

LOVE OF THE WORD

BY

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E cannot take leave of Richard Rolle without listening to his principal message and the one which is the dominant theme of the illuminative way. His greatest work was on 'The Fire of Love', his most unique mystical experience was the burning of love in his breast, and his poetry which did more than anything else to spread his spirit among his contemporaries is concerned with the sweet love of Jesus, his Spouse. Love is thought, with great desire of a fair Loving.¹ The illumination as we have seen comes principally from the shining of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in the beginning of infused contemplation. But this light cannot of course be separated from the Word whose function it is to enlighten the understanding. Indeed the activities of the second and third Persons of the Blessed Trinity in this respect cannot be separated; it is the one action of the *Verbum spirans amorem*.

The mind truly disposed to cleanness, receives from God the thought of eternal love . . . [and it is necessary that this] mind be fully knit unto Christ, and it lasts in desires and thoughts of love—the which are certain and endless intent—and which thoughts, wherever he be, sitting or going, he meditates within himself without ceasing, desiring nothing but Christ's love (*Fire of Love* 25, Misyn-Comper p. 107.)

This is typical of Rolle and of the period we are here considering. One of the sweetest joys now is to meet Jesus, the Word Incarnate, in this new and more intimate life of love.

On the side of the creature lover there has grown up through the various purifications and the 'cleansing' of his mind a desire far purer than when he first set out to serve the Lord. At first the yearning of the soul for God was occasioned principally by the knowledge of the *duty* of loving God above all things, then came the fuller understanding of the will of God as a personal love for the soul which in its turn responded more spontaneously in its longing; and now that the divine touch has been laid on her the soul begins to experience an almost bitter desire for the Beloved. Commenting on the opening verse of Psalm 12, Rolle says:

¹ Cf. *The Life of Richard Rolle with his English Lyrics*. F. M.M. Comper, p. 248.

The voice of holy men, who covet and yearn the coming of Jesus Christ, that they may live with him in joy, and complaining of delaying, says: 'Lord, how long forgettest thou me, in the ending', which I covet to have and to hold, that is 'how long delayest thou me from the sight of Jesus Christ, who is the very ending of my intent?' 'And how long turnest thou thy face from me?' that is, 'When wilt thou give me a perfect knowing of thee?' These words may none say truly save a perfect man or woman who has gathered together all the desires of her soul and with the nail of love fastened them in Jesus Christ. . . . (cf. H. E. Allen, *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, pp. 10-1.)

The beginnings of love have stirred up a desire which in its turn feeds love and prepares the way for the divine love to descend more completely into the dwelling of his choice. 'For the longer we live the hotter we desire thee, and the more joy we feel in thy love, and painfully we hie to thee' (*Fire of Love*. 26. p. 110.)

This desire regarded from the ascetic point of view arises from the renunciation of worldly, material desires and concupiscence. Rolle offers his book to those who 'all things forgetting and putting aback that are longing to this world, they love to be given only the desires of our Master' (*Prologue*, Misyn p. 13); and in the 8th chapter of the 1st book he describes how they must fly all worldly attractions, and staunch the wounds of fleshly desires. He calls this 'highest poverty'; indeed it represents the cutting away of earthly ties and attachments; and in '*The Form of Living*' he gives as the first two signs of a man's being in charity that he has no coveting of earthly things, and that he has a fervent longing for heaven so that he can find no joy in this life. (cf. Heseltine, *Selected Works*, p. 46).

But this negative way of regarding the quenching of earthly lusts can only reveal a superficial aspect of the new-found joy in desiring. For it is not possible merely to destroy all human yearning. The heart is made to desire, and to destroy its every longing would be to destroy human life itself. Mere repression achieves ill results, as is manifest in a thousand ways in modern neurotic conditions. To insist that a man should not fix his heart on any creature without showing him an alternative object would dry up the spring of life. This in fact explains why some people who have forsaken the world by vow and state of life become withered in spirit, narrow in outlook, bitter in company. They have few desires and these are mostly of a negative character; they often become valetudinarians because they are conscious only of what they lack; being without joy in living they seek it in vain in physical health.

