

his death he sang for the last time the lovely invocation at Compline, *ne projicias me in tempore senectutis*—cast me not aside in my old age—the prayer, for him, was already heard: he shall not be confounded when he shall speak to the enemies in the gate.

Fr Jerome died as he had expected, and as he would have wished: very quickly and quietly, and working right up to the end. Impatient as he always was with his own physical ailments, and strong in bearing pain and discomfort, he would have hated an enforced inactivity. He died at his job. And the work that he accomplished goes on, and will go on: a building durable with all the durability of work that is done in the hand and will of God.

May his spirit guide and strengthen those who, with heavy hearts, must continue to work for the school he loved and the Province he loved: and for him, may he be taken very swiftly into the arms of the God he served so simply and so well.

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

BY

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JUST as any person's career becomes more individual and outside species and classes the more developed and specialised he becomes, so in the spiritual life the holier a man becomes the less easily will he fall into any preconceived categories. The first stages of the life of the spirit are easier to follow, just as a man's career begins with his schooling when he learns the same subjects and undergoes the same discipline as all his schoolfellows. When he has left school or university and has begun to live his own life, then he should tend towards uniqueness until, rising in his profession, he has fewer and fewer men with whom he may be identified. So as the soul rises from the schooling of the purgative way and the night of the senses she begins to live the divine life in her own unique way, until passing into the night of the spirit she emerges into the unitive way where only the most general characteristics are shared with others who are yet in the same 'way'. 'Star differeth from star' among the saints as well as among the angels. Similarly the writings of the great mystical authors, while preserving a fundamental identity, are extremely diverse in their descriptions and analyses of the workings of grace. We have only to compare the writings of St Catherine of Siena with those of St Cathérine of Genoa, of St Teresa with St John of the Cross, of Mother Julian with the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

Everyone however will have to pass through a further stage of purification, a new kind of 'Night' of desolation, indicative of another conversion and leading into the way of union in which charity attains its complete supremacy. There was a period of ten days when the apostles were left alone without the joyful presence of the risen Lord and before the Spirit had come to enlighten, strengthen and transform them. This period between the Ascension and Pentecost has been regarded as the night of the spirit finally purifying the apostles before their last conversion and entry into the unitive way by the descent of the Spirit of Love. St John of the Cross speaks of the necessity for those who are called to the divine union of love of God to pass through this night of the spirit. At the beginning of the second book of the *Dark Night of the Soul* he describes in detail the weaknesses which still remain and the intense suffering and purification through which the soul passes in order to rid her of these imperfections. But he also shows the positive nature of this night, likening the approach of the soul to God to that of a man to the sun—'the nearer a man approaches the sun, the greater are the darkness and the affliction caused him through the great splendour of the sun and through the weakness and impurity of his eyes'. (*Dark Night* ii, 16. 11). The night is therefore no vacuum; it overflows with the reality of God's presence, the closeness of God banishes all other reality into a realm of insignificance. That banishment itself purifies the spirit, leaves it isolated and desolate until it grows accustomed to the intensity of God's presence, and the cloud which at first seemed dark and forbidding turns out to be luminous and radiant with the transforming splendour of Mount Tabor.

On account of the uniqueness of these higher states of prayer and the spiritual life it will be more convenient to examine the doctrine of the one or two outstanding books of the medieval English mystics, namely those who have reached the heights. Of these Mother Julian of Norwich and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* write as masters of the way of union and compel an attention which is not to be distracted too much by a subjective analysis of the exact stages of the spiritual life they are describing. The way of union is 'covered' by both writers from their own point of view; and each gives a clear understanding of the essential but in a very individual setting. And since all must enter in some manner into the second night the *Cloud of Unknowing* will be found to be more applicable to the beginning of this new life of love. The *Revelations of Divine Love* unfold a meaning and universality in the love of God as experienced by the good anchoress who could see no wrath in God, so that Mother Julian will later provide us with an effective insight into the 'way of Wis-

dom' which should characterise the unitive way. We therefore turn now to the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

