

THE PURGATIVE WAY IN THE  
ANCREN RIWLE

BY

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.



INCE the *Ancren Riwle* was written for recluses of a solitary and strict type we might suppose it to contain either the bare bones of a very strict rule of life—horary, penances and prayers—or the highest form of spiritual teaching designed for the well-nigh perfect. When we remember that Mother Julian was an anchoress at Norwich we may expect to find a rule, designed for such as her, to contain deep mystical doctrine. It is probably for reasons of this nature that so few people open this straightforward and normal book of sound spiritual advice. In effect the *Riwle* is an ascetical work designed to instruct beginners in their first retirement from the world. Although he is evidently writing for contemplatives, the author scarcely mentions 'mental prayer' or its equivalent and passes in silence all mystical experience. Indeed he expressly states that he is writing for those who belong to the 'Order of St James', by which he does not mean, as some have supposed, a special religious order of that name. He is writing rather for those who primarily set out to be good Christians fulfilling the main part of that definition of religion, 'to visit and assist widows and fatherless children, and to keep one's self pure and unstained from the world'—'thus does St James describe religion and order'.<sup>1</sup> The author apparently regards the first half of this Apostolic dictum as descriptive of the Active Life which pertains to religious men and women remaining in the world (and 'especially some prelates and faithful preachers') while the second half describes the Contemplative Life, that of the Anchoress, and does not imply joining any religious order of men or women. 'The latter part of this saying relates to anchorites, to your religious order, who keep yourselves pure and unspotted from the world, more than any other religious person' (*Introduction*, p. 8). He has in view, therefore, the most general requirements for the contemplative life, Dowel in a contemplative setting.

These particular anchoresses lived the eremitical life but without taking any public vows or belonging to any religious order, as the *Introduction* makes quite plain. They took private vows, in particular consecrating their virginity to their heavenly Bridegroom. Thus con-

<sup>1</sup> *Introduction* page 8. NOTE: All references are here given to the modernised version: *The Nun's Rule, being the Ancren Riwle modernised* by James Morton. Medieval Library Vol. XVIII; London. Chatto & Windus, 1926.

secrated they lived in poverty, chastity and obedience; poverty, for they depended to a certain extent at least upon the charity of neighbours for their support;<sup>2</sup> obedience, in their subjection to a spiritual director who was usually the parish priest or the bishop. Naturally, therefore, a rule intended to instil the fundamentals of such a life would differ from the rule or constitutions of a definite religious order. It is far less trussed up and canonically moulded, because the life of this sort of recluse cannot be legislated for in the same way as a regular group living the common life. The details of an anchoress's existence depended in many ways on the individual herself, and her rule of necessity had to be broad and adaptable. So we find in this document a competent description of the life of any beginner. The first and last chapters alone deal with the precise mode of life of the holy women who lived in those cells close by the side of parish churches in the Middle ages; and even in these chapters we may quarry many principles valuable for the ordinary Christian.

Experience has shown that this *Riwle* was admirably suited for all states of life after the first conversion, for it enjoyed a very great popularity from the time of its writing for a good three hundred years. It was read widely, not merely in England, but particularly also in France. In England, as Professor Chambers has shown,<sup>3</sup> this popularity served to continue a thoroughly English tradition in the prose of the country. We presume, therefore, that at the same time it continued the English tradition of spirituality. But the *Riwle* exists also in Latin and French versions, both nearly as early as, if not earlier than, the English.<sup>4</sup> There has been some discussion in fact as to which was its original language. For a long time it was thought to be the work of Richard Poore, Bishop of Salisbury (1217-1229) written for three anchoresses at Tarrant Keynes in Dorset. But this tradition rests on some additions to the Latin version. Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P., put forward the theory that it was written by an English Dominican. He based his argument on various similarities and possible connections: the author speaks of 'our laybrothers' in referring to the office of *Paters* and *Aves*; it contains a prayer which has been attributed to Blessed Jordan of Saxony. Fr McNabb went on to attribute the authorship to Friar Robert Bacon, O.P. (1170-1248) on far more slender evidence, the chief being that the *Riwle* refers to a certain man of the author's acquaintance who undertook mortifications very similar to those of St Edmund of Canterbury, and Robert Bacon describes these austerities in his life of St

<sup>2</sup> But the author omits Poverty from the vows he discusses in the Introduction, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *The Continuity of English Prose*, by Professor Chambers (O.U. Press).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. NOTE at the conclusion of the present article.

Edmund.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, little certainty as to the origin of the *Riwle*, except that its English origin is practically established beyond doubt. It was written before 1230 for at that date it was revised for a community of recluses larger than the three mentioned in the text as the recipients of the *Riwle*.<sup>6</sup> Professor Chambers has shown<sup>7</sup> that as the *Riwle* has come down to us it must have been written about 1200, and that the translation into Latin for the Sisterhood at Tarrant was not made till nearly 1300 by Simon of Ghent, Bishop of Salisbury.

The three Sisters for whom the *Riwle* was originally written were evidently devout and very pious, and also comfortably settled. One MS preserves the following description:

'Much word is there of you, what gentle women ye be; for your goodness and your nobleness of mind beloved of many; sisters of one father and of one mother, in the flower of your youth, ye have left all worldly joys and become anchoresses.'<sup>8</sup>

The author is frequently at pains to assure these three that his warnings against the grave abuses of the anchorite life are meant to cast no reflection on their own excellent behaviour:

'Whatever may yet remain to be said of those rules, I would that they were as well kept by all, as, through God's grace, they are kept by you (p. 38).