St Thomas teaches that poverty of itself is a negative state rather than a dynamic virtue, for it cuts away rather than fills up. One must

cut the painter and push out into the deep in order to catch the big fish; but the cutting in itself is only the occasion of the catch—he does not haul in the fish with the stumpy end of the painter. Rolle follows the same teaching as the Angel of the Schools in this matter of the ‘highest poverty’.

Truly by itself poverty is no virtue but rather wretchedness; nor for itself praised, but because it is the instrument of virtue and helps to get blessedness, and makes any eschew many occasions of sinning. And therefore it is to be praised and desired. It lets a man from being honoured, although he be virtuous; but rather it makes him despised and over-led, and cast out among lovers of the world. To suffer all which for Christ is highly needful (*The Mending of Life*. 3. Misyn-Comper. p. 205. Cf. *Form of Living* 10. Heseltine p. 42).

Our Lord himself takes the place of all these worldly desires. The positive fulfilment of desire in him is the only human way of assuaging all the variety of yearnings in the heart of man. It is as though all the rivulets of passing human wishes, the craving for little luxuries and human comforts, all flow into the one great stream of the burning desire for Christ himself. He is man and he is God and he can fulfil all the passions of human nature by transforming them in some way into a part of divine love. So strong can this stream become as to convey the soul to the very threshold of death itself in a flood which is the exact contrary to the desire of self-destruction in suicide.

‘Thou truly art my Treasure, and all the desire of my heart; and because of thee I shall perfectly see thee, for then I shall have thee’. And I spake thus to death: ‘O Death, where dwellest thou? Why comest thou so late to me, living but yet mortal? Why haldest thou not him that desires thee? Who is enough to think [*excogitare*] thy sweetness, that art the end of sighing, the beginning of desire, the gate of unfailing yearning? Thou art the end of heaviness. . . . Behold I grow hot and desire after thee. . . . Behold I truly languish for love; I desire to die; for thee I burn; and yet truly not for thee but for my saviour Jesu’. (*Fire of Love* 16. Misyn-Comper. p. 74-5).

Quia amore languo. This is the theme not only of all Rolle’s main work, but also of all the medieval spiritual literature; and it is a theme which is only realised in life by those who have entered into the new world of delights granted by infused contemplation.² Of course the sinner as soon as he had turned from his evil ways had

² It is useful to compare this medieval outpouring with the words of Dom Bérorgey in the description of the joy of finding Jesus once more in the prayer of Quiet. (*La Pratique de l’oraison mentale*, vol. 2. p. 72).

received the gift of infused charity with the influx of grace; but charity in this life is a movement towards the beloved Object. In heaven all will be at rest for desire will be fulfilled and love will reign perfect in its possession. But here it is always, or should be always, growing, moving towards its object. 'Lord Jesu, I ask thee, give me movement in thy love withouten measure', says Rolle, and a little later he defines the love of man on earth precisely in terms of this gradual reduction of the desire into the joy of possession: 'What is love but the transforming of desire into the thing loved?' (*Fire of Love*. Misyn p. 78 and 79). The whole of the way towards God, the entire extent of the progress of the spiritual life is, of course, simply a development in charity which gradually absorbs all the faculties of a human person, his intellect included, and brings them to cohesion point in God. At first charity lies almost hidden, like the foundations of a building, at the back of the active life of purification in which the moral virtues predominate. Charity is the form, the extrinsic form, of the patience and mercy, the humility and penance of the first steps in the spiritual life. Yet of necessity activity, service, prudential and 'moral' considerations hold sway. But as these virtues develop they become more and more rooted in love, and the extrinsic form itself begins to overshadow all others. At first a man will put up with trials because he knows that this is necessary, that God demands it, that it will cleanse his spirit and that patience is a human perfection. But there comes a time, if he has been growing up spiritually, when he will do all for the love of God; he will be patient because he loves our Lord and follows him by love step by step in the Passion.