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'Here beginneth a book of contemplation which is clept *The Clowde of Unknowyng* in the which a soul is oned with God'—this is the original inception of what is often considered to be the greatest English mystical writing. The author considered it merely as 'a book of contemplation', and in spite of its uniqueness it should be placed in its context among other contemporary books. It was written some years after Richard Rolle had propagated his mystical teaching, and when his popularity was probably at its peak. The author of *The Cloud* takes pains, in consequence, to destroy some of the abuses to which Rolle's teaching easily lent itself. The burning heat of love could be mis-interpreted in a material way and so the beginners in the spiritual life 'conceive these words not ghostly, as they be meant, but fleshly and bodily; and travail their fleshly hearts out rageously in their breasts'.¹ The book was written, however, before Mother Julian had her visions, or at least before she had fully comprehended their significance. It is likely, therefore, that the doctrine of this book and of its fellows from the same pen influenced her judgment and interpretation of what she had experienced. There exists in particular a close bond between this author's works and the writings of Hilton which were so popular among the recluses and religious of the time and were also popular with people, like Margery Kempe, who from the ranks of the laity interested themselves in 'high contemplation'. Indeed, *The Cloud* has often been attributed to Hilton; and with reason, for the thought and often the language itself run very close to the *Scale of Perfection*. It is interesting to note, for example, the references to the idea of re-forming which forms the framework of *The Scale*. Hilton shows the progress of the soul according as it is first re-formed in faith and then in faith and feeling—the final conversion which leads into union. We find *The Cloud* speaking of a re-formation by grace which leads the soul to comprehend God by love. Again, the symbolism of the cloud itself which gives the name to this book is to be found in Hilton's *Scale* 'This night is naught else but a forbearing and a withdrawing of the thought of the soul from earthly things by great desire and yearning to love and see and feel Jesus and ghostly things'. (Bk ii, c. 2) It is, Hilton tells us in the same chapter, a good night and a little darkness, and finally, 'this is a rich naught'. This teaching is practically identical with that of *The Cloud*, and there is, too, so

¹ Chapter 48. The version here used is the well-known modern edition by Justin McCann, published originally in the Orchard Series by Burns & Oates

practical moralising in which the two books show the same inspiration, as for example *The Cloud's* warning against judging others (c. 30) to which an annotator has added the remark, 'the same teaching in his *Scale* and in the *Lives of the Fathers*'.

Differences between *The Cloud* and *The Scale*, however, are easily noticeable both in certain general characteristics² and in the treatment of particular points. Thus while *The Cloud* defines prayer as 'a devout intent directed unto God for the getting of good and removing of evil' (c. 39. p. 96), for Hilton 'prayer is naught else but a stying of the heart into God, by withdrawing of the heart from all earthly thought'. (c. 25). This is a surprising contrast, as we should naturally have expected the very 'mystical' *Cloud* to choose the second of the two traditional definitions which both come originally from St John Damascene. Again, in the interpretation of St Mary Magdalene's repentance and love *The Cloud* considers that the intensity of her love made her forget all her sins and even to a certain extent the very humanity of Christ (c.16. pp. 51-2); *The Scale* on the other hand says that until after the ascension her love was 'much bodily and little ghostly' (ii, c. 30). It is unlikely that the same man would have written of her in two such opposite senses.

It is, however, of little importance to us here who was the actual author of these treatises. In the latest work of scholarship on *The Cloud* and the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* Dr Phyllis Hodgson has concluded that 'despite the immediate popularity of his work, there has not yet been found any reliable external evidence about the writer'.³ That the author should remain forever unknown is characteristic of the style of the work, which particularly inculcates the 'naughting' of humility. The authorship is important to the present study only in so far as it reveals a man who was in the full stream of the best spiritual teaching of the time, following in the footsteps of Rolle and preparing the way for Mother Julian and Walter Hilton.⁴ It is evident too that he was a director of worth and repute, perhaps equal in influence to those other two celebrated directors, Rolle and Hilton. 'He was evidently recognised as a spiritual director', writes Dr Hodgson, 'for the immediate purpose of all his treatises is to give some definite practical advice to young disciples, and he habitually

² Dom Maurice Noetinger has pointed out these differences in his article on the Authorship of *The Cloud* in BLACKFRIARS, March, 1924.

³ *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, edited from the MSS. with an Introduction, Notes and Glossary, by Phyllis Hodgson (Oxford U.P. for the Early English Texts Society) p. lxxxii.

⁴ Dom Noetinger points out that Hilton has summarised a good deal of *The Cloud* in his *Scale* (op. cit.). And Dom Justin McCann is inclined to regard the author as an Oxford 'Master' retired to a country cure; in which case he would have started from the same place and under the same influences as Rolle.

directs their spiritual exercises with the voice of authority' (E.E.T.S. p. 1 xxxiii). Important also is the humility of the author, symbolised in his anonymity. When he reflects on the attacks made by 'actives' on his way of life he excuses them since they cannot understand the true nature of the contemplative ideal, and adds:

When I think on my innumerable faults, the which I have made myself before this time in words and deeds for default of knowing, me thinketh then, if I would be held excused by God for mine ignorant faults, that I should charitably and pitifully hold other men's ignorant words and deeds always excused. (c. 19. 6. 58).

