fictional character in *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915), based on her diary of seventeen days with a volunteer ambulance corps during the early weeks of the First World War:

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> We pass low Flemish houses with white walls and red roofs. Their green doors and shutters are tall and slender like the trees, the colours vivid as if the paint had been laid on yesterday. It is all unspeakably beautiful and it comes to me with the natural, inevitable shock and ecstasy of beauty. I am going straight into the horror of war. For all I know it may be anywhere, here, behind this sentry; or there, beyond that line of willows. I don't know. I don't care. I cannot realize it. All that I can see or feel at the moment is this beauty. I look and look, so that I may remember it.[3]

Such experiences of intense beauty accompanied by feelings of ecstasy represented a form of mystic sensibility for Sinclair, which, using the terms of her mostly self-directed immersion in nineteenth-century idealism, she defined as awareness of a true reality beyond visible appearances. Closely tied up with her understanding of artistic process, her mystic perception of this reality was both goal and impetus for a disciplined channeling of creative energy modeled on Jungian sublimation and based on theories of life energy drawn from Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson. The concept of sexual energy, in particular, mingled with her theorizing about mystic and artistic process, as her thought reflected her modern era's almost erotic air of productive, progressive change. But she was motivated as well by the disruptive aspects of that modern flux, that could manifest in the unsettling, if often banal effects of ever-new technology, or erupt in war.

Recognized in her day not only as an innovative writer of fiction, but also as a philosopher, Sinclair pursued a project of translation and transformation, adapting nineteenth-century modes of thought to serve twentieth-century cultural contexts. Against the backdrop of a crisis of meaning defined largely in terms of mortality, and sharpened by the outbreak of the First World War, she advocated a "new idealism," seeking a self-authenticating spiritual orthodoxy apart from the old orthodoxy of establishment Christianity on the one hand, and the extreme heterodoxy of her period's occult experimentation on the other. At the same time she was energetic in her conversations with emerging intellectual trends. The first to apply the psychological construct of "stream of consciousness" as a literary term, Sinclair advanced Modernist forms of "singular interiority" in her later novels, including *Mary Olivier*.[4] She shared in her period's burgeoning fascination with both Western and Eastern mysticism as well as with paranormal phenomena (she favorably reviewed Rabindranath Tagore's poetry, and was a member of the Society for Psychical Research), was supportive of practitioners of Imagism and other avant-garde genres that emphasized immediacy of experience (she was an early champion of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound), and embraced feminism as well as both Freudian and Jungian systems of thought (she campaigned for suffrage, and supported London's first psychoanalytic clinic).

As she mixed the sexual with the mystical, the frankness of her writing could be shocking. While hardly a new association to make, her eroticizing of mystic experience represented a particularly modern response to an increasingly depersonalized world, as it relayed various impulses for connection, both with other individuals and with some contextualizing force or reality. At the same time, her choice to live as a solitary artist, and her belief in the creative potential of sublimated libido embodied her modern moment's anxiety about the place of the individual within broader matrices of influence that might threaten autonomy. For Sinclair, establishing herself as a female artist capable of self-determining agency required careful marshaling of relational boundaries. Thus, while she conceived of the mystic exercise of personal will as an alliance with a greater "divine" will and believed in the potential of such paranormal phenomena as telepathy to bring communion between individuals, her images of sexual intimacy often framed concerns about psychic intrusion into permeable consciousness.

Sinclair's belief in mystical access to some supernatural realm, therefore, can be described as modern in both its hope and its aversion. Ultimately she understood mystic sensibility as a vehicle of agency driven by need—for control and influence in a seemingly uncontrollable world, for connection and participation in the face of increasing fragmentation, and, conversely, for carefully delineated boundaries that could resist threats to the integrity of the self.

Writing a "new idealism"

Sinclair's rejection of Christianity joined her to a modern restlessness that sought spiritual satisfaction outside the limits of traditional religious institutions. Having embraced Spinoza's pantheism at an early age, she argued herself out of Christian faith when a young woman. A precocious reader of Kant and Hegel, she published her first public article on the idealism of T. H. Green, and throughout her life filtered her perception of her modern moment through a form of neo-Platonism laid out in her *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) and *The New Idealism* (1922).[5] These books and other articles won her membership in the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy, among other honors. Like Green, she thought in terms of human self-realization into ever more refined consciousness of the true reality of the world, a reality she equated loosely with God. Her emphasis on the evidence of personal intuitive experience of this "ideal" reflected her affinity with Bergson's elevation of the intuitive over the analytical as well as her participation in Modernism's prevailing turn to such "inner" perception.[6] Her conclusion to *A Defence of Idealism* expands on the kinds of elevated sensation she related in the excerpts above, with particular reference to the certain knowledge such visions could provide:

> But lovers and poets and painters and musicians and mystics and heroes know them: moments when eternal Beauty is seized traveling through time; moments when things that we have seen all our lives without truly seeing them, the flowers in the garden, the trees in the field, the hawthorn on the hillside, change to us in an instant of time, and show the secret and imperishable life they harbour; moments when the human creature we have known all our life without truly knowing it, reveals its incredible godhead; moments of danger that are moments of sure and perfect happiness, because the adorable Reality gives itself to our very sight and touch.
>
> There is no arguing against certainties like these. (*Defence,* 338-339)

These moments of insight offered something that joined transcendence and immanence for Sinclair by revealing a physical world permeated with a usually obscured divinity. And as such other Modernists as James Joyce were discovering, this was a joining that she felt pushed the communicative possibilities of traditional language. Sinclair's experimentation with Imagism and stream of consciousness narrative, particularly as she used them to convey Mary Olivier's moments of ecstatic vision, sought more effective vehicles for expressing the inexpressible. Such impressionistic phrases of fragmentary, bare description as "wide fields, flat and still, like water, flooded with the thin, clear light; grey earth, shot delicately with green blades, shimmering" excerpted above, for example, attempted to capture young Mary's mystic experience on the fly, as it were. Both Imagism and stream-of-consciousness use "concrete images," Sinclair asserted, to seek direct access to reality, and to avoid presenting a "passion, emotion, or mood" as "an abstraction." Thus, in writing about Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, Sinclair stressed the "immediacy" of her stream of consciousness technique as compared to an "objective" method. "What we used to call the 'objective' method is a method of afterthought, of spectacular reflection," she wrote. "The first-hand, intimate and intense reality of the happening is in [the protagonist] Miriam's mind, and by presenting it thus and not otherwise Miss Richardson seizes reality alive."[7] In rehearsing concepts promulgated by T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound in a 1915 defense of Imagism, Sinclair similarly emphasized the coincidence between "the thing and its image," explaining that "what the imagists are 'out for' is direct naked contact with reality."[8] In Sinclair's words, an Imagist poet seeks to become "what Schopenhauer called 'der rein anschauende Subject,' the pure perceiver"; significantly Mary Olivier specifically celebrates Schopenhauer's formulation:

> There was Schopenhauer, though. *He* didn't cheat you. There was '*reine Anschauung*,' pure perception; it happened when you looked at beautiful things. Beautiful things were crystal; you looked through them and saw Reality. You saw God. While the crystal flash lasted '*Wille und Vorstellung*' the Will and the Idea, were not divided as they are in life; they were one. That was why beautiful things made you happy. (*Mary Olivier*, 292-293)

Sinclair's practice of intermingling first, second and third person perspectives further extended this sense of immediacy to connect reader and character, as Mary's frequent references to herself as "you," as in this last passage, simultaneously addressed and incorporated the "you" who was reading.

Tapping the energy

Sinclair was particularly reliant on Schopenhauer not just for his conception of such sublime moments, but for his equally foundational conception of the "will." Later broadened through Bergson's construction of *élan vital*, or "vital force," Schopenhauer's assumption of an underlying energy invigorating not only human life but all natural phenomena fed Sinclair's investment in the exceptional potential of human agency. Schopenhauer posited what he called the will as an enigmatic, all-encompassing force, the very ground for existence that manifests in persons through the individual "will-to-live." At the same time that the will carried a metaphysical dimension for him as the basis for all existence, it also operates in what might be called a more traditional mode as a fundamental volitional force, or "instinct," that drives individual action.[9] Always on the horizon, however, and in seeming tension with this picture of a will intimately engaged in the specifics of human living, is that prior understanding of will as the foundational force of life. Schopenhauer claimed, in short, an essential continuity between such natural forces as the gravity that pulls mountain stream water downhill and the human will. As such, not only is the will free from reasoned control, but the intellect "is unable to determine the will itself, for the will is wholly inaccessible to it, and . . . is for it inscrutable and impenetrable."[10]

Sinclair's application of Schopenhauer's thought stressed the will's expression as personal volition, and, in fact, in her emphasis on disciplining the will through sublimation assumed a level of conscious control that Schopenhauer denied. She was also far more enamored with the evolutionary constructs of human advancement she drew from Green than the anti-teleological Schopenhauer would have countenanced. It is still easy to see the attraction his idea of an indomitable force driving both natural and human events might have had for her in explaining the ubiquitous energy of modern change. Running as the motivating impulse for the creative achievements of "outstanding individuals," Sinclair asserts, is this fundamental "will-to-live," a will that precisely because of its contiguity with a more generalized will in the Schopenhauerian sense can manifest in moments of perception of the "truly real." While these moments of sublime revelation of the world's perfect "being" are the goal, the will's nature is always a dynamic "becoming." In an almost rhapsodic paean, Sinclair asserts that will is fundamental in being "traceable in the lowest conceivable germ of Personality—the will-to-live, the need to appear, to grow, to reproduce the self, to gather experience and appear more and more." As a result, "in a sense [will] is the stronghold of individuality," and thus is centrally implicated in any interrelation between an individual and others. "For it is with his will that the individual fences himself off and asserts himself against other individuals. It is with his will, in the form of interest and love, that he draws near to them and is drawn, and so makes his personality greater through theirs and theirs through him." Specifically, she adds, "it is his will as energy that, whether in resistance or obedience, knits him to the forces of the 'real' world outside himself," and, perhaps most important, "it is his will that in submitting or aspiring, in adoration or in longing, links him to the immanent and transcendent Reality that he calls God" (*Defence*, 69-70).