This is, therefore, the point when the active life of the moral virtues gives place to the contemplative life of the theological. This fact is borne out, as we shall see later, by Walter Hilton in his *Scale* up which the active only ascends to a point where he may have some fitful glimpses of the full transformation; but it is for Hilton the full re-forming of the soul in 'faith and feeling' where the contemplative really takes over. And this formation of the soul 'in faith and feeling' seems to correspond closely with the contemplative life of Rolle whose love of God seems to diffuse his whole being.

For Hilton the final stage of 'reformation in faith and feeling' would seem to be the state of union when love has transformed everything into God, but there is a lesser degree in which the '*mens*', the supreme part of the soul, has not entirely been changed by the Gifts of the Spirit; so, as we should expect, contemplative life begins properly with the first regular influx of infused contemplation. And this is the period when the soul first really languishes for love.

The soul has approached closer than ever before to God, not, as Thomas says following St Gregory, by physical paces but by steps

of love. Rolle has himself set out briefly his measure of these steps of love. For instance in the *Mending of Life*:

First therefore we are taught righteousness and corrected of ill by discipline; and after that we know what we should do, or what we should eschew. At the last we savour not fleshly things, but everlasting heavenly and godly (Misyn. p. 209).

Or at greater length in the 8th chapter of *The Form of Living* he sets out three degrees of love. The first he calls 'Insuperable', that is, that it is not conquered by temptation or adversity—'when nothing that is contrary to God's love overcomes it, but it is stalwart against all temptations and stable, whether thou be in ease or anguish'. Secondly, 'Inseparable' love comes 'when all thy heart and thy thought and thy might are so wholly, so entirely, and so perfectly fastened, set and established in Jesus Christ, that thy thought goes never from him'.

The third degree is highest and most wondrous to win. That is called *Singular* for it has no peer. Singular love is when all comfort and solace are closed out of thy heart but that of Jesus Christ alone. It seeks no other joy. . . . Then thy soul is Jesus-loving, Jesus-thinking, Jesus-desiring, only breathing in the desire for him, singing to him, burning for him, resting in him. (*The Form of Living*. Heseltine pp. 35-7).

But it would seem that all these degrees of love are already within the contemplative mould of the illuminative way for he says that even in the first degree a man may say 'I languish for love'. And elsewhere, in the *Fire of Love* he describes the 'heat', the 'song', and the 'sweetness' of this love which he himself experiences.

It is particularly noteworthy that our Lord, the Word Incarnate, plays the central part in this transformation in love. The Blessed Trinity of course lies as background of all thought and of all love, but at this point it is necessary to gather all the human forces into the power of love, and that is achieved in the way God designed by sending his Son as our human brother. This delight in the manhood and Godhead of our Lord inspires all Rolle's Lyrics and these more than any other of his writings influenced the religious thought of the anchorholds and contemplatives as well as the more pious section of the populace of Rolle's day. His vivid picture of the piteous bleeding of Christ in 'My king that was great' is paralleled closely by the whole of Mother Julian's *Revelations* which sprang from the same sort of concrete realisation of the pains of Christ.

Naked is his white breast
and red his bloody side;
wan was his fair hue,
his wounds deep and wide.

His hymns to the Holy Name, his songs of love, his more penitential lyrics like 'All vanities forsake', his hymn to the Creator, all are centred round the person of our Lord who dominates his poetic imagery as well as his love.³ Theologically this movement springs from two important sources. First we find Rolle writing of the Son in relation to the Trinity as God and in relation to ourselves as man.

The Father, Life, getting the Son, Life, has given to Him His whole substance. . . . Truly the everlasting Son of the Father is become Man in Time, born of a maiden, that He might gainbuy man from the fiend's power. This is our Lord Jesus Christ: the which only be fastened in our minds the which for us only was tied on the cross. Nothing truly is so sweet as to love Christ. (*Fire of Love*. Misyn. p. 36).