An attitude of humility such as this gives an increased assurance to those reading his words that he will not be misleading them. And in this he shows a certain advance on Rolle who sometimes leaves his readers a little uneasy about his sensitiveness to criticism and his self-consciousness.

The sources whence the author drew his doctrine are also of interest since they reveal him as a well-read as well as a deeply experienced man who does not transgress the limits of orthodoxy, but draws his ideas from traditional theology. Of course, like the mystical writers of any age, his theological roots lie in the neo-platonism of the pseudo-Denys. The very title and theme of this, his most important work, is derived from Denys who describes the darkness of the ascent to God as the '*caligo ignorantiae*'. According to the *Mystica Theologia* of Denys, the presence of God 'plunges the true initiate into the Darkness of Unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehension of his understanding . . .'⁵ But *The Cloud* is descended even more directly from Richard of St Victor whose influence on St Thomas as well as upon all the best English spiritual writing of the middle ages is considerable. 'The clouds of unknowing' (*nubes ignorantiae*) and the 'cloud of forgetting' (*nebula oblivionis*) are both to be found in Richard. There are long passages which are direct borrowings, some almost direct translations, from *Benjamin Major* and *Benjamin Minor*. In particular the allegory of Rachel and Benjamin whence Richard derived his titles appears in the sixth chapter of the *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, and the same is to be said of the allegory of Moses climbing to the top of the mountain (c. 73).⁶

Another contemporary work which seems to have influenced *The Cloud* considerably is the *De Adhaerendo Deo* which has been generally—some think erroneously—attributed to St Albert the Great. There is a remarkable likeness between *The Cloud's* constant

⁵ *Dionysius the Areopagite on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*. By C. E. Rolt (S.P.C.K. 1902), p. 194.

⁶ For details of this and the following relationships cf. Hodgson op. cit. p. lxxiii-vi, and lxiv sqq.

Of these works the two most directly concerned with the higher stages of the spiritual life are *The Cloud* and *The Epistle of Privy Counsel* and with these we are therefore primarily concerned. There are certain differences in style and approach between these two treatises no doubt due partly to the passage of time and partly to use of the phrase 'naked intent' and the '*mens nuda sine imaginibus*' of the *De Adhaerendo*. This latter work which has had such tremendous popularity, second only to *The Imitation*, should be read in conjunction with *The Cloud* in order to emphasise its teaching as well as to convince the reader of the traditional character of the English treatise which has sometimes been assailed as being too esoteric.⁷

Finally the influence of scholastic thought on the author of *The Cloud* is very evident, and St Thomas was no inconsiderable figure in his eyes. In the *Epistle of Prayer*, which seems to be the second treatise from his pen, he writes:

Devotion is nought else, as saint Thomas the doctor saith, but a readiness of man's will to do those things that longeth to the service of God.⁸

And although *The Cloud* is sometimes accused of being too voluntarist in its explanation of the place of love in contemplation, that is to say somewhat anti-intellectualist in emphasis, there can be no doubt that the author had received a scholastic training. The metaphysical nature of his final work, the *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, is undoubtedly the result of a training in the schools, perhaps, as has already been suggested, at Oxford or Cambridge.

In various places the author refers to his other writings and it seems likely that seven tracts are attributable to him. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is the first of these, and the *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, the second in importance, was written last to explain to the same disciple some difficulties which had arisen from following *The Cloud* (cf. c. 7. p. 210); for having read this and other works the disciples were still demanding reasons. *The Epistle of Prayer* and *The Epistle of Discretion* probably followed *The Cloud*. The other treatises are *Denis Hid Divinity*, *How Man's Soul is made to the Image and Likeness of the Holy Trinity* (both included in Dom Justin McCann's edition of *The Cloud*) and *The Discerning of Spirits* which is of more doubtful origin.

⁷ A new translation of the *De Adhaerendo Deo* has recently been made by Elizabeth Stopp, and published as *Of Cleaving to God* by Blackfriars Publications.

⁸ St Thomas's words are: 'Devotio nihil aliud videtur quam voluntas quaedam prompte tradendi se ad ea quae pertinent ad Dei famulatum' (II-II. 82. 1). This treatise together with *The Epistle of Discretion* and *The Discerning of Spirits* is included in the volume of seven tracts first published in 1521 and edited in a modern edition by Edmund Gardner—*The Cell of Self-Knowledge* (London, 1910).