The will's usefulness as an expression of agency was thus strongly associated in Sinclair's mind with the expenditure of disciplined effort, and intertwined with the achievement of mystic sensibility. Set in a social context of widespread psychical and occult experimentation, her emphasis on the fruitful exercise of an "evolved" will participated in a general impulse to endow human agency with extraordinary efficacy. The popularity of Bergson's theories as they built on Schopenhauer coincided with widespread expectations that through proper direction or focusing something of the human self could be projected as an influence, communicating thoughts, producing healing, even causing harm. In her 1916 "Clinical Lectures on Symbolism and Sublimation," in which she commented on two chapters of Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious*, and in an unpublished text *The Way of Sublimation*, Sinclair worked through a shift in allegiance from the new and suggestive possibilities of Freud's thought, to a preference for Jung, largely because of Jung's understanding of libido more as "creative energy" than as eros.[11] Sinclair was also attracted to Jung's suggestion that this energy could be sublimated into various productive channels, though, as with Schopenhauer, Sinclair assumed a possibility of direction that extended beyond Jung's claims.[12] She summed up perhaps the essence of her philosophy of individual and species evolution in terms of this key concept: "The perfect individual is the person perfectly adapted to reality through the successive sublimations of his will."

For Sinclair, this engagement with the possibilities of invigorating force dovetailed with her preoccupations with sexuality, and specifically female sexuality, that linked individual libido with the deepest rhythms of existence. Philosophically, in a manner that might later be expressed through the Lacanian term of *jouissance*, she approached the sexuality of her female protagonists as fundamental expressions of creative energy, energy that required channeling to be fully potent.[13] At least in representations of her singleness to herself and others, Sinclair was adamant that it served the purpose of her highest calling—to be a writer. Whatever her choice might have been had a serious prospect of partnership presented itself,[14] she saw sexual intimacy for women as incompatible with, or at least deleterious to artistic achievement. In *Mary Olivier*, dubbed Sinclair's "novel of sublimation,"[15] for example, the somewhat ambiguous conclusion in which Mary chooses not to pursue a love relationship is open to at least one reading that finds her life-long course of self-denial producing not only artistic success but a form of mystic fulfillment.

At the same time, Sinclair's emphasis on sublimation was itself a paradoxical application of will through its surrender, as finding her "self" required the denial of that self's desires. With echoes of the Eastern strains of mysticism Sinclair absorbed through Tagore and other sources, higher consciousness is achieved if not through the negation of desire's attachments, then through desire's redirection.[16] Biographer Hrisey Zegger reads Mary's development as a process of purification, which, according to Sinclair's friend Evelyn Underhill, "involves detachment, abandonment of outward things that confine and 'enchain the spirit,' and mortification, 'the death of the selfhood in its narrow individualistic sense' and the 'raising to their purest state of all that remains' by a 'deliberate recourse to painful experience and difficult tasks.'"[17] The program of supposedly productive self-denial reaches one apex in Mary's decision to forgo a trip to France because her brother is sick. While Mary first feels anguish over giving up the trip, she is able to give up even the desire to go. After praying for help, "if Anything's there," she achieves "a sense of exquisite security and clarity and joy" in a new certainty that "she was not going to Agaye. She didn't want to go" (*Mary Olivier*, 300). Mary likewise gives her life's narrative its dramatic close by willing an end to wanting her lover Richard and to his wanting her. The difficulty in reading Mary's final mystic achievement of "knowing what reality is," therefore, reflects the complex outcomes of this rejection of an arguably beneficial union. To Mary, however, the cost is unquestionably worth it (*Mary Olivier*, 436).

Applying the energy

"The Flaw in the Crystal" illustrates the various aspects of Sinclair's erotic mysticism as a story of both sexual desire and alignment with a supernatural force, expressed through the sublimation of that desire to achieve a "spiritualized" connection between individuals. The bond Agatha shares with her married friend Rodney is in part the remarkable healing effect she has on him, the product of what she calls "the power, the uncanny, unaccountable Gift." The erotic performance of her union with that power is both a channeling and an experience of being channeled, as she serves as the focusing vessel for an almost personified influence able to dispel mental distress, first from herself, then from others. Agatha treats Rodney, then his wife Bella, and finally, and nearly disastrously, another acquaintance, Harding Powell. In her generic description of the power, Sinclair skirts Christian associations as she incorporates religiously tinged requirements of purity and disciplined dedication. Not exactly prayer, or as Agatha tells Harding's wife, Milly, "not anything *you* mean by it," what Agatha does in channeling the Gift in some ways *is* prayer, "only it's more, much more," she says. "I can't explain it. I only know it isn't me" ("Flaw," 135). In its own erotic imagery of dissolution, the power, Agatha repeatedly stresses, "found her." When her helpless concern for Rodney had brought her to the verge of her own mental collapse, she had "flung out her arms across the bed in the supreme gesture of supplication, and thus gone, eyes shut and with no motion of thought or sense in her, clean into the blackness where, as if it had been waiting for her, the thing had found her" ("Flaw," 119). Bringing the power to bear on a person she wants to help involves a similar surrender, or descent into an oceanic infinitude, that yet retains an element of agency:

> You could think of it as a current of transcendent power, hitherto mysteriously inhibited. You made the connection, having cut off all other currents that interfered, and then you simply turned it on. In other words, if you could put it into words at all, you shut your eyes and ears, you closed up the sense of touch, you made everything dark around you and withdrew into your innermost self; you burrowed deep into the darkness there till you got beyond it; you tapped the Power, as it were, underground at any point you pleased and turned it on in any direction. ("Flaw," 120)

Into this dynamic stasis Agatha is able to draw the "innermost essence" of those she would cure, as in her ministrations to Harding, "the walls of flesh were down between them; she had got at him." The possibility of intrusion or pollution, discussed below, arises out of the intimate nature of Agatha's application of the power, an application communicated through the eroticism of merged "essences" and the operation of the Gift through a conjoined sleeping. After extending the power in intercession for Harding, Agatha knows that "he would sleep; he would be all right as long as *she* slept. Her sleep, she had discovered, did more than carry on the amazing act of communion and redemption. It clinched it. It was the seal on the bond" ("Flaw," 122-123).

In *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, Sinclair described her own Agatha-like experience with that melding into a greater "will" when she is asked to sit up with a severely wounded soldier. A discontinuity between her lack of medical training on the one hand, and her assumed power of volition on the other makes the night something of a crystallizing moment. The experience can be read first as an exercise in incompetence ("That night I would have given everything I possess, and everything I have ever done, to have been a trained nurse") as, having awakened numerous staff to assist her, Sinclair comes to realize through their responses that "my case was not the only case in the hospital" (*Journal*, 218). Yet, the night's service was effective on an entirely different level as her active "willing" apparently produces a measurable improvement in the soldier's condition. As in "The Flaw in the Crystal," Sinclair expresses the potential of the influence she wields in the quasi-religious terms of prayer:

> There is nothing that I can do for him but to will. And I will hard, or I pray—I don't know which it is; your acutest willing and your intensest prayer are indistinguishable. And it seems to work. I will—or I pray—that he will lie still without morphia, and that he shall have no pain. And he lies still, without pain. I will—or I pray—that he shall sleep without morphia. And he sleeps (I think that in spite of his extreme discomfort, he must have slept the best part of the night.). And because it seems to work, I will—or I pray—he shall get well. (*Journal*, 219-220)

Forced to prop up the soldier's lower back with her arms, Sinclair describes her long night's vigil as physically but also spiritually exhausting, using embodied terms to describe the ordeal of "willing," and making the weight on her arms a metaphor for the burden of concentration (*Journal*, 220). Describing her sense that the time she has spent in the room caring for the soldier is not one night, but "months of nights," Sinclair expands even that: "All my life I have known and cared only for the wounded man on the bed" (*Journal*, 221). Not only is the soldier proclaimed improved the next day by six doctors who "all say he is ever so much better. They even say he may live—that he has a good chance," but Sinclair herself has found the experience efficacious: "The night has not been so terrible, after all. It has gone like an hour and I have left him sleeping. I am not in the least bit tired; I never felt drowsy once, and my cough has nearly gone" (*Journal*, 223).

While a matter of near-physical and personal endeavor, this effective willing for Sinclair is even more dependent on maintaining a particular state of mind, captured in the association with prayer and in the downplaying of any significance of the physical contact between her and the soldier. Agatha's ability to make use of the Gift requires a similar form of conscious sublimation that disavows the erotic nature of the connection, even as the process of her intervention plays it out. While part of her careful application of the gift for Rodney includes setting aside any thought that "there *should* be anything they had to hide," the actuality of their desire for each other is the story's steady undercurrent. She therefore purposefully denies her attraction: "She had set herself apart; she had swept herself bare and scoured herself clean for him. Clean she had to be; clean from the desire that he should come" ("Flaw," 83). Any "flaw" in that pure state of mind, she determines, leaves her vulnerable to the mentally destructive forces she intends to expunge ("Flaw," 121). As she tries to explain to Milly:

> Goodness and purity are terrible. We don't understand it. It's got its own laws. What you call prayer's all right—it would be safe, I mean—I suppose it might get answered anyway, however we fell short. But *this*—this is different. It's the highest, Milly; and if you rush in and make for the highest, can't you see, oh, can't you *see* how it might break you? Can't you see what it requires of *you*? Absolute purity, I told you, Milly. You have to be crystal to it—crystal without a flaw. ("Flaw," 189-190)

In the true nature of erotics as potentially both attracting and disturbing, therefore, the positive elimination of boundaries could also constitute a form of danger. Of greatest concern for Sinclair were intrusions that could penetrate the "self" itself. In this she was not alone. Belief in such paranormal phenomena as telepathy and communication with the dead fed public worries about potential violation through psychic communication, as such intimate connections hinted of the sexually transgressive. Here psychic experimentation fed the same hopes but also anxieties as technological advances, Pamela Thurschwell observes, as such communication devices as the telegraph could create "fantasies of access to others who would be otherwise inaccessible to the fantasizing operators of these technologies, because of gender and class barriers."[18]

The image of blessed, healing mutual sleep integral to Agatha's application of the Gift, and the heightened awareness of the world's reality that comes with her sensitivity to it, both turn frightening as Harding imposes his will in return ("Flaw," 123). In a reversal of the earlier depictions of her calm control, and of her spiritual interventions as beneficial for others, Agatha shows signs of Harding's madness through her inverted perception of the landscape as "violent and frightful" ("Flaw," 168). Compared to her earlier beatific perception of a nature infused with beauty, "what she experienced now (if she could have given any account of it) was exaltation at the other end of the scale. It was horror and fear unspeakable. Horror and fear immanent in the life of things." The intensity of the vision that had been uplifting now is disturbingly harsh, with colors painfully vibrant and sounds terrifying. "She saw the world in a loathsome transparency; she saw it with the eye of a soul in which no sense of the divine had ever been, of a soul that denied the supernatural. It had been Harding Powell's soul, and it had become hers" (Flaw," 169). Sinclair speaks of breached boundaries, explaining that “in the process of getting at Harding to heal him [Agatha] had had to destroy, not only the barriers of flesh and blood, but those innermost walls of personality that divide and protect, mercifully, one spirit from another.” Strengthening the imagery of infection or of the uncontrolled spread of influence, the permeability is not just between Harding and Agatha, but, because of Agatha’s psychic connection with Rodney and Bella, with them as well (“Flaw, 176-177).

In an article about the story for *The New York Times Review of Books*, Sinclair asserted her belief in both the positive and negative potential of such psychic connection, describing the apparently “natural” human relations in the story as “invented,” and all the “apparently ‘supernatural’” events as “true”:

> That there are such happenings is becoming more and more a matter of experience. . . . Whether they come under the head of psycho-therapeutics, Christian Science, the Higher Thought, or the New Mysticism, whether they can or can not be satisfactorily disposed of as cures by “suggestion” or “auto-suggestion,” they have this in common, that they presuppose a pull upon some utterly secret and mysterious and immaterial power, some way of communication between persons below or above the level of their ordinary consciousness.[19]

On the basis of extended testimony by healers, Sinclair defended in particular her depiction of Agatha’s distress: “Every one of them has told me that, until the healer knows how to protect himself, this uncanny transference is a fact,” she wrote. “The physician will explain it as an effect of auto-suggestion, the Christian Scientist will tell you gravely that it is the last stand that the Evil One, the Spirit of Error, makes against the Truth, which is shortly to annihilate him.” In response, Sinclair asserts again the importance of purity: “Simplicity, single-mindedness, is the great thing. . . . For, however tried and assaulted, the true healer, the flawless vehicle of spirit, never fails.”

Considering death

While couched in this story as the communication of psychic healing or pollution, hovering in the background of Sinclair’s exploration of exceptional agency was a more fundamental anxiety about modernity’s burgeoning threats to life, which would be epitomized in the war, as well as fascination with possible penetration of the division between life and death. In *A Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair’s careful presentation of what she understood to be the "new mysticism" wraps up with the vexing, perhaps central question for her exposition: What about death, and what happens after it? For her, the answer lay in the "pan-psychism" of Samuel Butler that assumed the survival of a consciousness through successive generations of ancestors stretching to the past and of descendants stretching to the future. Taking a Lamarckian approach, Sinclair followed Butler in arguing that unconscious instincts, such as the ability to walk, are a result of what were first consciously pursued actions of previous generations.[20] Even as she defends his theory as the best explanation of the mysteries of instinct, however, Sinclair takes him to task for leaving out the concept of "personal identity." She calls Butler's arguments "unanswerable," claiming that "we cannot explain or account for the most ordinary facts of our life and consciousness without presupposing that we have lived and been conscious before." But,

> unless the Individual carried through all his previous experiences *some personal identity over and above that of his progenitors* [italics in text], their experience will remain theirs and be no earthly good to him. For he could not profit by it to the extent he has been proved to have profited, if, at every stage of his past career, he had not been capable of absorbing and assimilating it—of taking it to himself. (*Defence*, 22)