And he goes on to hint that we should not attempt to plumb too deeply with our minds the mystery of the Trinity, and to be content in this respect with the Son made man, hanging on the Cross. Secondly there is the doctrine of the mystical body which inspired in one way or another the majority of the English Mystics.

Every mortal man ought to consider that he will never come to the heavenly Kingdom by the way of riches and fleshly liking and lust, since, forsooth, it is written of Christ . . . that Christ behoved to suffer and so enter His joy. If we be members of our Head, Jesu Christ, we shall follow Him; and if we love Christ, it behoves us to go as He has gone. (ib. p. 84).

The member of the body is now not merely directed by the head but is in love with the head, conformed to it. His virtuous life is a life of Christ; he acts virtuously because he follows Christ who acts in this way; he accepts the will of the Father because he is in the Garden of Olives watching the sweat of blood moistening the soil of the world. Life now is Christo-centric, to use an awkward but meaningful modern expression. Here may we find a meeting place for all the genuine writers on the spiritual life. St Augustine is as eloquent on the love of Christ as is St Bernard. The 'Imitation' has been considered to be 'unmystical' in tone, and yet the seventh and eighth chapters of the second part have the same accent and tone as Rolle: 'If thou seek Jesu in all things, thou shalt find Jesu. . . . Among all therefore that are dear to thee, let Jesu be solely thy darling and thy special friend'. Or again in the *De Adhaerendo Deo*, attributed to St Albert and almost as formative of pre-reformation spirituality as the 'Imitation', we read: 'There is no other way by which we may be drawn away from outward and sensible things into ourselves and so into the divine secrets of Jesus Christ, than by the love of Christ,

³ For these lyrics cf. the volume, already cited, by F. M. M. Comper.

than by the desire of Christ's sweetness, so that we may feel, perceive and taste the nearness of Christ's divinity'.⁴

Rolle, in his descriptions of the transports of the love of Jesus, however, has not entered into the final union, which has been called beyond all others 'transforming'. He is not relying on feelings or sensible consolations, but he is still very imaginative in his conception of the meaning of union. He recognises its wholeness, and how this love of God embraces every aspect of a man's life bringing with it true integrity (cf. *Fire of Love*. Misyn pp. 99-100). But there is still a certain distance, however brief, between the soul and God, a distance which those who have experienced the heights of love cross with further steps of love. To make this clear we may compare a passage of Richard Rolle with a similar one from the *Living Flame* of St John of the Cross. Thus Rolle writes:

Therefore if our love be pure and perfect, whatever our heart loves it is God. Truly if we love ourself, and all other creatures that are to be loved, only in God and for God, what other in us and in them love we but Him? . . . He that truly knows to love Christ is proved to love nothing in himself but God. Also all that we are loved by and love—all to God the Well of love we yield . . . wherefore nothing but God he loves and so all his love is God (*Fire of Love* i. c. 19. Misyn p. 87).

This fine passage, which brings out a great deal of the nobility of Rolle and his attractiveness, yet suggests that there remains a sense of *otherness*; the soul still feels distinct from God though linked so closely in this deep activity of the will. St John of the Cross, however, in describing the final transformation of love, the most complete that can be attained in this life, would seem to draw out a new meaning in Rolle's words 'all his love is God'. We quote only a short passage from this tremendous description of the union of love: 'For the will of these two is one; and, even as God is giving himself to the soul with free and gracious will, even so likewise the soul having a will that is the freer and the more generous in proportion as it has a greater degree of union with God, is giving God in God to God himself, and thus the gift of the soul to God is true and entire'.⁵

We shall find this further transformation of love more clearly indicated in the two greatest of English mystical writings, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Revelations* of Mother Julian of Norwich. Richard Rolle is in many ways the leader of the mystical movement and often seems to have approximated to the highest forms of love. But these others, perhaps being more hidden and therefore less tempted by the snares of pride, seem to have drawn still closer to the end of all loving.

⁴ *Of Clearing to God*. Translated by Elizabeth Stopp (Blackfriars Publications).

⁵ *Living Flame of Love*. St. 3. n. 68. Peers vol. iii, p. 101.