Of these works the two most directly concerned with the higher stages of the spiritual life are *The Cloud* and the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* and with these we are therefore primarily concerned. There are certain differences in style and approach between these two treatises no doubt due partly to the passage of time and partly to the purpose of providing a more 'rational' explanation in the second work. *The Epistle* brings in the more primitive and essential note of offering and worship, which had been taken for granted in *The Cloud*. Thus, the twenty-fifth chapter of *The Cloud* has so many verbal parallels and similarities in argument to the third chapter of *The Epistle* that the fact has been used to prove that the author of the two works is the same. And yet in *The Cloud* the question of Christ's passion restoring all men to the oneing affection with God lost by Adam makes no reference to his sacrifice. *The Epistle*, on the other hand, speaks of this 'oneing' in terms of a continual offering of the sacrifice of a man's whole being, and says of the passion of Christ that he was 'offering himself up in the veriest sacrifice'. (p. 191. compare p. 71). This difference of emphasis is noteworthy, but there is no question that both works teach the same fundamental doctrines. It may be that the idea of sacrifice was brought into the second in order to correct a misconception in the first, lest the author be thought to exclude worship from the higher forms of prayer and approach to God. The style of both is the same rambling delightful discussion of a man who has experienced intensely what he wants to speak about. He apologises in *The Epistle* for this defect. 'Lo! here be many words and little matter'. *The Epistle* occasionally descends into an alliteration which is almost reminiscent of Langland when he speaks of 'thy wanton seeking wits' (p. 186) or 'thy prayer is privy, thy pride full pure, thy manners meek, thy mirth full mild' (p. 230). This is not to be found in *The Cloud*, and it suggests that *The Epistle* embraces more explicitly the various elements in the way of union where the other book takes them for granted, concentrating only on the outstanding features of simplicity in the naughting of self.

In conclusion it is necessary to refer to a subject already opened in these articles—the question of the profit of reading these mystical writings and the manner in which they should be read. This question becomes vital in opening the pages of *The Cloud* and its companion works. For the author in his Prologue very urgently, and with all the limited authority that a writer can exert over those unknown to him who will come upon his writings, insists that his book was intended exclusively for the man who 'by a whole intent purposed him to be a perfect follower of Christ'. Again, at the beginning of *The Epistle of Privy Counsel* he declares that he is writing for the one

individual to whom the work is addressed and not for 'all in general'. It is clear from the prologues of both works that the author anticipated that his writings would be passed on to others, but he was in fact writing letters of direction to a single individual with his own special difficulties in a sphere of considerably elevated prayer. And, as he points out, 'the nearer men touch the truth, the more wary must men be of error'. (*Cloud* c. 34. p. 84). The exclusiveness, therefore, which he displays reveals no inner circle of Christian gnosticism, but only a precaution lest the possible misunderstanding of his words lead to disastrous errors—and the subsequent history of mysticism among the quietists would have confirmed his fears. He is not writing speculative theology for the 'novice', like St Thomas; but he is writing mystical theology, subjective in many ways and based on experience as much as on theological studies. For most of the modern readers of these works the type of prayer described therein is an ideal rather than an experience. And there is for 'beginners' and 'proficients' a danger of confusing the first stages with the later. The two 'nights' in the ascent are very similar in many details, but on different planes. It is therefore quite easy for a man to think that he is experiencing the night of the spirit when he is in fact only on the fringes of the night of the senses. Consequently the reader must be very careful how he understands the words of *The Cloud* and *The Epistle*. It is, of course, a matter of standards or criteria. A man can learn in the abstract what it would be like to sail round the moon. In the concrete, however, he is apt to apply the standards he knows from experience, so that by pole-jumping or perhaps by piloting a 'plane he can easily imagine himself circling the moon, though he is but a few feet from the ground. For this reason it is very important to discover the particular stage about which *The Cloud* is talking. Some people consider it to be a book almost for beginners; others that it is in the very summit of the mystic way. If it is for the advanced, as the author himself seems to insist, it will be dangerous for the beginner to read it as though it were intended for him. But it will be profitable for him and for all to read it in the objective spirit of one enquiring into the ways of God in his infinitely varied working in the human soul. These workings of God are wonderful and admirable, but the admiration of them should remain objective and not be followed according to 'the ape's manner'.

Look that thou be no ape, that is to say, look that thy stirrings to silence or to speaking, to fasting or to eating, to loneliness or to company, whether they be come from within of abundance of love and of devotion in the spirit, and not from without by the windows of the bodily wits, as thine ears, and thine eyes. (*An Epistle of Discretion*. p. 103).