The influence of her reading in Eastern mysticism is again evident in her preference for an explanation based on reincarnation, whatever adjustments she made to Butler. In this, she joined a contemporary conversation that not only seriously considered reincarnation a distinct possibility but weighed the pros and cons of alternate formulations. Her gravitation toward Butler's particular theory indicates as well the tension in her thought between the universal and the particular, mirroring her attraction to Schopenhauer's balancing of a single, all-encompassing force of will, and a personal, individual volition. In a seeming paradox, the "surviving self" that Sinclair grafts into Butler's thought is simultaneously a discrete individual and one with the flow of ancestral heritage. From her earliest exposure to Spinoza's pantheism, Sinclair seems to have been enamored of such models of union between the individual and the universal, leading up to the ultimate goal of mystic union with God, or what Underhill called the "Unitive State." Even more, the continuation of the self reflected for her the strength of the "will-to-live" as too foundational a force to be stopped by death. The self that with proper sublimation could resist psychic intrusion, it would seem, would be enduring in other ways as well.

Questions of reincarnation also drew on her involvement with paranormal inquiries. As a member of the Society for Psychical Research who yet prided herself on her skepticism, Sinclair saw the host of movements that promised forms of occult power or other exceptional abilities as both intriguing and suspect. The undeniable validity of some psychic experiences, she warned, could be offset by the fraudulent nature of so many others "claimed equally," as she put it, "by scoundrels and saints" (*Defence*, 263). Her interest and skepticism mingled, in fact, as she asserted that "both through the agency of mediums and otherwise, *things happen*; things that are not explainable by any trickery; things interesting enough, and even uncanny enough to charm the most fastidious lover of the occult. (Unfortunately, lovers of the occult are very seldom hampered in their researches by over fastidiousness.) The question is: *What* happens" (*Defence*, 312).

In attempting to maintain careful boundaries around "acceptable" practices of mysticism, therefore, Sinclair took specific aim at what she saw as the more disturbing examples of organized, and, perhaps more important, widespread movements of what she broadly called "spiritualisms," specifically criticizing Theosophy and Christian Science. Christian Science was "by far the more dangerous, though not the less dubious, of the two," she maintained, "*because of its successes* [italics in text]" (*Defence*, 264). Her criticism of Christian Science as being essentially "bad science" reflected her own efforts to preserve a scientific basis for her supernatural theory. Despite her own assumption of survival after death, for example, she found it necessary to consider the "evidence" for communication with the dead. On the one hand, psychic phenomena seemed an indication that such communication should be possible. If various occult and spiritualist experiments were cause for at best the suspension of disbelief until her "What" question could be answered, she asserted that "whatever Spiritualism may be, telepathy is a fact; and whatever the precise limits and possibilities of telepathy may be, we have not yet discovered them" (*Defence*, 313). And if telepathy could bridge the gap between individual consciousnesses, then the step to bridging life and death as well might be small. Even the new marvels of technology were encouraging such optimism, evidenced in efforts to use mechanical means to communicate with the dead. "If you can talk to people at a distance on the phone, the logic runs," writes Thurschwell, "why shouldn't you be able to talk to the dead?"[21]

On the other hand, precisely because of her belief in telepathy, Sinclair argued against the possibility of ever ultimately proving the truth of communication with the dead. Since what might appear to be a conversation between an “incarnate” subject and a “disincarnate” subject might actually be an instance of telepathy between two living people, communication with the dead could never be proven beyond doubt. Ensuring the proper test conditions, she pointed out sardonically, would require going to absurd lengths, namely the extermination of all human beings other than the test subject: “But until we have eliminated every possible source of suggestion from the living we have no right to assume an even remote suggestion from ‘the other side.’ . . . The test will not be watertight until the communicant is alone with the communicator; and *then* there will only be his word for it” (*Defence*, 312-313). Sinclair’s willingness to seriously entertain the methodological hurdles involved in such an experiment, and her concern about confusing one fantastic phenomenon with another, says much about her, and even more about the fluid expectations of the period in which she lived. Just what the ever-expanding reach of scientific inquiry could discover seemed at times limitless, including, potentially, the nature of life and death.

It was this latter question of the nature of mortality, in fact, rather than the possibility of conversation with dead spirits, that most concerned Sinclair. Mary Olivier’s narrative is laced with questions about what it means for an individual to exist, but also with questions about the dissolution or at least redefinition of life in death. While Mary outgrows her nearly paralyzing fear of the sight of funerals, sparked by a terrifying childhood visit to the City of London Cemetery, her ardent desire to discover the “Thing-in-Itself” is driven in part by the threat of non-existence, even as, paradoxically, death offers the tantalizing yet uncertain promise of ultimate answers (*Mary Olivier*, 62ff., 83-84). In describing the strain of enduring her hyper-critical mother’s “disapproving, reproachful face,” Mary states: “Sometimes you felt that you couldn’t stand it for another minute. You wanted to get away from it, to the other end of the world, out of the world, to die. When you were dead perhaps you would know. Or perhaps you wouldn’t. Perhaps death would cheat you, too” (*Mary Olivier*, 294). Certainly the outbreak of war with the accompanying onslaught of death contributed to Sinclair’s fixation on such issues. The ecstasy of her rush into danger in her *Journal* excerpt is as much anticipation of encountering the possibility of death as it is response to the passing scenery. And in *A Defence of Idealism*, she summoned the testimony of those confronting death in battle as a warrant for the “certainty” of mystic apprehension:

> Almost every other hero knows it; the exquisite and incredible

> assurance, the positively ecstatic vision of Reality that comes to him when he faces death for the first time. There is no certainty that life can give that surpasses or even comes anywhere near it. And the world has been full of *these* mystics, *these* visionaries, since August, 1914. Sometimes I think they are the only trustworthy ones. How pure, how absolute is their surrender; how candid and untroubled their confession; how spontaneous and undefiled their witness.
>
> And see how they back up all the Others— (*Defence*, 269)

Sinclair participated here in a common hagiographic spiritualizing of death in war, though her elevated personages were not the usual memorialized war dead, but rather threatened soldiers possessed of a heightened vision just by death's proximity. By contrast, her commentary on the dysfunctional relations within the Olivier family describes the trivializing of death in empty expressions of dissatisfaction, as when Mary's brother Dan threatens to kill their father in childish pique (*Mary Olivier*, 15), and even more with her mother's repeated refrain that she would rather see someone in his or her coffin than have that person do something she did not like (e.g., *Mary Olivier*, 243). Little Mamma also regularly enlists post-death judgment in her controlling emphasis on being "good." More sinisterly, the threat that misbehavior would cause someone's death operates as a central weapon in curbing self-assertion. Another brother maintains that he would "die rather than hurt Mamma," yet has enough sense of his own integrity to pursue a military career against her wishes: "Mark loved Mamma; but he was not going to do what she wanted. He was going to do something that would kill her" (*Mary Olivier*, 282, 71). Death figures more seriously in Mary's dissatisfaction with the atonement as the basis for Christianity, as the Christian God emerges as an angry figure, like her father, who kills people who are disobedient. The Passion, as Mary understands it, "meant that God had flown into another temper and that Jesus was crucified to make him good again" (*Mary Olivier*, 59). Pantheism, with its emphasis on God's "oneness" with creation, attracted Sinclair largely in its opposition to this vision of a separated, judgmental deity.

Amidst her somewhat intellectualized exploration of death as a philosophical principle, scientific puzzle, or macabre family cliché, however, Sinclair, who survived both her parents and her five brothers, also paints death as a painfully real horizon for Mary. Given the uncertainty of Mary's brothers' health and the actual passing of members of her extended family, Mary understands death as the inconceivable extinction of those she loved: "Supposing Mamma died? Supposing

Mark died? Or Dank or Roddy? Or even Uncle Victor? Even Papa? They couldn't. Jesus wouldn't let them" (*Mary Olivier*, 55). She gets an early introduction in the death of the family dog, Tibby, and of a newborn lamb that had been promised to her (*Mary Olivier*, 16, 24-26). The novel further relates the passing of the family maid, Mary's father, brothers Mark and Roddy, her uncle, and finally her mother. While not described, the deaths of two aunts leave bequests that fund the final leasing of Mary's house (*Mary Olivier*, 429). If Sinclair's philosophical and spiritual musings, as well as her inquiries into the occult, were driven by concern about death, therefore, it was far from a merely theoretical interest. Against the backdrop of the war, her assertions of reincarnation, her consideration of communication with the dead, and even her more general investment in the integrity of the self can all be read as understandable reactions to personal history as much as to a fraught moment of modernity.

Conclusion

Merging and adapting strains of nineteenth-century philosophy with reconfigured elements of psychoanalytic theory, Sinclair took advantage of the fluid context of her time to develop her own philosophy of the mystic potential of human will. Her conception of agency negotiated the overlapping terrains of early twentieth-century speculation about the nature of consciousness and the potential for access to alternative or higher realms of existence. Unusually sophisticated in the level of her engagement with the philosophic principles underlying that negotiation, her simultaneous interweaving of pragmatic skepticism and intrigued credulity in considering paranormal possibilities made her highly representative of her modern *episteme*. Just as her thought bridged the *fin de siècle*, working through the transition to a new century's new challenges, her approach to a mystic sensibility held together elements of the transcendent and immanent, the particular and universal, but also the dynamic and static. The "new idealism" she sought to shape, Sinclair wrote, "must somehow contrive to reconcile the universe of things with the universe of thought."[22] Young Mary's first moment of mystic apprehension occurs as heightened awareness of the concretely physical yet supernaturally "shimmering" landscape around her. Much later, the mature Mary can in a flash of insight understand a living mutuality between herself, external natural reality, and God, a unity of eternal "being" despite the fluctuation of temporal "becoming":

