

THE NEW LIGHT

BY

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RICHARD ROLLE has been called 'The Father of English Mysticism' and it is to him we turn for the first introduction to mysticism in its strict sense among English writers. He was born some hundred years after the *Ancren Riwe* was written, and yet he is historically the first of the group of English mystics who experienced and wrote about the

higher degrees of mystical prayer. Perhaps the greatest era of English sanctity had already passed when he was born in the last decade of the 13th century. There had been a succession of men and women from the time of Venerable Bede who had been led by the Spirit of God to transports of divine love and wisdom. But they had not been reflective in the way that the men of the 14th century were reflective so that the description of their lives does not enlighten later generations as to the nature of their prayer or their manner of reaching high degrees of contemplation. Rolle, amidst a profusion of Latin and English writings, did proclaim these hidden experiences, and his message was received with enthusiasm.

Geographically Rolle represents the most northerly point of the mystic path which seems to have run from Eckhart's Germany to the Low countries, across the North Sea to East Anglia and so up to Yorkshire where Richard was born near Pickering just before 1300. Some have suggested that the trade route of the Yorkshire wool which crossed to the lower Germanies was responsible for opening the avenues of thought to the mystical teaching of Eckhart's disciples. This may well be so, for the spiritual seldom works entirely independently of the material, and it is not unlikely that Richard's father held some humble post in the important export business. Rolle himself ran away from Oxford to become a hermit before he was twenty, and there is no clear indication that he received at first any other influences for a mystical life than an uncompleted ecclesiastical education with a reaction thereto, as well as a devout and poetical nature. But after spending some years as a hermit he completed his studies in Paris and there, apparently, first attained to real mystical heights of prayer. Of the period after that when he was back in Yorkshire Miss Hope Emily Allen has written: 'He then lived where he might have met anyone, from the king down, have had access to any book

written, and learned of any movement stirring in the Church'.¹ And whatever may have been the influence on him, this situation in spite of his retired life gave him a wide audience in that part of the world. His experiences were dramatic and his language poetic and full of romantic metaphor so that he soon had disciples, both men and women, and was exercising sway over most of the spiritual writing of the period. It was inevitable that with such popularity the greater number should have mistaken his teaching and seized on the romance without understanding the meaning symbolised by the metaphor, so that after a while a Carthusian came to declare that he had known more men to be ruined by Rolle's writings than to have profited. The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* takes these false followers to task as well: 'Oftimes the devil feigneth quaint sounds in their ears, quaint lights and shining in their eyes, and wonderful smells in their noses: and all is but a falsehood' (c. 5), and Walter Hilton has to caution his readers about such lights and 'feelings of comfortable heat and great sweetness' (*Scale*, p. 2, c. 29). Both these refer to a too literal understanding and copying of Rolle's special experiences. No one, however, has doubted the authenticity of Rolle's own mystical enlightenment and the accuracy of his interpretation thereof, and his effect stretched beyond the purely religious sphere of prayer and contemplation to that of English poetry.

It is his genuine mystical experience coupled with his emotional way of expressing that experience which suggests him as a model of the illuminative way. There is little emphasis on the hardships of purgation. An ascetic he undoubtedly was; but his writings in general speak of the joy of love rather than of the pains of penance, they certainly are not concerned very much with the purgative way. From the first he refers to himself as the 'sitter', because he had chosen that posture as the most conducive to contemplation as well as the most comfortable. Yet we could not easily class him among the higher ranks of those who have largely experienced the joy of perfect union in the unitive way. However diligently we may apply the interpretation of metaphor and analogy, his constant insistence on the heat of love in his breast as being also a physical thing limits the scope of the love: he cannot have borne the full impact of the *Todo y Nada* of St John of the Cross.

We refer here, of course, more to writings than to his own personal life. He was regarded by many after his death as a saint and an Office was composed for the celebration of his feast. He may therefore have reached the intimacies of union which mark the final stages of sanctification. But from what has come down to us of his own life he seems

¹ *English Writings of Richard Rolle*. Introduction, p. xxiii.

to have spent most of his years, which were untimely in their ending, in that somewhat uncertain and fluctuating time of the spiritual life called by many the Illuminative Way and by St Thomas the age of the *Proficient*—a term which conveys movement and development rather than a quiet rest. He seems to have passed comparatively quickly from the first age of the spiritual life to this second period of new light. In a celebrated chapter of the *Incendium Amoris* he describes how he came to the burning fire of love:

“Three years, except three or four months, were run from the beginning of the change of my life and of my mind, to the opening of the heavenly door: so that the Face being shown, the eyes of the heart might behold and see by what way they might seek my Love, and unto him continually desire. The door forsooth yet biding open, nearly a year passed until the time in which the heat of everlasting love was verily felt in my heart.² (c. 15.)