'I write more particularly for others, for nothing here said applies to you, my dear sisters, for ye have not the name, nor shall ye have, through the grace of God, of staring anchorites, nor of enticing looks and manners, which some at times alas contrary to the nature of their profession practise (p. 41).

'But would to God, dear sisters, that all the others were as free as ye are of such folly' (p. 68, cf. pp. 144-5, 163 and 171).

Besides Roger Bacon, St Gilbert of Sempringham has been put forward as a possible author. But the true author remains hidden. Whoever he was, he must have been a man of sound judgment, deep learning and wide knowledge of the Scriptures and the Fathers. There are few traces of scholasticism, and Aristotle himself does not attempt an appearance. The author allegorizes a great deal on the Scriptures, but he does so in a remarkably restrained manner, if we

<sup>5</sup> Miss Hope Emily Allen has refuted the theory of Dominican authorship. cf.: Vincent McNabb, O.P., 'The Authorship of the Ancren Riwe' in *The Modern Language Review* IX, 1; January 1916. Hope Emily Allen, 'The Origin of the Ancren Riwe', *The Modern Language Assn. of America*, XXXIII, 3, 1918.

<sup>6</sup> These three have sometimes been identified with Emma, Gunilda, and Christina, maids-in-waiting to Queen Maud, daughter of St Margaret of Scotland, who had started a hermitage at Kilburn in 1135.

<sup>7</sup> *Continuity of English Prose*, pp. xcvi. sqq.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Chambers, *op. cit.* xcvi.

compare it with his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> The quotations from the Sapiential books and from SS. Austin, Gregory and Aelred often have a deep moral content of a nature that precludes any suggestion of the merely 'pious tag'. Like Langland, the author shows a thorough appreciation and love of the liturgy, and he often quotes from the hymns and responsories of the Roman Breviary as well as the collects.

The author has a peculiarly attractive style and his imaginative pictures often touch deeper realities than the merely quaint. He has closely observed the ways of a child, how the child likes to have the object beaten that has hurt him (p. 140), how the mother will play with him (p. 174). The description of the back-biter (pp. 66-67), singled out by Professor Chambers, and the ways of adding sins through circumstances, are examples of the author's vivid and powerful gift of description. And there are many medieval details of interest preserved through these descriptions—the way men would tie knots in their belts, as we do in our handkerchiefs, to remind themselves of some commission (p. 300), the criminal taking 'sanctuary' in the church (p. 130), the occupation of the ash-gatherer (p. 161), the knight's shield hung up in the church after his death (p. 297).

Like Langland too the author writes with the doctrine of the three ways and the two lives at the back of his mind. He compares the elect of God of the first way to pilgrims who live an active life in the world. The second type is dead to the world, having left it for the religious life, to be alive in Christ. The third type is nailed to the cross of Christ, and to this class belong the anchoresses (pp. 263-267). The three Marys who came to anoint the body of our Lord stand for the degrees of penance in the ascending scale of perfection (p. 282), while evidently the anchoress chooses the better part of Mary (pp. 314-315). The traditional teaching about the Mystical Body is as much part of the *Riwle* as it is of the Vision of Piers Plowman: the whole Church is supported by the prayers of the recluse (p. 107), a conception which is almost unintelligible today in our activist generation; he refers naturally to our Lord as the head of us, the members, without attempting to explain it (p. 272), so that his first readers must have been familiar with this great Pauline doctrine.

There is no dull reading in this rule, and it can be a constant delight today as it must have been to those three sisters at Kilburn seven hundred years ago. It is divided into eight parts:

Introduction: the nature of Rules.

1. Religious Service.
2. On Keeping the Heart.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Beryl Smalley, *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*.

3. Moral Lessons on Solitude and Recollection.
4. Temptations, External and Internal.
5. Confession.
6. Penance.
7. Love.
8. Domestic Details.

We shall follow this order in the description of the Purgative Way, except that we shall include the individual rules of the final section under the general discussion of the nature of rules in the Introduction.

NOTE: The Early English Text Society has recently published the Early French and Latin versions of the Ancren Riwle—*The Latin Text of the Ancrene Riwle* edited by Charlotte D'Evelyn (Oxford Univ. Press; 31s. 6d.) and *The French Text of the Ancrene Riwle* edited by J. A. Herbert (Oxford Univ. Press; 28s.) These are part of a larger undertaking to make available all the surviving MSS. of the treatise for the benefit of such scholars as Miss Hope Emily Allen, to whom both the present volumes are dedicated. It is hoped in this way to facilitate a final decision on the date, authorship and original language of the work. It is already fairly well established that the English preceded the Latin and French versions and that these latter are translations. But the translations are of great value even to the non-specialised reader who will be able to follow the development of the *Riwle* and witness its popularity in Europe as well as in England. It is a pity from this point of view that the introductions to both volumes are so short and so limited in scope. The general reader would need to be shown the different characteristics of the versions, where they differ or agree, and the history as far as it is known of the translations. But even without this help, which will come rather as the fruit of these editions, the reader will find much to delight and inspire. The penultimate chapter on the rule of love possesses a new charm in its early French form, and the first hints of the Rosary devotion stand out clearly in the titles for the 'Five Joys' of our Lady—*Les Cynk Ioies Nostre Dame*. The Latin text, from an early fourteenth-century MS. at Merton, has the advantage of a very detailed table of contents, not found in the other versions. Here again the chapter on charity reads with the same freshness and direct inspiration that we find in the early English and the early French. The *Riwle* is indeed a masterpiece that did not suffer from the early translator; on the contrary it served as a spiritual text-book in Latin, French and English and was in its own way and age as important as the *Imitation*.