> Catty had taken away the tea-things and was going down the four steps into the house. It happened between the opening and

> shutting of the door.
>
> She saw that the beauty of the tree was its real life, and that its real life was in her real self and that her real self was God. The leaves and the light had nothing to do with it; she had seen it before when the tree was a stem and bare branches on a grey sky; and that beauty too was the real life of the tree. (*Mary Olivier*, 430)

If the perception of something permanent and "real" could be communicated in a passing vision that even incorporated a tree's growth, then the "ideal" of her "new idealism" was as alive as it was perfect, Sinclair concluded. The potential for such mystic apprehension, moreover, lay in the further dynamism of an evolving human racial consciousness, and in the personal evolution of the conscious individual. Not only was a mystic sensibility the highest expression of human development—the Butlerian product of generations of disciplined sublimation—but as a capability it would further evolve in a way that highlighted the progressively modern understanding of an autonomous agent acting in the world:

> Thus, though we cannot say what the Mysticism of the future will be, we may be pretty sure what it will not be. It will not be sickly; it will not be morbid and hysterical, or sentimental. In exchanging God the Father for God the Absolute Self, it will have lost that irresponsible dependence which has kept men and women for centuries in a pathetic infancy. Sooner or later the mystic has to grow up like other people. He will know that he fulfils the absolute purpose best by trying to become, as far as possible, a self-determined being. (*Defence*, 289)

At least the best, such self-determination was in fact, she suspected, perhaps the only response to forces all too ready to turn the promise of modernity's energy into something quite different.

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[1] Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1919; reprint, New York: New York Review Books, 2002), 57. Cited in the text as *Mary Olivier*.

[2] Sinclair, "The Flaw in the Crystal," *Uncanny Stories* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 130-131. First published in the *English Review* 11, May 1912, 189-228. Cited in the text as "Flaw."

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[3] Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 10-11. Cited in the text as *Journal*.

[4] Sinclair drew the term from, among other sources, her reading of her friend Evelyn Underhill, who wrote that the unconscious contains "all those 'uncivilized' instincts and vices, those remains of the ancestral savage, which education has forced out of the stream of consciousness and which now only send their messages to the surface in a carefully disguised form." Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911; reprint, Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 1999**),** 52-53; cf. also Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 219n23.

[5] Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions* (New York: Macmillan, 1917). Cited in the text as *Defence*. *The New Idealism* (New York: Macmillan, 1922). "The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism." *The New World* 2 (December 1893): 694-708.

[6] See Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1912; reprint 1949).

[7] Sinclair, "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson," *Egoist* 5 (April, 1918): 57-9.

[8] Sinclair, "On Imagism," *The Egoist* 2 (June 1915): 88-89.

[9] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 275. Cited below as *WWR*.

[10] Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 291.

[11] "Clinical Lectures on Symbolism and Sublimation II," *The Medical Press*16 (August 1916): 144; *The Way of Sublimation*. Typescript. May Sinclair Collection, Rare Book Collection, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania. See Rebeccah Ann Kinnamon, "May Sinclair's Fiction of the Supernatural." Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1974, 24.

[12] Jung questioned the extent to which the libido could be sublimated by "free choice or inclination." To the contrary, he asserted, "the individual . . . must often learn in his life that so-called 'disposable' energies are not

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his to dispose.'" Jung, "On the Psychology of the Unconscious," in *The Essential Jung*, ed. Anthony Storr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 153-154, 156. See Raitt, 232.

[13] See Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Rose. (London: Macmillan, 1982; reprint New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

[14] To the extent that *Mary Olivier* is autobiographical, Sinclair apparently was romantically interested in a number of men, but never entered into a permanent relationship.

[15] Jean Radford, "Introduction" to Sinclair, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (London: Collins, 1922; reprint London: Virago, 1980), no page numbers. See also Hrisey Dimitrakis Zegger, *May Sinclair*. Twayne's English Authors Series 192 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 106.

[16] Both Sinclair and Underhill were acquainted with the Bengali poet Tagore. Sinclair wrote an laudatory review of his work. See "The 'Gitanjali': Or Song-Offerings of Rabindranath Tagore," *North American Review* 197 (May 1913): 659-76. Underhill collaborated with him in several translation projects.

[17] Zegger, 108. She quotes Underhill, *Mysticism*, 211, 205.

[18] Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 87.

[19] Sinclair, "Concerning My Book: May Sinclair Tells How Tales of Strange Influences Came to Her as the Basis for a Story," *The New York Times Review of Books*. 3 November 1912.

[20] See Samuel Butler, *Life and Habit* (1877), The Shrewsbury Edition of the Works of Samuel Butler, ed. Henry Festing Jones and A. T. Bartholomew, vol. 4 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1923).

[21] Thurschwell, 23.

[22] Sinclair, *The New Idealism*, 14. See also Raitt, 234-235.