Certainly he regarded himself as having attained practically the highest degree in the spiritual life, for later in the same chapter he speaks of ‘the high degree of Christ’s love’ which had been granted him, and concludes that the soul ‘ascends not into another degree, but, as it were, confirmed in grace, as far as mortal man can, she rests’. That was his own opinion, but there is evidence to suggest that after he had received this special mystical gift he retained a good number of blemishes. Perhaps they were part of the bluff truculence of the Yorkshireman; he was somewhat resentful of opposition and inclined towards pride in his own graces. Apparently referring to his own special way of life he admonishes those who smile at it and regard it as uncanonical by asking: ‘How do they dare to rebuke him whom rather they should honour as patron?’ (*Contra Amatores Mundi*). In his early writings he had challenged without sufficient humility—however right he may have been—the authorities of the Church and the spiritual state of many of the clergy. The effect of this lack of maturity led inevitably to persecution from diocesan officials as well as his own friends who had at first welcomed him hospitably. And so gradually towards the end of his life his writings show a greater peace of mind and growing maturity which suggest that he is in fact reaching some further stage of union in love of God. It is mysterious that God’s sudden mystical graces should leave the soul so much work to be done in adjusting her personal moral virtues to the situation. But it is a fact that many imperfections remain after these high passive graces have been bestowed. St Teresa herself was puzzled by this incongruity and put the diffi-

² All quotations from the *Incendium Amoris* are taken from Richard Misyn’s 15th-century translation edited by Miss F. M. M. Comper and published by Messrs Methuen.

culty, without resolving it, in her *Life*: 'How is it, when the Lord begins to grant a soul such sublime favours as that of bringing it to perfect contemplation, that it does not, as by rights it should, become perfect all at once? . . . How is it that it is only later, as time goes on, that the same Lord leaves it perfect in the virtues?' (c. 22. Peers, i, 143).

It is therefore later in life, after considerable change of domicile, passing hither and thither in the south and west of Yorkshire, that Richard finally settles down at Hampole in a quiet state of resignation. He is no longer concerned with what others think and say about him and his tendency to pride and arrogance are finally overcome. He is removed from the 'business of bodily things' partly by his greater retirement, but more through his greater interior peace. But his apostolic activities naturally increase, in the sense that he is constantly concerned with the spiritual upbringing of many devout religious and his fame as a man of wisdom and holiness begins to spread abroad and assist in a reviving of the Christian spirit. All this is characteristic of the age of the proficient with its early mystical experience and the consequent alignment of the normal life of the virtues with these special divine gifts. So that when death came, probably through assisting others during the Black Death in Yorkshire in 1349, Richard Rolle was really stabilised in the life of union and ready for its culmination in heaven.

In following the aim of these articles by tapping the spiritual literature in the English language before the Reformation, we should strictly leave out of consideration the greater part of Richard Rolle's writings which began in Latin. And this would in some ways be desirable because his English writings all belong to the later period when he was more surely rooted in the illuminative way. And they link up easily with the previous studies on the *Ancren Riwele* because he began to write in the vernacular for the sake of devout women who were in fact leading the life outlined in that Rule. His first English work was probably *The English Psalter*, written for an anchoress named Margaret Kirkeby who came from Hampole but who after his death moved her cell further north to Anderby. Later, a year before his death, he wrote *The Form of Living* for the same anchoress. This is another instance of the influence of these holy women on the English literature of prayer and the devout life. The *Riwele* begins the tradition and Rolle continues it a century later, writing several books and many spiritual lyrics for these his spiritual daughters. After his day the tradition was firmly rooted in English life.

Rolle however was by no means tied to the English tongue and a

great deal of his work was in Latin, in particular the greatest of his works, the *Incendium Amoris*, which was probably written at the beginning of the last period of his life. It would therefore be narrow-minded to exclude from present consideration the treasures of his Latin pen which can happily elucidate and enlarge the thought behind his English works. We are in duty bound to consider all his works in so far as they apply to the way of the proficients, a policy which demands the neglect of some of Rolle's more elementary writings, which will for that very reason repay a careful reading apart from this study. Moreover two of the most important Latin works have an easily obtainable 15th century translation by Richard Misyn which helps to link us directly with the pre-Reformation tongue.

It is not easy to fix any chronology in his writings except in so far as the English are usually later than the Latin. So that we make no attempt here to follow Rolle's development as reflected in the series of his own books, letters and hymns. The method most suited to our purpose is to base ourselves on the English writings and expand their content by reference to the more celebrated of his Latin works.

DEVOTION TO THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

BY

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CHILD in trouble or in disgrace goes first to its mother for comfort and forgiveness. When in fear of its father's anger it hopes for its mother's help in turning anger aside. It is not surprising that after a long period of self-sufficient rationalism, in a time of widespread misery and persecution, men should begin to show a new appreciation of their own sinfulness and weakness and their dependence on God by turning first of all to our Lady, God's Mother and ours. Unlike ours, her heart has never faltered for one moment in its love of God and its love of mankind. All its desire has been for God and the showing of his glory among men. Her heart has never lacked courage or patience; it has been always what our hearts should be and are not. Thinking of it we see our own shortcoming; we see, too, a source of sympathy and help. Our Lady is the first, most perfect, fruit of Christ's redeeming work and cooperates with him in the rescue of sinners and the perfecting of his Church. To her, as refuge of sinners, millions have turned in these last hundred years or so. They have been years